

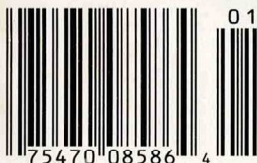
ALFRED HITCHCOCK'S Mystery MAGAZINE

JANUARY 2003

A.J. Raffles: Ice Cold
The gentleman thief
returns for diamonds
in a Christmas caper.
BY JOHN HALL

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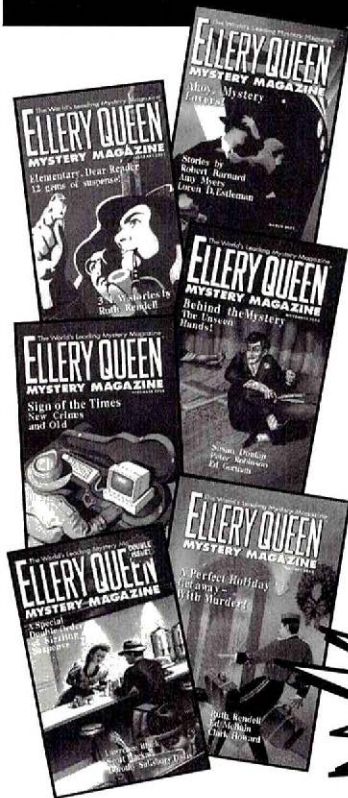
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JANUARY 2003

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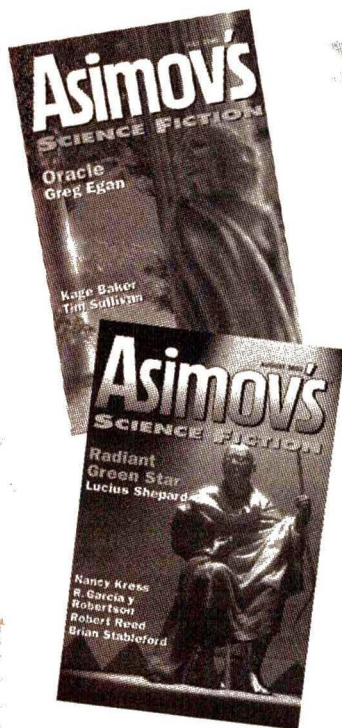


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CONTENTS



SHORT STORIES

- A. J. RAFFLES: ICE COLD** by John Hall **4**
THE SOUND OF ONE FOOT DANCING
by James Van Pelt **22**
THE DEMON OF E STAIRCASE by Charles Sheffield **28**
**THE FACTS CONCERNING THE CARNIVAL
OF CRIME AT CHRISTMAS**
by S. L. Franklin **59**
THE RING IN THE SAND by Eleanor Boylan **89**
THE TROPHY ROOM by D. A. McGuire **97**

MYSTERY CLASSIC

- THE TROUBLE WITH RUTH** by Henry Slesar **130**

DEPARTMENTS

- EDITOR'S NOTES** **3**
THE MYSTERIOUS PHOTOGRAPH **58**
UNSOLVED by Robert Kesling **87**
SOLUTION TO THE DECEMBER "UNSOLVED" **88**
BOOKED & PRINTED by Robert C. Hahn **140**
THE STORY THAT WON **141**

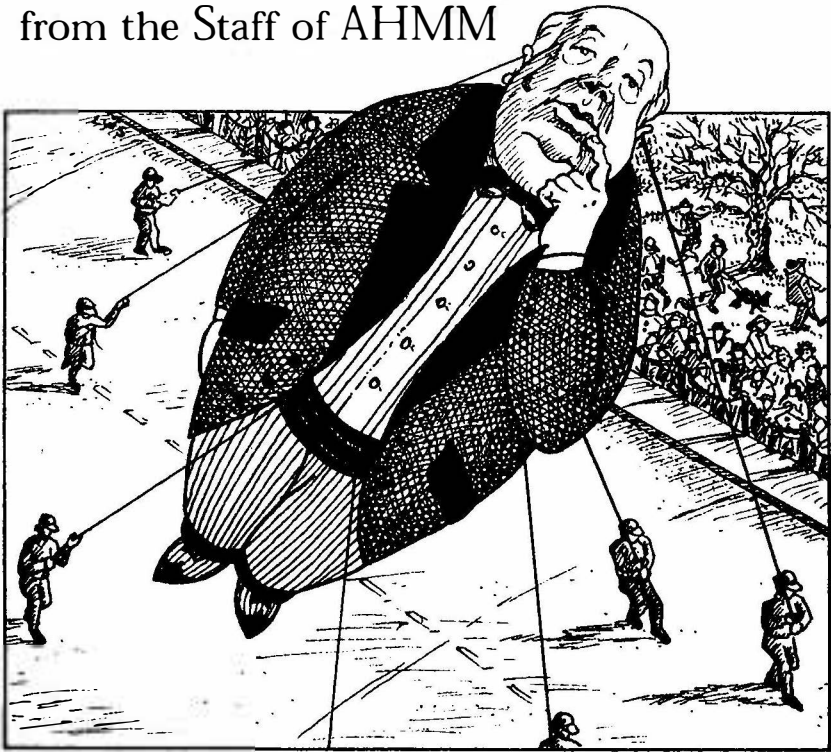
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from the Staff of AHMM



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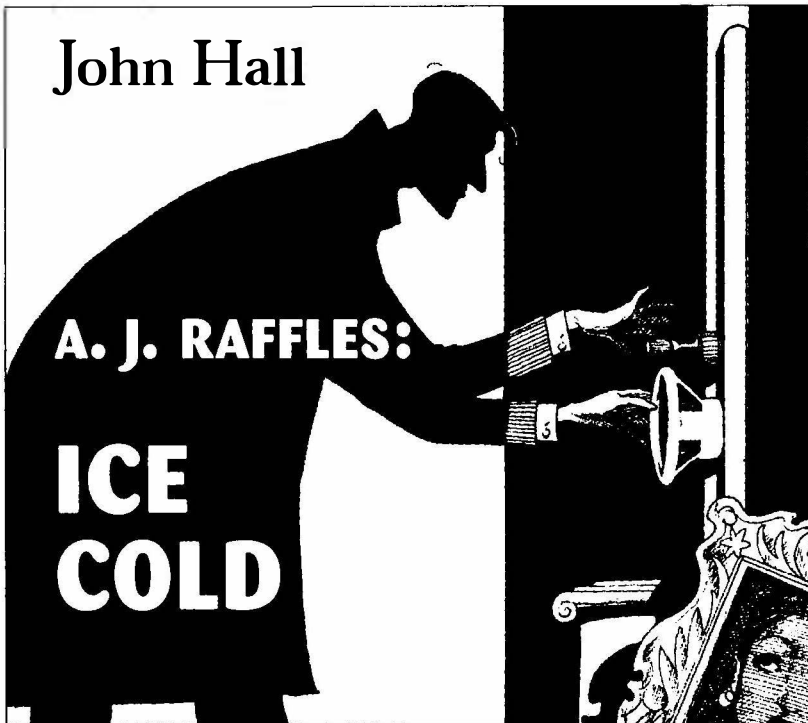
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John Hall

A. J. RAFFLES:

ICE
COLD

“Cold as Christmas, Bunny,” said A. J. Raffles with a shiver, turning away from the window of his flat in the Albany. He lit a cigarette, grimaced, and threw it into the fire, for it was very definitely not a Sullivan.

I passed him my cigarette case, which contained my last three specimens of the only brand. “Things are bound to get better,” I urged him, though truth to tell I had little enough confidence in my own words.

This was in those halcyon days before Raffles’s disgrace and my own imprisonment. *Halcyon* days? Well, we were at liberty, and under no suspicion so far as we knew, but when you had said that you had said everything. The last few months had been a succession of dull days, enlivened by the occasional disaster. My attempts at writing were selling but fitfully, and Raffles, thanks to my timidity, had not “worked” at his alternative profession for almost half a year. In summer, of course, things had been different; there had been invitations, in which I was included, and life had been relatively easy. In winter, with no cricket, and consequently no invitations—well, matters were getting desperate, and I feared that Raffles would be embroiling me in one of his schemes before too long.



"Did you contact the detective story editor you were chasing?" he asked me. "The man at *Criminal Days*, or whatever it's called?"

"Oh, him! He did a bunk. Must have taken his stories too much to heart. Owed his tailor thousands, and his wine merchant even more, so there seems little prospect of my getting my miserable five guineas."

"I see." Raffles looked sidelong at me. "Look here, my Bunny, it is an axiom that desperate times call for desperate measures."

"Raffles—"

"Meet me here tomorrow and we'll have lunch and talk things over." And with that he ushered me out, deaf to all my bleats of protest.

What could I do? Raffles was right, of course, desperate action was called for, and that meant only one thing, but for all that I cursed Raffles bitterly in my mind as I walked home through the damp, foggy streets. It was a week before Christmas, but there was little enough prospect of any cheer or goodwill for us, unless we returned to our lawless ways. I had not even the wherewithal to buy a decent Christmas lunch for myself, let alone a present for Raffles.

I was at the Albany the following day, and Raffles greeted me with a rueful look on his face. "I tried to ring you, but your telephone isn't working," said he.

"Cut off by the Exchange," I answered shortly.

"I see. Can I break our appointment?" were his next words.

"Oh, by all means. But why?"

For answer, he waved a note at me. "I have been asked to lunch, Bunny, and I'm afraid the invitation does not include you this time."

"One can hardly expect every invitation to include me, Raffles. Anyone I know, though?" I added, curious.

"You'll know the name, if not the man. H. H. B. Morgan."

"Good Lord!" I did indeed know the name. H. H. B., or Henry Harrington Barrington Morgan, to give him his full and splendid title, was no relation to the American financial dynasty of the same name, although in his early days he had never bothered to correct the frequently made assumption that he was, an assumption which doubtless did him no harm. There were those who thought that his name was assumed, deliberately chosen to have echoes of that other Henry Morgan who made himself rather a nuisance on the Spanish Main. Certainly H. H. B. had a piratical reputation in financial circles. No one quite knew how he had arrived on the London stage, or where his money came from in the early days—gold and diamonds had been hinted at, though the traders in South African shares denied any knowledge of him—but everyone knew that he now had a controlling interest in the Megalithic Investment Trust Company. He had been the darling of the city a couple of years ago, although his star was now shining a little less brightly than it had once shone. His reputation for adroitness had become a



reputation for ruthlessness, and in fact there were one or two rumours circulating which came under the heading "libellous." A friend of mine with some connections in the Square Mile had shown me the last annual report from the Megalithic earlier that year and shook his head over it. "It looks to be doing well, and the dividend is up again, but half the investments are unquoted," said he, "and I believe that there is a good proportion of the capital which simply isn't listed here at all. Don't tell anyone I said as much, of course," he added somewhat hastily, "but although the shares are up, personally I wouldn't touch it with a barge-pole." I assured him that I would not—a promise I could keep without the least difficulty, as my investment portfolio at the time had consisted of five shillings in the post office, a sheet of twopenny stamps, and a sovereign on a 33-1 long shot in the Gold Cup.

Such, then, was the man who had invited Raffles to lunch! "I wonder why?" I mused aloud.

Raffles laughed. "You don't think he could love me for myself, then, Bunny? Perhaps you are right. Possibly he wants me on the board of the Megalithic, to add a little lustre?"

"There are tales—" I began.

"I have heard them. You may be sure I shall walk carefully, Bunny. But he should give me a decent lunch, if nothing else, and there may well be something else. I'm only sorry you can't come as well."

"I'm not! There's sure to be something else, as you put it, and I suspect it will not be entirely to your advantage, Raffles."

He laughed at this and assured me again that he would be careful. Then, as it was near the hour of his appointment, he left me, with a promise to meet me at teatime to tell me how things had gone.

I took my own modest luncheon at an ABC teashop and passed a couple of hours looking at the bright displays in the big department stores. As the last of the daylight faded, and the Christmas lights were switched on, I returned to the Albany to find Raffles seated at his ease smoking a fat cigar.

"Courtesy of my host," he told me, passing me another Havana. "Or perhaps I should say *our* host, Bunny?"

"Oh? And why that?"

"Because we are invited, you and I both, to pass the Christmas week at Morgan's house in Oxfordshire."

"Oh," was all that I could manage at first. Then, "Why?"

"Ah, there we must enter the realms of speculative philosophy, Bunny. It was, as you may imagine, my own question. His answer? 'Famous cricketer and his friend lend distinction and perhaps even an air of excitement to the house party; and so on and so forth. All very flattering.'"

"But specious?"

Raffles frowned. "I should be inclined to think so. I have no illusions, Bunny. We are not invited for ourselves, as a rule, but for our cricket, and



there is none at this time of year. The offer may be genuine; he may wish to impress his other guests. Still—” and Raffles shrugged his shoulders, and remained indifferent to any further suggestions on my part. “It should prove interesting, whatever the source of the interest. And he certainly spares no expense when he entertains,” was all he would say.

Despite my reservations, I had no intention of refusing Morgan’s invitation, for I knew I should not get another of the kind—or indeed of any kind! A few days later, then, I met Raffles at the station and we travelled together to Oxfordshire.

Whatever the motive for Morgan’s invitation, I thought, he did us very well. His carriage was there to meet us, and our rooms were everything that one could wish.

I suppose I have to say that dinner was an interesting enough occasion, though we were not a large party. The other guests were an elderly widow, one Lady Whitechurch, with her niece and companion, Cynthia. There was the editor of a large and conservative newspaper and his wife and a local magistrate and his wife. Cynthia was an attractive girl; I judged that she had the potential to be lively in the right company, but she was very much overshadowed by her aunt. Lady Whitechurch and the rest of the guests, by contrast, were anything but lively. Indeed, I have never encountered a duller crowd of people; I could half believe that Morgan might have wanted Raffles and myself to add a little sparkle to the proceedings. I determined to earn my corn, then, and attempted to engage my neighbours in conversation, only to be rebuffed at every overture. Lady Whitechurch was particularly offhand with me.

In a somewhat sulky silence, I ate my dinner, which was excellent, and covertly observed the company with a more professional eye. Our host wore a large and ostentatious diamond pin, and another large diamond glittered on his finger. The other men had no jewellery, and I turned to the ladies. Cynthia wore a string of pearls, not very valuable but they suited her complexion; the wives of the newspaper man and the JP both had diamonds, nice enough but nothing special; and Lady Whitechurch had some old emeralds not unworthy of the attention of the lawless individual. But it was Mrs. Morgan’s necklace which caught my attention and held it all through the meal. I do not know the correct technical term—the word *scapular* comes to mind, but I cannot remember if it means a style of jewellery or a bone in the human body—in any event, it was a cross between a necklace and a breastplate, some six inches at its deepest, the whole thing being a sort of crescent shape, white gold with the largest and finest diamonds I ever saw, and so many of them, too! I saw Raffles give it a casual glance, then avoid looking again, but he caught my eye and nodded, just slightly.

There was some desultory conversation after dinner, and I managed to get Raffles on one side. “You saw it?” I asked without preamble.

“One could hardly miss it!” he said, laughing.



“Well?”

“Tempting, I allow. But tell me, what d’you say to our fellow guests?”

“The drabest crowd of bores I ever met. Cynthia excepted, of course.”

“Dull, but worthy?”

“I suppose so.” I regarded him suspiciously. “And—oh! Excellent witnesses, you mean?”

“You surpass yourself, Bunny. Certainly they were not asked for their brilliant conversation. But witnesses to what, I wonder?”

We soon found out. The rest of them very soon excused themselves and went to bed, exactly as one might have predicted. As Raffles and I were about to do the same, Morgan, the only one left in the room apart from ourselves, said, “Mr. Raffles, I should be grateful for a word with you, and—” with a contemptuous look at me “—your friend.”

“Ah. I was rather expecting that,” said Raffles.

Morgan raised an eyebrow at this, but said nothing as he led us to his private study and closed the door. “You noticed my wife’s diamonds?” he asked, without even offering us a drink or a cigarette.

“I thought them rather fine,” agreed Raffles.

“I want you to steal them. Tomorrow will do.”

I think I must have leapt out of my chair, but Raffles never turned a hair. He lit a Sullivan, and said, “I do not think I heard you correctly, sir.”

“Oh, you heard me all right!” Morgan opened a drawer of his desk, and produced a sheet of paper. “I’ve watched your career with some interest, Mr. Raffles, and I don’t mean your cricket. It is rather odd that many of the house parties you have attended have been blighted with burglaries, is it not?”

Raffles shrugged a shoulder. “Scotland Yard have thought the same, as I understand it. But they have not thus far insulted me with a direct accusation.”

“Oh, I don’t deny that you’ve been clever,” Morgan conceded. “I might well have done the same as Scotland Yard and dismissed it as some monstrous coincidence. But, you see, I have something which Scotland Yard does not have.” And he waved the sheet of paper at us.

“Indeed?”

“Indeed, Mr. Raffles. Tell me, does the name —— mean anything to you?”

I started again, for the name he mentioned was that of a fence, a receiver of stolen goods, with whom Raffles had had dealings in the past.

Morgan nodded at me. “Your friend could do with some of your self-control, Mr. Raffles,” he said offensively. “I think we can drop the pretence.”

“Well, and suppose the name does mean anything? What does this mysterious person say?”

“Everything, Mr. Raffles, everything. Descriptions of the goods you sold him, dates and times, and prices.”



"Let me see if I interpret you correctly," said Raffles calmly. "You propose to keep this information to yourself, provided I steal your wife's diamonds?"

Morgan nodded affably. "Correct in every particular. If you don't, of course, then this—or not *this*, for this is merely a copy, the original is in that safe—" he nodded to a portrait on the wall—"and I don't think even *you* will open that, Mr. Raffles—the original, signed, sealed and notarized, will be with the police in a matter of days. In fact, you can keep this copy," and he threw the sheet of paper to Raffles, who caught it, glanced at it, put a match to it, and flung it, alight, into the large glass ashtray on Morgan's desk.

"But why do you want anyone to steal your wife's necklace?" I asked, puzzled.

It was Raffles who answered. "Because he's broke," he said quietly. "As broke as you or I, Bunny! Broker, if that's the right word. Those nasty rumours in the city are true, then. But he dare not admit it, even to his wife."

"But why theft?" I persisted. "Why make a fuss that is sure to involve the police? If I were in your position, I'd have a copy made and swap the two of them without—" I broke off, for Morgan had given a guilty start.

"You have such a copy?" asked Raffles.

Morgan started to speak, then got up, moved the picture and fiddled with the safe—making sure we could not see him as he did so—and threw a leather case on the desk. Raffles picked it up and opened it, whistled, and showed me the contents.

"They look real!" was all I could stammer.

"You —!" said Morgan with considerable contempt. "They ought to, since they cost a small fortune, for all that they're fakes. This is a new process, never been marketed, and it won't be, for I bought up the patents from the — fool who invented it. Only a jeweller, and a good one, could tell the difference."

"Then why steal the originals?" I persisted. "Why not just swap them? A lot less fuss and bother, you know."

Morgan gave a gasp, and looked away in disgust.

"He wants the insurance money, Bunny!" Raffles explained. "He wants to be paid twice, once by the insurance company, once by the fence to whom he will sell the stones. I shouldn't use —, though," he told Morgan quite seriously, "for he will cheat you. And then betray you," he added, steel in his voice. "Yes, Bunny. An ingenious enough scheme, if it does smack of greed and avarice. I had better take this," he said, hefting the fake necklace casually in his hand.

"No, you won't, you —!" and Morgan produced a wicked-looking little revolver, apparently from thin air.

"Consider!" said Raffles earnestly. "I steal the real necklace—for I



assure you that Bunny here is pure as the snow now driving against your window—and what will happen? The police will want to search everyone in the house, the innocent and the guilty. They will ask you to open the safe, and lo! The necklace—this necklace, that is, real to all outward appearances—is in there. They will immediately suspect an insurance fraud, and arrest you. You will, I give you my word, be far safer letting me take the fake as well as the real thing.”

Morgan jerked the barrel of the revolver in a menacing fashion. “Hand it over!” Raffles reluctantly did so, and Morgan went on, “All very clever, Mr. Raffles, but the police won’t search *anyone* in the house, not even you—for the simple reason that you will make it look as if the thieves came from outside. There have been one or two burglaries in the area just lately—real ones, sheer coincidence, nothing to do with me—and the police will assume that it is the same gang, an assumption which your fellow guests—excellent folk, all—will confirm is correct. Take your time, examine the house tomorrow, and do the job tomorrow night—I suggest when everyone’s in bed, my wife is a heavy sleeper, and I won’t disturb you if I hear you—but I’ll leave the time to your discretion. And I’ll leave the other little details, footprints in the snow, jemmied windows, and the rest of it, to you as well. I’m sure you know more about these things than I do,” he added offensively, putting the fake necklace back in the safe. “And for good measure, if there is any doubt in the minds of the local constabulary, I have the receipts and so on for the copy, and any decent jeweller will confirm that it *is* a copy. Call me sentimental if you will, but the fake did cost a good deal, and I don’t want to part with it.”

“Particularly as it looks so very real?” said Raffles quietly. “After all, why settle for two payments if you can get three? The average fence wouldn’t realize that that’s a fake, or not until it’s too late.”

Morgan laughed in his face. “I knew you were the boy! A man after my own heart! A great pity we didn’t meet sooner, for we might have worked together.”

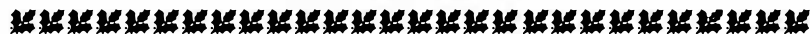
Raffles shuddered at the thought. “Very well, I agree, since I have no choice. You’ll give me the run of the house tomorrow to weigh things up?”

“Of course, as long as you’re discreet.”

“And when the job is done, you’ll hand over that statement?”

“Ah, I do not promise that, not just yet. I do promise that I won’t send it to the police, though. You see, it’s not altogether out of the question that I may need your specialist services again in the future, and as you observed, I’m a man who believes in insurance. I promise you one thing, though, Mr. Raffles. Double-cross me and the police will get that document!” He nodded at the door in silent and contemptuous dismissal.

“We’ll say good night, then,” said Raffles quietly, and he took my arm and led me out, telling me to be silent when I ventured to express some of what I felt about Mr. Morgan.



"What d'you think of our host now, Bunny?" he asked, his eyes sparkling, when we were safely in his room.

I told him. At some length, I fear.

"I tend to concur," said Raffles when I had stopped from sheer exhaustion. "Not a very nice man, as my old nurse would say."

"And mine usually added, 'Come away!'" I said. "But we can't very well, can we?"

"Not just at the moment." Raffles lit a cigarette. "You know, Bunny, those diamonds are the finest I've ever seen! And I mean to have them!"

"Well, then, take Lady Whitechurch's emeralds as well, could you?" I said sceptically. "I could use some cash myself."

"You know, I think I might. After all, no self-respecting burglar would take just one item, would he?"

It was said with such assurance that my scepticism vanished. But my awareness of the magnitude of the task did not. "And the other business? The document?"

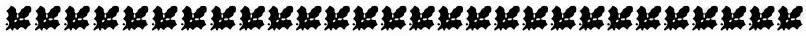
"Ah, yes, the document. That does present a problem. But don't you see, Bunny, that the problem of the document is quite different from the problem of the diamonds? In the first place, I'm by no means convinced that Morgan *won't* send the document to Scotland Yard, even if I do steal his precious necklace, because quite frankly he strikes me as a double-dealing, back-biting yellow cur of the worst sort. And even if he doesn't send it now and give us away, he won't hand it over to us, so what's to stop him calling on our 'services' at any time in the future? For his fortunes are sure to decline again, once the cash from this particular swindle is spent. And I for one don't relish the thought of being a sort of hired crook, an unpaid one at that. We're sure to run up against something that we can't and won't do, and then the document will land at Scotland Yard anyway, so it's simply a matter of deferring the inevitable. And then there's the question of the diamonds, Bunny—if we hand them over to Morgan, he'll keep the proceeds without any thought of sharing with us, and we still have our own bills to pay!" He smoked in silence for a moment or two, then went on, "Bunny, you're a good fellow, but I need to think this out by myself. Cut along to bed and get a decent night's sleep. And if you could, keep Morgan away as much as possible tomorrow, would you?"

"Away from what?" I asked.

"From me, of course! I'll need to think and observe, and I can't do that with him nearby."

I did as he suggested and went to bed, but I fear I did not get a decent night's sleep, or anything like it. I felt that we were damned if we did and damned if we didn't, and I could not honestly see even Raffles coming out of this with any honour, much less any profit.

I saw him only briefly at breakfast, and as I passed him he lowered his voice and said, "Remember!" The trouble was I did remember, I re-



membered that that was the last word Charles I said on the scaffold! A bad omen, I thought. In the event I did not have to keep Morgan occupied, for he kept out of the way pretty much all day, I rather suspected in order to avoid any suggestion that he had been seen with Raffles and myself if anything went wrong. I feared more and more as the day drew slowly and agonizingly to its close that something *would* go wrong. I tried to get Cynthia on her own, purely to break the monotony, but her wretched aunt insisted on playing gooseberry.

In the afternoon I excused myself from the game of cards that had been set up in the drawing room—"For fun only, strictly no gambling," and wouldn't you just know it, in that company?—and set off for a brisk walk to clear my head.

I went over the lawn and through the park, looking for Raffles but not seeing him anywhere, until I found a little wood with some farmland beyond. I was delighted to spot a hare, obviously as bored as I was myself, gambolling about in the snow, all on his own, perhaps getting into training for the boxing matches he would have with his rivals in love in a few weeks' time. I stood there entranced for a quarter of an hour and was startled when Raffles's voice whispered in my ear, "All bunnies together, eh?"

"A hare, Raffles, not a rabbit. And where the devil have you been, anyway?"

"Oh," he said vaguely, "getting the feel of the place, the lie of the land."

"And have you formed any plan, then?"

"An outline, my Bunny, an outline. It will need courage, though, and not a little luck. Has Morgan been obtrusive today?"

"Rather the reverse. I think he's avoiding us, in case—you know."

"I do indeed. Look here, can you try to keep him away from me this evening, if necessary?"

"Naturally. And is that all?"

He nodded. "You had best not appear in this at all, Bunny. Just in case."

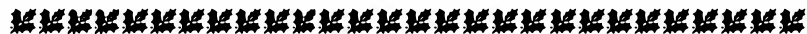
"I hardly think so!"

He gripped my arm. "Bunny, your courage is not, and never has been, in question. Don't you see I need a man on the outside in case of emergency? Your main task is to keep Morgan out of my hair, but also to be ready to use your initiative."

"Put like that, of course—"

"Good man! And now it is almost time for tea."

We returned to the house, but as soon as we entered, Raffles excused himself and vanished. I realized almost at once that he was starting his "plan," and in answer to a question from one of the others as to where he was, I made some noncommittal reply. He came into the room ten minutes after tea had been served, full of apologies for his lateness, and telling a charming story of having stopped longer than he had intended to watch a hare playing in the snow!



After tea Raffles pleaded a headache and vanished once more. There was no general movement to follow him upstairs, for it was that curious time that you get only in winter when tea is over but it is too early to think of changing for dinner, and all you want to do is sit in your armchair and gaze at the ever-darkening sky.

It was fully dark, and people were starting to light lamps here and there, and there was a shuffling as we thought of dinner and the attendant preparations, before Raffles turned up again. "Hello!" I said. "Feeling better?"

"Yes, thanks. I had fallen asleep, but I fancied I heard—" Raffles was standing by the door, having just come in. The rest of us had turned to look at him, as you do when someone enters the room, but as he broke off his sentence and stared down the room at the french window, we all turned back again to follow his gaze and were astounded to see the window standing open and just inside it two large men, both wearing black masks over their faces and both holding revolvers.

I cannot remember who said what. Someone said, "Damn!" and one of the ladies let out a little scream, but mostly we just stood or sat where we were, too surprised to do anything.

One of the men said, "Stay where you are and you won't get hurt," which was hardly original, but I suppose there is a set form for these things, and we stayed where we were accordingly, which is what he wanted. The speaker, evidently the leading light in the team, told his mate, "Keep 'em covered while I get the stuff," and made his way out past Raffles, obviously making for the bedrooms.

"This is deuced awkward," said Raffles, half to himself.

I stared at him, wondering if he had somehow arranged the whole thing himself. Was this part of his plan? I had not seen him all day, he could easily have gone into the village a mile away and sent a telegram or something. Only his face, a comical mixture of disbelief and chagrin, gave me pause. He caught me looking at him, shrugged, and laughed, much to the amazement of everyone else in the room.

After a very short while, as it seemed to me, there were heavy footsteps outside. The door flew open, and the burglar who had gone upstairs started into the room, pretty clearly in a bad temper. His way was blocked by Raffles, who spoke to him in a low voice. I was nearest to them, and fancied I heard Raffles say some such phrase as "something to your advantage," but I could not be certain. I am certain that the burglar hesitated a moment, then motioned with his revolver to Raffles to step out into the corridor. The two of them were out there no more than a minute, then they returned, Raffles first, the burglar, his good humour obviously restored, following.

"Anyone who steps outside in the next ten minutes will be shot," the burglar informed us, and then he and his still silent confederate made their way out through the french window.



"Telephone the police at once!" shouted Morgan to anyone who would listen.

"I think they will have cut the wires," said Raffles calmly, and this proved to be the truth.

Morgan's next suggestion was that someone—Raffles, me, the JP, the editor, the butler—should follow, for, as he said, "The —s won't be out there! They've made good their escape by now! It was an empty threat! There's not the slightest danger!"

"In that case," said the editor, speaking for the first time in my presence since I had been introduced to him, "in that case, why don't *you* go out there?"

Morgan subsided at that. But only for a moment, and then he demanded angrily of Raffles, "What the devil did you say to that chap?"

"Oh," said Raffles easily, "I merely said that since he had Mrs. Morgan's diamonds—that was what they came for, of course—there was no need to bother with things like our cuff links and signet rings. It would waste some considerable time, and they are really worth so little." Morgan snorted angrily at this, but Raffles went on just as calmly as ever, "And I persuaded him to leave Miss Cynthia's pearls with me," and he produced the string from his pocket and handed it to her.

"Thank you, Mr. Raffles! They're not valuable, I know, but they were my mother's." And she put them round her lovely neck.

"And now," said Raffles cheerfully, "I think the rest of you should check your belongings. They have the diamonds, and I strongly suspect they have Lady Whitechurch's emeralds—catch her, someone!" he added, as the lady fainted on hearing this—"but I couldn't say what else they might have taken."

Morgan made a gurgling noise and rushed out, returning a moment later to gasp, "The —s have rifled the safe!"

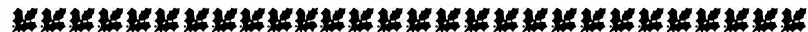
"Only to be expected," said Raffles, adding casually, "Anything valuable gone?"

Morgan choked and turned purple.

After ten minutes—and ten minutes seems an awfully long time under those circumstances—we did go outside, and of course the crooks were long gone. Then the butler had to go into the village for the local constable, who had to telephone the sergeant, who had to call Scotland Yard. I think there is no need to describe the comings and goings, the questions and answers. The police seemed convinced that the two men were that gang that had committed the other robberies round about, and none of us seemed disposed to contradict that view.

It was not until the early hours of the morning that anyone managed to think about bed. I pushed Raffles into his room and shut the door firmly. "What did go on between you and that burglar chap?" I asked him. "Was he part of your plan?"

"Do you suspect that I lied, then?"



I looked for a weapon, but found only Raffles's silver-backed hair-brush. "I could mark you with this, though," I told him.

He laughed and lit a cigarette. "Well, then. No, he and his mate were most definitely *not* part of my plan. In fact, I was never more startled in my life than when they walked through that French window! As for what I said, I simply told him that I knew he had not found Mrs. Morgan's diamonds."

"Oh? And—"

"I knew that," he said patiently, "because of course I had taken them myself, about ten minutes earlier."

"Oh!"

"I confessed my crime, but said that rather than face exposure and social ruin I would surrender my spoils."

"And you did?"

"Oh, yes. But I really did ask him to leave Miss Cynthia's pearls, and he agreed. Said he'd only taken them because there was nothing else remotely of value upstairs or in the safe."

"So he *did* crack the safe? I thought that might have been you! He must have recognized the fake for what it was, which is logical, I suppose, him being an expert as it were." I caught Raffles's cynical eye upon me as I bumbled on, and asked, "Wait, though—what about the emeralds? Did he not take those?"

"I took those at the same time as I took the diamonds, of course. Be sensible, Bunny!"

"And you still have the emeralds?"

"Oh, yes. The burglars didn't know about those, you see, it was the Morgan diamonds they were after."

"Well, we have something out of it," I said grudgingly. "A pity you had to hand the diamonds over!"

"Bunny, my Bunny! I did not hand the diamonds over, as you so engagingly put it."

"No? But—"

"I handed over the fakes, which I had taken from the safe even earlier today. Morgan rather overrated the difficulty of opening the safe, by the way."

I was still puzzled. "But I thought you said the crooks had opened the safe?"

"They did, the second time. And found it empty, as I had already taken the fakes."

"And the incriminating document?"

"If you examine my grate," said Raffles, nodding at the fire, "you may find traces of its ashes, though I doubt it."

"I confess I am not entirely with you, Raffles. Just what was your plan?"

He sighed. "I had made some preparations during the day. I bor-



rowed some boots from the hall cupboard and made some very convincing tracks in the snow. I then jemmied a side window, which the police did not notice, since of course they knew the thieves had come and gone through the french window. Just before tea, I opened the safe and took the fake necklace and the document from it, leaving the empty jewel case.”

“Yes. Why? I mean, I can see why you took the document, but why the fake diamonds?”

“To give to Morgan, of course. Don’t interrupt. When I had finished my tea, I said I had a headache. I went upstairs and took the real diamonds, and Lady Whitechurch’s emeralds. Now, I had intended to place the real stones in the safe—”

“Good Lord!”

“Well, can you think of a safer place? No pun intended. You see, Bunny, I did not share Morgan’s touching faith in the police being fooled by the scheme he had concocted. I fully expected the police to search everyone here, and thoroughly at that. The police would perhaps not examine the safe, but if they did do so, and the real stones—not to speak of the Whitechurch emeralds—were in the safe, then it would be Morgan whom the police arrested, not us. If, as I thought likely, the police did not check the safe, then all would be well. I intended to give the fake necklace—which I planned to put in a temporary hiding place when people went upstairs—to Morgan, and I imagined that he would put it straight in the safe.”

“Wouldn’t he see the real stones?”

“The theft would be detected about the time I handed the fakes to Morgan, and there would be the devil of a fuss, so I did not think he would examine them too closely. But then I had also planned to put the real diamonds in the empty jewel case. The safe was full of papers, and I planned to bury the emeralds under those. Of course, if he went through the safe he would be sure to see them, but they would not be obvious to a casual glance, and I could not believe that Morgan would stand there going through the safe with us in the room, even if the theft were not discovered! He might look at the supposed fakes when I handed them over, and even compare them with the supposed real diamonds, but what of that? He would see minor differences, if he saw any, but that would only make him more convinced of the quality of the fakes! After all, he would expect to see two sets of diamonds in the safe, and that is what he would see. But as I read it, he would lock the safe immediately once the fakes were back inside it and try not to mention its very existence to the police, try to forget he had a safe, until the fuss had died down, for he dared not risk its being searched by the police. And that was all I wanted. All I needed was for the stones to be undetected for a few hours, as long as the police were in the house, in fact.”

“But I still don’t see the point! All you would have done was to en-



sure that the fake diamonds, the real diamonds, and the emeralds were all together in the safe, instead of just the fake diamonds!"

"Ah, but I never intended to leave them in there! I planned to return at my leisure, when the police had left, having searched the place—and us—and proved us guiltless. I confess that when I took the real diamonds I toyed with the notion of leaving Mrs. M. the fakes in their place, but I dismissed the idea. With the document gone, Morgan would know that I had been into his safe anyway. And then I did not want him to have even the consolation of selling the fakes for what he could get! And for good measure, I had an idea the fakes might prove useful in the future. A pity I had to hand them over to that burglar chap, but it really could not be helped, Bunny."

"I begin to see your plan. And Morgan could hardly complain that the jewels—real or fake—had gone, not when the theft had already been investigated and he had claimed the insurance money!"

"You read my mind, Bunny. And with that incriminating document gone, we were safe. Of course, my plan was but half complete. I went downstairs with the real diamonds, the fake diamonds, and the emeralds, all variously disposed about my person. I planned to put in an appearance, then when people went up to change for dinner, I would put the real stones in the safe and the fakes somewhere else. But it was then that things went awry, or seemed to, because it was then that those crooks—and I swear they were nothing to do with me—appeared. As I say, I foisted them off with the fakes."

"But the real stones? You had not put them in the safe, you say? Incidentally, Raffles, I think I might have improved upon your plan! I should have taken the real stones first and made only one visit to the safe instead of two!"

Raffles laughed. "You give me more credit—and less—than I deserve! I was making the 'plan' up more or less as I went along, you see. It was largely a matter of timing. I could not go upstairs for the real jewels until everyone came down for tea—but I could open the safe. And the main thing, the vital thing, was that damned document! Jewels or no jewels, I had to have that document, Bunny! As I said, I toyed with the idea of leaving the fakes, and only settled on leaving the real stones in the safe at the last minute. There was simply no time. I still had the stones, the fake and the real, in my pockets. And come to that, excepting the fakes, I still have!" And with that, he drew diamonds from his left pocket and emeralds from his right.

I put a hand to my forehead. "Suppose the police had searched us?"

Raffles laughed. "And why should they, when everyone had seen the crooks make off through the french windows? For all that, Bunny, I am happy that it was not our old friend Inspector Mackenzie whom Scotland Yard sent. He *would* have insisted on searching us, I fancy! And that would have been the end. Still, all's well that ends well, Bunny."



Not for the first time during our short stay I slept badly, and Inspector Mackenzie, our old adversary, found his flatfooted way into my dreams. I was pleased when the hour of our departure came. The other guests had left a little before, but Raffles seemed in no great hurry. In vain I urged haste, but he merely smiled and said "All in good time."

And then, just as we were about to leave the house, Morgan came in, that damned little revolver pointed at us again!

"Oh, really!" said Raffles with a sigh.

"If you would?" Morgan gestured with the barrel, and we moved into the billiard room to be greeted by none other than Mackenzie himself and a couple of his associates!

"You're not leaving without being searched," Morgan told us.

"I have no objection to Inspector Mackenzie searching me," said Raffles in a bored tone, "but I refuse to have you present."

Morgan blustered, but Mackenzie backed Raffles, somewhat to my surprise, and our erstwhile host had to leave.

I confess I was trembling, though Raffles, as always, was serene and untroubled. How could he be so calm, I asked myself, with the diamonds and emeralds concealed about him? Mackenzie did search us, and downright thoroughly, but without success. It was the turn of our luggage next, and I trembled anew, and with increased vigour. The stones must be found now! Still, at least the personal search was over, and I had been able to put my trousers back on before we were arrested!

But Mackenzie found nothing. He emptied our bags, searched our meagre belongings, examined the linings of the bags, even emptied Raffles's tobacco pouch, all to no avail.

"Well," said Mackenzie, obviously as baffled as I was myself, "I'm very sorry, gentlemen, but Mr.—" he emphasized the word "*—Mr.*" Morgan insisted, and my superiors listen to him."

"For the moment?" suggested Raffles quietly.

"Ah, we have our eye on him, I'll not deny it. There are stories, you know. Just a little bit of proof, that would be enough for me. But getting that bit of proof, that's another matter."

Mackenzie and his merry men escorted us to the station—"Just for the look of it," as Mackenzie said—and we all travelled back to London together, Mackenzie growing philosophical as he smoked some of Raffles's tobacco, and telling us that it was very likely the same gang that had committed the other robberies in the neighbourhood.

"I daresay you're right," said Raffles. "Look here, Mr. Mackenzie, you and I have had our differences, I'll not deny it, but if you had a Bible about you, I'd swear here and now that I have nothing to do with those burglars. No one in that room was more startled than I when they appeared."

"I'll testify to that!" I said without thinking.



Mackenzie laughed. "I don't dispute it," said he, and we parted the best of friends.

I returned to the Albany with Raffles in no very happy mood, despite our having evaded Mackenzie's grasp. "I don't know how you knew we'd be searched, though!" I said, when we were alone.

"Oh, I told you that I mistrusted Morgan. I did not expect Mackenzie, though, I'll grant you that. However, I did fully expect Morgan to hold us up and search us, for I knew that he thought the burglary a put-up job, and so I got rid of the stones."

"A pity, Raffles! It will be a miserable Christmas now! Still, we had a decent dinner, though the company wasn't very congenial. Better than porridge in a police cell! And it was a good breakfast."

"Yes, I noticed you stoking up on the kippers, Bunny. Perhaps just a light lunch?"

"It'll be all light lunches, and dinners too, unless any of my editors are feeling generous!"

"My treat," said Raffles. "But nothing to drink, mind."

"Oh?"

"We need clear heads for tonight, and our return to Oxfordshire."

I stared at him.

"Bunny, Bunny! I know you are not the quickest of men, but you are inordinately slow just now. I mean to burgle Morgan's safe, of course."

"But—oh! That's where you hid the jewels?"

"Last night, when all the little rabbits—and snakes—were asleep. As I say, I did not trust Morgan an inch."

"But suppose he checks the safe?"

"I do not think he will, for he knows, or thinks, rather, that there is nothing of value left in it. But suppose he does? I hardly think that he will inform his wife, and Lady Whitechurch, and his insurers, that all is well, do you? No, he will be puzzled, no doubt of that, but delighted, too. And I fancy his delight, and his greed, will far outweigh his puzzlement. He will leave the stones where they are. Oh, he may think it as well to move them as soon as possible, lest we—or our business rivals—return, but it is the holiday season, and besides, he dare not take them openly to the bank. No, he will leave them where they are, in the unlikely event that he discovers them. In any case, I don't think he will expect us to return so soon!"

In the event, our return visit was something of an anticlimax. We lurked in the shrubbery until the last light had been extinguished, then broke in using the side window that Raffles had jemmied the previous evening—the butler had evidently not thought it worth bolting the stable door, so to speak—opened the safe, and took the stones, which were, Raffles whispered, quite undisturbed. We did ten miles in a little over two hours and caught a workman's train at five in the morning at a little wayside halt.



After breakfast, Raffles vanished with the stones, to return after lunch with a satisfied smile on his face.

"All done?" I asked.

"In the bank, Bunny, metaphorically and literally. I'll give you a cheque for your share in a moment."

"I trust you didn't use ——?" I said laughing, naming the man who had betrayed us to Morgan.

Raffles frowned. "Certainly not. I had all but forgotten him. I wonder how best he should be handled? Perhaps—" He broke off and gazed at the door of his bedroom. Putting a finger to his lips, he stood up and started towards the door, only to stop in his tracks as it was opened.

Our old friend, the senior burglar, stepped into the room. He wore his mask, but there could be no mistaking either him or the small revolver he pointed at us.

"Another small but wicked-looking revolver, Bunny!" sighed Raffles. "Are people giving them as Christmas presents this year, I wonder?"

Our uninvited guest placed the revolver on a table. "To establish my good faith, gents," he said, with an awkward little bow.

Raffles picked up the gun, glanced at it, and handed it back. "It is duly established," he said.

The burglar put the gun in one pocket and took a chamois leather bag from another. "We were both done!" he said shortly, throwing the bag to Raffles.

Raffles took out the necklace—the fake, of course—and examined it closely before passing it to me. "Bunny?"

"Fakes?" I said, putting what surprise I could into the word. "They are very lifelike."

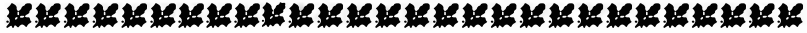
"Too — true!" said our guest. "I was fooled, but my fence wasn't. You can have that as a souvenir, if you like." And he turned to go.

"One moment," said Raffles. "I happen to know that the man from whom you—we—took these stones has claimed from his insurers as if they were genuine. Honest crooks I don't mind, but fraud is another thing altogether." He picked up pen and paper. "I happen to know the firm is the Northern Midland, and I think, yes—The enclosed, the subject of a claim against you by H. H. B. Morgan, Esq., and which came recently into my hands, may interest you.' That will suffice, I imagine, for insurers are astute men. A cardboard box, a little brown paper—so! I'll post that tomorrow."

"I'll do it on my way home," offered our guest. "There are such things as postmarks, you know."

"That is very civil of you," said Raffles. "And you really had no need to go to so much trouble. Perhaps this will compensate you somewhat—" and a rustle of banknotes completed the sentence.

"You're a good 'un!" said our guest with admiration.



“Before you go, the fence who rejected the stones was not by any chance —, was it?” and he mentioned our betrayer.

“Not — likely! Only a — fool ’ud trust ’im!”

“I trusted him,” said Raffles quietly, “and he betrayed me to my enemy.”

“Did he, now?”

“I was not after those stones by accident, nor yet of my own accord. It was suggested to me that I steal them.”

“I see.”

“And where a man betrays once, he can easily do so again. It occurred to me that perhaps some of —’s friends might care to have a word with him, show him the error of his ways?”

“Yes, I—his friends, I mean—might just do that small thing.” Our guest nodded and let himself out, presumably via the window through which he had entered.

“You were not quite honest, you know, Raffles,” I said. “You as much as suggested that — told you to steal the stones, not Morgan.”

“Did I give that impression? The two are well matched, Bunny, and they both deserve whatever is coming to them.”

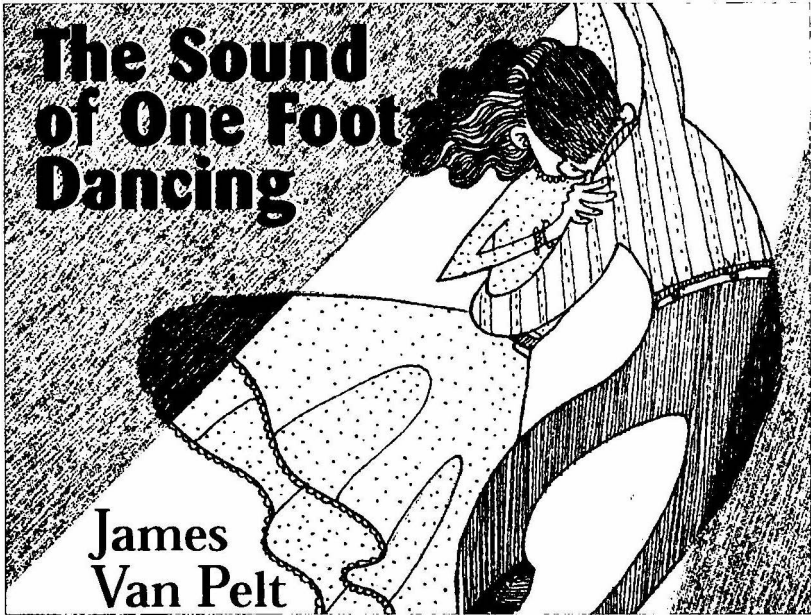
“And another thing, Raffles—that burglar chap knows who we are! You, at any rate. How on earth did he know that? And aren’t you afraid he will use that knowledge against us at some time?”

Raffles shrugged. “As to who we are, he probably made enquiries of the butler, or somebody in the local pub. Assuming the butler was not in on the robbery, of course, and that wouldn’t surprise me in the least! Betray us? I hardly think so, Bunny. Didn’t you see his face when I mentioned — and his betrayal of us? Honour among thieves, Bunny, that’s the watchword.” And he lit another Sullivan and laughed at my expression.

The insurers were interested in the fake necklace, very interested indeed. They called in Scotland Yard, and Mackenzie himself arrested Morgan for insurance fraud. The day after the news of the arrest broke, the shares in the Megalithic Trust began to slide; when trading resumed after the holiday, dealings in the shares were suspended; ten days into the new year the firm went bust, and Mackenzie’s investigation was widened to include all Morgan’s business dealings. And at the spring assizes, Morgan was sentenced to ten years in the Dartmoor quarries.

The fence who had betrayed Raffles simply disappeared. I gather that the police view was that he had feared their attentions and had left the country to escape detection, but I rather fancy that the squalid alleys and rotting wharfs by the London river could tell a different tale.

All was not unrelieved gloom and despondency, though. Raffles and I—and the unknown burglar, too, I have no doubt—had a very merry Christmas, and a prosperous start to the New Year. □



I shook the chains holding the soundstage's side doors locked, then started the long walk through the darkened studio to check the front. The day had been a full one. Mr. Sandrich, the director, had the crew knock down the Lincoln Day set and assemble the 4th of July one. He didn't like three of the flats, and they had to be redone. The dancers and extras got antsy, and all the while reporters were trying to get in to interview Fred Astaire about how he felt about yesterday's declaration of war. In the meantime, one of our cameramen had a son on the *Arizona*, and he didn't come to work because the navy hadn't told him whether his boy was alive or not, so I doubled as studio security and camera grip. I'd been thinking about quitting, you know, joining the war effort and all.

It was three in the morning, and I should have been going home myself, but a percussive tapping from the Holiday Inn set kept me here. Tired as I was, I had to smile. Astaire was practicing by himself again. It didn't matter when Sandrich called the day, Astaire stayed to work. I'd heard he weighed a hundred and forty pounds when the picture started. The Paramount doctor said he was down to one twenty-six and prescribed thick steaks, which were delivered from the commissary every night at seven. He hardly touched them.

The front doors were locked, so I found a chair in the dark beside the set and watched Fred Astaire dance. Only one overhead spot was turned on that isolated him in its lighted circle. His hands were in his pockets,



and he danced with only one foot. The taps flew briskly, different rhythms, slow at first, a quick rattle, then a steady syncopation. He switched, so now his other foot beat out a rhythm. His head was down. I'd seen him do this before, a dancer's warmup. Soon, he started moving on the stage, more ice skating than dancing, in and out of the light.

I relaxed into the seat. The steady tapping of his flashing feet lulled me and excited me too. No one could be so tired that watching Fred Astaire wouldn't wake him. Without music, he made tunes. Without a partner, he made a duet. His hands were out, practicing one side of a routine I recognized. It was the part from *Flying Down to Rio* where he and Ginger Rogers danced across seven white grand pianos. He hummed the tune, turning, turning, dipping and sliding, in the light and out. I could almost see Ginger, dress flying, anticipating his moves. He'd told me once, "Of course Ginger was able to accomplish sex through dance. We told more through our movements instead of the big clinch. We did it all through dance."

Astaire accelerated. His feet hardly touched the stage, while his tapping seemed not to come from him, but to be an accompaniment. I'd seen him dance many nights, but not like this, one hand curled around an invisible waist, the other in the air, holding an invisible hand. Round and round. Through the light, brilliantly lit, and then back to the dark, a gray shape swirling, tapping, humming his musical part.

Then, he stopped. "Where'd you go?" he said, his voice echoing in the empty studio. "Where'd you go?"

I cleared my throat. He jumped. He didn't know I'd been watching. "Where'd who go, Mr. Astaire?"

"Is that you, Pop?" He shaded his eyes from the spot and peered toward me.

"Yes, sir. Nice dancing, sir."

"Where'd the girl go?" He looked at his empty hand, puzzled.

"Girl, sir? We're alone. Studio's locked up."


"There was a girl . . . about yea tall. Dark hair. Round face." His voice trailed off. "We were dancing."

I stood, my skin as cold as marble. "You must be tired, sir. It's time to go home."

He looked at me, his forehead and cheeks white in the spot, his eyes deeply shadowed. Then he glanced behind him as if he'd heard a noise. "I was holding a girl, I could have sworn . . ."

I rattled my keys. "It's been a long day, Mr. Astaire. I'll open the door for you."

When he was gone, I crossed the cavernous space, past the Valentine Day's set, through the little tree-lined road for the carriage ride, where Bing Crosby sang "Easter Parade" to Marjorie Reynolds, through the Holiday Inn set—the Christmas tree was next to the piano; they'd do the "White Christmas" bit this week—and then to the north doors.



They were secure, I knew they were, but I checked them anyway. When I came to *the* door, my hand trembled. The big deadlock turned stiffly—the door wasn't used much—and I pushed it open with my shoulder. Outside in the California night I saw a narrow alley, a low wall, and on the other side, shining in the starlight, the glistening mausoleums and tombstones of the Hollywood Memorial Cemetery. Rudolph Valentino is buried there, and so is Douglas Fairbanks. I also saw Lillian's grave, not so new now, tucked away inconspicuously next to the gaudier displays.

Lillian, who answered a call for dancers last year, who lined up with the rest, who made the first cut because she wasn't too tall, or too short, or too fat, who waited for her chance to dance, and when they called her name she stood, took her spot on the stage, put her hands on her hips, poised for the music to begin, like a thousand other girls over the years. I watched her because I always watch the dancers' auditions. Except this time, for this girl, before the music started, she swayed and fell.

I sighed. Lots of girls faint. They stand around all day, their hopes in their throats, and then their turn comes. So I walked forward, fingering the smelling salts in my pocket. She'd come to, another embarrassed performer. But she didn't. The studio doctor got there within minutes. The other dancers, all hopefuls, surrounded us.

"She's gone," the doctor said.

A dancer shrieked. "It was just sleeping pills! It couldn't have killed her."

I learned that day how strong, how *obsessive*, the Hollywood dream is. Lillian had looked like a shoe-in for the part. If she flubbed her audition, then the other dancer thought she'd have a better chance, so she'd slipped her the drugs.

The doctor told me later, "Lillian must have had a weak heart, Pop, for her to collapse that way."

I don't know what killed her, but I don't believe it was a weak heart. Not *her* heart.

Lillian's tombstone glowed grayly among the others. There's something in the real dancers, like Fred Astaire, that won't quit, some steel-barred determination that keeps them on their feet long after the rest have gone to bed. I looked up and down the alley, the door's handle cool under my hand. "Go to sleep," I said into the empty night. "Go to sleep, Lillian. Quit coming back."

Most of the soundstages at Paramount have a haunt or two. It's an old studio. The first film was shot here in 1917, De Mille's *The Squaw Man*. Valentino shot *The Sheik* here in 1921, and *Wings*, which won the first ever Academy Award for best picture, was filmed here in 1927. Casts by the hundreds have come through Paramount's gates. All those dreamers filming dreams. But doors swing open on empty stages.



Equipment moves. An actress can walk from one spot to another ten feet away and suddenly shiver. "It's so cold here," she'll say, her hands wrapped round her arms.

I saw Lillian the first time a week after she died, her back to me, standing in an open door. "You can't be here, Miss. We're closed," I said. Then she turned, and I recognized her as she faded away. She returned two or three times a week, looking sad. I followed her once, walking slowly from set to set. At the end she met my eyes. I blinked, and she was gone.

I asked around. None of the other security guards knew about her. Only me. I thought, why me? Why do I always see her? Was it because I held her head as she died on the stage, so young, so unfulfilled, still waiting for her musical cue? Was that it?

When I returned to the soundstage at noon, filming had already been going for four hours. Jimmy, the morning guard, told me that Astaire was waiting at the gates at six and danced for two hours before the rest of the cast arrived. Firecrackers popped within the studio.

"He's doing the 4th of July routine again?" I asked.

Jimmy shook his head, then nodded. "The man's unstoppable."

There was applause as I approached the set. The camera crew and extras clapped. Astaire stood in the middle of the stage surrounded by wisps of firecracker smoke. "Not right yet. Let's shoot it again," he said. Then he took his starting position behind the curtains.

Mr. Sandrich looked like he wanted to say something, but he swallowed the thought, shrugged, and said, "Cue the music. Take twenty-one. Cameras, action."

Astaire came through the curtains, all movement and rhythm and timing. This was supposed to be a spontaneous routine. In the story, Marjorie Reynolds, his partner, doesn't show up and two important Hollywood executives are in the audience. He grabs a handful of pocket torpedoes, and as he dances, he throws them against the ground, an explosive counterpoint to his own pyrotechnics. It's the most amazing dance routine I'd ever seen.

He turns. Bam! He skips twice, does a half pirouette. Bam! Bam! He lights an entire string of firecrackers, then dances among the explosions. All to the music. All looking like he was making it up on the spot. It was stunning.

When he finished, he didn't even appear to be breathing hard. Everyone applauded again. My hands stung with enthusiasm.

"No. It's still not right. Let's do it again." He disappeared behind the curtains.

A familiar voice said over my shoulder, "Pop, he's getting so thin, I could spit through him."

"Yes, sir, Mr. Crosby."

He shook his head in wonder as he walked away toward the sound-proof practice rooms. Martha Mears, Miss Reynolds's voice double, was

with him. They'd been working on the harmonies for "White Christmas" since last week.

All in all, Astaire did the firecracker routine for the cameras thirty-eight times and it was late at night before he said it was good enough. Only the essential crew members were left in the studio.

"Go home, boys," he said. "I want to get in another step or two."

The lights shut down, except for the spot he'd danced to the night before. I checked the doors. In the year since she'd died, I'd never seen Lillian dance. She walked or stood. She found me, then locked her eyes on mine, straining to communicate a mute message from beyond her grave I never understood.

Tapping came from the stage again. One foot.

"Hey, Pop," he said as I took a seat in the dark. "Let's see if we can get a curtain call from our mystery dancer."

He beat out his complicated, one-footed rhythm, hands deep in his pockets. "You know, my character in the film is searching for a dance partner." He changed to the other foot without breaking the beat. It scraped, skipped, heel-toed, variation on variation. "I know what it's like to look for a partner. One dance. One supreme dance to glory." He sounded whimsical. "Sometimes when the music starts, it's like . . . well, it's like . . ." He trailed into silence, his eyes tracking offstage. "Ahh," he sighed.

I couldn't see her! Why couldn't I see her? Astaire glided to center stage. Offered his hand. Curled the other around the small of her invisible back.

I've seen Astaire dance with Ginger Rogers, with Eleanor Powell, Rita Hayworth, and Grace Kelly. He's redefined what a human can do with his body to music. But I'd never seen a dance like this. Not before. Not since.

And they danced. The room grew cold. Not just a spot, but the whole studio, thousands of square feet. My exhalations were frosty plumes. I found that I was crying, the tears freezing on my cheeks. I suddenly felt like an intruder, a peeping Tom. I left. I Walked through the Holiday Inn interior. The Christmas tree glittered in the little light. Bing Crosby's pipe lay on the piano top. I could almost hear him singing, "I'm dreaming of a white Christmas . . . where children listen to hear sleigh bells in the snow."

Then I exited. Now I stood in the Holiday Inn exterior. Impossibly, the snow machine above turned on. Oatmeal flakes tumbled down around me. I was freezing in a fake snowstorm while Fred Astaire danced with the ghost of a dead girl who never made it into the pictures.

I unlocked a north door. Crossed the alley. Leapt the low wall, then walked home through the Hollywood Memorial Cemetery. I never went back to the studio. I mailed my resignation.

They released *Holiday Inn* in August of 1942. A Japanese U-boat shelled a Santa Barbara oil refinery in January. Corregidor fell in May.



We beat the Japs at Coral Sea and again at Midway, but the losses were terrible. I tried to enlist. The army wasn't interested in a prematurely gray, heavy, flat-footed thirty-two-year-old ex-security guard.

In September, finally, I went to see the movie. Someone told me that they'd seen me in the film, and I remembered that on a lark they'd used me in one scene. Didn't even change my name. I'm standing at a security door when the filming of the final *Holiday Inn* sequence starts, and I tell Fred Astaire and his agent they can't come in. I have one line. Behind the door, Bing Crosby and Marjorie Reynolds finally get together. If you watch the movie, you'll see me.

But that's not what's important.

I settled into the theater seat. The movie was pretty popular. That song, "White Christmas," just seemed perfect for our boys overseas, but this was a weekday matinee, and I almost had the house to myself.

It's a sweet story. I'd almost forgotten. Bing Crosby loses his girl to Fred Astaire, and then he has a bad go of it as a farmer, then he tries show business again at *Holiday Inn*, a nightclub only open on holidays. Crosby meets Reynolds, and they fall in love, only to have Astaire come along and try to steal her, too. I waited for the 4th of July number. How would it play on the screen? Would anyone see that Astaire used thirty-eight takes to look like he'd made it up on the spot?

The scene approached. There's an ensemble song and dance number before Astaire's firecracker routine. I was watching, my eyes half closed. A line of girls comes onto the stage from one side, a line of guys from the other. They're singing a patriotic tune about the Fourth. The guys group at the back of the stage singing the bass line. Half the girls split off into the audience; the other half, six girls, have formed three pairs, backs to the camera. The first pair faces the audience to sing, "Let's salute our native land." The next pair turns, "Roman candles in each hand." Then the last pair sings, "While the Yankee doodle band."

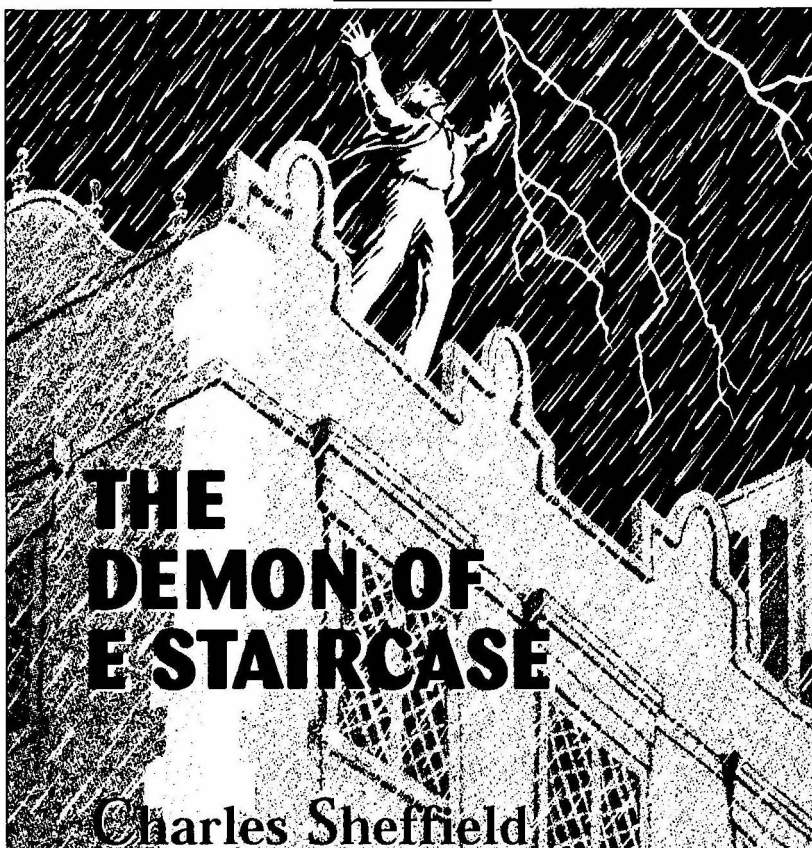
I don't hear any more. I'm standing in the theater, pointing at the screen. The girl on the right is Lillian. She sings and dances through the rest of the scene. It's Lillian. Astaire danced her right into the movie. He got her a part. Rent the video if you don't believe me.

I never saw Fred Astaire again.

After Astaire died at eighty-eight, Mikhail Baryshnikov said, "It's no secret we hate him. He gives us complexes because he's too perfect. His perfection is an absurdity."

They buried him at Oakwood Memorial Park not far from Ginger Rogers's grave.

I wish they'd put him at Hollywood Memorial, where his real partner rests, the one who danced her way into *Holiday Inn*. The only one light enough on her feet to match him, step for step.



THE DEMON OF THE STAIRCASE

Charles Sheffield

After the thunderstorm of the previous evening the skies had cleared. The passengers on the coach were riding aloft until the interior, which despite all efforts had admitted rivulets during last night's torrent, dried out.

The two men provided an odd contrast. The thin one huddled inside a greatcoat and shivered slightly in spite of the warm June morning. The fat man by his side, also in his middle forties, bounced in his seat like a child and leaned forward as the coach approached the crest of each hill, seeking spires

amid the gentle rise and fall of the East Anglian landscape.

"Close to twenty-five years since I first came here, Jacob," he said. "A man changes a great deal in a quarter of a century. Yet would you believe it, I still feel the nervousness of a young lad within my belly? Though the feeling is, to be sure, a good deal less."

"While the belly, Erasmus, is to be sure a good deal more." Jacob Pole leaned forward a little, caught by his companion's eagerness to see the town ahead. "Is it Cambridge that excites you, or is

it the prospect of the exhibition and lecture?"

Erasmus Darwin smiled, revealing the absence of front teeth. "No doubt it is b-both." As often when he was at ease, his voice had a slight stammer. "If rumors are correct, our good captain has returned a host of novel plant and animal forms from his voyage to the Pacific, and greater marvels yet from the vast terra incognita in the far south. Who would not be excited?"

"I perhaps less than you." Pole, satisfied that their destination still lay some distance ahead, leaned back in his seat and nestled down again inside his thick coat. "I sailed the South Seas more than once, seeking my own variety of novelties, but what I brought back was less than marvelous."

Darwin had at breakfast caught the slight tremor in the other man's hands and read its meaning. He patted the wooden chest sitting at his side. "I have Jesuits' bark here, should you feel the need for it."

Jacob Pole shook his head. "This is no more than a minor fit, brought on by the cold and damp of last night's storm. Give me time and warmth and I will be good as new. But what of your friend who waits for us? The storm delayed us, and we are already late. Are you not uneasy, imposing so on his time and hospitality?"

Darwin was pleased at the change of subject. There was no point in voicing his own fears, that his companion's worldwide quest for treasure had permanently damaged his health and

would doom him to an untimely death. "Be we late or be we early, you need have no worries about our reception by Collie Wentworth. Twenty-three years ago, when we were both undergraduates, he became convinced that I had saved his life."

"And had you?"

"I doubt it. He had been drinking when I pulled him from the river, but others were about. Had it not been me, it would have been someone else."

"And his gratitude continues yet?"

"It is more than that. Collie is the kindest and best-natured of mortals. Permit him his pipe and his glass, and he will wait if we are late a full day, and never say a word against any man."

Jacob Pole nodded, and the two lapsed into the silence of comfortable familiarity, the only sound the steady clip-clop of the horses' hooves and the tuneless whistling of the coach driver on his seat a few feet below. They came to and breasted a final long hill, descended until they crossed the old stone bridge over the River Cam, and turned right into St. John's Street. The great gates of the college were closed. Darwin, nimble for a man of his bulk, swung down from the coach's upper level and gave Pole a helping hand.

He stared up at the carved decorations above the double doors. "Ah, they carry me back. But it is odd to find the main gates closed at this time of day. Come on."

Leaving the coachman to transport their bags to the court-

yard, he led Jacob Pole through the narrow inset door and into the stone forecourt beside the Porter's Lodge. There Darwin again stood frowning about him in perplexity.

"Wentworth's message said that he would be waiting here to meet us at noon, which is already passed. I see no sign of him, which is not perhaps surprising if he is eating lunch. But, much stranger, there is no one in the Porter's Lodge." He walked forward and stared around the open rectangle of First Court, with its precise squares of close-clipped green lawn. "Or, for that matter, anywhere else. At this time of year one expects few students—but not a college deserted. In my years of study here, I never saw this court so empty of people."

An archway at the end of First Court led to Second Court, with Third Court beyond it and then the river. Darwin again moved forward, into a passageway with the dining hall on the right and the kitchen and buttery on the left. As though confident of what he would find, he turned into the buttery. Sure enough, four men were seated at one of the rough wooden tables, full glasses in front of them and a round covered dish on the table end. They sat close, heads together and talking earnestly.

"No need to stand up." Darwin waved a fleshy hand. "We are seeking Mr. Wentworth, a Senior Fellow of this college. He was to meet us by the front gate, but he was not there and the court seemed . . . unusually empty."

Despite the invitation to remain seated, the four men shot to their feet.

"Excuse me, sirs." The only one of the four not wearing a striped apron took a step forward. "You came to see Mr. Wentworth, you say. May I tell him your name?"

"I am Erasmus Darwin. My companion is Colonel Jacob Pole. As I said, he is expecting us."

"Very good, sir. I will inform him." The man headed for the door, but hesitated there. "Things at the college today are, as you might say, not usual. Begging your pardon, sirs, but would you be good enough to remain here in the buttery until I return with Mr. Wentworth? I'll be quick as I can." He turned as he went out. "George, hospitality for these gentlemen."

"Yes, yes." A man with a girth to rival Darwin's stepped forward. "Beer, sirs, or cider?"

"Apple juice, unfermented, for me. Jacob?"

"The same will do." Pole watched as all three men hurried away into the room beyond the buttery. "Erasmus, what the blazes is this? We come for a talk about empty places on the map and instead we find an empty college."

"I do not know. But whatever is going on, we won't hear it from these men."

"How do you know?"

"For one thing, they are not students, but college servants. They should not be drinking in the college buttery. For another, look at their faces—but say nothing."

The three men were returning. One carried a metal jug and two

pewter tankards, the others each bore a covered dish. They laid them down, gave nods that were almost bows, and hurried out without a word.

"Fear?" asked Pole.

"To the point of terror." Darwin removed the lids from the dishes and grunted approval at what he saw. "Veal pie and game pie. We will not starve, even though it take a while to locate Wentworth. But fear it was, mortal fear. Did you not see them start when we entered and I spoke? It was as though you had put a sword through each of them."

Pole poured apple juice, cool from cellar storage, and drank deep. He sighed in satisfaction, laid down the tankard, and said, "I've had many remarks about my appearance, but never that it would frighten grown men. What's your explanation?"

"I have none." Darwin removed a knife from his coat, cut a substantial wedge of game pie, and sniffed it. "Excellent." He took a bite and said in muffled tones, "Explanations without facts are like fears in the nighttime. They seldom withstand the first rays of light."

He was still chewing that first mouthful when the half-door to the buttery swung open. The man who hurried in was about Darwin's age, a one-time redhead whose faded fringe was covered with a powdered wig. His face was pale, the eyes reddened by fatigue.

"Collie Wentworth." Darwin swallowed, stood up, and clapped the newcomer on the shoulder. "And what a reception to give me

after all these years—gates closed, Porter's Lodge empty, quadrangles deserted."

His tone was cheerful, but his eyes were evaluating the other man. His next words held a different tone. "Bad news, Collie? If we were better at an inn in the hours before the Cook Expedition lecture and exhibit, you have but to say the word."

Wentworth glanced at Pole, who had so far not spoken.

"An official introduction," Darwin said at once. "Driscoll Wentworth, Colonel Jacob Pole."

Pole bowed. "At your service."

"And what you say before him, Collie," Darwin went on, "will never go farther. My word on it."

Wentworth nodded. "That is appreciated. However, your word on something else is what I need. First, I have unwelcome news for you. The Cook Expedition lecture is postponed, delayed by the same storm that slowed your coming. I will confess to you, today I have given little thought to that or to your own impending arrival, much as it was earlier anticipated. However, your presence may be most opportune. Your reputation as the first physician in Europe is well deserved, and you are the most rational man that I know. Would you offer an opinion on an event within this college?"

"You have sickness here?" Darwin's pudgy face came alight with interest.

Wentworth shook his head. "Worse than that. We have death. Early this morning, of Dr. Elias Barton."

"Elias Charles Barton?"

"The same."

"I am sorry to hear of it. I knew him, Collie. Not well, for he arrived in '55, the year that I took the M.B. He already had a reputation for brilliance and erudition."

"Brilliance and erudition, those I will admit." Wentworth's face took on a curious expression of distaste. "Though the ends to which they are put is perhaps more important than their degree."

Pole's raised eyebrow at Darwin spoke paragraphs. *The kindest and best-intentioned of men, who thinks well of everybody? Not when it comes to Elias Barton.*

Darwin said only, "And now it is former brilliance. Collie, medical knowledge can do nothing for a dead man."

"It can perhaps do one thing, which is to confirm the cause of his death. There is dispute in this college concerning the nature and manner of that event. The circumstances are as follows. Late last night—"

"With your indulgence." Darwin held up his hand. "Are the mortal remains of Dr. Elias Barton here in the college?"

"They are. For want of a better temporary resting place, we placed his body in his rooms, at E Staircase in Third Court."

"Then I would rather examine the body before hearing the circumstances of his death. An opinion without bias is more easily arrived at when the mind is unclouded by collateral information."

Wentworth frowned. "As you wish."

He led the way through the grandeur of Second Court. His face held its frown and he did not speak again. The silence allowed the walkers to note the faint sound of wind and to speculate on another change in the weather. Clouds were returning overhead, while a heaviness in the air suggested a respite from, rather than an end to, the violence of last night's storm.

Third Court was less imposing than Second and backed onto the Cam River. Wentworth took his guests to the far left-hand corner, where a narrow passage gave access to Kitchen Lane and the Wren Bridge. Here, however, he turned into a stairway just before the opening to Kitchen Lane. He unlocked the heavy oak door on the left that led to a ground floor set of rooms, motioning Darwin to enter but saying to Jacob Pole, "It is not a pleasant sight. If you would prefer to remain outside . . ."

Pole grunted. "Appreciated. But to find worse than I have seen in battle, we would have to be wading in blood before we came to the doorstep."

He followed Darwin into an elaborately furnished room about fourteen feet square. The left-hand wall held three narrow windows, with a large oak desk set by the middle one. Although it was clearly designed as a study, the far wall being all bookcases, columns had been added to the other walls in the form of caryatids, carved and painted women whose eyes seemed to follow anyone about the room.

Wentworth shrugged as he saw

what the others were looking at. "A distasteful preference, but done all at Barton's own expense. He kept this set of rooms throughout his whole time in college, declining larger sets, and employed skilled artisans from several different parts of the country to perform his work. Since he was certainly not detracting from the value of the rooms, he was permitted his whim."

Darwin nodded absently. He had paused on the threshold and was sniffing the air. He did not long pause there but continued into the bedroom, where a still form covered with a sheet lay on a wide bed adorned with a carved wooden head and foot. No one, seeing his earlier bantering with Jacob Pole on the coach, would have recognized the man, coldly serious and absorbed, who removed the sheet and bent over the body.

"His clothes are wet." He spoke as though to himself. "But we lack the facies of drowning. This body was *broken*—at feet and ankles, and much above. Tibia and fibula, femur and pelvis, all smashed. Spine and ribs shattered. Elias Barton suffered a long fall onto rock or stone."

Wentworth started to say, "That is exactly what—" but Darwin held up his hand.

"Not yet, Collie. Detail is the heart of diagnosis, and I am not yet finished."

He bent again over the body, now baring the torso and examining the chest, shoulders, and upper and lower arms, especially the hands. He turned these over to inspect the palms and the fingers and moved at

last to the head. He rolled back an eyelid with his thumb and peered hard at the sightless orb behind it. He grunted, then pried open the mouth to examine the lips, teeth, and tongue.

"Erasmus, is this necessary? Surely you have already—"

"Now I have." Darwin replaced the sheet over the body, returned to the study, and plumped down hard on the only comfortable chair. There he sat motionless, a vacant expression on his fat face, until at last Wentworth glanced across at Jacob Pole, who nodded and said, "Well, 'Rasmus? Are you going to offer an opinion, or do you propose to take a nap there?"

"Eh?" Darwin looked up.

"The death of Dr. Elias Barton."

"Oh, it is as I said. He slipped from some high place, and the impact with the ground killed him. That is clear enough. That his clothes are damp is no mystery, if he fell last night before or during that torrential rain. It all fits. Yet there is . . . something . . ." He again stared vacantly across the room, to the open windows at the far side.

"You say he fell." Wentworth spoke the last word with unusual emphasis. "He was not, you think, picked up and thrown?"

If Darwin was surprised by the question, he chose not to show it. He shook his head. "Strictly speaking, one cannot rule out the possibility. However, I judge it unlikely. From the nature of the injuries the body landed erect, as though during the fall he had struggled to land feet first. The lower body is horribly injured, so if someone held him by

the legs and threw him down, any evidence there would of course be undetectable. On the other hand, there are no bruises on arms or shoulders consistent with violent gripping, which would surely have been necessary, if one were to overpower and hurl to his death a struggling victim. Finally, I find no head wounds to suggest that Elias Barton was knocked unconscious prior to his fall. He fell, he was not thrown. And he was alive—also, I surmise, awake and aware—until the moment of impact.”

Darwin stared at Wentworth. “I suspect that my comments in no way surprise you.”

“In truth, they do not, although in thoroughness of detail they go beyond the information offered by Dr. Arbuthnot, the physician who first examined the body. However, his conclusion, although more summary, was in essence no different from yours.”

“On the other hand, from your expression neither of our efforts is satisfying to you.”

“I cannot deny that your conclusion disturbs me, although the Master of St. John’s has already made his official announcement, that Elias Barton was unfortunate enough to fall from a high window and kill himself. An accidental death, with no room for doubt. However, will you permit one more call upon your time and attention?”

“The Cook Expedition lecture is, you said, postponed. My time today is yours.”

“Then pray follow me.”

Wentworth led them out of the rooms, but not, as Darwin and Pole

had perhaps expected, taking the right turn back into Third Court. Instead he went left and up, ascending a dark, steep stairway with deep treads and tight right-hand turns. They went up and up, until by the fortieth step Pole was cursing and only lack of wind prevented Darwin from joining in.

“Where the devil are you taking us?” Pole halted, his hand on his side. “Up to heaven?”

“Or perhaps to hell.” Wentworth had reached his destination, a narrow door of dark oak, and was waiting for them there. “We are at the top floor, almost at the roof. This room is not occupied during the summer, so the door is never locked. It was not locked yesterday.”

He led them through a doorway small enough that Jacob Pole banged his head on the way in. The single room beyond, substantial in size but far less grand than Elias Barton’s quarters, had windows on three sides. Wentworth urged his companions across to the left, to a single oval window with a chest-high sill.

“Look over, if you can.”

Pole was the only one tall enough. He craned forward. “The river. A sheer drop. But a hard climb to get up to that sill.”

“Elias Barton could have done it. He did not.” Wentworth moved left, to a wall with two narrow windows. “Here, as you see, it is much easier to climb out of the window onto the gutter, and only a foot-high parapet stands between a man and a sheer drop to the cobblestones of Third Court. In the dark, in last night’s bad weather,

anyone might slip and fall. But Elias Barton did not take that option, either. He fell from here, down to his death in Kitchen Lane."

The third window was open. Darwin and Pole approached it cautiously until they could actually see what lay beyond. Then Pole snorted in disbelief. "From here? Why, man, your friend Barton would have to be twelve feet tall to slip over that—the protecting wall would come up to my waist."

"Which is exactly what I said to John Chevallier, the Master of the College. Regardless of what Elias Barton was doing last night, by no stretch of the imagination could he have 'slipped' to his death from here. It would be necessary for him to climb deliberately out of the window, ascend to the top of the wall, and step out into space."

"Which would make it suicide," Darwin said quietly. "A prospect that I assume our good Master prefers not to face."

"A prospect which he refuses absolutely to entertain. That conclusion would lead to other issues. At the very least there would be a question of burial in consecrated ground, and the investigation might not stop there. But the Master asserts—believe it if you will and if you can, although I certainly cannot—that a terrific gust of wind—and last night's storm had many of those, no one can deny—lifted Elias Barton bodily over the parapet and dropped him to his death. For John Chevallier, any other explanation is anathema."

Darwin was leaning out of the window, as far as his great belly

would permit. He nodded. "Accidental death, even if it is the result of folly, leads to closure without re-cremations. Whereas the alternatives . . ." He pulled back from the window. "Is the Master religious?"

"Almost unnaturally so."

"So John Chevallier will do anything to save Barton from what he sees as the road to eternal damnation. Tell me, is this the only window from which Barton could have climbed, to land where he did?"

"All other high windows on this side of E Staircase were closed, because those rooms are not occupied. But this one was open then as it is open now, as the still-wet patch beneath it suggests. Any other window would imply at best an accomplice, at worst a murderer."

"No other rooms at all were occupied, then, in this entire staircase? Isn't that a rare situation?"

"Not in high summer. Also, not quite all rooms are unoccupied. I said, all high windows looking out over Kitchen Lane were closed, because those rooms are unoccupied. In fact, there is someone in the rooms on the next bend of the staircase above Elias Barton's study."

"But no one spoke to him?"

Wentworth's face again took on a tight look of disapproval. "Indeed we did. His name is Thomas Selfridge. He is a young sizar, a second-year student of no great attainment. Barton was his tutor. His biggest fear seems to be that we will somehow conclude that he was involved in the death."

"Are you sure that he was not?"

"I was suspicious, though for no sound reason. Talk to him your-

self, should you wish—but do not ask permission from the Master. He would like the whole matter closed and forgotten.”

“I will speak to Selfridge. But there are others with whom I would like to talk first.”

“Erasmus, I never dreamed of putting you to such trouble. You came all the way from Lichfield; and you are in need of rest—”

Pole interrupted gruffly. “Don’t waste your breath on sympathy, Mr. Wentworth. Look at that face. Can’t you see that Erasmus eats mystery with the same gusto as he eats his dinner?”

He turned to Darwin. “Where now, ’Rasmus? Whose life do we make a misery now?”

“It has happened to me, too many times to count.” Darwin was following Wentworth to one corner of First Court. “I stop my sulky outside a house where there has been a report of infectious disease. I go to the front door and I knock. A servant answers and says—apologetically, in most cases, and with all honesty—‘I am sorry, Dr. Darwin, but no one is home.’ Yet I observe, with my own eyes, half a dozen maids and footmen scuttling about at the far end of the hall! I say to him, ‘What then are those? The household sprites?’ and he gapes at me. It is one of the mysteries of our society. Servants go everywhere, and they see everything, but we often behave as though they do not exist.”

They were approaching the staircase. Wentworth stepped ahead. “Let me go first. I will emphasize to

the College Butler the importance of full and complete cooperation.”

“Hold.” Darwin paused in mid-stride. “I must be getting old, Collie, or my brains are addled by a poor night’s sleep. This approach will not work. It *cannot* work. When the Master of St. John’s has himself defined the official position, no college servant will dare suggest anything else.”

“But it was you who suggested that the assistance of the college servants—”

“—is most desirable. It is. But this must be played differently. We must work outside the walls of the college, or we will learn nothing. Collie, do you know of an inn frequented by the college servants?”

“The Baron of Beef close by the Round Church and not fifty steps from the college front gate. The servants drink there, since they are forbidden to drink in college.”

“They drink, and then they talk, or they are like no serving folk I ever met. And I ask you, what will they be talking about today? Jacob, let’s be off. Not you, Collie. You are familiar to them and you will inhibit their gossip. Stay here, and when we return we will inform you of the outcome.”

“You are going to drink?”

“No.” Jacob Pole pulled a dark-brown briar pipe from his jacket. “Erasmus doesn’t drink. He claims that alcohol is an evil influence. So guess who has to do the drinking, while he sits and pretends to?”

“And the smoking. And guess who enjoys that, Collie, so long as he’s not paying? Come on, Jacob. This is going to take at least an

hour or two. Get ready to open up that hollow leg.”

It required two rounds of drinks for everyone, and almost exactly one hour of time. In that period Darwin and Pole changed status from strangers to silent but interested and hospitable fellow drinkers.

The curiosity of the others helped. A third of the inn’s clientele were servants from next door Trinity College. They had heard rumors of something terrible that had happened at St. John’s the previous night, and they were all eager for details.

“Atop the college roof, he were.” The speaker was a lanky, dark-haired man with a flair for the dramatic. He stood up and raised his arms above his head. “With the wind ’owling ’round ’im, an’ the thunder crashin’ an’ the lightnin’ flashin’. An’ ’im calling down the Devil ’imself, to do ’is bidding.”

“Now where’d you get all that from, Joe Walker?” The speaker was not so much questioning as eager for lurid details. “We all ’eard ’e was out on the roof, but who gave you that Devil-worship stuff? Did yer just make it up?”

“I did not.” Walker was indignant. “I could ’ave told you that Dr. Barton was conjurin’ demons weeks ago, if you’d bothered to ask me. An’ *that* word didn’t come from me, neither.” He called on a short, bald-headed man for support. “Did it, ’Enry?”

“Joe’s quite right.” Henry swept the audience with a sinister squint. “Near a week back—six

days, I know it were that because I recall it ’appened right at teatime on Wednesday. Simon Thorpe, ’e were bedmaker for E Staircase on Third Court and did Dr. Barton’s rooms, ’e come in the kitchen where me an’ Joe was cutting watercress, an’ ’e were white like a ghost. He swallowed a quart of beer down like it were nowt, an’ said that Dr. Barton were conjuring up demons in his room.”

“He saw it happen?” said a man sitting next to Jacob Pole.

“No, an’ lucky ’e didn’t, or that would have been the last of ’im. But ’e saw the smoke in the air, and ’e smelled fire and brimstone. Said it were like a whiff from the gates of ’ell.”

“An’ it ’appened again, two days ago.” Joe Walker felt that Henry had enjoyed long enough in the limelight. “That’s when Simon Thorpe told me, personal, that ’e were done. If the job meant workin’ Elias Barton’s rooms, with the chance of being dragged off to ’ell, ’e wasn’t ’aving no part of it. An’ ’e meant what he was saying because come yesterday morning Simon ran off. He never showed up for work, an’ I reckon as by now ’e’s t’other side of Huntingdon, an’ still goin’. An’ I say, good for ’im, otherwise ’e might have been up there on that roof when the Devil come down ’owlin’, an’ grabbed up Elias Barton, an’ dashed his brains out in Kitchen Lane.”

“I ’eard that t’Master of St. John’s says Barton slipped an’ fell. He weren’t thrown.” This was from one of the Trinity servants.

“Aye, you’ll ’ear that, an’ say it

the Master did." Joe Walker nodded. "But some time when you 'ave ten minutes to spare, Jack Piper, I'll take you up on to that bit o' roof of Third Court, and you can tell me if it's a place a man could ever *fall* off."

"Not take me up there you won't. I'll stay on ground."

"Then you 'ave to trust my word on it, Elias Barton didn't slip an' fall, 'e thought 'e could call up the Devil, an' win. But the spells 'e 'ad weren't strong enough, and the Devil picked 'im up like 'e were a feather, right in the middle of the lightnin' storm, an' smashed 'im down to 'is doom."

Walker spoke with huge relish, and there was a general mutter of agreement and awe. Jacob Pole nudged Erasmus Darwin and said softly, "There you have it. The word according to Joe Walker. Seems that everyone here buys it, too. But I'll be damned if one way or another it does us a bit of good."

Darwin had been sitting with his head tucked down on his chest. He roused himself and said, "Then damned you must be, Jacob. Because what we heard here is of the utmost importance and relevance. In fact, it is sufficient. We can depart. However, first let us buy another round for all present, so that we are perceived to leave in a state of grace."

"I feel, Collie, like Buridan's ass, drawn equally strongly toward two desires." Darwin was sitting in Wentworth's rooms on M Staircase in Second Court. The window was open, and gusty winds blew

papers across the desk in front of it. Another storm was on the way.

"Except," went on Darwin, "I am in rather worse plight than Buridan's donkey. I am drawn not in two directions, but in three. First, I need to speak with Thomas Selfridge, the young student who has rooms above Elias Barton."

"That should be simple enough. He is from the West Country, with no friends or relatives in Cambridge, and his reputation is of shyness and absorption in his studies. He seldom leaves his rooms, and today of all days I would expect to find him reclusive."

"Then for the moment let us leave him there, preserved for our later attention. What of Dr. Arbutnot? Will it be possible to converse with him?"

"Not for another hour. He keeps his practice in Sidney Street, a short walk from here. He was called in by the Master to examine Elias Barton because he is a graduate of the college, a frequent guest at High Table, and a man who can be relied on for discretion. However, he mentioned that should we need his services later, he would be taking lunch with a colleague at Corpus Christi."

"Then our immediate options are reduced." Darwin, reminded by Wentworth's words that he and Jacob Pole had missed their own lunch, reached out to the tray on the table in front of them and picked up a slice of cold roast swan. His lack of front teeth made a challenge of biting into it, and he took the easier alternative of cramming the whole into his

mouth. "Elias Barton and I knew each other," he said indistinctly, "but only, as one might say, as ships in passing, and that more than twenty years ago. What manner of man was he, in intellect, in interests, and in spirit?"

Wentworth took his time before he answered. "He possessed an acute intelligence, that I will not deny. I never spent an evening next to him in Hall without feeling at the end that his was a mind more acute, more rapid, and more clear than my own. And I am not one to undervalue my own brains."

"And his interests?"

"Diverse. His training was in history and the classical period, but he knew this university, and its leading minds, as well as anyone knows them."

"In science, as much as in his own field?"

"Not to my knowledge. I would describe him as an interested observer of science and natural philosophy, rather than as a specialist. You seem surprised by that."

Darwin had stopped chewing.

"I am. It is not the answer that I had expected, though I must wait until we meet with Dr. Arbuthnot before I can draw a conclusion. And Barton's character? I notice that you have not spoken of that."

Again Wentworth paused. "For good reason," he said at last. "It is not my habit to speak ill of the dead, or to call into question a long-held good reputation. But what you heard in the tavern an hour ago did not arise full blown from the heads of college servants. For all his long tenure here, Elias

Barton had certain eccentricities and . . . tendencies. As, for example, his refusal to change his rooms for larger ones when they were offered. But that is nothing. We all have our minor oddities. However, about a year ago Elias Barton changed his patterns of behavior."

"How so?"

"He no longer took his meals in Hall, but always in his own rooms. He withdrew from social contact with other College Fellows. He ceased to give his usual course of lectures on significant intellectual trends of the past hundred years."

"Did he not, as a lifetime College Fellow, have that option?"

"Of course. Yet it marked his increasing oddity. It would be easy to say that he became a recluse, but that would not suffice as a description. Since the beginning of this year I have seen him often, late at night, rambling alone around the quadrangles. Once I saw him pirouetting like a dervish on the Third Court lawn. As a graduate of this college he had, of course, a right to walk or dance on the grass if he so chose. Nonetheless, it is this kind of behavior that makes me—and not only me—suspect that Elias Barton's death was in no way accidental. I believe, despite anything that the Master might desire and proclaim to the contrary, that a man whose reason was unhinged by overwork or unnatural practices deliberately took his own life. A brilliant mind can become deranged more easily than a simple one, without recourse to the Devil."

"And the smell of smoke and

brimstone, which so alarmed the bedmaker?"

"That I credit to imagination. The servants are a superstitious lot. In fact, there is more to the story than Joe Walker gave you. The bedmaker, Simon Thorpe, indeed complained of the aftertaste of devilry in Barton's rooms, and he left the college the night before last. Except that a gardener, Lambert Gray, who was working on the Third Court lawns, swore that he saw Simon Thorpe yesterday morning. Gray avers that Thorpe went into the doorway to E Staircase—and never came out."

"That was not investigated?"

"Investigate what? Every room on the E Staircase of Third Court was thoroughly looked into this morning, even though most are unoccupied. As for Lambert Gray's own reputation, he is an inveterate gossip and an idler, who sneaks off into Kitchen Lane to smoke a quiet pipe whenever he can. If he did not see Thorpe leave, it is because he was not in Third Court to see him leave. In any case, he came up with his story only this morning, after Elias Barton's body had been discovered. I assign no significance to it, except to confirm the overheated imagination of college servants."

"True. As Shakespeare says, at night most imagined bears are no more than bushes. However, occasionally one of them will prove to be a real bear."

The clock on the mantelpiece sounded the hour, and Darwin glanced across at it. "Still too early, I judge, for Dr. Arbuthnot. May

I then pay a visit to your sizar, Thomas Selfridge?"

"Certainly."

"Alone, if you have no objection. If he is as shy as you say, numbers will work adversely on his willingness to talk."

"My own feeling is that regardless of shyness he will offer you minimal cooperation. You should not be surprised if he is less than fully honest with you. However, you should do as you wish. Colonel Pole and I are situated comfortably." Wentworth already held a bottle in his hand. "Tucked away in my little corner of England, I am always happy to hear of travels around the world. For treasure, Colonel, was it not? And you are hoping that James Cook's discoveries in the southern continent will offer you scope for more success."

"Better to say, scope for more failure. For I am forced to admit that all my travels, from Patagonia to Samarkand, have brought me five cases of fever and a thousand bug bites for every grain of gold." Pole pulled his chair closer to Wentworth. "You have perhaps heard talk of Trapalanda, the lost city of the Caesars, in the High Andes of South America. Once I was given—no, let me be honest—*sold*, a map bearing on it the city's supposed location. I set out with eight mules, and a year's supply of provisions . . ."

Darwin left the room, light-footed and silent for such a big man. He knew how the story ended. Yet Jacob's lust for treasure remained unquenched. As it should. An eager traveler derived more from

life than one whose every goal had already been attained.

In twenty years of general medical practice around Lichfield, Darwin had been forced to deal with every type of patient. No fears could exceed those of a first-time mother, suffering the delivery of a breech baby in a farmer's cottage in the dead of a Derbyshire winter, without adequate warmth or hot water.

Kindness, confidence, competence, and Darwin's natural benevolence usually won the day. Yet even he had to admit that he was making little headway with Thomas Selfridge.

Darwin had read one major reason for Selfridge's nervousness within the first thirty seconds of meeting, but he was convinced that there was more. The youth was pale and slim, with an uncombed shock of raven hair. He avoided Darwin's eye, even when Darwin first introduced himself. He stood no more than five feet four inches—and he stood all the time, in spite of attempts to persuade him to sit down. Darwin himself perforce remained on his feet, asking about the logic and rhetoric courses that Selfridge had to take, and in which he was showing remarkably little interest. Finally, Darwin's wandering brought him close enough to the desk under the window to examine the pages strewn across it.

He looked, and looked again. "I thought to see essays concerning the traditional studies. But here you appear to be working with the new fluxions."

"Yes!" The dead voice suddenly came to life and gray eyes, clear and sparkling, met Darwin's for the first time. "You know those methods?"

"I will claim familiarity, but not mastery. In my day here, a knowledge of the calculus was considered to be at the outer limit of human understanding. Yet I assume that it is the same as every area of human effort; there must have been progress in the past twenty years."

"Enormous progress." Thomas Selfridge so far forgot his nervousness as to come over to stand at Darwin's side. "There is the Swiss genius, Monsieur Euler. I have written to him, and he to me. His new symbols, notation, and inspired analyses clarify the previously obscure and make possible vast new advances."

"Beyond those of the immortal Isaac?"

"Beyond even Newton." Selfridge went to the desk and picked up four sheets of paper. "Pray do not misunderstand me, Dr. Darwin. Sir Isaac remains the supreme scientific genius of this or any other era, and it is a mark of his unparalleled abilities that he was able to accomplish his feats without either the science of infinitesimals, or an easy or flexible notation. He made use of geometric tools so unwieldy that no other man could lift them, and still he accomplished miracles. But see here. This is Newton's analysis of cometary motion, just as he developed it by geometric methods. And here—less than one-third the length—is my own proof of

the same results, carried out with the aid of the calculus.”

“Impressive indeed.” Darwin examined both sets of pages carefully. “This first sheet appears to be very old. May I ask where you obtained what appear to be Sir Isaac Newton’s own notes?”

It was as though he had struck Selfridge in the face. The other flinched, turned pale, and took a step backward. He said nothing, until Darwin was at last forced to repeat, “Come, now, where? I have no thought to trick or trap you. You are a student, and clearly a most talented and dedicated one. But it is unusual for an undergraduate to be able to acquire such a page, even if it is only a fair copy, written in Sir Isaac’s own hand.”

Selfridge walked to the chair in front of his desk and sank down onto it as though his legs refused to support him. “I obtained it, and many others, from Dr. Barton,” he said in a weak, husky voice.

“I believe you. He was your tutor; it is entirely reasonable that he should assist you in your studies.”

“But I swear that I know nothing about his death.”

“It is about his life that I would like to ask you.”

“I know little.”

“More, perhaps, than you realize. For instance, you tell me that you obtained the Newton papers from Dr. Barton. Did he tell you how he came by them?”

“It was in a sense at my request. When first I came to St. John’s, close to two years ago, I knew no one. However, Dr. Barton was named as my tutor. I was assigned

this room, just above his, and we spoke every week or two of the usual assignments of the undergraduate curriculum. In truth, those studies interested me little, and I performed indifferently well. But one day as I was leaving his tutorial he asked me what, given complete freedom, I would *choose* to study. I told him of my ambition, which I had formed when I was just sixteen years old; I wished to learn the most modern mathematical methods of analysis, now under development on the Continent, and make them a standard part of the English arsenal of analytical weapons. I am afraid that I was so presumptuous as to suggest that Cambridge, which I perceived as locked into the notation and notions of Newton, was in danger of becoming a backwater of mathematics.”

“Presumptuous indeed, to criticize Newton here, of all places, where he developed his great *System of the World* and wrote the *Principia*. But all advances begin life as some form of heresy. How did Elias Barton respond to you?”

“He laughed. He asked me if I had studied Newton’s works as Newton himself wrote them, and not in the contaminations and abridgements of lesser minds. And I was forced to concede that I had not. Such source materials were unavailable to me back home in Devon. I thought that was the end of the matter. But some months later, perhaps a year ago, Dr. Barton stopped me as I ascended to my room and said that he had something to show me. What you are holding formed a small part of

it. It was works of Newton, written in the master's own hand. Great as Newton was, Dr. Barton informed me, he was in the habit of making fair copies of his own and other people's works."

"Do you know how they were obtained?"

"Dr. Barton did not tell me. However, all agree that he was an outstanding archivist, with a knowledge of sources unmatched in this or any other college. He required that I first make a fair copy of every page that he gave me, and return the originals to him before I was permitted to study them. I did return them, in all cases but for a few sheets which happened already to be twice-copied by Newton himself. Dr. Barton assured me that some of the writings here are not to be found anywhere else."

Darwin reared back, staring again at the sheet he was holding. "Then what Elias Barton had were *new works* by Isaac Newton?"

"So I was assured, at least for some of the pages."

"They must be enormously valuable. Did it not seem implausible that Elias Barton would permit you to study them, month after month, and never seek to announce the discovery that he had made?"

"To be honest, I thought little of that. To have these, in my own hands, to study, to transform the results to modern guise, and to marvel at them—not much else entered my head. And Dr. Barton did say that all would be made known at the right time."

"What time?"

"I cannot be certain. When, I think, certain activities of his own were completed."

In his excitement, Selfridge's tone had been rising higher and higher. Now, as though again suddenly self-conscious, he laid the papers back on his desk and said in a trembling voice, "I have committed no crime, have I? I surely intended none."

"No crime known to me. Even if these papers were obtained by some irregular route—which I very much suspect—the offense was not with you but with Elias Barton. I wonder, though, why you were not more honest this morning, when you heard the news of his death and were asked if you had any connection with him."

Suddenly the old Selfridge was back, a youth who would no longer look Darwin in the eye. "I had some connection with Dr. Barton in life, but I played no part in his death. Yet I felt sure that if ever I mentioned the papers that he had given to me, that would be the end."

"Of your own studies and access to them? Perhaps you are right. For the moment, hold what you have. Study the work, and cherish it."

"I will. I know of nothing more precious. I would protect these things with my life."

"That will not, I trust, be necessary. Even if you were forced to give up the originals, you have the fair copy?"

"Of every line and every symbol."

"Then I think you have nothing to fear." Darwin started to leave, but turned back. "One more question. You have indicated that you

owe much to Elias Barton, and I can appreciate that you may be reluctant to say anything against your tutor. But your rooms are just above his. Did you observe any change in his behavior, or in aspects of his life, in recent months?"

Selfridge hesitated. "If he were alive, I would not say this. But since he is dead, I do not see how it can be held against him. In the past six months, he changed. Rather than greeting me when we passed each other, he was as likely to scowl and mutter. We held no more tutorials. He also became more slovenly and careless in his dress. When I first met him his clothes were always clean and carefully matched as to color and style. He had a special fondness for cinnamon velvet and for green brocade, and the cut and balance had to be perfect. However, in recent months it seemed he put on the first garment that came to hand, wearing it regardless of color, match, cleanliness, or anything else. Also, there was the smell."

"He stank?"

Again, Selfridge looked away from Darwin. "Of his person, I cannot tell, since we were never in close proximity. But my room, as you see, lies directly above his. The dreadful odors and noxious fumes that rose through the boards of my floor, especially at night, sometimes made it impossible for me to sleep, even with every window open to its widest."

"Can you describe the smells to me?"

"They were various. One night it would be sulfurous, the next an acrid, acid vapor that left me

coughing. This is poor description, I know, but I lack the words to be more precise."

"That is in no sense your fault. I would do no better. We lack a taxonomy of smells, and all our descriptions will remain inadequate until the arrival of some new Linnaeus able to name and catalog odors. But in your case, with smells so foul, did you not think to complain to the College Steward?"

"I did not want to . . . cause trouble. I owed Dr. Barton for his former kindness to me."

"Do you know what he was doing to make those stinks?"

"I heard rumors."

"Did you believe them?"

"Not for a moment. Excuse me if my next words offend, but I do not believe in any forms of the supernatural. Neither gods nor demons form any part of a rational world view."

Darwin nodded his approval. "Which makes you—and me with you—an exception in a superstitious world. I too find no need to hypothesize deity or devil. You will meet criticism, but hold steadfast to your opinions. Today we are in the minority, yet our day will come though it may take a thousand years. As for the foul fumes created by Elias Barton, they will trouble you no longer. And if it eases your mind, let me say that I have a good idea as to their true nature, although I am not yet prepared to declare finality on the subject."

Darwin left the room and began his descent of the wooden stairs. As he went he heard Selfridge's door

slam shut and the lock go into place. It troubled his mind—he sensed unfinished business there—but it must wait until more urgent matters were settled.

“Selfridge is, as you said, shy and reclusive. He was also not fully honest with me. On the other hand, Collie, neither were you.”

Darwin was once again in Wentworth’s comfortable rooms in Second Court, and from the look of the other two men they had been in no hurry for his return. A bottle of white wine sat on the table; another, empty, was on the floor, and within easy reach stood a plate of ripe strawberries and raspberries. Pole had taken up residence by the window, basking in full sun, and for the first time since the previous night’s storm he was not shivering.

“I, not honest with you?” Wentworth, in the act of again filling his glass, paused. “Why do you say that?”

“You tell me. On the way here this morning, I told Jacob that you were full-hearted and generous, and would never say a word against any man. Yet that does not seem to apply to Elias Barton. Where the Master would give the man an honorable quietus, you seem implacably opposed to it. Why?”

Wentworth’s lips tightened. “Very well. These words for this room alone, Erasmus. Elias Barton was, as all agreed, a man of great talents. He was also a man of flaws.”

“As we all are.”

“Not these flaws. No member of

the college will admit it—the Master, recently appointed, may not even be aware of it. But Elias Barton, who as a Senior Fellow was called upon to respect chastity and celibacy, did not. That failing is not uncommon, but Barton lapsed in a peculiarly unfortunate way. There is no way to put this, except directly: Barton had a taste for young men. The ones most readily available were his own students, and he seduced several of them. I suspect that Thomas Selfridge was his catamite. That is the reason why, despite a lack of evidence, I remain suspicious of Selfridge’s complicity in Barton’s death.”

Darwin shook his head. “I do not believe it. Barton contrived his own demise.”

“I am most glad to hear that. You are an acute observer, Erasmus, more than I. But that is not all. Tolerant as I like to think myself, I cannot condone sodomy within this college.”

“If there is sodomy within St. John’s, be assured that Selfridge is not involved. I saw complete absorption in abstract studies, far beyond the normal—not an indifferent student, as you had suggested, but an exceptional one. However, after speaking with Selfridge I also feel an increased concern about other events relating to the death of Elias Barton. Collie, I would appreciate it greatly if you would take me at once to Dr. Arbuthnot.”

“We are ahead of you there, Erasmus.” Wentworth waved for Darwin to sit down. “At Colonel Pole’s suggestion I sent a man over to Arbuthnot’s office, bear-

ing my request that Rufus Arbuthnot come here as soon as he returned from his lunch appointment. I said he was needed for a meeting of the highest importance and urgency. Rufus knows me well enough not to disdain such a message, and he is a good friend of this college. So sit down, relax for a moment, and give me your opinion of ripe berries augmented by a truly fine Sauternes."

"The wine, with your permission, I will forgo. Let me tell you what I heard in Selfridge's room."

Darwin sat down at Wentworth's side, picked absently at the plate of fruit in front of him, and summarized his conversation with the young sizar. He omitted nothing relevant to the death of Elias Barton, while seeing no reason to mention another curious fact derived from his own observations.

He ended with a digression on the difficulty of classifying odors, elaborating his earlier remarks to Selfridge to the point where Jacob Pole was nodding off and Driscoll Wentworth poised to interrupt. Darwin's impromptu lecture was ended by the precipitous arrival of Rufus Arbuthnot.

The doctor was short, round, and energetic. He breezed in, calling before he was through the door, "What's this now, Collie? Cryptic messages—highest importance—urgent—must meet, must meet *now*. Tosh, man, you've had me over here once already today—with a coat over a night-shirt, and where's my dignity?"

He spoke in bursts in a lilting Welsh accent, nodded to Pole and

Darwin, helped himself without asking to a glass of wine, and went to stand by the window, where he bobbed up and down like a round windup toy.

Wentworth waved his hand. "Colonel Jacob Pole, Erasmus Darwin."

"Good afternoon—Colonel, Doctor. Now then! Would that be Dr. Darwin of Lichfield?" Arbuthnot stooped and peered at Darwin as at a biological specimen. "Your fame precedes you, sir. Did you not affect that amazing cure of the Vicar of Northesk? And one yet more remarkable of Lady Buxton?"

Darwin smiled his ruined smile. "Remarkable, Dr. Arbuthnot, only that in the latter case there was nothing at all wrong with the lady. She merely needed to be told that, and firmly."

"Like a fifth of my wealthy patients, while genuine sickness in the poor goes untreated." Arbuthnot leaned forward and helped himself to one of the few remaining raspberries. "So what is it, Collie? Military matters—medical matters—or more of this morning's claptrap?"

"Dr. Darwin would value your opinion regarding the last mentioned."

"John Chevallier still sitting with his head in the sand, eh? Barton blown off the roof—stuff and nonsense. I hope, Dr. Darwin, that the Master has not been troubling you."

"No. I have yet to meet the gentleman."

"Keep it that way."

"But I would like to ask your opinion regarding the death of

Elias Barton. You saw his corpse long before I did."

"Early this morning. Already dead. Condition of the body, hmm, dead, say, six hours."

"And in your examination, did you inspect his hands?"

"Of course. Ah, see where you're going. Course I did, hands often revealing. Fingers and thumbs, you mean? Blackened and stained. But old marks, those. Played no part in his death. He jumped from the roof of Third Court, simple as that. No one on Earth—including the Master, stupid man—ever persuades me Barton slipped. Blown over, even more stupid. Landed feet-first, he did. Like he decided—bit too late—he didn't wish to die."

"I concur completely. And the blackened and stained fingers. Might you suggest a cause?"

"No more than speculation. But—hmm. Discoloration and burning—definite burning, no whorls on some of the fingertips—accidental minor injuries. Careless use of acids and bleaches, maybe? For weeks or months."

"And not, conceivably, burns caused by a lightning strike?"

"Poppycock!" Arbuthnot, aware of a possible breach of etiquette, rushed on, "Of course, if you know facts of which I'm ignorant—"

"Not at all. Again, we concur completely. Suppose, however, we add to the list of substances that Elias Barton may have handled. What if, in addition to the corrosives that burned and discolored his fingers, he had worked with other materials? Heated mercury, say, or elements of the medical

pharmacopoeia, such as digitalis, foxglove, and aconite?"

"Then he was playing with fire. Might not notice at once, but over time—" Arbuthnot stopped his energetic bobbing and stood totally still. "My God. Mercury vapor poisoning?"

"The evidence was there. Go to the body, and you will see a blue line on the gums. And his teeth were loose."

"Long-term use, then. So—effects on brain. Fits of madness—mistrust of others—outbursts of violence—excessive gaiety—apparent drunkenness. Any and all have been recorded."

"All those, plus hallucinations and a conviction of invincibility. A man whose brain is affected by mercuric vapor poisoning might well feel that he could tame a lightning storm—or fly, if he chose, safely down from the highest of places."

"Ye gods." Arbuthnot slapped himself hard on the forehead. "John Chevallier—a pox on the man—was right after all. No deliberate suicide for Elias Barton. Death by misfortune and ignorance. But Barton—he was an archivist. Right, Collie? Not skilled in science. Dabbling in subjects far from his competence?"

"His great learning led to his downfall. As a charitable act to a young scholar for whom he served as tutor, he managed to locate a set of papers written by Isaac Newton. I assume he discovered them in neighboring Trinity College. He had been seeking Newton's mathematical writing, but he found much more. As Newton

himself has said, he minded mathematics and science more as a young man than an older one. After forty, his interests turned to other pursuits. To the interpretation of scripture, and to—

“Alchemy!” The word exploded from Arbuthnot. “He left a mass of alchemic writing.”

“Some of which many of us have seen. A huge collection of papers exists. But what Barton realized—as young Selfridge would not, even if he was exposed to them—was that the alchemic pages he had discovered formed no part of any known body of work. They were new sheets, never before circulated, never before perused by anyone in the near fifty years since Newton’s death in 1727. Barton surely intended to publish them eventually—but would he not be as surely tempted to seek even greater glory? Those pages, remember, came direct from the hand of Newton, the largest-minded genius of this or any age. Barton permitted Selfridge access to the mathematical papers, which apparently duplicated known work. But the alchemy, which was new—”

“He kept for himself!” Arbuthnot’s face was fiery red with excitement. “He would, man, sure he would. Keep it to himself—confirm—duplicate. And if there was anything sensational in Newton—lead into gold—”

“But Barton would have realized the dangers,” Wentworth protested. “Whatever his faults, he was a man of unequalled knowledge of the past century.

The mental breakdown of Newton himself in 1693 was well-known and widely reported, and many attributed that to dangerous chemical experiments.”

“Barton probably believed that he was observing full caution.” Darwin addressed himself to Rufus Arbuthnot. “Would you agree, Doctor, that a man is usually quite aware of physical problems? A sprained back, or in my own case, a gouty big toe, which cannot easily be ignored. But mental conditions, in which the observing organ of the brain is also the organ affected, present far more subtle problems.”

“Aha! No doubt of it. Mental patients don’t seek medical assistance—don’t know they’re sick, half the time, have to lock ’em up willy-nilly. Think Barton noticed changes? Seclusion couldn’t have helped.”

Wentworth said in amazed tones, “So when all is done, the Master was right. We are in a very real sense dealing with accidental death, even though the act itself spoke of suicide. It is not at all what I expected, but I’ll drink to a swift closure.” Wentworth reached for the bottle.

“Not quite over.” Darwin reached across and arrested Wentworth’s hand in the act of pouring. “There may not be, I fear, as comforting an outcome as you envisage. Something else must be examined: Barton’s rooms.”

“That has been done, Erasmus, once and then twice.”

“Perhaps. But it must be repeated with a more directed focus. The experiments of alchemy are

not conducted within the confines of an egg-cup. There must somewhere be an alchemic laboratory. With your permission, Collie, we must search for it."

"I suppose we must. But Rufus, we have taken a great deal of your time. If you would like to return to your practice in Sidney Street—"

"In a pig's eye, Collie. I smell mischief. Am I correct, Dr. Darwin?"

"My own nose says the same, though I greatly wish that we are both wrong. Collie, can we take with us a couple of strong college servants, also a few iron tools?"

"What do you want with them?"

"I am not sure."

Wentworth laid down with resignation the glass that he had all the time been holding. "All right. You go to the E Staircase of Third Court. I will meet you there with people and tools."

The path across the quadrangles from M Staircase of Second Court to E Staircase of Third was no more than a hundred yards, but in the hour since Darwin had returned from his meeting with Selfridge the weather had changed again. The three men hurried along under darkening skies from which the first heavy drops were already spattering.

E Staircase was dark and silent. Darwin advanced to the oak door of Elias Barton's rooms, banged on it with his fist, and cursed. "Locked, as of course I should have known. I didn't think to ask Collie for the key. We'll have to wait for him, unless some of these rooms

share a common lock. Jacob, you carry a deal less weight than I. Nip up one flight, would you, and see if Selfridge has a key that might also fit here."

Pole's boots clattered loud on the stairs, turning one short flight and up again. A silence followed, after which the sound of boots repeated, slower now. Pole reappeared shaking his head.

"Sorry, 'Rasmus, but Selfridge isn't there. No one is. The door stands open, but the room is empty. And the desk is cleared."

"Damnation. I take blame for this. Dr. Arbuthnot, if a person were to leave here bound for the West Country, what would be the most logical avenue of departure?"

"Leave here westward? Coach to London, I'd say. Path via Oxford's shorter—but transport less frequent and convenient."

"And a coach to London leaves?"

"Far side of the marketplace. On the hour."

"Which approaches fast. Jacob, I need your help."

"Damn it, Erasmus, I can't run all the way to the marketplace, any more than you could. And look at it out there, it's pissing down."

The rain was sheeting into Kitchen Lane, beyond the sheltered passageway.

"Jacob, I would not ask you to. You and I would be blown and foundering in the first fifty yards. Go to the buttery and dining hall and find a healthy-looking young man. Offer him a shilling to run to the market place and seek out any coach bound for London. Regardless of who he finds on the coach or

waiting for it, he is to proclaim aloud and to all a simple message, 'If you leave, Dr. Darwin will be forced to reveal your secret. If you return to the college, you can be protected.' Do you have it?"

"Down pat. Should he wait for some answer?"

"No. There may be no answer. But go now, with your best foot forward and my profound thanks."

Pole headed off into the driving rain without another word. Half a minute later Driscoll Wentworth appeared, his hat streaming water. He was alone and carrying a crowbar, a big hammer, and an axe.

"Not a servant to be found, Erasmus, when you need one. I'll have Trelawney's guts for this. What now? Do you want this door broken down?"

"Not unless you enjoy destroying college property. You have a key. Use it, Collie, and stand back while I take a look inside."

Darwin waited as the door swung wide, then pushed his way through. The sky outside the narrow windows had become so dark that the interior was all gloom. Darwin paced around, examining each wall and stooping low to peer at the floor. The others had followed him in. All were very conscious of Barton's body in the bedroom just a few feet away.

"What, Erasmus?" said Wentworth. "Tell us what you are seeking, or we cannot help."

Darwin banged with an open hand on the wall beside a storage cupboard, and grunted at the feel of solid stone. "The obvious. The alchemic laboratory must be here.

Look for evidence of oddities of wall or floor. With lack of forethought, I failed to realize the need for more light." He moved to the table lamp. "Plenty of oil in this. Unless I am all thumbs it should take no more than a few seconds to ignite the wick."

"What kind of oddity? In this room or the bedroom?" Arbuthnot was over by a massive bookcase set along the wall. "Behind this, maybe. Take two men to move."

"Then it is not a candidate." Darwin was working the flint obsessively. "Barton must be able to have acted alone."

"Something like this, perhaps?" Driscoll Wentworth had been exploring beneath a wooden table. He had removed his wig, and emerged with his bald head veiled in cobwebs. Now he was rolling back a faded Persian rug and rubbing his hand along the wooden planks beneath. "I feel a seam or crack here, running crosswise to the grain of the boards. Erasmus, where is that lamp? And, Rufus, if you will give me a hand this can proceed more quickly."

He and Arbuthnot rolled the rug back all the way. Darwin, the oil lamp lit at last and producing a guttering yellow flame, held it low.

"A little farther," Wentworth said. "There! See the metal ring set in flat to the floor? This whole section should move." He reached down, raised the iron loop, and lifted. The square trapdoor rose on brass hinges to reveal a square opening two feet on a side.

The three men craned forward. "A room below!" Arbuthnot ex-

claimed. "Thought we were on the ground floor."

"We are. And now we know why Elias Barton showed no inclination to move to other quarters." Darwin was leaning over, precariously far. "You said that he employed out-of-town workers on the modification of his rooms. And he paid them well, I will warrant, for their future silence. Move aside, Collie. It will be a close fit, but I see a ladder there. I propose to go down."

"Better if I do it, Erasmus. I'm a good deal more limber."

"So is almost everyone. But it is better if I descend. And, if I am correct in my conjectures, Dr. Arbuthnot should accompany me. You should remain here."

Darwin had already set the lamp down on the floor. He did not wait for Wentworth's approval, but sat on his ample rear and gingerly lowered his feet to meet the top rung of the ladder. He turned, took four cautious steps down, and reached up for the oil lamp. Arbuthnot, unsure of the ladder's strength, waited until Darwin had reached bottom. Then he came scuttling down and was talking before his foot hit the dirt floor.

"It is indeed a regular alchemic workshop!" He was breathless. "Just as you said: retorts, furnace, crucibles, alembics, and against that wall bottles, jars, and vials."

"Completely equipped." Darwin held the lamp close to the array of bottles. "Here is yellow sulfur, red lead oxide, red and black iron ores. There are the acids, acetic and citric, and perhaps nitric and sulfuric. And here is quicksilver,

whose heated vapors contributed to Barton's downfall."

"Some animal essence here." Arbuthnot had the stopper out of one of the bottles. "What a mix of stinks, when all was going!"

"Duplicating and confirming, as near as Barton could, Newton's own alchemic work." Wentworth was lying flat on the floor, his head poking over the trapdoor edge so that he could see what was going on. "And the source of the smells that frightened away Barton's bedmaker. Erasmus, I'm coming down. I'm as interested in this as anyone."

"A few moments more—I thought, but perhaps I was wrong." Darwin had scanned the rough-walled chamber, and now he was peering under tables and workbenches. "No. It is, alas, just as I feared. Dr. Arbuthnot, would you?"

He was down on hands and knees by a long, low table in the corner. Together, he and Arbuthnot dragged out an object wrapped in coarse sacking. Darwin peeled back a part of it.

"Dead." Arbuthnot had automatically reached forward to touch the cheek and feel the neck. "And for some time—rigor mortis been and gone. But who is he?"

"I could speculate. But others know beyond all doubt." Darwin held the lamp so that it shone on the face of the corpse. "Collie?"

"That's Simon Thorpe, Barton's bedmaker."

"Who did not run off to Huntingdon and beyond, as Joe Walker asserted. Sometimes even an unreliable witness may be right.

Lambert Gray, the gardener whose testimony you were inclined to reject, did not err. Simon Thorpe indeed went into E Staircase yesterday morning—and never again emerged from it.”

“But why did Barton kill him?” Wentworth was at last descending the ladder, slowly and uneasily. “And when and how did he kill him?”

“*How* is easy.” Rufus Arbuthnot turned the head to reveal that the back of the skull was smashed in. “As for why and when . . .”

“We are obliged to conjecture.” Darwin squatted back on his heels. “Young Selfridge and you yourself, Collie, remarked that in recent months Elias Barton seemed to lose all sense of time, even seeming unaware of day or night. At first he would have been careful to safeguard his secret, working his experiments late and with his oak securely sported. But as his mania grew, so did his carelessness. No one is alive to confirm it, but suppose that Simon Thorpe entered these rooms during the daytime and found the trapdoor open. Would not any man have advanced to the edge, curious to see what lay below in a room previously unknown to him?”

“While Barton was working down there?” Wentworth had reached the foot of the ladder.

“No.” Arbuthnot had stripped back the sacking and was further examining the corpse. “See here? Smashed skull. Barton above, likely in his bedroom. Thorpe enters, finds trapdoor open. Then—bang, hard blow on the head from be-

hind, forward he goes. Fall might have killed if head wound didn’t.”

“We have to lift Thorpe’s body aloft and prepare him for decent burial.” Wentworth had taken only one quick glance at the body on reaching the floor of the hidden laboratory. “What on earth could Barton have hoped to do, had he not himself died? Thorpe has relatives; his absence would have been remarked on within a few days. Might this murder have urged Barton toward suicide?”

“Never.” Darwin was assisting Arbuthnot, winding sacking tight about the body. “Elias Barton suffered the common delusion of all who believe they have infinite power. What would the death of a mere servant matter in his universal view of things? I doubt he thought of or cared about secular consequences. He had already passed well beyond the bounds of sanity.”

The melancholy business of hoisting the bedmaker aloft called for the combined effort of all three men. It seemed wrong to leave Simon Thorpe in the bedroom next to the body of his murderer, and Wentworth headed for the office of the College Steward to arrange for a more suitable resting place. Arbuthnot, after a look at his watch, went with him.

“Two hours late! Hell to pay in my office. But wouldn’t have missed a minute of this—corpse and all!”

Darwin was left alone to his vigil, pondering how a day begun with prospects of antipodean discovery could have turned to a puzzle of multiple deaths. He performed a systematic search of Barton’s

rooms, including the alchemical laboratory, but did not find what he sought. His efforts were interrupted by a hollow clomp-clomp-clomp of approaching footsteps. He did not think of ghosts or the restless spirits of the dead, but he did grip one of the fire irons until Jacob Pole's face appeared at the doorway. The colonel was soaking wet. Raindrops glistened in his eyebrows and thinning hair, and he was shivering.

"When the man I found in the dining hall didn't come back, Rasmus, I went to look for him on the way. He swears he gave the message exactly as you told me and I told him. Doesn't sound promising, though. He saw half a dozen passengers waiting for the London coach, but no one showed any reaction to the message."

"I did not expect an immediate result. But many thanks for running my errand. Go to Collie now and demand food and a hot drink—another malarial bout is the last thing you need."

"Won't you come with me? Aren't you all done?"

"Not quite. A possible item of unfinished business still lies here."

Pole stared at the pair of shrouded corpses, then at the open trapdoor. "More bodies? I passed Wentworth in Second Court. He told me what happened to Simon Thorpe."

"No more bodies. I hope that we are done with deaths. But there remains another matter here, and it is one better handled solo than duo—a matter this time of life."

"About time. I began to wonder

if you had brought me to a college or a charnel house."

Pole squelched away, leaving Darwin alone again in near-darkness. Night was far away, but rain fell heavily and the sky was black from horizon to horizon.

The sound, when it came, was scarcely audible above the hiss of rain along gutters. Light footsteps entered E Staircase, paused for a moment outside Elias Barton's chambers, then continued slowly and hesitantly up the stairs.

Darwin allowed half a minute before he followed. Very little light bled into the staircase from above, and he almost had to feel his way. He tapped on the open door, two flights up. "It is Erasmus Darwin. I am alone."

He entered without waiting for a reply. A figure in a rain-soaked overcoat sat huddled on the chair by the desk.

"You returned." Darwin sat down on the only other chair. "You were wise to do so. The death of Elias Barton is resolved, and you are under no suspicion. I know your secret, but it is safe with me."

Selfridge looked up. "I felt that I had to leave. Dr. Wentworth was not satisfied with the Master's explanation, I knew that from his questions of me. There would have been more probing, perhaps a search of my room, and who knew what digging into my private affairs. There are already those in the college who believe that I was Elias Barton's catamite, and might therefore have been involved in his death."

"Did Barton in fact seek your affections?"

"Not at first. Initially I believed that his assistance to me in my studies was no more than natural kindness on his part, and the duties of a tutor toward his student. But I was wrong. His true motives were revealed when he at last made open advances toward me."

"Which you, of course, were obliged to rebuff—or provide to Elias Barton the surprise of his life."

That produced from Selfridge a hint of smile. "A surprise indeed. Also an inevitable discovery."

"It is amazing that has not happened already. You have led a charmed life at St. John's. If Dr. Arbutnot, after examining Elias Barton's body, had chanced to see you, that would have been sufficient."

"Why so? My voice, my movements, my behavior—"

"—are not sufficient. You possess undisguisable features, such that to the eye of a trained physician you would not for one minute pass muster as a man. What is your name—the name with which you were christened?"

"You know! How could you possibly know?"

"More from an accumulation of detail than a single instance. One who lacks the laryngeal prominence of the human male should be careful always to wear high-neck collars, and never a loose shirt. Your voice, which most of the time you held deliberately to its lower register, rose sharply in excitement when you discussed Newton and your own work. Finally, your close and accurate ob-

servation of Barton's dress style and color preference seemed more like a woman than a man, unless you were indeed of Elias Barton's own amatory persuasion. Again, I ask your name—your *real* name."

"I am Athene Selfridge. My late father valued knowledge above all things, and told me I was named to achieve it. The pity is that he did not also inform me of the obstacles that would be set in my path."

"It is likely that he did not comprehend them, any more than I do, or any man. We can only surmise the frustration of a woman of talent, seeking success in what has so far been regarded exclusively as a male domain."

"It is worse than that. Consider this college—your own college, from which you are doubtless proud to have graduated. It is an institution which claims to cultivate the highest forms of knowledge—yet it is an institution which denies to half of humanity a presence within its walls."

Darwin nodded. "What you say is sad but true. And I see no change in sight, although I would like to think that time will prove me wrong."

"Time?" Athene Selfridge's voice rose, shedding the low tone she had adopted as a man. "You speak of time, but how much time? How long am I supposed to wait, Dr. Darwin? One century will it be, or perhaps two?"

"I would hope not. But because I can in all honesty discern no signs of prompt change, may I offer advice? Why not return to your home in the West Country, and work via correspondence with the leaders

of mathematics. You already mentioned an exchange of letters with Monsieur Euler. An assumed name for you, or simply the use of A. Selfridge, would—”

“No!” Athene Selfridge glared at Darwin. “Never! You ask me to accept the status quo, rather than fight it? I will not. Without defiance there will be no progress. Better to stay here, with all its risks. Better to be exposed, than to retreat like a tame rabbit to some safe haven in the West Country. Expelled, I will at least make my point—that a woman can work at mathematics as well as any man. If I am wrong in this, Erasmus Darwin, then tell me the nature of my error.”

Darwin’s eyebrows rose and his jaw dropped. “Wh-why, my dear.” The hint of a stammer came into his voice. “Thank goodness that Jacob Pole is not here. Were he present he would gloat to see my shame. You are not wrong at all. I am. I have long preached that principles should never be subservient to acts, yet here I am playing false to my own precepts.”

He glanced around the ill-furnished room. “It is no life of luxury that you seek. You are happy with your eremitic isolation?”

“I thrive on it. The ideas of mathematics are best conceived in solitude.”

“Yet if you remain here at St. John’s, you run continued risks of exposure and expulsion. You are a young lady whose actions already prove her not averse to risk. Will you consider taking one more?”

“I am a mathematician, Dr.

Darwin. I must compare risk with possible benefit.”

“The risk, immediate expulsion. The benefit, an ally here in this college—and one very different from Elias Barton, who expected a certain *quid pro quo*.”

“Dr. Darwin, before your intervention I was already frightened and running. I can be in no worse situation than I was an hour ago.”

“Then come with me.”

The fickle weather scattered huge and random droplets on them as Darwin led the way to Second Court. He walked straight into Wentworth’s rooms, where the Senior Fellow stood at the window and Jacob Pole sat again at the low table with a steaming jug in front of him.

Wentworth swung around, and his smile at Darwin changed when he saw the latter’s companion.

“Now then, Collie.” Darwin paused in the doorway. “Abandon any thoughts of sodomy, pour yourself a glass of wine, take a deep breath, and sit down. And permit me to introduce to you Miss Athene Selfridge—who is not, nor has she ever been, nor could she ever be, the catamite of Elias Barton or any other man.”

The explanation took five minutes. Wentworth’s questions, exclamations, and muttered protests continued into the second bottle.

“Erasmus, how can I, a Senior Fellow of this college, condone and even assist in such deception?”

“Who was it mocked the policies and judgment of a certain university not sixty miles from here, when

Miss Parker's daughter composed English verse that you judged far superior to that of Sir Roger Newdigate's contest winner?"

"No folly is too extreme for Oxford."

"Right. But cast out the beam in your own eye. Who at St. John's comprehends and champions the mathematical work of Monsieur Euler, or Monsieur D'Alembert, or young Monsieur Lagrange? I will answer my own question: no one other than Athene Selfridge. Do you wish to see this college fall behind the French?"

Wentworth rolled his eyes. "God preserve us from such a thought."

"Then your duty is clear."

"Damn you, Erasmus. You should have let me drown twenty years ago." Wentworth turned to Athene Selfridge. "You know, do you not, that no one of a right mind disputes with Dr. Darwin?"

"I am beginning to learn it." Athene moved to Wentworth's side and took his hand in hers. "I will practice the utmost discretion. I will seek to bring nothing but honor to this college. If at any time you ask me to leave, I will do so without question."

Wentworth slowly nodded. "I can in fairness ask no more than that. Let us drink to it. Erasmus, you have no glass."

"You know that I have for many years foresworn alcohol."

"Erasmus."

"Collie, must you insist on your pound of flesh? Oh, very well." Darwin accepted the glass that Wentworth pressed into his hand. "I have no need of a clear mind

tonight. The Cook exhibit is washed out, the lecture postponed. But if there is to be a toast, Miss Selfridge must propose it."

"That will be my honor." With all the glasses raised, Athene Selfridge paused for thought. "If it were I alone, I would drink to you fine gentlemen. But since all are included in the toast, let it be to the wondrous Isaac Newton, before whom the greatest minds alive all bend the knee."

"To the wondrous Isaac." All drank, but Jacob Pole continued, "And damn the man, too. To hold in his head such secrets—perhaps of the elixir of life, perhaps even of the philosopher's stone that turns lead to gold—and then to permit such work to be lost."

Once over the first hurdle, Darwin was drinking as happily as anyone. "We should not blame Isaac Newton," he said. "It is Elias Barton who should be double damned. I searched thoroughly, and the papers describing Newton's alchemic work were nowhere in his rooms or laboratory. They are lost forever. And it is a great loss. Newton, with his great powers, may have advanced far along the road of chemical discovery that Mr. Priestley and Monsieur Lavoisier, close to a century later, are beginning to mark out."

"A loss forever," Wentworth said. "But just possibly not." He stood up suddenly, knocking wine glasses over on the table. "When I was called to Elias Barton's body this morning, I noticed at the far end of Kitchen Lane a mess of blown papers. Suspect-

ing undergraduate foolery, I ordered them collected up. But if Elias Barton had been holding the alchemic papers in his hand when he stepped off the roof—”

“Their subsequent fate?” Darwin spoke, but all came to their feet.

“God help us, old papers are treated as waste and used to light fires.” Wentworth frowned. “But they would have been wet from the storm, and not burned until thoroughly dried. There is a chance.”

He was gone. The others sat frozen, with even Darwin reduced to silence until Wentworth returned. He was holding in his arms a bulging brown sack.

“Thank the storm for its favors. Trelawney said that every foolscap sheet found this morning in Kitchen Lane was collected and placed in this bag. But all were wet. Drying had not yet begun. We have everything!”

He placed the sack on the table, opened its neck, and reached within with both hands. Slowly and carefully, he pulled forth a great mass of paper. The sheets were wet, set at all angles, and stuck together. Carefully, one by one, Wentworth peeled loose pages and handed them to the eager onlookers.

“Well?” He was still at work separating sheets, while the others observed a total silence.

“Written in ink,” said Darwin, “but of a type soluble in water. The words of genius, perhaps immortal words, washed away drop by drop—to the cobblestones, to the gutters, to the River Cam, to the North Sea.”

“All?” Wentworth ceased sepa-

rating the pages and looked up.

Three heads nodded. “Nothing here,” Jacob Pole said sadly. “Maybe the odd word or handful of letters, half distinguishable. But no philosopher’s stone.”

“And no leap forward of centuries in chemical knowledge,” said Darwin. “Nothing to foreshadow or even surpass the discoveries made in our own time.”

“And no new mathematics.” Athene Selfridge alone appeared undismayed. “These pages might as well be blank. But is that not as it should be? This generation, and those that come after us, should not be content to trace the words of former genius. The future should be as a tabula rasa, on which new words and thoughts may be inscribed.” She put down the page that she was holding. “You asked me to propose a toast, and I did so. With your permission I will now offer another. Let us drink not only to the great Isaac, but to those minds of the near or far future, who will carry our ideas as far beyond today as Newton carried us beyond the notions of Aristotle.”

Every glass was raised, and every man drank. But on Darwin’s face alone sat the expression of one who comprehended the toast in full, and was overwhelmed by it.

He regarded with approval the bright gray eyes and young intensity of Athene Selfridge. But for the first time in his life, he felt old. □

Author’s note: This story takes place in 1776. In 1981, St. John’s College, Cambridge, opened its doors to women students for the first time.

THE MYSTERIOUS PHOTOGRAPH



Hulton Archive

Tête-à-tête. We will give a prize of \$25 to the person who invents the best mystery story (in 250 words or less, and be sure to include a crime) based on the above photograph. The story will be printed in a future issue. Reply to AHMM, Dell Magazines, 475 Park Avenue South, New York, New York 10016. Please label your entry "January Contest," and be sure your name and address are written on the story you submit. If possible, please also include your Social Security number.

The winning entry for the July/August Mysterious Photograph contest will be found on page 141.

The Facts Concerning the Carnival of Crime at Christmas

S. L. Franklin



PART I

I think of it less as a Christmas crime, to tell the truth, than as a crime of the 1980's. And not because it had that much to do with Reaganomics or slash-and-grab greed—although the second of these was evident in a way—but because it took place at a shopping mall. The eighties, of course, were a boom time for malls. I personally shouldn't complain, since the security-consulting half of my business at the time depended to a great degree on malls, but it was true as well that the criminals in this particular case couldn't have succeeded the way they did at first without a mall to operate in.

Another truth is that I originally got into mall security by accident. One spring day in 1977, when my one-man operation, Carr Investigations and Security, was suffering an all-time record absence of new clients, the family bank balance got me desperate enough to head out with the idea of soliciting business. Through luck or fate or divine intervention, I hadn't been driving for more than three or four minutes when I found myself cruising by a new shopping mall that was being built about eight blocks from my office. The place was called Speedway Mall because it was located on the site of a long-defunct half-mile race track, and when I saw a sign reading "Grand Opening September 1977. Mall Office Now Open," I dropped my plans to cold call an industrial complex out in Niles, made a U-turn and followed the arrows through a curbed but unpaved lot to a temporary entrance, parked the car, and strolled inside.

I expected to find half-completed chaos and a cigar chomper using a construction crate for a desk, but instead I discovered that this particular portion of the mall was all but finished, and the mall offices, lining one side of a brick-and-glass walled corridor, were filled with modular furnishings and a staff of at least five, four of whom were using telephones as I walked in the public entrance. The fifth was a long, slim blonde wearing a youthful, intelligent expression and a cornflower blue dress. I handed her one of my business cards across the service counter and said, "Hi. I'd like to talk to someone about your security program, or if no one's here who deals with that subject, I'd like to arrange an appointment."

She looked at me slowly—without fear, you might say, since I'm oversized and not handsome—then she stood up and walked to the door of an interior office, commenting over her shoulder, "I'll see what I can do."

That's how I met Judy Pilske, and even though she didn't play any further role in my getting around a pair of skeptical supervisors and into directing the setup of security at the mall, I judged her to have assessed me positively when she took that first look, or I would never have made it past the counter. So to some degree I owed my entry into mall security work to her, and when she was promoted to office manager a few years later at the ripe age of twenty-two, I was pleased to see her sitting in with the security chief at Speedway when I came by every couple of months to review the mall's records and procedures.

Judy was a graceful and reasonably attractive young woman, and like a lot of Northwest Side girls she was a live-at-home Catholic looking hard for a husband. Husband material in the late seventies and eighties was in as short supply as ever—even for long, slim blondes—so, before she finally did get engaged and then married, after all this happened, she spent half her time in the mall office fending off passes from the usual gang of suspects, some of them higher-ups in the Speedway Corporation. Being a Northwest Side girl, however, meant that she could handle it.

Over time we got to be fairly good acquaintances—I guess that’s the real point—enough at least so that we knew each other’s stories. I put up with her cigarettes at our review meetings, and she put up with whatever I did that was irksome. I enjoyed dealing with her because she was smart and hardworking, unlike a couple of the security chiefs Speedway had in those early years.

Exactly none of this was on my mind, of course, the evening in December, 1983, when I got back to the three-flat a good hour ahead of schedule from a one-day job up in Wisconsin. Ginny had taken the kids to her sister’s place in Niles, and so, being on my own for once, I decided to dial up my office answering machine for messages, something I hardly ever did back in those primitive, pre-voicemail days. The first couple of calls didn’t amount to much, but then this one came on:

R. J., this is Judy Pilske at Speedway Mall. Something strange is going on here that we need your help with. Please call back today if at all possible, and *only talk to me*. I’m on from twelve to nine today, so if you don’t hear this till evening, I’ll still be around. Thanks.

After listening to the message a second time, I decided that I didn’t care for the “only talk to me” portion very much. It probably meant that Frank Malin, the acting security chief at Speedway, thought he could handle the problem alone, whereas he struck me from the beginning as the kind of guy who would rather perform an appendectomy on himself than see a doctor.

The time was only ten to eight, and our three-flat was a short drive from the mall, so on the spur of the moment I decided to run over in the car, see Judy, and possibly even do a little Christmas shopping afterwards. I made quick time to and through the mall to the same glass-and-brick corridor, but when I poked my head into Judy’s office she wasn’t in evidence, and the reception area twenty yards farther along the way appeared to be abandoned as well. While I stood there with the reception door open, wondering whether to call out or try another office, I heard a strange, high-pitched sound, almost like a whistle, coming from the far end of the corridor. I stepped out looking, the way you do, and

there, running toward me, shrieking nonstop, was a young girl, maybe fifteen years old, dressed in early-eighties high-school chic—tight Levi's, aviator's jacket, and a pint each of eye makeup and hairspray. Behind her near the entrance to the women's washroom was a second girl, similarly dressed, retching and screaming.

I stepped into the first girl's path—I had to, in order to stop her—and grabbed her by both shoulders. “What's wrong?” I said. “Tell me—I'm with mall security.”

She went limp and started hyperventilating. Between gasps she said, “Blood—in the restroom—a woman all bloody—”

By that time the screams had attracted a handful of curious people. One of them was a competent-looking middle-aged woman, and on an impulse I said, “Ma'am, could you please take these girls—” the other one had come up to us “—into that office? There's a phone on the counter. Call the Speedway Security Office—it explains how right there—and tell whoever answers to get an ambulance over here because there's been a severe injury in the washroom by the mall office. It's an extreme emergency.”

I steered the first girl in her direction, then took off at a run toward the washroom, afraid of what I was going to find. As I dodged around the blockoff at the entrance I could smell a whiff of recent gunfire, and then I saw that I was right: on the floor at the far end, between a row of stalls and a row of sinks, Judy Pilske lay face downward in a pool of blood. I hurried to kneel by her and then adjusted her head to let her breathe easier, but I was afraid to do anything else. She'd been shot twice—in the lower back and the right shoulder—and the bruise on her forehead made me think that she'd fallen headfirst against the base of the wall. Her pulse at the neck seemed thin and fast to me, and her respiration light and slow.

I brushed the hair away from her face while I thought dark thoughts, then stood up and hit the wall with my fist.

After that I looked around belatedly to make sure that no one else was in the washroom before I went back outside to see if anything else was happening. I discovered a young and extremely green mall security guard standing by the entrance, but he told me he was embarrassed about entering the ladies' restroom, so I suggested that he simply keep guard instead, then went to a pay phone farther down the corridor and dialed the local district headquarters to report the shooting and ask for support. At about the time a dispatcher told me that a squad car had already been sent, I could hear sirens sounding in the far distance, so I went back inside the washroom to stand over Judy. I took off my overcoat and covered her with it, I remember, hoping that I was doing the right thing and wishing that I remembered more first aid.

The good part, anyway, was that she was still alive and she had a chance. She'd been shot in nonvital spots by a smaller caliber weapon

and I'd found her fast. Unfortunately, she'd also lost a lot of blood. So, if they got her on plasma quickly, I thought, and if the exit wounds were clean, and if the ambulance didn't break down, and if the paramedics weren't Stan and Ollie . . .

"Someone trailed her to the washroom," I said half out loud to get my mind in focus. Trained her, stepped inside, fired twice, and left quickly. That was how it must have happened, because otherwise Judy would already have died from a third wound fired from closer up. *But why did the assailant leave?* I hunted around for another clue, one of those essential details that shows up later full of meaning, but I didn't find anything, and just as I started to go back outside, the ambulance crew and the police arrived together in a rush.

It had been a long seven minutes.

PART II

Two hours later I was finally sitting down at Judy's desk to try to figure out why she'd called me in the first place. In the intervening time I'd conferred with Jim Sammons, the detective sergeant in charge of the case, and we'd agreed that, if Judy pulled through, she was going to need guarding until we found out what was happening at Speedway and who her assailant was. Then I'd called a vice president of the Speedway Corporation to verify my authority to investigate the whole business. It was in my contract, but sometimes people have to be reminded. I'd also called home and talked to Ginny. She was back from Niles and had just tucked the kids in.

"R. J.," she'd said, "please promise me you'll be careful when you leave there. I think—that is, it makes sense to think—that Judy Pilske might have been shot because she got in touch with you. You have to consider that."

"Yeah," I'd replied, "I have. So the sooner we get an answer, the sooner the danger's going to be past."

"Maybe I can help."

"Right. Tomorrow morning, first thing."

"Then please be careful tonight."

Judy's copy of the Mall Security Log, when I found it, was uninspiring—the usual catalog of petty crime, frailty, stupidity, and craziness it always was. In December to that point it tallied two muggings, a stolen vehicle, four vehicle break-ins, a handful of stolen purses, some suspected pick-pocket activity, a variety of disturbances by the obnoxious or irate, two episodes of vandalism, a hit-and-run in the parking lot, vagrancy, pan-handling, et cetera, et cetera, and a two-part list six pages long of suspected or confirmed shoplifting and stolen or missing merchandise.

When I asked the on-duty security supervisor if he knew of any particular problems requiring my being called in, he'd only grunted. Frank Malin, his superior, was incommunicado at his bowling league that night.

I prowled around Judy's office for a few minutes, looking into this file drawer or that cabinet, before I suddenly remembered an occasion in which I'd seen her slip a half-finished report under the blotter pad on her desk. On this particular night, I discovered, the blotter pad concealed two things, a bill for repairing the office copy machine and an incomplete insurance form relating to the victim of the hit-and-run accident in the mall parking lot. There was nothing unusual in this pair of documents, except for the fact that Florence Siwinski, the victim of the hit-and-run, apparently had died after three days at Northwest Hospital without regaining consciousness.

This fact, though, was enough to make me decide to take the form and the security log home with me, and while I was driving along—carefully, per Ginny's instructions—I had the not-so-funny thought that Judy Pilske was at that moment lying unconscious at Northwest Hospital after a hit-and-run *shooting* at Speedway. This parallel circumstance inspired me to call Jim Sammons before I went to bed and ask him if he could dig out the police file on Florence Siwinski for me. Then I crawled in beside Ginny, but I didn't sleep well.

The next morning, after our children—ages four and eight that year—were off to pre- and grade school respectively, I gave Ginny a pretty thorough summary of the problem, then I handed her the security log and the accident report and said, "You tell me if there's something here. I'm going to make some calls from the bedroom."

First I called another mall out in the southwest suburbs and canceled a security review appointment for that morning. Then I called Northwest Hospital to find out about Judy. She was in critical condition in the intensive care unit, so I was informed. After an additional five-minute hold, the floor nurse came on the line and gave me the answer to my real question: Judy hadn't regained consciousness and probably wouldn't for some time, maybe days, a response that sounded fairly hopeful to me, actually, so I didn't ask for further details that I wouldn't have been given anyway.

My next call was to Speedway and Frank Malin. Malin was a fifty-year-old former police sergeant from Chicago who had left the force early. He'd been the kind of cop who makes it hard for other cops—gruff and domineering, not corrupt, but a taker of small gifts and unfair advantages. When the Speedway Corporation hired him as a shift supervisor I'd advised against it, and when he'd been made acting security chief while his boss, Hank Arnow, convalesced from a triple bypass operation, I'd protested strongly. The Speedway Corporation paid for my advice—not enough, from my standpoint—but they didn't always take it.

"Malin here," he said in a smoker's baritone.

"Yeah, Frank, this is R. J. Carr. I'll be over there at eleven to see you about Judy. But I want to know now why she called to get my advice on security. I know she went to you first—she said as much in the mes-

sage she left on my machine. Only I'm still in the dark because she'd been shot by the time I got there last night."

"Yeah. That was pretty terrible, all right," he said. "And the papers are giving it space, which doesn't sit well with the management either."

"So?" I said.

"So I don't know."

"Look, Frank," I said, deciding to take a hard line, "you can help me crack this case and be a hero, or you can try to hush it up and get nothing but trouble. You're not on the force anymore, remember?"

I could almost hear the gears grinding in his brain, trying to figure if that made sense. Finally he said, "You seen the log?"

"Uh-huh."

"Well—it's all those thefts. The Merchants Association complained, so we tried tighter controls and supervision, but stuff is still going."

"And Judy thought you should call me?"

"I wanted to give it a couple more days."

"Anything else?"

"Ah . . . no."

"All right, then. I'll see you about eleven."

We hung up and I went back to the kitchen where I found Ginny emptying a teapot into a large mug. Ginny stood about a foot shorter than I did, and the similarity between us ended at that point. She was thirty-four and looked twenty-five, for one thing, whereas I was forty in both fact and appearance. She'd inherited classic French features from her mother and classic French curves either from her mother or somebody else—maybe her father, who was Latvian—so we didn't look alike in that way either. Otherwise she had black hair, a fair complexion, an I.Q. of two hundred or so, and a calm and generally reserved manner with only one notable weakness, an irrational attraction to ugly, oversized detectives.

"Did you—how is Judy?" she asked. "Would they tell you?"

"In intensive care," I said. "Critical but stable is my impression. Still unconscious."

She stepped over to the table, sat on a kitchen chair, and pushed the waves of hair back from her face. "R. J.," she said, "I don't want to sound like an alarmist, but . . . you have to find this person quickly."

"You mean Judy's assailant."

"Assailant, yes. Stop it at that, before the term becomes murderer. Of Judy—or you. You're both at risk, I think."

"And other people, too," I pointed out. "But, all right—pedal to the metal at Speedway Mall. That's what I told you last night, in fact. And in answer to the question you haven't asked yet, the main problem at Speedway is a rash of thefts. Have you looked at those?" I gestured at the security log in front of her.

"I just came to that section, I'm afraid. Come and sit next to me. We'll look together."

So I sat and we looked. After a minute or so, Ginny said, "Bring me a piece of paper and a pen, would you, please." I got them from a drawer.

"Do you see what I'm seeing?" she asked, as she began making notations.

I looked a little more. "Well," I said, "there are about a hundred stores in Speedway, and I'd guess not over fifteen are on here, but—" I stopped and leafed quickly through the six-page list. "Wow! Orchid Records. Mason's. Catterson Furs! Ginny—those stores have security sensors at the exits."

"What?" she said, looking up from her notes.

"You can't shoplift anything from those stores—or not without a heck of a lot of trouble. Their merchandise has a label or a sealed-on container or an embedded computer chip that sets off an alarm if it isn't deactivated or removed by a salesclerk."

"But, it's those stores and—" she looked down at her notes "—and three others, Slade Jewelers, California Kitchens, and The Wedge, where . . . And look, look at the dates."

I looked, we looked, and in five minutes we'd worked out what was happening in pretty clear terms. Someone was targeting those six stores for expensive and in some cases fairly large articles, targeting them over and over, in fact, on Wednesdays and Fridays, if the pattern of Thursday and Saturday reporting meant anything.

"What do you think?" I asked.

"I—you're the expert on this type of thing, but my opinion is that—have there been any arrests?"

"No," I said. "The last column tells the status. Three or four apprehensions on theft in other stores. Kids, I'd guess—but this doesn't look like kids."

"No. To me it looks far more like, oh, a carnival of crime—or organized crime in a very special sense. Someone has analyzed security at Speedway Mall and found a weak spot."

"Six weak spots. And you're right about it being professional work, Ginny. The only items taken are fenceable goods. Look at this: fur stole, food processor, diamond bracelet, a box—an unopened box, Ginny—of the latest album by The Grateful Dead. Not that we'd be interested, but . . ."

"No." She smiled a rare, sardonic smile before continuing, "Although doubtless it is a popular seasonal gift and already in short supply—unlike the new boxed set of Handel's *Messiah* that I'm parenthetically hoping to find under our humble tree. Fortunately for me, though, that album is almost certainly not a fenceable item, and no one could ever accuse it of having anything to do with Christmas."

She made another comical face, then said, "Musical tastes notwithstanding, however, something seems quite apparent in what's happening at Speedway Mall, R. J., and it's just this very element: the Christmas season. Nothing here says so, precisely, but what makes the

shoplifting possible on this scale must have something to do with the Christmas shopping season.”

“How?”

“I don’t know. But my sense is that someone is taking deliberate advantage of it somehow, as cynical and horrible as that seems. It can’t be just a coincidence. Larger crowds, more harried clerks, longer store hours—there has to be some one thing, or a combination of things.” She gave me a look of sudden misgiving. “Or don’t you agree?”

“Maybe,” I said. “It’s a starting point, anyway. But the ‘thing’ you’re talking about has to be something so basic and simple that nobody notices it. What I mean, Ginny, is that it can’t be very complicated, or it would have been spotted by this time. The people running those businesses aren’t babes in the woods, you know, and according to what Malin just told me, everyone over there has been on the alert for the last few days, trying to figure it out.”

We talked a few more minutes without much result before I said, “Well—it’s probably not worth asking, but you didn’t see anything in the rest of the log that might throw some light on the thefts, did you?”

“No. It’s almost incomprehensible to me that people can be so sad and sick in so many ways, but I honestly didn’t notice anything beyond the shoplifting pattern. What I did notice—I wonder if anyone else has made the connection—is that the woman who was the hit-and-run victim, the one who died, was struck on the same evening that the only car theft was reported. In fact, before you came in here talking about shoplifting, I was certain that the attack on Judy had to be related to the car theft and hit-and-run. The presence of the insurance form misled me.”

I thought for a moment, then said, “You’re suggesting that the car thieves ran her down as they escaped?”

She hesitated. “Stated thus baldly it sounds unconvincing, I admit. But . . . I don’t think ‘coincidence’ describes the way the two fit together either.” She examined the form in her hand while I waited.

“Yes,” Ginny said, then looked up at me. “I thought I noticed that name. She was an employee of The Wedge, R. J. It might not mean anything, of course, but Judy did seem to hide away this form, as if she were holding it back to show you.”

“Yeah,” I said. “Maybe.”

I didn’t like what was happening. When Ginny’s arguments and my instincts pointed the same way, we had never been wrong on a case that I could remember.

PART III

I got over to the mall at quarter to eleven and wandered into the office complex through the reception area. After saying hello to a couple of familiar faces and ducking more than a couple of questions, I headed to the interior where the private offices were. As I approached Judy’s office door

I heard a sound, probably a file drawer closing, and for some reason that made me step quietly and look before I entered. What I saw, from the rear, was a young woman of medium height, thin as a stick, and with long, straight brown hair. She was searching rapidly through the things on Judy's desk and not finding what she wanted. She stopped, raised a hand to her chin as if thinking, and then, as I had the previous evening, she raised the blotter pad and looked beneath it.

After another five seconds I tapped on the door, just to get a reaction, but she only turned briefly and said, "Come on in, whoever you are. You can help me look."

"What are we looking for?" I asked, as I slipped around to the front of the desk where I could see her better: frameless glasses and no makeup on a small-featured, somewhat pretty face. She was new to me, but she wore a mall identity pin that read Barbara Becker, Program Coordinator.

"You're Mr. Carr, aren't you?" she said, looking away quickly from my birthmarked face. "So you know about Judy. They say she'll pull through, but the whole thing is just so terrible that I feel like going home and crying." She shook her head sadly, but then continued in a perky tone, "Oh! I'm Barb Becker, by the way, and what I can't find is an insurance claim form. It's for one of my Christmas Temps. She was killed by a hit-and-run driver out in the parking lot last week. Another horrible thing." She gestured vaguely and made a deeper frown. "You didn't hear that. We're not supposed to say negative things about Speedway Mall." She picked up a cigarette from the desk and lit it with Judy's lighter.

I said, "Well, I can find the form for you."

I opened the security log in my hand and slipped out the form. Her eyes widened briefly before she exhaled smoke and said, "So that's where the little stinker got to. Did Judy fill it in?" She took it from me and looked it over. "Nope. Well, Judy sure has an excuse, but I don't know what I'm going to tell the woman's son."

I said, "What's a—what did you call her? A Christmas something?"

"A Christmas Temp. This is our third year—my first running the program. The Speedway Corporation keeps a roster of mostly local neighborhood people—usually housewives and college students—who want part-time holiday work. So when the various stores in the mall need extra personnel for the Christmas rush they call us—me—and I send them over someone from my list who meets their requirements. It's a really smart program: it saves the stores a lot of screening and paperwork, it gives us a boost with the local community, and practically all the wages paid get spent here for Christmas presents." She drew on her cigarette.

"Yeah," I said. "Sounds great."

"It was Judy's idea," she replied and made a defeated, fatalistic shrug. "Well, I've got to get back to biz. Nice meeting you, Mr. Carr." She drifted out the door.

I did the same a couple of minutes later, after I'd parked the security log and called to leave a message for Jim Sammons to find out more for me about the car stolen on the night of the hit-and-run. On my way across the mall to talk with Frank Malin in the security office I happened to see Barb Becker again as she walked along, engaged in a heated conversation with what seemed to me to be an unlikely companion, an aggressively stupid-looking man in a slicked-back ducktail haircut, denim jacket, and corduroy shirt. He was about thirty years old, but with a hard, weathered face, and the young woman seemed to have lost all her chipper good cheer in talking to him. She looked more than a little unhappy, in fact, and I couldn't help speculating why, if only to divert my thoughts from the hurrying mass of shoppers and the loud, unrelenting blare of seasonal music that was long on Rudolph, Santa, and presents, but short on everything else.

In contrast to the retail area, the security office seemed almost like an island of calm when I stepped inside. Frank Malin greeted me in front of the three-person staff with an air of forced cordiality, asked after my brother Johnny, who at that time was a detective captain at Homicide Central, and led me back into a room that could have passed for a wartime interrogation chamber but was really his office.

"Pull up a chair," he said, pointing to the only available candidate, a wobbly secretarial number tucked in a corner. "And be careful. It tips over backwards real easily. One of the many amenities afforded the head of security." He waved roundly at the rest of the room—a metal desk, an inexpensive-grade executive chair, a file cabinet. It reminded me of my own office in a way, only my furnishings were older and my room had a window.

With his large, angular face and broad, powerful shoulders, Malin gave the impression of being hard and square. He lit a cigarette, then he said, "Well, you've seen the log. You're the one comes in when we're too stupid to catch on. So, who do I detain?"

"Today is Wednesday," I said in reply. "What are you and the guards watching for?"

He thought for a few seconds. "I'd say . . . we're watching for a gang of professionals. Slick and careful. They go for big stuff, they work together somehow—hand the stuff from one to another, maybe—and they've got some way, maybe a lead-lined bag, to get by the security sensors in some of the stores. Either that or they're invisible."

Suddenly, and for no reason I wanted to name, I felt better. "Lead-lined bags," I said. "I hadn't thought of that. You realize, then, that the stores with sensors are among the big losers."

"Well, I know they've complained a lot. That rat's ass at Orchid Records—I could turn him over any day of the week for possession and probably dealing—he's been in here screaming."

"Yeah, he's a jerk," I said. It was good to have some common ground.

“But my point is that six stores are bearing the brunt of the thefts.” I reeled off their names. “In fact, I’m not at all certain that the rest of the mall is being affected by this gang. What’s left on the list seems to be pretty random. Have you talked to Penney’s and Wieboldt’s?” The two anchor department stores had their own in-house security.

“Yeah. What’s-his-name over at Penney’s said they got no big problem. Wieboldt’s never tells us anything, but if something goes bad, they scream.”

“And they’ve been quiet?”

“Yeah.”

“That’s interesting,” I said. “Listen. This is how it seems to shape up: this gang has picked six stores that carry medium to big ticket merchandise and figured out a way—or possibly six ways—of moving the stuff out. I’m not absolutely sure, but the pattern in the log indicates that they do it on Wednesdays and Fridays.”

He made a skeptical growling sound, then opened his copy of the log and looked through it. After a couple of minutes of cross-checking, he said, “You know—I think you’re right. What if we put all our floaters on those six stores for the rest of the day?”

“Wouldn’t hurt,” I replied. “I really came over to talk about Judy, you know.”

He looked at his watch. “Sure. But if I don’t go for lunch now, I’ll never get one, so . . .”

“All right,” I said. “I could eat.”

“Fine. Oh—you’ll need to know about this. I just heard about it myself. On Saturday night the manager of Speedway Cinema turned in a small handgun to us. One of her cleaning people found it. Monday we got a call from someone claiming he lost it.” Malin shook his head. “Anyway, the guy said he’d come by and pick it up—show his permit—sometime this week.”

“And it’s gone,” I said.

“Yeah. It’s gone. Evidently it was put in the holding drawer under the reception counter out front for this guy to claim, the last time anyone saw it. He came by this morning and threw a fit when we didn’t have it for him.”

“And in the meantime there’s been a shooting here with a small caliber weapon.”

“Yeah. Course, it might be a coincidence.” But I could tell from the look on his face that he didn’t think so either.

“Judy doesn’t like me,” Malin was saying as we angled toward an isolated table in the newly opened Mall Food Court: twelve different varieties of indigestion at one convenient location. I had Greek; he had Chinese. “I may be the only white male around here who hasn’t laid his hand on her thigh, but still she doesn’t like me.”

We sat and started eating. “She likes you, though,” he said, pointing a plastic forkful of chow mein at me. “Every problem, she wants to call you.”

"This is the first time she ever did."

"That I don't know about. I know I've been acting head of security since September twentieth, and I know management doesn't want to bring you in for consultation over dope smoking in the washrooms."

"So what did she say specifically? This time?"

He chewed a little, possibly thinking, possibly not. "This theft problem just exploded from nowhere—you've got to understand that first. November was very quiet till the last week. Then, boom!"

"And?"

"The Merchants Association gets hysterical, and of course they go to Judy because she's their liaison with mall management. I'm responsible to management—so is Judy, you know?—and management says to keep it quiet, keep the police out, solve it internally."

"And?"

"Okay. Judy doesn't like me. She thinks I can't handle this job. You don't either—I heard it through the grapevine. Judy says I'm a policeman, not a security expert. But management tells me to keep trying. I keep trying."

"And that's it?"

"Yeah. That's it."

I watched his face for a moment, then said, "You're not telling me everything, Frank."

For a moment I thought he wasn't going to respond, but he finally said, "Nothing you need to know, that's all. It's private—between her and me. If I'm wrong about that, then you're right and this job is too big for me." He lit a cigarette. "I want this job, Ray. Hank Arnow is not coming back. The doctors say the stress would be too much, so come January, either I'm permanent head of security or I'm out on my ass. So nobody wants this stuff cleared up worse than I do, but I still have to do what I'm told."

There wasn't a lot to say in response, so I didn't say it. As we were leaving the food court, Malin remarked casually, in a low voice, "See that guy coming in?"

It was the man I'd observed earlier talking to Barb Becker. "Yeah," I said. We kept on walking.

"He works here—fairly new guy on the nighttime custodial crew. Name's Mike Cooksey. Don't recognize him, do you?"

"Nope," I said to keep things simple.

"That's too bad. Either I've seen him before, or he reminds me of someone I've seen before."

"Oh. Someone with a police record."

"Uh-huh. Only he hasn't got one—at least not as Mike Cooksey—and I don't have time to look through mug books."

I spent the early afternoon gathering bits and pieces and feeling the sense of urgency I'd had all along grow more and more pressing. First

I'd doubled back to the food court and retrieved a greasy food wrapper from a trash receptacle as soon as Mike Cooksey was out of sight, on the principle that fingerprints beat mug books every time. I'd lived my life in a family of policemen, so I know that the faint association of a face with past criminal activity in the mind of a former cop, even a mediocre cop, was probably worth checking out.

Then I'd talked to some of the security guards and the managers of Catterson Furs and The Wedge ("Your Source for High Tech Electronics") and ambled around in all six of the problem stores. At three o'clock I'd driven over to the new district headquarters on Grand Avenue for an appointment I'd made with Jim Sammons, only he turned out to be running late, so I hunted up an evidence technician to start a trace on Mike Cooksey's fingerprints.

Then I'd stood in the doorway of the new building and looked out across a couple of parking lots toward Northwest Stadium where, in another life, twenty-odd years before, I'd played a lot of high school football. The sky was iron gray, and flecks of snow drifted here and there. After a few minutes the image of Judy Pilske lying in her own blood cut across my view, and I'd sat down on a bench and brooded over the problem till Jim Sammons called me into his cubicle at five to four.

"Judy Pilske," he said.

"Right."

"Someone entered her room this afternoon about two thirty, then backed off when he saw the guard."

"Male?"

"Correct."

"And?"

"Our man was on the far side of the room. By the time he got around the bed and out into the hallway, the man had disappeared." Sammons looked tired. He was about twenty-six, with a Scandinavian handsomeness—close-cut blond hair, pale blue eyes, a loose athletic build.

"How's Judy doing?" I asked. "Or do you know?"

"She'll probably make it," he replied, looking down at his hands on the desk. "The concussion's the difficult thing, the doctor says. She must have pitched forward against the wall at a bad angle. I let the guard off and sat there awhile so he could get his lunch. It made me feel like going hunting, though, watching her hooked up to all those tubes and monitors. It's funny. I used to know Judy back in high school a little. Haven't seen her since, but I guess that connection made it come home to me."

I'd been wrong: Sammons wasn't tired, he was angry.

"We'll get him," I said.

He took a deep breath, then responded, "Good. What do you know that I don't?"

I told him about the missing pistol and the shoplifting epidemic, the connection Ginny had spotted between the car theft and the hit-and-run.

“Right,” he said. “I’ve got those files here. The hit-and-run victim was a fifty-seven-year-old widow named Florence Siwinski. She was a temporary employee of The Wedge store in the mall, and she was struck as she was walking to her car in the parking lot at around nine fifteen that night. The only witness was a hundred yards away and had no idea what kind of vehicle was involved. We have not traced the vehicle. No one has come forth with either a confession or a lead. Mrs. Siwinski died unexpectedly three days later without regaining full consciousness, but her condition had been improving. That was Sunday. An autopsy was requested, and we got the report yesterday. Mrs. Siwinski died of suffocation. Somebody smothered her in the hospital.”

I didn’t say anything. Sammons waited a couple of seconds, then went on. “As for the stolen vehicle, it is, or was, the property of a David Harnisch of River Forest, who discovered it missing at around eleven that same night when he came out of the Speedway Cinema after seeing a movie. I handled this one myself. The man was hysterical. He’s still hysterical—he calls here every day. His car was a brand-new Mercedes 450 sedan with a built-in alarm system. It was stolen by pros, and my feeling is that it will never be found. It could be the vehicle that ran down Florence Siwinski, but I doubt it.”

“You mean, I take it, that whoever ran her down wanted her dead.”

“That’s what I mean. It’s not my case, but I talked to Lieutenant Weber about it this afternoon. No one officially visited her room on Sunday according to the hospital people, and her son, who would otherwise be the obvious suspect, has an unshakable alibi—he works as a vendor at Soldier Field when the Bears play, and Sunday was their last home game. Also, he’s the one who demanded the autopsy.”

“It all fits, anyway,” I said. “This Mrs. Siwinski was a Christmas Temp at one of the stores that’s being hit hard by the shoplifters. She must have suspected something or else spotted someone and got spotted herself before she could report it. Or something like that.”

“What I don’t like,” said Sammons, “is the parallel with what’s happened to Judy Pilske. I wish we could put a second man over there.”

“What about her family?”

“It’s a thought. I saw her parents as I was leaving today. Nice people. Worried to death, of course. I don’t think they have much money.” He looked down at some notations before saying, “Oh. I think I’d better tell you that tomorrow we’ll be over at Speedway to look into your shoplifting ring. What you’re saying about how it ties into the hit-and-run and the attacks on Judy—I don’t think you can claim it’s a private security problem any more.”

I felt a twinge of unlikely sympathy for Frank Malin as Sammons made this remark. “Well,” I said, “in that case, I guess I’d better wrap it up tonight, if I want to keep consulting for Speedway Mall.”

“It’s that way, is it?” He suddenly looked hesitant.

“Speedway Management is the toughest client I’ve got,” I said. “But

seriously, I'll have it worked out by . . . oh, I'd say ten o'clock tomorrow morning. Keep guarding Judy."

"What—?"

"No," I said. "Don't ask me. I'm not on the public payroll—I earn my living solving these things, and that's what I intend to do tonight. I'll tell you this much, though: I've got at least a portion of the shoplifting puzzle worked out, and I'm going home now to try to work out the rest with my wife. She has all the brains in the family."

We both stood in anticipation of my departure. Sammons hesitated again, then he said, "You're married, eh? Law enforcement is hard on marriage, from what I've seen."

"It depends."

"I've avoided it—marriage." He looked all at once very young for his age. "What I said about knowing Judy in high school—actually, we dated for a while. We stopped because I was Lutheran, she was Catholic. One more reason why marriage doesn't work out. But it was a shock seeing her after nine years, shot up like that." His face was putting on a brilliant blush.

I said, "Well, I'm Presbyterian, myself, but my wife was raised half-Catholic and half-Lutheran. Her folks made it work."

As I left I could see him staring with his clean-cut, handsome face at my birthmarked, ugly one. It's a look I've always gotten a lot of and don't care for much, but what occurred to me on this particular occasion was that Sammons wasn't really seeing me—he was seeing a long, slim blonde in a hospital bed—so I let it pass.

PART IV

A quarter after nine that night I was showing that same dubious mug to the closed circuit security camera outside the main loading dock of Speedway Mall.

"Say the secret password," said a voice in a box.

"Pulp."

"What?"

"Let me in, or tomorrow I'll beat you to a pulp."

"Yes, sir. Just joking."

"Right."

I was feeling good. Ginny and I had come up with a very tight theory about the shoplifting ring, and although we still couldn't quite see how the goods were being disposed of, that wouldn't matter if we found enough confirming evidence on the people involved. I was meeting Frank Malin at nine thirty to make a directed search for the evidence, if it existed.

The backside of the shopping mall was and still is a depressing sight, not to mention an ungodly smell. The first thing that hit me as I came in the door was the odor of live garbage, collected in its own huge dumpster

from the twelve Food Court outlets and four independent restaurants scattered elsewhere in the mall. For no particular reason, mainly to get away from the stink, probably, I ambled down one of the service corridors which ran behind the stores. No matter how flashy the storefronts, no matter how elaborate the decor of the public areas, in every mall of this design these corridors look the same—poorly lighted, lined with cheap wallboard, covered with cheaper paint, and over the paint the inevitable graffiti.

When I made the first turn in the corridor, about a hundred feet from the loading dock, I saw coming toward me a one-man motorized truck pulling two narrow flatbed carts in tandem. On the carts were what appeared to be barrel-shaped waste receptacles and boxes of trash, and as the distance closed between us, I came to recognize the driver of the truck as Mike Cooksey, Frank Malin's dark-haired boy.

"Hey! Haul your damn ass out of the way!" he yelled from about twenty feet off. I could see his point: the right angle turn was tricky pulling that load, so I moved back a few yards and leaned up against the wall as he slowed to make the swing around the corner. Since I was wondering more about Cooksey than about what he was doing, the tail end of the cart was almost out of sight before the fact registered with me that what I had been watching was the day's take by the shoplifting ring being methodically and prosaically carted away from the stores. All the barrels on the two carts had been stenciled RETURN TO, followed by a particular retailer's name, and each RETURN TO I had seen was one of the six problem stores.

I started to hurry after Cooksey but then stopped, thinking it might be better to watch what he did with the barrels first, so I held off for thirty seconds to give him a good lead, then ambled back along the corridor to the shipping area. As I came out into the brighter lighting I spotted the carts, minus the driver and truck, parked unobtrusively alongside the first loading bay next to another cart which was half full of what looked to be shipping cartons. Except for a forklift operator thirty yards across the expanse of concrete, no one else was visible in the large, enclosed space. The forklift roared suddenly and disappeared into the interior of a trailer backed up to the dock. I quick-stepped along the wall to the carts full of barrels.

A brief inspection told me that five of the six stores were represented by trash receptacles, The Wedge's alone being absent. I looked around another time to make sure that I wasn't under observation, then I carefully maneuvered the barrel marked RETURN TO CATTERSON FUR down onto the floor. It was filled to the top with innocent looking trash, mainly paper, and after a moment of indecision I decided not to dump it. Instead I sifted down into its contents with my hands.

My arms are long, and I was penetrating close to the bottom, trying to detect anything at all promising with the touch of my fingertips, when at last I felt the surface of a plastic bag with a soft, fur-like substance beneath it. I eased my arms up and out and stepped back to consider

whether I should dump the receptacle after all or simply take everything—carts, barrels, and contents—in charge as potential evidence.

The forklift was roaring again across the way, but all at once I became conscious of another sound coming from behind me, with the result that I turned just fast enough to duck slightly, so that the mop handle Mike Cooksey was swinging at the side of my head struck me at an upward angle straight across the forehead.

My glasses flew wide, I fell back against the barrel, my knees folded, and I toppled, not totally unconscious, onto my face. Then I must have blacked out.

“Mi-i-s-ter!” I heard a voice yell. “Señor! Mi-i-s-ter!” Someone was shaking my shoulder. Then I felt a pain across my forehead and down into my neck, and I jolted into consciousness. I opened my eyes—not that I could see too much when I opened my eyes—and realized that I was on my back, which meant that someone had turned me over, the someone being a Hispanic-looking man whose mustachioed face was bent over me. I raised a hand to my forehead and felt blood there—but not much—and the memory of what happened came back to me.

“You okay?” said the man. “You need a . . . *medico*?”

“My glasses . . .” I said, pushing up on an elbow and feeling a new wave of pain across my forehead.

“Glasses . . .” he said. “Ah!” He pointed to his eyes. His face moved out of my sight range then returned. “Bad luck, mister. These glasses are busted.” He handed the frames to me half filled with shards and splinters.

My next thought was for Cooksey. “Where’s the man who hit me?” I asked, trying out of habit to look around.

“Cooksey? That man, he runs fast, I can tell you. I see him hit you—then I come fast, on forklift. Cooksey, he goes out the door like . . . a rabbit!”

“The exit door?”

“Sí. Yes.”

“I need to get to a phone,” I said.

“And water.”

“Yeah, and water.” He helped me up. “What’s your name?” I asked.

“José. They call me Joe, but I am José Ortiz.”

“Well, José, you’re a darned good man. I’m R. J. Carr. Glad to meet you.”

I followed him to a dispatcher’s desk along the back wall. “*Teléfono*,” he said. “I go to bring the water.”

I dropped into the chair by the desk and put my face down on my arm for a second. That was a mistake—the pain surged through my head. I jerked it back up, then pulled the telephone over near me where I could see the buttons and punched in the number of the security office around a corner fifty feet away. “Is Malin there yet?” I asked, peering at my watch. It read nine forty-two.

"No. Was he supposed to come in?"

"Yeah. This is R. J. Carr. I was assaulted on my way to meet him by Mike Cooksey, one of the maintenance men. You didn't spot Cooksey shooting out of here by the loading dock door, did you? On the closed circuit camera?"

"I can check."

"Don't bother. Have someone sweep through the parking lot—you've got his car make and license number in the employee file. Also his address. I'll want that in a few minutes. If Frank shows up, tell him I'm at the loading dock." I hung up and noticed Ortíz standing beside me holding a large paper cup full of water. "Thanks," I said. I gulped the water down, then I punched in my home phone number.

"Hello," said a clear, feminine voice.

"Hi. It's me."

"Yes?"

"Can you get Mrs. Andersen to come up for a while and stay with the kids?" Dorothy Andersen was a widow who lived in our basement flat. "I've broken my glasses—smashed to smithereens—and you're going to have to bring me another pair or I'll never get this done."

"What happened? Are you all right?"

"Yeah, I'm okay—just a little blind. There's a pair in my top dresser drawer, or maybe the bedside table. Bring it to the loading dock on the west side of the mall. A man named José Ortíz will show you in. Treat him nice. He saved me from a beating."

"R. J.!"

"I'll tell you when you get here."

After we hung up I sensed Ortíz standing near me again, along with another man. I asked Ortíz to watch for Ginny and then followed behind his companion to a washroom where I cleaned the blood off my face and out of my scalp. The wound was a long split in the skin close to the hairline with some bad swelling underneath that would get worse, I suspected, before it got better. But for the moment I was functioning, and I had work to do.

Id just made it back to the loading dock desk when I was attacked again, this time in the form of a blindside embrace from Ginny, who had set a speed record getting to the mall. She was crying, which wasn't like her, so I hugged her, calmed her down, and told her what had happened. She dried her eyes with my handkerchief, then finally placed the glasses she'd brought onto my nose.

"I brought you something else," she said.

"All right," I responded. "But it wouldn't have helped, and I won't need it."

She stepped close to me again and transferred a .22 caliber target pistol from her purse to my coat pocket. The gun belonged to her—one of a pair left over from the days when she'd done target shooting. I've

never been big on firearms myself, to be truthful, and never carried any back in those more innocent years unless I had to. The look on Ginny's face told me I had to.

"I'm staying until you're ready to go," she said next. "The children are asleep, and Dorothy, I'm sure, is asleep by now, too, in your chair."

"Fine," I said, "but the whole problem is pretty much worked out. I just need to check a few files over in the main office."

"Hmph," she grumbled, with a new expression on her face, half dubious and half worried. "Then I'm coming along. I honestly wonder sometimes if you ought to be trusted out by yourself." Meaning, or so I deduced, that she was thinking about a case from a few months before that had put me in the hospital with a concussion. All at once she embraced me again, so I held her awhile longer—never hard work—and when I looked up I saw a young black security guard eyeing us tentatively.

I said, "It's okay, pal—we're married. Has Frank Malin ever shown up?" Ginny moved behind me and did things to her face.

"Don't know, sir. I came to write up a report on the assault."

"You can do something better. See those two carts of trash barrels? Get a maintenance man to haul them over to Security and put them in the storeroom. They'll just about fit."

"Yes, sir. Could I ask why?"

"They're evidence. A shoplifting ring was putting stolen merchandise in the trash, and Cooksey was collecting it."

"Ah!"

I led Ginny away to the security office, and just before we got there she said, "R. J., I just remembered something: an extremely young man to be a police sergeant stopped by the house immediately after you left to come over here, and he gave me a report for you on Mike Cooksey's fingerprints."

"Sammons," I said. "Right. Did he ask you about being married to a detective, by chance?"

"I . . . in a manner of speaking, yes. He also asked about my religious affiliation. What did you tell that man about me?"

"Well—the subject came up about Lutherans and Catholics and I just said—"

"Oh. No wonder he looked embarrassed. I told him I was Presbyterian."

"Good—that ought to confuse him even more. You didn't by chance bring along that report, did you? About Cooksey?"

The report on Cooksey's fingerprints was brief but meaty. The fingers that made them attached to the hands of Michael Corcoran, frequent user of aliases, most recently a resident of the Pontiac Correctional Facility—specialty, car theft—and nephew of Thomas Alton, a man well known in certain local circles as a suspected receiver of stolen goods. This information was what might be called highly suggestive.

Ten minutes after talking over the report, we were in the reception area of the mall office, going through the file cabinets that flanked Barb Becker's desk, searching for anything we could find about Christmas Temps. Frank Malin had never shown up for our meeting, even though his wife assured me over the phone that he'd left home at nine fifteen. So there was another worry.

Ginny found the Christmas Temps files in a tray on Barb Becker's desk, and one look through them gave the rest of the show away. Fifty-six Christmas Temps were working as clerks in stores. The last six, entered on the master list all on the same day in the same handwriting, were those assigned to the six problem stores. One, Florence Siwinski, was now dead, which accounted for the absence in the evening's haul of the trash barrel from The Wedge where she had worked.

My head was throbbing pretty badly by that hour, but otherwise, with this information in hand, I felt all right. It was only ten thirty-five by the clock on the wall, which meant that we—Ginny and I—were over eleven hours ahead on the time by which I'd told Sammons that the case would be wrapped up. The only difficulty remaining was that the aforementioned clock hung over a doorway, and in that doorway stood Barb Becker with a small automatic pistol in her hand.

"Get away from my desk!" she said in a harsh, unnatural voice. I felt Ginny give a start beside me. "Get up! Get away from my desk!"

We stood together and edged slowly between various pieces of furniture toward the opposite side of the room. I attempted to shield Ginny from the gun by turning away from Barb Becker while Ginny walked backwards, facing me. For a second or two we were close together, close enough for Ginny to reach into my coat pocket and pull out the target pistol. "Hold off," I whispered, then turned around, keeping Ginny behind me. "You're too late," I said.

"Shut up," the woman replied. She walked in a jerky motion to the desk and stared down at the open files spread across it. "What right have you—you think you're so smart, don't you? You and your ugly face! I can't stand to look at you!" She threw down a set of keys and flopped like a stick puppet into the chair but managed to keep the pistol pointed toward us. With her free hand she pulled a pack of cigarettes and a lighter from her coat pocket, extracted a cigarette, put it between her lips, and lit it.

"Who's with you?" she said, after two deep inhalations. "Let me see her." She waved the gun barrel from side to side.

I grabbed Ginny's hand holding the target pistol and clenched it behind my thigh as she stepped to my side. "This is my wife Ginny," I said. And then, just to try it out, I said, "And this, Ginny, is Barb Becker, wanted on suspicion of the attempted murder of Judy Pilske."

"No, I'm not!" she shouted. Her face became even more distraught than it had been. "No, I'm not! That was my precious little lamebrain lover, Mike!"

"You've got the gun," I said.

"*I took it from him*—can't you see that? Then maybe you're not so smart! He's around here someplace tonight—pretty little Mikey—hauling garbage. I hope I never see him again!"

"He talked you into this?"

"Yes, yes, yes! Mike and his uncle, who else? He was going to make a killing, and no one would ever know. Then he'd go straight—straight to Hell—and we'd get married. God!"

When she stood up, I let go of Ginny's hand and said, "Let me have the gun, Barb."

"No! I'm going to shoot you down—you big smart-ass! And then that little dumb-ass, Mike." She gestured wildly and then started to shake.

I said, "But the gun's empty, Barb. You can't shoot anyone with it." That was the clue I'd been looking for in the restroom the previous night and hadn't found. I stepped forward slowly with my hand held out, while she stared at me with an expression of intense loathing.

Then Ginny said, "Miss Becker, please give the pistol to my husband, or I'll be forced to shoot it out of your hand." As Ginny moved two paces over and assumed the stance of a marksman, Barb's eyes turned reflexively in response. That was when I grabbed her hand quickly and yanked the pistol from it, then popped out the empty clip and held it up for Ginny to see.

"Oh, no! Oh, no!" Barb Becker cried.

Even with my head throbbing, I managed to block her sudden rush toward the door.

PART V

"Well, the truth is, sometimes these things look more complicated than they are."

The date was December twenty-third of that same year, and I was seated in a small, private visitors' lounge at Northwest Hospital, along with Ginny, Frank Malin, Jim Sammons, Mr. and Mrs. Stan Pilske, and their daughter Judy—still on one intravenous feed, still weak enough to be in a wheelchair, but mending fast and strong enough, according to her physician, to hear the whole story. Strong enough also, I hoped, to see me without a relapse: the stitches I wore across my forehead made me look even more than usual like a Halloween freak.

"The thing really began last July," I said, "when a man named Mike Corcoran, only I'm going to call him Mike Cooksey, got out of prison. He'd done three years straight time—not the kind of guy the parole board goes for—but when he got out he headed right for Barb Becker's door."

"Barb?" Judy said. "Not *my* Barb Becker!"

Jim Sammons was sitting beside her, strangely enough, and he said, "Yes, Judy, I'm afraid it was."

She started to cry. He took her hand and offered his handkerchief

in what I took to be a very ecumenical spirit. "Go on," she said. "I can stand it. That's the worst you can tell me. She's my best employee—my friend. How . . . ?"

"Well," I continued, "she was also Mike Cooksey's girl—his fiancée, in fact, although that was off while he was at Pontiac. I can't tell you what charm Cooksey had to attract Barb in the first place, but he turned it back on when he got out, and suddenly he was there living with her, listening to her talk about her job, about Speedway Mall—how it worked from the inside—and about how he needed to find a job himself.

"I don't honestly think Cooksey had a clear-cut idea of what he wanted to do after his prison stint, so when Barb wrangled him an interview for an opening on the Speedway custodial crew he went along with the idea, at least at first, but he also went to his uncle Tom Alton and got a false identity made up in the name of Cooksey, not Corcoran, that described a man recently discharged from the U.S. Navy. Because Mike had been in the Navy, just not recently or honorably.

"Barb, I'd guess, thought the false identity business was okay. She wanted Cooksey to get into some kind of honest work, and you don't have to have a bleeding heart to understand that ex-cons have a hard time finding employment. The main point is, Speedway ended up hiring him—and then Tom Alton got ideas."

"Who's this Tom Alton?" asked Judy's father.

Frank Malin broke in by saying, "He's the biggest fence on the North Side, Mr. Pilske. Receiver of stolen goods. He's so big he finances thieves to steal for him—everything from jewelry to cars to red-hot stoves."

"Only this time it didn't cost him anything except a little inspiration," I said. "What with Barb being so enthusiastic about running the Christmas Temps program, and Mike hauling the garbage away from the backs of the stores two nights a week, and Christmas coming up pretty soon, his thought was to persuade Barb to put a handful of thieves into positions at the mall where they might shuffle a few fenceable goodies into the bottom of the trash twice a week. All in the spirit of Christmas greed, you might say.

"After Mike checked out the backs of the stores to learn their procedures, Alton selected six as the easiest to take the most profit from: Catterson's, Mason's, The Wedge, Orchid Records, Slade's, and California Kitchens. Then the two of them told Barb about their little project and what her part in it was going to be. At the same time, Cooksey proposed that they get married on the profits and promised to go straight forever, and Barb, I'm afraid, caved in to the pressure. There were also some not-so-veiled threats by Cooksey, by the way, concerning Barb's future health and personal appearance that probably helped sway her decision.

"At any rate, Alton lined up a crew of likely and likable thieves—including his own daughter—and Barb sent them out as Christmas

Temps to the six targeted stores. This was actually a much riskier project than Alton realized, though, and my feeling, Judy, is that Frank and Speedway Security would have broken the ring by now through the process of elimination, even if Ginny and I hadn't come into the business over the attack on you. All we really did was to intervene from a different angle, so we saw the problem in a different light. And, of course, Mike Cooksey's stupidity and general incompetence would probably have blown the program to smithereens by this time anyway.

"And there was another problem as well.

"The deal Alton cut with the Christmas Temps gave them half the value of what they stole when it was resold, with Cooksey and Alton splitting the balance. Not a bad arrangement on the surface, but what it meant in real terms was that the young woman at Catterson Furs—Tom Alton's daughter, strangely enough—stood to gain ten or twenty times what Florence Siwinski would make stealing from The Wedge.

"The Widow Siwinski, I think, was new to the game. Her husband had been a friend of Tom Alton's, and Alton probably was trying, in his twisty old mind, to do her a good turn. But she didn't see it that way. She looked upon herself as an employee with a grievance, taking as much risk for a few hundred dollars as Debbie Alton was doing for several thousand, so she finally went to Mike Cooksey and threatened to disclose the scheme to Speedway Management unless there was a more equitable distribution of the profits.

"Now, I'm told that Tom Alton has a long history of nonviolence, so my assumption is that Cooksey never consulted his uncle at all; he just asked Mrs. Siwinski to wait for him in the parking lot after work that night. Then he decided to be extra clever by running her down with a stolen car, which he would then drive to a chop shop for disassembly, and when he saw a new Mercedes by the cinema building, he must have thought his ship had come in. At car theft he had some talent, but as it turned out, he wasn't so good at running down widows, with the result that he had to sneak into her hospital room here a couple of days later to finish the job. And that, Judy, is where you come in."

She'd been listening, I think, but she'd also been looking down at the handkerchief in her hand. She finally raised her head, saying, "You mean, I suppose, that I kept back the insurance claim. I didn't, actually, although I was going to. Mrs. Siwinski had made an appointment for the previous Friday morning to see me regarding an unspecified complaint concerning mall security. That was the morning after the hit-and-run. I was so busy with the usual Christmas uproar that the fact that she didn't come in didn't register—I had two or three crises that ate up her appointment time and my lunch hour, too. The insurance form didn't arrive in the mail until Monday, and that was when I realized that the temp who missed the appointment was the woman who had been run over in the parking lot.

"I felt very neglectful. The Christmas Temps were my program until this year, and I had a hunch that Barb, good as she was—" Judy paused to look at Sammons. "—good as she was, would not think to send flowers or a get-well card from Speedway Management. Somehow I'm the one who always does those things. Also, one look at the form told me I had to call the hospital for information, and when I did I was shocked to hear that she had died—and that the cause of death was being withheld until the medical examiner's report was finished.

"This was all very grim to me, and it came right on top of a meeting with the Merchants Association about the shoplifting problem. The next day I called the hospital to see if they'd heard the cause of death yet, and I was told, rather indiscreetly, I suppose, that she'd been smothered and it was a police matter."

Judy took a long drink of water before she went on. "Hearing that, I got—well, I know now that I went off the deep end. I marched over to Frank's office—I hope you forgive me, Frank—and laid out this . . . this scenario, I suppose, where some security people were doing the shoplifting and Mrs. Siwinski discovered it and was killed before she could tell the mall management about it. Frank and I hadn't seen eye to eye on the shoplifting all along, and I'm afraid I said some stupid things and we parted on bad terms." She looked at Malin with an appeal in her eyes.

He shrugged and said, "Hey, forget it. I mean . . . if you'd been right, it would be different, you know, but there obviously was a gang involved, so I knew you were wrong. I felt a lot worse about you getting shot than about what you said, except—I'm glad you know the truth."

"So anyway," I said to Judy, "then you called me."

"Yes. But I did something else that seemed, well, unimportant at the time, but probably wasn't, from what you've been saying. After I called you I spent half an hour unloading my frustrations on Barb Becker, and I, well, I couldn't bring myself to accuse security personnel to anyone but Frank, so I just said something about how I had a suspicion that the shoplifting might be the work of mall employees."

"Which was exactly the wrong remark to make—right," I said. "We know that part of the story from Barb. She went home at five while you stayed on, and she had a lengthy argument with Mike Cooksey about the whole affair in which your suspicions played a prominent role. And at that point Cooksey panicked completely. My guess is that Tom Alton had told Mike that murder wasn't on the program and if he got caught he was on his own, so he went in for more murder to cover himself.

"I checked the custodial work schedule on a hunch and discovered that, the night before you were shot, Cooksey had been assigned to clean the security office. He's just the kind of guy to nose around in the drawers at the counter for no good reason and come across the pistol being held there for pickup. We know for a fact that Tuesday at around six thirty he was in the security office making a complaint about mi-

nor vandalism to his car. On one of these occasions, but probably the second, he stole the gun.

“What we know for sure is that he was lurking around the management office an hour or so later in his custodian’s uniform, and when he saw you head to the ladies’ room, he followed you in, and . . .”

“I don’t remember it at all,” Judy said. “You could be talking about someone else.”

“You were very lucky,” Ginny remarked, speaking for the first time, “although it may not seem that way. Mike Cooksey had probably never fired a pistol before, so even at close range he hit you in nonvital spots, and since the pistol only contained two rounds, he couldn’t follow up from even closer. And R. J. found you very quickly, too.”

“Yes,” Judy said. “I feel lucky. I—well, I’ve had a chance to apologize to Frank, for one thing. And I know, R. J., that you and Ginny—I’m so glad to meet you, Ginny—have worried over me and worked overtime to figure out what was wrong at Speedway. I care about Speedway. And I met an old friend, too, that I hadn’t seen for years.” She paused, not looking at Sammons, then went on, “But how did you find out how the shoplifting was done? I haven’t even been told that.”

“Ginny figured it out,” I said.

“Not so—not at all. What I said was simply that the thefts were in some way connected to the Christmas shopping season, that some factor was different at Speedway Mall because of it. R. J. discovered what it was.”

“The Christmas Temps,” Judy said.

“Right. I ran into Barb Becker, you see, and in our discussion of Florence Siwinski the Christmas Temps program came up. I tried not to let my mouth fall open too wide when she told me about it, because even though it fit right into Ginny’s theory, that might have just been happenstance. But a little later I saw Barb having a public argument with a young man, and later still Frank pointed out the same young man as *one*, a new mall employee, and *two*, a person he suspected of a criminal past. At that point, with absolutely no evidence to support it, I formed the working hypothesis that Barb was being . . . used emotionally, let’s call it, to manipulate the Christmas Temps program for her boyfriend’s criminal gain.

“In order not to excite suspicion—and also because I had to play the organ at church that evening—I made arrangements with Frank for us to look through the employment records of the Temps at nine thirty, after the mall was closed. I arrived a few minutes early and spotted Cooksey at work hauling the trash barrels from the problem stores, which told me the method used to remove the stolen items. Cooksey spotted me as well, though, and socked me with a mop handle. Luckily, your night loading man saw him do it and chased him away with a forklift before he had a chance to beat my brains in. Frank never did show up, but Ginny came over to help me, and when we found the Temps files, they gave us everything else

we needed. I called Jim right away with names and addresses, and he led a sweep to pick off the thieves at their homes. And that's most of the story. Frank?"

"Must be my turn, eh?" he grumbled. "Okay—I'll make it brief. That night, just as I'm about to get out of my car by the loading dock to meet Ray, I see Mike Cooksey come running scared out through the dock security door, and he keeps on running, looking back a couple times, till he's across the outer circle to the employees' parking area. Then he hops in his car and burns rubber halfway to the north exit. I'm facing north, and my gut instinct says to me, 'Screw Carr—let him find his own records. I got to follow this punk.' So I start up and I'm lucky—he comes to his senses once he's out on the street and keeps his speed down near the limit.

"He drives around in circles for a while, then he gets over to Narragansett and heads north. And he keeps going north, which is okay with me. I expect him to turn off on the Kennedy, but he doesn't, and when we get up to Devon, he turns east. I end up running a light to keep close, but what the hell, by this time I almost don't care.

"Anyway, you know how you go about a mile through the forest preserve there on Devon? Well, I'm doing fifty-five to keep his taillights in sight, but then he slows down so quick I have to go by him or blow the tail. But I catch what he's doing. Just east of the woods there are some commercial buildings before the light by the Northwestern tracks. He turns in and pulls to the back. I get turned around in time to see him coming at me on foot. I pass by, turn around again, and follow him across the tracks, then back through some side streets. Finally he goes in a door on the side of a building. I drive by, and it's a big auto body shop.

"Then I do a dumb thing. I park, I get my .38 out of the glove compartment, and I walk up to the door and try it. It's unlocked. I step inside and the place is lit up like Christmas, and it's full of chopped up cars. The only guy I see, though, is Cooksey—by a phone thirty feet away. He sees me, too, and Jesus God, does he come at me. He's a wild man. So I put a bullet in his kneecap.

"A couple of ugly guys turn up about then from the front of the building. Cooksey's done screaming and passed out, so when these guys see the gun and Cooksey, they decide they aren't quite tough enough, and well—that's about it. We all got together later and exchanged notes, and what I did was smarter than I knew."

"You couldn't have done better, Frank," said Jim Sammons. "You got Cooksey, with the chop shop as a bonus, and we got the rest."

"Yes," said Judy, peering at Sammons. "But did you really have to arrest Barb Becker? It's not right."

There was an uncomfortable silence while Sammons gave me a hard look. "I'm not aware that Barb Becker has been arrested, Judy," he said finally. "Carr there didn't name her on the list that he gave to me, and no one has sworn out a complaint against her that I know about. Actually,

she's our chief witness against Cooksey and the Alton gang. Speedway Mall has continued to employ her, I believe—" he gave me another hard look "—as a gesture of support or confidence or something."

"The feeling," said Ginny beside me, "is that Barb was coerced; she did not conspire. When we met her in the mall office that Wednesday night, R. J. and I, she was very unhappy and remorseful and—not herself. Did you know that she has no family? It was a terrible experience for her."

"And that's why, I believe," said Sammons, "that she's been living at the Carr residence ever since."

There was a silence and a few more stares until I shrugged and said, "Well—you know how it is: cheap babysitting is hard to find. And anyway, we couldn't very well let her go home alone that night—she was in pretty bad shape. So the plan now is to fatten her up a little, then boot her out after the holidays."

"I feel better," said Judy. "But you've got to make her come and see me."

"She's shy about it," I said, "but it's in the works. We've overstayed our time for today, though, so I think we'd better call a halt before the floor nurse has conniptions."

"But, Mr. Carr," said Judy's mother, "you can't stop until you at least tell us how the stolen things were gotten out of the mall. This Cooksey man collected the trash barrels—but then what happened?"

"Oh—yeah. That was Alton's real touch of genius, as far as I'm concerned. He had his thieves put the stuff they stole into color-coded trash bags. On his meal break Cooksey would throw the bags into three or four pre-addressed shipping boxes and feed them into the next day's UPS pickup. They were sent to some accommodation addresses run by Alton, and the sender was—guess who?—Speedway Management. In other words, Alton even had the mall paying the freight for him. But still, you know, practically all the merchandise has been recovered—so how's that for a happy Christmas ending?"

Pretty happy, as it turned out. Frank Malin was hired as permanent head of mall security, Judy Pilske and Jim Sammons had a wildfire romance and got married the following June, Barb Becker made a good recovery, Santa left Ginny the *Messiah* recording on Christmas Eve, and my stitchmarks disappeared through the wonders of modern medicine.

Only Mike Cooksey ended up unhappy—with reason. Instead of a stocking full of coal, he got the ninety-and-nine plan at Stateville for Christmas, not to mention a limp to walk with for every one of those years.

UNSOLVED

Robert Kesling

Unsolved at present, that is, but can you work it out?

The answer will appear in the February issue.

On Saturday morning the Minneapolis police officers assembled in the squad room. "What do we know about the woman found murdered last night out near McPhail College?" Captain Avery Goodman asked.

Lieutenant Hugh Kerr replied, "Her first name was Gina, and she was married to one of the Five Fiendish Felons, that gang the Chicago police warned us about."

"I thought," Goodman snapped, "you men were keeping close watch on their activities. What happened?"

"Somehow, sir, they eluded us last night," Kerr said apologetically. "The leader is known as Mr. Smith. He recruited the other four. All five are from different states. Each is a specialist in a particular crime. The gang includes a counterfeiter, an extortionist, a burglar, an arsonist, and a dynamiter. At least that is what Gina, hoping for a reward, told the Chicago police. But before the Chicago P.D. could assemble enough evidence for a conviction, the gang blew town."

"Presumably the gang members are prime suspects?"

"Undoubtedly it was one of them," Kerr declared. "The single bullet in the middle of the forehead is their signature revenge on an informer. It seems Gina was found out."

"So, what else do we know about this gang?" Goodman asked.

"As you know from our reports, Captain, each of the five arrived on a different day this past week, Monday through Friday. We were expecting them and were able to identify them from the descriptions Chicago provided. We also know:

1. The men arriving the day before and the day after Abe were Mr. Rankin and Mr. Tillett (in some order).
2. The dynamiter arrived at some point after the extortionist. One is Abe; the other is married to Flora.
3. Mr. Tillett (who isn't married to Helen) and Julia's husband (who isn't from Kansas) arrived on consecutive days (in some order).

4. The burglar, who isn't married to the victim, came at some point after the arsonist.

5. The two men arriving the day before and the day after the man from Ohio (who isn't Mr. Peters) were Mr. Quinn and Ida's husband (in some order).

6. Neither the man from Louisiana (who isn't married to Helen) nor the man from Kansas (who isn't Cal or Ed) came on Thursday.

7. The two arriving the day before and the day after Mr. Peters were the man from Michigan and Helen's husband (in some order).

8. The first and last arrivals were Dan and Helen's husband (in some order). Helen isn't married to Ben.

9. Neither Ed nor the man from North Carolina is married to Flora (who isn't Mrs. Quinn).

Members of the infamous gang were rounded up and questioned separately by Captain Goodman and Lieutenant Kerr. The husband of the murdered woman offered to turn state's evidence in exchange for clemency in connection with his previous crimes. "Yes," he said, "Mr. Smith shot my wife. He wanted to make an example of an in-former. I saw him pull the trigger."

Thorough investigation proved his accusation correct.

*What are the full names of victim and killer?
What was the specialty of each of the Five Fiendish Felons?*

SOLUTION TO THE DECEMBER "UNSOLVED":

Romaine Barr and his wife Della are now posing as Fred and Nora Unser. They are residing in the first floor condo.

FLOOR	HUSBAND	WIFE	SURNAME	STATE	PROFESSION
7	George	Maria	Shultz	Michigan	jeweler
6	Dan	Kathy	Perdue	Tennessee	engineer
5	Albert	Laura	O'Hara	Wisconsin	banker
4	Earl	Helen	Rankin	Utah	dentist
3	Bart	Irene	Queen	Virginia	artist
2	Carl	Julia	Turner	Texas	florist
1	Fred	Nora	Unser	Pennsylvania	contractor

The Ring in the Sand

Eleanor Boylan



If you are a homesick New Yorker spending Christmas in Florida, all you have to do is walk into any mall, gaze about at the rampant glitz, listen to the tinny rendition of “The Little Drummer Boy,” and you are smack back in the middle of Bloomingdale’s.

Not that I was homesick—far from it. The morning’s weather in Manhattan had been frigid, I’d heard, and our temperature in Sarasota was eighty degrees. I’d enjoyed my shopping spree and was feeling virtuous in the knowledge that the last grandchild’s present was stashed in the shopping bag beside me. But I was feeling impatient. The mall mob was becoming oppressive and my kind host and cousin, Charles Saddler, who had promised to pick me up, was late.

I wondered vaguely if I should struggle up and find a phone (I could hear my daughter’s voice: “Mom, why the heck don’t you get a cell?”) when I spotted Sadd, as he is affectionately called, hurrying toward me, his white thatch bobbing up and down through the crowd.

“Blasted throng,” he gasped, reaching me. He seized my shopping bag. “Hurry! The parking lot is jammed and I’m in a fire lane. I gave Santa twenty dollars to sit behind the wheel and move it if he has to. God knows where he’d go with it.”

“Not as far as the North Pole, I hope.” I plowed along beside him.

“Sorry I’m late, Clara.”

“Don’t apologize. You were probably getting my Christmas present.” This was an “in” joke; Sadd loathes malls and enters one only if dragged.

“Actually, I was.”

“Was what?”

“Getting your Christmas present.”

I turned to stare at him, bumped into somebody with a stroller, and apologized. “Where is it?” Sadd was empty handed.

“Where’s what?”

“My present.”

“In my head. Here we are.”

We pushed though a groaning door to where, ten feet away, a beaming Santa sat at the wheel of Sadd’s old Buick, ringing his bell out the window and receiving contributions from amused shoppers. He was doing a rather brisk business and called to Sadd not to hurry.

I said “Thanks, Santa,” dropped a bill into his basket, and reached the passenger side.

“Any problem?” asked Sadd, as Santa emerged from his post.

“Naw. One cop came by but I knew him. Thanks for the twenty.”

As we plunged into the labyrinthian ways of the parking lot, Sadd said, “Let me tell you about your Christmas present. It’s a little mystery.”

Oh, Lord. I didn’t know whether to be pleased or not. I said, “Sadd, I’m getting a bit creaky for—”

“Just as I was leaving the house the phone rang. It was—”

“Tell me when we get home. This traffic is insane.”

“And you don’t trust me to drive and chew gum?”

“Chew gum, yes. Talk, no.”

The drive from the mall in Sarasota to Sadd’s home on Santa Martina Island takes about forty minutes. It’s my opinion that nature designed Florida’s west coast barrier islands as shock absorbers. You cross the bridge from the mainland and are hit with the breathtaking expanse of the Gulf of Mexico. You gasp and gape, no matter how many times you’ve done it, all the way to Sadd’s house at the end of the tiny key where the gulf merges, sometimes tumultuously, with the waters of Tampa Bay. The filagree shape of the Sunshine Skyway Bridge is discernable ten miles away.

Today the gulf and the bay lay in a shining sunset embrace and I tore my eyes away to go inside and put parcels in my room. Sadd went into his little galley kitchen with the words “Drinks outside.”

“Can I help?” I asked halfheartedly.

“No. Go out and sit down.”

“I’ve been here two weeks and I haven’t lifted a finger.”

“You’ll be lifting all ten of them next week if you insist on going back to New York. Why you have this bourgeois urge to spend Christmas with your grandchildren is beyond me.”

Since retiring from a publishing house in New York, Sadd has devoted himself to ecology in Florida, has no interest in visiting his daughter's family in Toronto, and deflects visits from them by, as he puts it, "shipping them off to Europe or the destination of their choice."

I smiled at him affectionately as he came out bearing a tray of martinis. I accepted one and said, "This mystery of yours better be flat-out simple. Remember my decrepitude."

He sat down and looked out at the water. "Actually, the thing is more sad than mysterious. There's been no crime and no one has died. It began with a bizarre accident about three years ago and I guess had been pretty much forgotten. Then suddenly, a few days ago . . ."

His almost somber face made me say anxiously, "I hope it doesn't affect you personally, Sadd."

"No, not at all." He straightened in his chair. "But it did affect a good friend of mine, the one who called me just as I was leaving to pick you up. So, as I was saying when I was told to shut up and drive . . ."

Sadd, owing to his many years as an editor, can give an account of an episode that is both concise and compelling. You learn to listen to him without interrupting and his story will unfold with just enough detail to make it edge toward the lengthy, then he will rein you in with a zinger and your glass stops halfway to your lips.

"My friend, Malcom Elder by name, is a retired judge who lives just up the road from here. He has a granddaughter whom he adores and she is indeed adorable. A few years ago when this happened she'd have been about twenty-one, fresh out of college, vacationing with Grandpa and waitressing in a popular restaurant on the island. Enter the villain—do I call him that because I was jealous?—in the person of the restaurant owner, a three-times-her-age, three-times-married entrepreneur: successful, good-looking, and apparently catnip to women. His name is—was?—John Bell. Nobody seems to know if he's alive or dead." Sadd sipped his drink and frowned. "My poor friend Malcom. How he loved—loves that girl. He sat where you're sitting now and told me what she'd said to him, quoting her exactly and smiling a little in spite of himself: 'Gramps, I love him. Do me a wedding.'"

"And of course he did."

"Of course. And, oh my God, that wedding . . ."

I was about to ask why he had to call upon his Maker at the mere memory, then a thought interjected.

"Where were the girl's parents?"

"Who knows? Probably she least of all. As I recall, her mother is Malcom's daughter, but there were multiple divorces and a general atmosphere of absenteeism."

I sipped my drink. "Gramps was all, and Gramps was it?" Sadd nodded. "Tell me about the wedding."

"I'll need a refill for this." He got up and went into the house. I sat

still and thought about my own granddaughters and said a sort of prayer. Now he was back with his drink and a bowl of pretzels.

“When you ‘do’ a wedding in Florida and you live near the beach, you are apt to do it there. The thing can range from a rather nice little ceremony to a circus. This was a circus. The beach teemed with young people in bathing suits and there was a raucus band. The bridal party was disporting itself in the surf when I arrived. There was a row of canvas chairs for fogie friends of Malcom and there we all sat trying to make conversation and not look too disapproving. At one point I said something to Malcom about the sunset and he nodded and kept staring straight ahead. He seemed unable to take his eyes off his granddaughter, who at that moment was riding the shoulders of the bridegroom as he frisked in the water.”

I couldn’t help it; I giggled. Sadd ignored me.

“Finally the bandleader squawked something over his speaker and the happy pair sloshed out of the water as their friends cheered and converged about them. A guruish looking figure came beaming forward across the sand. He was wearing a Banana Republic shirt, jeans, and some sort of peace emblem on a cord. Naturally, he was barefooted.”

This time I burst out laughing. What else can you do? And Sadd grinned. “Clara, you know conventions never meant a great deal to me—you’ve even said I’m a philistine—but damn it, a wedding is a wedding. I would certainly never hold out for a church, but I do think I’d hold out for shoes.”

Now we laughed together. Then Sadd was suddenly sober.

“There began some sort of ritual, which, just before the exchange of vows, ended in a freakish disaster.”

“What . . . ?” I whispered.

Sadd downed his drink. “I must go back in time a bit for you to get the full impact of what happened. Years ago, Malcom had given his granddaughter an enormously valuable ring that had been his mother’s. Given, that is, in the sense that he told her it would be hers someday, and from her childhood he had often taken it out of his safe and allowed her—have I mentioned that her name is Sophie?—to fondle it and try it on. She would say it was going to be her wedding ring someday. He showed it to me once—a magnificent mass of gold and diamonds.”

I drew a breath. “And now it was sure enough about to become her wedding ring.”

“About to become.”

In the house the phone rang. I said, “Don’t you dare answer that. Finish the story.”

The answering machine began a muffled message as Sadd continued on.

“Sophie had pulled a T-shirt over her bathing suit and Bell was struggling into a pair of shorts—God forbid he should cover the array

of gold chains about his neck with a shirt. Everybody gathered round and Malcom went to stand beside his granddaughter. The guru started to intone something. I stayed in the rear of the group. There were about twenty persons between me and the bridegroom so all I saw was the back of his head as he went down."

"Down?"

"On his knees. He'd dropped the ring."

It must have been the martini. I saw something beautiful and bejeweled drop into the sand—sand, that terrible swallower . . .

"It only took a few seconds for everybody to realize what had happened; then all hell broke loose. Sophie shrieked and went down beside Bell and the pair of them proceeded to do the worst thing possible when a small object falls into sand."

"Dig frantically?" I was sitting forward in my chair.

"And scrounge and claw and heave the sand about only causing the thing to disappear more hopelessly."

My mind was racing. "Didn't anybody think to get one of those—what are they called?—metal detectors?"

"Oh, yes, several people raced off—it's quite a hobby here—and soon there were three or four of the things being dragged about, but by then the area had been so trampled and pawed there was no use. The ring was as lost as if de Soto had dropped it when he landed here in 1530."

"How simply awful." I almost felt part of the scene. "What about the wedding?"

"There wasn't one."

"You mean . . ."

"After a while Sophie just stood still with her grandfather's arms around her staring at the scene in a sort of trance. The noisy young crowd was stunned and silent, some of them crying, and one girl offered Sophie her own ring as a temporary make-do, but Sophie shook her head and said she wouldn't be married till her ring was found and eventually Malcom took her home. People began to drift off sort of unbelieving of what had happened. Don't ask me about Bell. I couldn't bring myself to look at the man throughout. I understand he prowled the beach for days, then took himself and his gold chains off somewhere leaving his son to run the restaurant, which, it turned out, was in trouble and has since closed."

The color had gone from the sky and grayness prevailed on land and water. A boat with a little lighted Christmas tree on its deck chugged by and someone waved to Sadd.

I asked, "Where is Sophie now?"

"Here. She stayed on with Malcom. Works in an art gallery, I think."

There was a fuzziness on the picture. I said, feeling my way, "Sadd, granted it was ghastly, really ghastly, but it *was* an accident."

"True."

“Looking back on it, doesn’t her reaction seem to you a bit of an overkill?”

His eyebrows went up. “How so?”

“Is it possible that she had heard about the trouble with the restaurant and this was a chance to get out?”

Wrong guess; Sadd flared. “If you knew this girl—and you will shortly—you’d never say that.”

Oh, dear. Elderly gentlemen and sweet young things; you can’t win. I said, “What do you mean I’ll meet her shortly?”

“Come with me.” He walked into the house and I followed. He said, “Let me play that phone message for you. I know what it is.”

He punched a button and a nice male voice said, “Sadd, this is Malcolm. Five o’clock is fine with Sophie and me. We’ll expect you.”

Sadd looked at his watch. “It’s only ten minutes from here. Would you mind waiting on supper? Are you hungry?”

“No. Why exactly are we going?”

“So you can hear about the mystery. I’ve mentioned your sleuthing skills.”

“Oh, please.” I hate that expression. “And if the mystery is why Sophie acted quixotically, well, I’ve already given you my guess, which you rejected, and I can’t think of another.”

“That’s not the mystery.” Sadd reached for his car keys. “The real one only developed a few days ago.” He looked smug. “Are you ready for it? The ring has surfaced.”

I gasped. “At that same beach?”

“No. At an estate sale in New York City.”

We drove along the road that bordered the gulf, Christmas lights beginning to glow from trees and windows. Sadd held forth at length on the superior merits of the clam chowder he had made that morning and which awaited us for supper. I half-listened, looking out at the deep green of the balmy Florida pre-twilight.

I said, “How rotten for someone to find the ring and not return it.

“Clara, we’re talking about something that happened three years ago. The thing could have been found last week by some tourist from Kansas having fun with a detector.” He slowed at a corner.

“Yes . . .” I reconsidered. “Or by someone on the beach that day but not at the wedding who heard the hubbub and joined in the search. Finders keepers, I suppose. Where is the ring now?”

“I believe it reposes on Sophie’s finger.”

“*What?* How did it get there?”

“I don’t know any more about it than you do. Presumably, that’s what we’re about to find out.”

We had turned away from the gulf onto a street bordering on a canal with glimpses of masts and davits. It was a cul-de-sac and we

slowed at the middle house on the circle, a pretty yellow one with a front porch and almost a New England look. A tall, very thin, elderly man was fastening a wreath to the front door. He turned brandishing the hammer in a wave as the door opened and a young woman stood there laughing and reaching for the hammer.

"Don't brain me, Gramps. Hi, Mr. Saddler."

Petite, short dark hair, pretty as pie—a pixie in a sweat suit. She came down the porch steps, her arms out to Sadd. As she hugged him, sure enough a gorgeous ring glowed on the middle finger of her right hand, which she now held out to me.

I simply said, "You're Sophie, and this is the ring."

She smiled. "And you're Mrs. Gamadge and you find out about things."

I began to protest this blithe assumption, but Malcom came down the steps and was introduced. We started into the house and I asked if we could sit on the porch. "It's so lovely out here and I have to go back to New York weather." Everybody commiserated and agreed the porch would be fine. Wicker chairs were dragged forward and Sadd sat down on the top step, saying he liked to feel that railing post against his back. Then, bless him, he said at once, "Malcom, we're wild with curiosity. When did you first learn that the ring had been recovered?"

"A week ago." The frail old man sat forward, clasping his granddaughter's hand as she perched on the arm of his chair; the ring gleamed between their fingers. "I have an old friend who owns an antique shop on Madison Avenue. He's visited me here a number of times and has seen the ring and always admired it. Well, it seems that he went to a dealer's presale at a mansion up on Riverside Drive and was stunned to see the ring. He couldn't believe I'd parted with it and checked the inscription to be sure. Then he called me to ask if it had been stolen. I told him to get it at any price and I'd explain later. Sophie was here when he called—"

"—and we were bawling and hugging each other—" from Sophie.

"—and she flew to New York the next day—" Malcom put the ring hand to his cheek. "—and it's like a miracle, isn't it?"

It certainly was and Sadd and I made appropriate sounds of wonder and congratulations.

"Have you been able to find out where the ring spent the time between the sand in Florida and the sale in New York?" I asked.

"No, and we're not going to try," said Sophie. "I don't want Gramps getting all het-up trying to investigate. We have the ring back and that's all that matters."

Well, yes and no, my dear. To you maybe, but not to me. What nagged at me was not how the ring got to New York but that it *did* get there. But I said, "You're probably right."

Sadd said, "You mean Clara isn't going to be able to exercise her talents?"

Sophie smiled at me. "Of course she can if she wants to, but I'm sure she has better things to do."

"Well, I have something to do right now." Malcom stood up. "And that's to uncork a special bottle of wine that I got to celebrate our wonderful—what shall I call it?—Christmas present!"

"Hear! Hear!" said Sadd, standing up. "Let me help."

"Sophie," I said quickly, as they went into the house, "I'm catching a glimpse of the gulf at the foot of your street. Would it bore you to take a stroll down there with me?"

"Not a bit." She jumped up, took my arm, and we went down the steps.

I said, "I hope it doesn't awaken unhappy memories. Is this near the beach where you were going to be married?"

"It is the beach. No problem. I swim here every day."

"You're a good sport." The fragrant dusk settled around us as we neared water. "Do you mind if I ask you a question, which you don't have to answer if you don't want to?"

"Sure."

"When you decided not to go ahead with your wedding were any of your friends critical of you?"

"A lot of them. I was overreacting, I was brutal, cruel, you name it."

But she was not a cruel girl. We'd almost reached the beach and some people passed us coming from it lugging gear and children. Sophie ran a little ahead to halfway down the sand. She called back, "This was the fatal spot, actually."

I walked toward her and stopped a few feet away. I said, "Sophie, you said I was a person who found out about things."

"Yes." She stood still, her arms at her sides, her face expressionless.

"May I tell you what I think I have found out?"

She hesitated, then said slowly, "Yes, if you promise not to tell Grandfather."

"Promise." I drew a breath. "I believe that the ring was never recovered from the sand because it was never in the sand."

She gave a little nod. "Go on."

"I believe that your husband-to-be didn't drop the ring but only pretended to, then palmed it."

"*Palmed it?*" she gave a little laugh. "I've never heard that expression."

"It's one magicians use. To hide or conceal."

She took the few steps to my side and even in the almost-dark I could tell she was smiling. She said, "Well, he wasn't much of a magician, because I saw him do it." Then she put her arms around me. "Let's go in and have some wine."



Of course it was her handwriting. The way she formed the small letter *a* and crossed the letter *t* so high, the nonexistent *r* at the end of both *Carter* and *Sawyer*; they were her trademarks. Even though Frances used a quill pen, with ink so old it was brown, and a sheet of yellowed paper she'd probably found in the attic, along with . . .

"Look at these, Herbie. I think we used these here, once, when I was a child. Can you imagine how old they must be?" She had plugged them in, and ancient as they were, the filament in each bulb glowed.

"But it's not even Thanksgiving yet." My protest had been small. These were her things; this was her house; these were her brass electric candles—ancient Christmas decorations. And they were standing stiffly in each window because of her insistence.

These were not my windows I looked out to watch the wild autumn wind sweep the leaves back and forth across the street. This was not my carpet, books scattered across it in the waning afternoon light, where history was opened to a forgotten chapter, and science to facts which held no interest. Nor was this my chair, where I rested my arms and leaned forward to watch the wind play with the leaves and rock the naked limbs of the sycamores in the front yard. And not my cat padding across the floor softly. Not my keys wound round my fingers.

I was only the caretaker, the boy hired to clean, to repair, to watch over this house that was not his own.

"Make it seem lived-in," Frances had said. "Set the timers. Put the electric candles in the windows."

So I had. I'd also set the clocks. "There are so many, I've not got to them all. Maybe what I should do is . . ." She seemed so flustered, and yet so perfectly beautiful as she tapped the tip of her pen against her teeth. "Yes, that's it. I'll make a list of chores for you. Will that be all right? It's odd being back here. This was just a summer house for me, and well, I'm a city girl." Then she had signed my paycheck, looked at me, and smiled.

I stretched my arms forward and the cat brushed its face against my fingertips. I reached into my pocket, removed the small wooden object there, and spun it on the floor for the cat's amusement. The late afternoon light was so low now it was nearly gone, and yet the room still seemed bright and animated. I watched the electric candles flicker on, just as I'd set them to do. Out in the kitchen the radio crackled, then there was music. I'd planned that, too.

"I want it to feel as it did when my father lived here." She'd been wistful as she stood by the windows in the afternoon sunlight, slowly fading most of the color out of this great room. The side of the sofa facing south was a dull, drab purple, while the opposite side, facing me, remained a vivid magenta. I'd noticed that when I'd cleaned this room, and vacuumed and dusted and polished each surface—wood, glass, or brass—until it sparkled. The furniture hadn't been moved in years.

I'd done the carpets, the windows, and everything but the curtains,



which I was staring at now. They were frail looking, mere wisps of sheer yellow fabric. She might want them cleaned; she might want them thrown out. Whatever she wanted, I'd do it. I would have done anything so I wouldn't have to go home.

I would even have braved the trophy room. "You don't need to bother with it now. Sophie kept it orderly. We can save it for last. It's the other rooms I need livable first."

I dropped the keys on the floor, looked down at the four squares of paper I'd found, or rather, had been left for me. Because as she'd said . . .

"A boy should have an adventure at least once in his life. Like Tom Sawyer or Huckleberry Finn. Do kids still read Mark Twain in school? It's been so many years; I can barely remember what kids read. Or do they . . ." Her brow had wrinkled as she'd said, ". . . read anymore?"

"I read," I'd told her. Though not a lot—that I didn't say.

"Do you? Some time you must tell me what you read. But don't you agree that, oh, that a boy should have at least one adventure before he's twenty? I've often thought so."

How did I tell her I'd had my share of adventures? I just agreed with her in my own way: "Yeah, sure, I guess."

"It will be all right? I won't take you away from your studies?" She hadn't asked about my mother, but she knew. She'd had the talks all right, a long one first with Clem, and then another with Jake.

"No, it's okay," had been my response. "I can use the job."

I might have added that I'd clean your house and your yard, mow and rake, *and* pile the leaves out back. Burn them up later, if you want. I'd paint the porch, clean the gutters, and repair the railings—I'd do it all, and it won't matter what you paid. And you don't have to leave "clues" around the house to amuse me, so I can have "an adventure."

I spread the yellowed squares of paper in the dying light on the old carpet. Underneath the floorboards of this room, the front room, the furnace gurgled. Yes, that's how it sounded, like a large, wet animal was down there, burping and turning and shaking the house. The pipes began to rattle and squeak; the heat was coming on as the wind whistled through the leafless branches of a sycamore standing near the house. But I loved the sound and the feel of this house, large and warm and empty around me. I loved the heavy, overstuffed, faded furniture and the worn, soft woven rugs; the floor to ceiling windows; and the pale curtains hanging in them. I loved the way the heat rose slowly from the radiators and moved those curtains just lightly so. I loved coming here every day after school, working, then eating the food I'd brought with me. I even liked spreading out my assignments in the waning light of this huge room. There were no distractions. There was no television or computer, no videogames. There was only that one old radio out in the kitchen. It sat on the black countertop—which I had polished—next to the cell phone Jake had insisted I bring with me.



Four weeks ago they'd come to a different house, my house, and taken my mother away. Three days after that, Jake Valari had stood in my kitchen arguing with me.

"I talked to your Aunt Clem. It's either this or you go live with her." There was no way Jake could hide the emotion in his voice. "Look, I know it's not much of a choice, but I'm willing to do it."

"For her?" I'd challenged. "Or for me?"

"You're fifteen, you can't stay here alone while your mother . . ." It was too hard for him to use the euphemism "gets well." "Either I move in with you for the time being, or you go live with your aunt in Boston. I don't think that's what you want. I think you want to stay here in Manamesset and go to school with your friends. Just correct me, please, if I'm wrong."

What a choice they'd all given me.

"I don't care what the court says, or some judge, or even my Aunt Clem." Truth is, that was a lie. I did care. No way I wanted to move in with my mother's sister. Clem was a good enough person, but I had no desire to move in with her family. So Detective Jake Valari, a friend of my mother's, was moving in with me. Until my mother . . .

Well, what do you say about a woman who tells her son, "Life is tough," after hearing how he'd discovered his girlfriend with her arm around a member of the football team? What do you say about that same woman after she downs a fifth of vodka, along with a half-bottle of sleeping pills, then crawls into bed without even saying goodbye?

"She's depressed," Aunt Clem had said.

"Yeah, I'm depressed, too, sometimes," I'd said. Then I left the house, walked all the way to the bay and out to the end of the jetty, where I tried to come up with ten good reasons not to jump in and swim until I ran out of energy—or breath or life.

Later I went off to a friend's house, shot some baskets, getting home long after dark. Jake had been waiting for me. And Clem and her new boyfriend. I hadn't said a word to any of them, just gone off to bed.

And then to school the next day. And the next. And the next. For three weeks. Like a zombie. Like a walking automaton. Counselors made appointments for me at school. I went to none of them. Teachers I'd known and liked for years tried to talk to me. I ignored each and every one. Friends came up to my locker, punched me in the arm, tried to joke around. I just asked if I could borrow their Spanish homework.

It was like there was a fog around my head and I was trying to drag, or push, or maybe plow my way through it. I dreamt at night that I was drowning—not in the bay; I knew Manamesset Bay could never hurt me, and that when I died—whenever, wherever, however—it wouldn't be the bay that would take me. This drowning was different, like suffocating in the air around me. I'd watched a friend have an asthma attack a few years ago and had been insensitive enough to ask him what it felt like. Like trying to breathe through a wet rag, he'd said.



So that's how I felt, like I couldn't breathe, like someone was holding something heavy and wet and cold against my face. For three weeks I'd awakened night after night, just struggling to breathe.

And then I met Frances. Frances, who looked up at me through her pale blonde eyelashes, and entered my life.

That day I was trying to find a reason not to go home. I was just delivering Remy's newspapers while he was in Florida for a week. My mother would be home by Thanksgiving, everyone—my aunt, Jake, the doctors—agreed. My mother was . . . well, she wasn't dying. She'd be home for Thanksgiving, two short weeks away.

"Well, are you going to stand there gawking?" A voice had interrupted my thoughts. "Or are you going to help get him down?"

Him was the large gray puffball of a cat perched out on the limb of a giant sycamore about twelve feet overhead. I was the hapless paperboy looking up at him. There was no way I could just ride on by, no way I could disregard a request for help. I have a hard time refusing anyone who asks me for help. It's one of my biggest character flaws.

"Well?" the woman snapped impatiently; she was smoking a cigarette. "Not that I care. He's my neighbor's." A nod to the huge house—peeling white paint with gray shutters, central chimney and four smaller ones, probably built around 1890—just behind her. The lawn needed mowing. The hedges were far overgrown. There were clumps of weeds, untrimmed bushes, and masses of dead flowers hugging the foundation. Even the driveway and slate stone walkway leading up to the front door had weeds growing up through the cracks. "It's a Persian," the woman said. "Miserable breed, so self-centered." She gestured, cigarette in hand, toward the cat. "I suppose Frances can call the fire department." She tossed the cigarette onto the sidewalk and stepped on it.

Then she stared at me, waiting for an answer. She was probably in her sixties, dressed in a short tan coat and dark pants that came down just above the ankles. She looked like a skinny scarecrow: bright painted face, straw-yellow hair with black roots, skinny wrists and ankles. And the look on her face? Well, that was an expression I was more apt to get from kids my own age. She was daring me to do something perfectly ridiculous and dangerous: any cat that could make it up into a tree could certainly make it down without my help.

But it was an expression I found hard to ignore. It was the same look that once had me walking through Tideman's Marsh when the eels were migrating through it. Slipping and sliding through the tall marsh grass, they'd looked like black snakes winding over dry land. It was pretty scary stuff. That was the expression I saw on her face: half contempt, half amusement. It said to me: "You don't dare help, do you? You're not a man; you're just a boy. Weak. Useless."

"No, ma'am, I don't think they do that," I said. I was half off Remy's bike.



“Who can’t—do what?” she demanded.

“The fire department. I don’t think they get cats down out of trees anymore.”

“They don’t?” She was horrified. “Good God, then what do they do all day? It’s not like we have a surfeit of fires around here!”

“No, ma’am, I guess not.” I backed up the bike a bit. “But if you wait a little while, the cat will come down by it—”

“Jean? You aren’t asking him to get Sammy out of the tree, are you?”

I spun around too fast and nearly fell off the bike. I can’t lie about Frances, or the fact that she startled me. It was the sound of her voice, or maybe the way she walked across the yard, rustling through the unraked leaves. No, it was more the way she looked up at me, even though she was just about my height. Dressed in a short white wool jacket and pale blue jeans, she was, at first sight, unremarkable. If someone later had asked what word first came to mind on meeting her, I’d have said pale.

Not pale as in lifeless, pale as in light-colored. Light skin, light blue eyes, light hair, and lashes so white you had to be very near to her to see she even had any.

“Strong kid like him,” the other woman snorted, lighting a new cigarette, “no reason he can’t climb up there and get that cat down.”

“Oh, please,” the younger woman said, “I shouldn’t wish him to fall and hurt himself.”

Though she seemed to have no accent, there was an inflection in her speech that my mother would have called affected. But to me, her voice sounded like water lapping against a half-submerged buoy.

She turned to me, extended her hand, and said, “I’m Frances Carter, and this is my neighbor, Jean Pritchard. She’s always telling others how best to look out for me or my cat. Do you have a paper for me?”

Even as I took her hand, it took me several seconds to find my tongue and mutter, “Frances . . . Carter? I don’t think that you . . . you’re not on my . . . list.”

“You’re not our regular boy, are you?” she said, still smiling; apparently I amused her. “The name would be under Sophie Carter. That’s my sister. She recently passed away.” She looked back at the house. “Twenty-three Sanctuary Drive?” Then, with her hand still in mine, she looked at me through her pale lashes.

And I was Smitten. Captured. Caught like a fish, but not with the hook snagged in my mouth, but dragged straight through my heart.

“Can you get the cat out of the tree, or not?” the other woman snarled.

“Jean,” she cautioned the woman with a soft laugh, then looking down where I still held her hand, said, “May I have it back?”

So I got the cat out of the tree. The sycamore tree was not quite old enough to be showing the mottled white and brown bark that comes with age, but it was still large, its trunk a foot in diameter, and at one time it had been pruned, which left a few fist-sized knobs low enough to grab on-



to. So getting up had been effortless. Not so effortless had been reaching out to Sammy, or Samson, who bolted the moment I touched him. He ran down my arm and across my back, then he leaped onto the ground and up into the bushes at the front of the house.

“I really must call your mother and apologize,” Frances said as she tended to the scratches on my arm. “Sammy’s cut right through this shirt, and your sweatshirt.” Her big fat cat had got me good, but I was doing a pretty heroic job masking my pain. I couldn’t help but wince, though, as I sat at her kitchen table and she applied peroxide to the marks.

“So Danny walked out on you,” Jean was muttering at the kitchen door, cigarette in hand as she turned to watch us. “I told Sophie he was no good.” She walked back our way, surveying the room critically as she did. “Something fishy about him, if you ask me. I told you how his friend came looking for him right after Sophie died?”

“Daniel wasn’t stealing from me, or from Sophie either,” Frances said gently. “I told you, Jean, nothing is missing from the house. Daniel was a drifter and he just . . .” Her blue eyes met mine. “. . . drifted away.”

“Well, if you plan to live here year-round, Fran, you’re going to need help. You need . . .” The older woman’s tiny, piercing eyes fell on me. “What about him?” She gestured with her cigarette hand at me.

Up until then I hadn’t said much. I was just the paper boy. I’d stopped and done a favor, for which I was now paying in blood. But now it seemed my turn to speak up: “Look, this is nothing. I get scratched . . .” I tried to roll my shirtsleeve down, but Frances, small as she was, was very firm; she pushed my hand away, shaking her head. The light in the kitchen wasn’t very good; in fact, the entire room was pretty dingy: dirty curtains; faded tabletop; and countertops cluttered with dishes, pots and pans, and an assortment of crates and boxes. Someone was either doing a cleanup job in here or the place had just been trashed. “. . . all the time,” I finished.

“I insist on paying for your damaged clothes,” she said to me.

“He’s perfect, Franny.” The older woman was suddenly there between us, hands down on the scuffed tabletop. “He’s not very big but strong enough by the looks.” Then to me, “How old are you?”

“Fifteen.”

“There you go,” the woman said, “fifteen, and probably not working. That right?”

“I don’t have a regular job, no.”

“Can you rake, mow, clean up this place? She’s looking. Her handyman just up and left her after Sophie died.”

“Jean . . .” Frances protested.

Jean, ignoring the younger woman, said to me: “What’s your name?”

“Herb . . . Herbert Sawyer, ma’am.”



"My God," Jean Pritchard said, standing back. "You're the son of that woman who tried to kill herself?"

I wasn't crazy about Mrs. Jean Pritchard. She was nosy, bossy, unsubtle, and outspoken, but it was her I had to thank for my current position. Caretaker. Handyman. One-boy clean-up crew for Miss Frances Carter, who had insisted from the start I call her Frances. I figured she was somewhere near my mother's age, and my mother was thirty-six, so Frances had to be maybe thirty-three, thirty-four. But she had done everything right, called and spoken to Jake, then my Aunt Clem, and even my school, just to "be on the safe side, you understand."

"Police detective." Frances had been impressed by Jake's credentials.

"Yeah, he's a friend of my mother's," I'd said. "I mean, they dated . . . for a while."

"He was kind enough to move in with you," she'd said. We'd been at her kitchen table; she had insisted I have a cup of tea. It was my first day on the job, one in which I had single-handedly transformed her front and side yards from looking like an overgrown vacant lot to something fairly respectable. But she insisted I needed a break after working so hard. "Because it must be difficult . . ." she'd said gently, "with your mother . . . away."

I hadn't wanted to talk about my mother. With the preliminary investigation over, she felt safe hiring me. Now I just wanted to talk about scraping down her porch railings and pulling up the rotted floorboards on the front steps. I wanted to ask how she wanted her hedges trimmed and if I should pull up the black-eyed Susans that had overtaken her flower garden. I was the outside help and felt uncomfortable sitting at the worn kitchen table in her grubby little kitchen.

"This is pretty bad, too, isn't it?" she'd asked unexpectedly. I guess I'd been too quiet, or she sensed my uneasiness. Maybe I'd been looking around at her kitchen too long: at the grease-stained stove, the broken light fixtures. My own home was small and plain, a kitchen-living room combination with two bedrooms down and an unfinished second floor. But it was clean and orderly and there were windows and light everywhere. This kitchen was basic black and white, with an old-fashioned sink with exposed plumbing, an ancient gas stove, and glass-paneled cabinets with many of the panels missing. Years ago, with copper pots gleaming from the ceiling and polished floors and woodwork, the room was probably pretty special, but today . . .

"No, needs a little work, is all." I shrugged. I hadn't wanted to embarrass her. I'd known her only two days but already I had a pretty high opinion of her. Maybe too high.

"I'm not living here yet. I'm staying at a motel," she informed me. "The house is warm enough, but the furnace is incredibly noisy. I'm looking for someone to come and work on it." She shook her head and smiled. "Maybe when you're done with the outside work . . ." She leaned toward me, one hand on my arm for emphasis. She was so composed; nothing she did



or said ever seemed too forward or improper. “Or am I expecting too much?” she asked. “I don’t want to take up all your time, Herbie. It’s just that when Sophie died . . .” She sighed and sat back, hands in her lap. “My sister left me comfortably well off, but she didn’t take good care of this place, did she? It was her summer home; she hadn’t lived here in years.”

“I’d be glad to help inside,” I’d told her. “Whatever you want.”

Her whole face grew animated. “Oh, you’re too good, too accommodating! And they say the younger generation is selfish. Slackers— isn’t that the current term?”

“It’s one of them.”

So I worked like a bear those next two weeks, every day after school, often long into the evenings. I raked and mowed, trimmed and pruned, scraped and painted. I pushed wheelbarrows of leaves and branches, sticks and weeds out to the back yard where I built a small bonfire and got rid of it all. It was exactly what I needed: hard physical work, and lots of it.

During those two weeks I saw her every day. It was November, cool but good enough weather for outside work. Frances and me, we were all business. That’s the only way it could have been, because even though I was, well, infatuated, I was smart enough to know that I was just a kid. So I had a kind of a crush on her; it was harmless, like the crush Remy had on the student teacher in Spanish.

Then the week of Thanksgiving arrived and she asked again if I’d be interested in working inside: “I’ve got the place fairly livable, except for that furnace, but at least you wouldn’t be cold inside. So, if you’re still interested, would you . . .”

Strip the wax off the kitchen floor? Steam and scrape off old wallpaper? Vacuum and buff down the hardwood floors in the front rooms? Vacuum the furniture and all the rugs?

“Of course,” had been my response to every question.

“You’re too kind,” she’d said.

So I had slowly moved from being the outside boy to the inside help, and then, from there, to the caretaker.

Then, a few days ago, she’d said: “It’s just not ready to live in. I’m going back to New York for Thanksgiving and probably won’t return till spring.”

Had she seen the disappointment in my face? Did she know I lived each day watching the clock and counting the minutes until I could see her? Though our conversations were brief, focusing mainly on my next task (“Could you roll up those rugs, take down those paintings, wash those windows?”), I lived for every word she said, my answers yes, always yes.

“The house is winterized, but I can’t stand that clanging furnace. So, until the spring, will you . . .”

Set up these Christmas candles? Buy a wreath after the first of December, hang it on the front door? Set the timers so the lights will go



on? And if it snows, shovel a path and clean the driveway? Make it look like someone lives here? Will you light the furnace, let it run a bit each day, keep it warm enough so the pipes won't freeze?

"And Sammy?" I'd asked, as the gray cat wound through my legs.

"Jean will take care of him," had been her reply as she scooped him up into her arms. "I inherited Sammy, too. He belonged to Sophie." Then she pressed the keys into my hand.

"Sophia Clara Carter. Lived in Lynn, summered here in Manamesset, or did until about ten years ago. Paid insurance and taxes on the Sanctuary Drive property, but other than that, generally let the house and two outbuildings fall into disrepair. Then early this fall she hired a local man to do some painting and carpentry work. Unfortunately that ended when she was found dead in her condominium on October tenth."

I hate to admit it, but it was the most interesting thing Jake had said in all the time we'd been living together. I looked up from my turkey sandwich. It was the Friday after Thanksgiving and I was having a rare meal at home because I had an indoor track meet that afternoon.

Jake waited for my reaction, then went on: "Self-inflicted gunshot wound to the head, Herbie. Sophie Carter committed suicide."

"And?" I said with complete attitude. "So?" I even shrugged. "Got nothing to do with Frances . . . Miss Carter."

"Miss . . ." he emphasized, "Frances Carter is a research historian, and lives in Greenwich Village, though she's recently made plans to relocate here to Manamesset. Never married. Inherited the house on Sanctuary Drive, plus two other properties in Falmouth and Brewster, from her sister Sophie. No other living family members. Her father, Lyman Carter, died in 1970 . . ." Another emphatic pause—cops must get off on this stuff. ". . . of a self-inflicted gunshot wound to the head."

I shook my head. "Frances must have been just a kid then."

"Must have been," Jake agreed. "I have no age on either Miss Sophie or Miss Frances." He definitely was getting off on all of this. "Maybe suicide runs in their family."

I bit down deliberately on my sandwich, said with my mouth full, "I've heard it does . . . in some families."

We'd had a lousy Thanksgiving at home, just him and me and a football game in which I'd had no interest. Halfway through, I got up and left and took my bike to the Carter house to do some work.

"Sorry, Herbie, I shouldn't have said . . ."

"Forget it."

"Okay, here's something else: the man who worked for the Carter sisters, a Daniel Church of West Falmouth, was reported missing by his girlfriend on October sixteen of this year."

"So?"

"So, Herbie, I've looked into this Frances Carter, though I have abso-



lutely no reason to be concerned, not at this point. I've talked to a friend up in Lynn and . . ."

"And what?" I cut him off. "What are you saying, Jake, that I'm working for a murderer? You've got to be kidding. What did Frances do? Off her sister? And her father? When did she do that, when she was five?"

"Let me finish. The medical examiner said that Sophie Carter killed herself. No one accused Miss Frances . . ." Her name sounded dark and ugly coming out of his mouth. ". . . of anything improper. She was in New York when her sister died. I've just looked into her background because . . ."

"Because I can't take care of myself?" I demanded. "Because I wouldn't know a murderer if I tripped over one?"

"Herbie, no one said . . ."

"Are you jealous because I spend so much time over there? You do know I'm working, don't you? That she pays me? I'm not over there partying, Jake. She keeps me busy, plenty busy. You should see the list of things she's left for me to do."

Strangely, he didn't seem interested in arguing with me, just said, "You'd do the same, if you were me."

"She's just a woman who hired me. That's all she is. I bumped into her by accident when I got her stupid cat out of a tree and that's it. I work for her. I'm her . . . employee."

"How's school?" he asked, startling me.

I stood up, no longer interested in the food, nor suddenly in the stupid track meet I was supposed to attend. I wanted to get on my bike, go over and check the Carter place, make sure the timers were on and the candles set well away from the curtains. I hadn't been altogether happy about agreeing to leave them on with no one there. And Sammy, I had to make sure I hadn't accidentally locked him in, and the furnace had to be turned back. It was running worse all the time.

"How's school?" he asked again, with the patience which makes kids my age so sick of adults sometimes.

"Fine."

"You haven't talked much about it."

"Nothing to talk about. It's fine. School is school."

"Your counselor stopped in to see me down at the station Wednesday."

"I'm not flunking anything. My work's all up-to-date. My grades are good."

"I know that. All As and one B," he agreed. "Your grades have never been better."

"So why the visit? What's the point?"

"You been doing your studying at the Carter house?"

"The last week or so, yes, so what? She's not there, you know. She's gone back to New York. You do know that? Damn it, Jake, it's not like—I mean, what do you think I'm doing? I'm not . . ." I was too flustered to continue. I turned away and ran both hands back through my hair.



“Your mother does that.”

“What?” I spun around on him, not knowing whether to be angry, insulted, confused, bitter.

“Tears her hair.” Jake looked down at his empty coffee cup. “When she’s upset.”

“Glad to hear it. Nice to know you notice,” I muttered, reaching for my jacket.

“I’ve talked to some of Frances Carter’s co-workers. She seems to lead a very quiet, self-contained life. No . . .”

I hated this! The way he jumped from subject to subject! School, then my mother, and now back to Frances. And they say kids manipulate adults? What was he doing to me? I spun around to face him.

“Self-contained? Does that mean she doesn’t have a record for seducing fifteen-year-old kids? That’s good, isn’t it, then? It means you can get off her and you can get off me and leave us both alone!”

I went out, slamming the door, then showing my hands into my pockets, stood at the bottom step. It was another windy day, which is all we seem to have here on the Cape in November, December, the whole damn winter. Why do people live out on this damn peninsula anyhow?

“Bay’s that way,” Jake said behind me.

I spun around, glared up the steps at him.

“That’s what you do when you’re mad, isn’t it, walk out to the end of the jetty?”

Okay, my next remark was completely out of line, but I said it right to his face. I told him where he could go.

“Yeah, that’s a good answer,” he said. “But if you’re trying to make me mad, it’s not going to work.” He folded his arms and stared down at me.

“What makes you think . . .” I was totally flustered, embarrassed, and a little bit ashamed. Truth is, I had such a rush of emotions just then I didn’t know what I was feeling, or why, and neither did I have a single clue as to how to control them. I just knew I felt like I was suffocating.

Then my fingers felt the small wooden object shaped like an egg that I’d tucked in my jacket pocket.

“Do you blame me for what your mother did?” Jake asked.

“This is a stupid time to talk about that!” I fired back. Finally something at which I could aim.

“You’re working your butt off, Herbie, day and night, making yourself so exhausted that you fall into bed each night without time to think about your mother, about what she did, about how it’s affecting you— isn’t that right?”

“You ought to change jobs, Jake. Become a ——— psychiatrist or something.” I turned around then, headed toward the driveway, the road, the water? I stopped short; no way did I want to fulfill his expectations. If he thought I was headed for the bay, I’d go in the other direction, toward town.

I felt his hand come down heavily on my shoulder. “No, I’m just hap-



py being a — cop,” he said to me, and then in an entirely different tone of voice, casual, friendly, upbeat, said, “So, what have you got planned for the rest of the day? Track meet? Then what?”

“I’m going to . . .” I couldn’t look at him. “. . . Frances’s and I don’t know, reset the timers. I change them every few days.” I shrugged. “I got things to do there; it’s a big house.”

“You bill her by the hour, the day, the week? Or does she have you on salary?”

“I work for her, Jake,” I said in a rather small voice. I had my fingers wrapped around the wooden egg, tight in my pocket. It was cool and smooth. Slowly I felt my breathing even out. “That’s all I do.”

“Did you think I doubted you?”

I shook my head, managed to meet his eyes. Mine suddenly felt a little wet. “It’s a real nice house, too. It’s . . .” I looked over my shoulder at my own home; it had seemed so large to me, so safe and snug, and now . . .

“It’s not the same as your own house, is it?” Jake asked.

“My mother, she’s everywhere in my house, Jake,” I said, choking on my words suddenly, which was stupid, but I couldn’t stop. “She’s . . . you can’t pick up a salt shaker and not think about her.”

He slid his arm around my shoulders and said, “So, first the track meet, then you take me to see this Carter house, if that’s allowed?”

“Hey, you’re a cop.” I wiped my eyes. “If you can’t trust a cop, who can you trust?”

“I’m washing all the dishes,” I said to Jake, explaining the reason there were stacks of bowls, platters, and dinner plates on the kitchen counters. “Except those up there.” I pointed to the highest cabinets. “A lot of fancy stuff up there, you know, stuff you seldom use. And I’m relining the cabinets, polishing up the woodwork.” I showed him where I’d worked, cleaning off grease so thick it had taken several scouring pads to remove it. A pair of cabinet doors, their windowed fronts cracked or missing, were leaning against a table leg. “Those are going to be replaced. Frances is going to have a cabinetmaker come in, match them to the originals. I’ve also done the floor.”

And what a job that had been, too, to scrape away twenty years of wax, then clean down to the original black and white tiles. In fact, I’d done nearly all the work in this room: bleached out the sinks, scoured and polished the faucets, washed the walls and floor, removed cobwebs and grime in the molding. I’d carefully cleaned the Tiffany lamp hanging over the center table, but the wiring in it was bad, so it hung beautiful, but useless.

“She’s going to have an electrician in to do some work. Might put in some ceiling fans, some new light fixtures,” I explained.

From there we moved to the dining room where I’d done little more than dust and vacuum; the ancient hardwood dining set was pushed up against an inside wall and still covered with dropcloths. The multipaned



windows were almost gray against the afternoon light. "I've got a lot to do in here," I added with a shrug.

Then to the front rooms and the small side parlor, which faced directly west. I deliberately saved this room for last. It was here I had worked the hardest. It had been filled with musty, sheet-covered furniture, most of which Frances planned to throw out. I had vacuumed the rugs down to a near-perfect sheen, and even though they were faded in places, the ancient reds and greens of the old Persian carpets were now brilliant—you could actually step on them now without raising a cloud of gray dust.

The furniture, too, I had cleaned, dusted, polished. The room smelled of lemon oil, the windows were crystal-clear, and the afternoon sun was shining through each perfect square pane. With the steam clanking through the radiators, it was exactly as a room should be, inviting and safe. You could sit and watch the waning sunlight, or the fallen leaves drift lazily across the front lawn. You could look out, see what was coming, and then be prepared for whatever did come.

"Of course, there's one other room," I told Jake as he stood in the center, hands on his hips, surveying the results of my hard work. "And the upstairs—I haven't even started up there. Do you want to see it?"

"Why not?" he said, seemingly well pleased by my willingness to bring him here.

"Why not," I echoed, then said, "Frances calls it the trophy room."

What word did Jake use, which I had used myself on first seeing this room? Weird? Yes, though I had only thought it, never wanting to insult Frances. Dust-covered bookshelves laden with musty, mildewed volumes; African masks stacked in a neat row to either side of the red-brick fireplace; rolled-up Persian rugs reeking of mothballs; furniture covered with yellowed sheets. Only the black antique desk pushed against a far wall was bare, but it was covered with thick dust that rose in a cloud when the cat jumped up on top of it, before nestling down into a snug fur ball.

But the most distinguishing characteristic of this room—and the one that astounded everyone on entering it for the first time—were the animal trophies. They were everywhere.

That one's an oryx, and here's an impala, a nyala, and a sable antelope. Water buffalo, addax, kudu. We even have a bongo." Frances had walked beneath a long line of animals frozen in time and recited all their names. "And waterbuck, eland, blesbok, and even a springbok." She'd taken a huge breath and smiled at me across the dimly lit room. "Over there," she pointed, "an ibex and mountain goat, pronghorn antelope, mule deer, white-tailed deer, and a moose. Did you know there is more than one kind of moose and more than one kind of white-tailed deer? And that one over there is an American bison, which many people call a buffalo. Oh, how he hated us to call it a buffalo."



The smell was overwhelming, a combination of leather, mothballs, and age. It was like walking into a world of ghosts. Not only were there heads on the walls, arranged from eye level all the way up to the ceiling, but scattered throughout the room were other specimens, full-body specimens. And when I realized what they were, under their plastic capes, I was startled. The dead, orange marble eyes stared at us from every corner of the room: brown bear, polar bear, grizzly bear, South American jaguar, Siberian tiger, African lion, mountain lion, African leopard, cheetah . . .

“He was a big-game hunter,” Frances told me, both with pride and a subtle longing that I didn’t want to see, hear, or worse yet, feel. Her father had died thirty years ago and still she spoke about him with a sense of loss. She smiled and said: “He did this in the twenties and thirties. He was already an old man when Sophie and I came along. His hunting days were long past. See those photos? He kept a photographic record of everything he hunted and killed.” She was standing near the only window in the room, pointing out a row of framed pictures on the wall, arranged beneath a line of mountain rams, their horns twisted up and outward like spiral knives. She was standing in the light of the window with an eastern exposure, so the light was not direct at this time of day, but in that light she looked faded, not merely pale. It seemed that if she turned, the light would bleach her out altogether. And if that happened, I could see right through her, as though she, too, were a ghost.

“Look at these,” she said, indicating a row of framed photos on the fireplace; in picture after picture a man was shown posed beside a downed elephant. “Forty African elephants he shot and killed in his lifetime. Imagine that.”

I couldn’t, and before I could comment, she said, “And the large white and black cat next to you—that’s this one.” She pointed to a photograph of a man resting a gun barrel on the head of a magnificent spotted cat. But there were many other photos there, dozens of them.

“That’s a snow leopard,” she said, touching one of the frames. “They’re nearly extinct now.”

“Maybe because of your father.”

Her smile never dimmed. “Maybe.” She took no offense. “It was acceptable then.” For her these animals simply were; they existed, but in a separate time. “I don’t know what I shall do with them. I don’t wish to keep them, but would a museum want them? I’m not sure.”

“You could ask,” I suggested.

“It’s a room of death, isn’t it?” she said, staring straight at me. “I often felt it was, even though as a child I liked it in here. Still, it’s not quite fashionable anymore, is it? I mean I could hardly hold a bridge party in here, could I?” And then she’d said, “All our treasure hunts started here.”

“Treasure hunts?” Jake was wandering about the room, looking at the



animals, the heads on the walls. On his face was a strange mixture of fascination and repulsion.

"Yeah, her father made up these games for her and her sister. With clues. You know, go here and there's a clue which takes you to the next, then the next. At the end there'd be a prize or something. But the clues were kind of intricate . . ."

"He always played upon somebody's name, or their initials. For example, mine are F and N, for Frances Norma. So perhaps the first clue would be 'FN's homeland.' Of course, I'd have to figure out who FN could possibly be. Sometimes he included an object, or on the slip of paper might be a picture of, say, a nurse's cap. Then I'd know, of course, Florence Nightingale, and if I didn't know she was from England, I'd have to look that up. Then I'd have to check the globe, or perhaps my father's atlas, and there'd be the next clue, under the heading England. Perhaps. That should have been a rather easy one."

"Sounds like fun."

"It was. We did a treasure hunt every summer, and then another in the fall. He'd spend days putting it together, writing up the clues at that desk, and then, when we were at school, he'd place them about. Sophie and I would play the game together. That was part of the fun."

"And the treasure at the end?"

"For Sophie, candy-coated almonds, and for me, chocolate coins in gold foil. Do you know the kind?"

"Yeah, I do." I'd had to admit, just having a father who had the time, and the interest, to do something so essentially unimportant and fun was hard for me to conceive. But she'd had that, Frances had; suddenly I found myself slightly envious of her.

"She made me a game," I told Jake as I walked to the door. "I found it after she left. I'm kind of going along with it. It doesn't do any harm."

"She left you a game?" Jake echoed, a puzzled expression on his face.

"Yeah, I mean, what the heck."

"Right." He was frowning now.

"She, well, she used my initials, HS. I've got most the clues figured out so far. Do you want to see?" Now I felt stupid, sheepish, like a little kid. "It doesn't do any harm, Jake."

"You've already said that."

"Yeah," I said, turning to leave the room. I just wanted to get away from all those dead animals. "Come on and I'll show you."

"1. H _____ Stone." Jake held the first clue in his hand. I'd left them on the long shelf of the front room. Written on the old brown stationery paper, it crinkled in his hand.

"Found it rolled up with a string around it on the kitchen table. There was a note next to it, said something like 'Found this—do you think it's



one of my father's?" But I knew her handwriting. Plus why would her father use the initials HS? They're my initials."

"And what did it stand for?" he asked patiently.

"Well, it did drive me kind of nuts. I thought of headstone and hard stone and about every kind of stone there is. But nothing fit until I remembered she said all the hunts started in the trophy room. So it was obvious." I shrugged.

"Obvious?"

"Hearthstone, Jake. I found the second clue on the fireplace hearth in the trophy room." I picked up the second clue. "This was number two."

"2. *HS, African ruler*," Jake read.

"That one took me a while to figure . . ."

"Haile Selassie," Jake said without a pause. "Ruler of Ethiopia from about . . ."

"Yeah, well of course you'd know that, after thirty years of watching *Jeopardy*. I didn't know. I never studied African history, for crying out loud. But I did a little research and figured it out."

"Which led you where?"

"To the atlas. There's several shelves of books in the trophy room and I looked up Ethiopia. No dice."

"Abyssinia."

"I should have called you, Jake. Yeah, you're right, Abyssinia, the old name for Ethiopia. Anyhow, there, tucked in the pages, was the third clue." I handed it to him. "Figure this one out, Mr. Smart Guy."

"3. *H _ S and Uncle Tbm*," Jake read, a sly smile creeping over his face. "Too easy, Herbie. Harriet Beecher Stowe wrote *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. Was there a copy of that book in the room, too?"

"Yeah." I could feel my face burn. Two clues which took me three days to sort out, and he got them in less than two minutes. "Okay, what about this one. It was tucked in the front page of the book." I handed him clue number three.

Which is where he stopped, frowned: Mr. Smart Guy was stumped.

Just like I was because on this piece of paper were just my initials, HS.

"That it?" Jake asked, turning the paper over, looking for something else.

"No, there's also this," I said, reaching into my pocket and pulling out the small wooden egg, which I put in his hand. "This was with my fourth clue."

"Sometimes we didn't finish a hunt, so my father would give in, tell us the final clue so we could have our candy before the mice found it. Sometimes I think there might be forgotten clues all over this house."

"You really think so?" I took a sip of my Coke. Frances had just taken one from the ancient refrigerator, which despite its age had cranked to life after being plugged in and snorting for a couple of hours. I cleaned the coils;



she cleaned two months worth of black mildew from the interior; and now it was stocked with soda and fruit juices.

"I know so. Sophie told me she'd found an old clue tucked in our father's desk. That was . . ." Frances looked off thoughtfully, then her eyes twitched to me. I wondered then how much of Frances Carter was simply an outlandish act; she seemed to enjoy teasing me too much. ". . . last summer, right after she wrote me that she was fixing up this place. But she followed it to the next location and nothing was there. We'd probably solved that game long ago as children. Still, there are those few hunts we never did finish. My father was working on one the summer he died."

"Really?" I leaned forward on the table.

"Really." She mimicked my pose on the opposite side and I sank back. Her eyes, laughing, stared straight through me. "So if you find any . . . odd bits of paper with words that look like clues on them, you must promise to save them for me. Yes? Because if anyone finds anything . . ." She took a sip from her soda. ". . . it's going to be you."

"Yeah, so that's where I'm stuck. Clue number four," I said.

"It's an egg," Jake said; he still held the small, inch-long wooden egg.

"Yeah, it's stupid, I suppose, a kid's game. I got work to do and I want to get the outside stuff done before the weather turns cold." I shrugged. "It is a job, Jake. No one bugs me; even when she was here, she didn't bug me. She worked upstairs mostly, and in the attic. There are more animals up there. A lot of smaller specimens like game birds and stuff." Suddenly I felt kind of foolish. "Look, Jake, I don't feel like hanging around today. Let me reset the timers and we'll go. I got a paper to work on and . . ." For the first time the house didn't feel quite the same. Instead of large and warm and safe, it had a different feeling: smaller now with Jake in it, and somewhat tainted or dirty. Despite all the work I'd done, it seemed I hadn't done enough, and like the treasure hunt games still hidden in the house, the house itself was unfinished. I could see streaks in the windows where I had washed them and dust on the floor where the remaining afternoon sunlight was streaming in.

"Fine. I'll wait in the car," Jake said. "Come out when you're done. No hurry." Then he turned and left.

"Thought I'd come by, say hi." It was Emma, the green-haired girl I'd been stupid enough to think liked me, the girl I'd been stupid enough to like back. "Did you have a good Thanksgiving?"

I let the wheelbarrow full of brush and privet branches drop to the ground and just stared at her. It was a gloomy Sunday and I wanted to get in some work before it started to rain. Emma Presley was an unwanted distraction.

No, rephrase that: Emma was just unwanted.



“Your friend, the cop, he told me where you were. But I already knew you were working here. Heard at school.”

I still said nothing. I had too much to do and the skies were growing ominously gray. I had an entire hedgerow to clean out; small pines and maples were growing up through the privet and each one had to be cut back or pulled up. I lifted the wheelbarrow up and turned it around.

“Herbie, you haven’t talked to me in weeks. I pass you in the halls and you just ignore me.”

Still, I said nothing, even though she was right there at my elbow. She wheeled her bike alongside me.

“Herbie, he . . . the kid you saw me with that day, he’s just a friend. I’ve known him since third grade. I’ve been trying to tell you that, but you won’t talk to me, Herbie.”

I dumped the brush behind the bigger of the two sheds; Sammy was there, tail high in the air, twitching back and forth.

“You know . . .” I heard the awkwardness in her voice. “I heard that the lady you’re working for, well, that she’s really beautiful and . . .”

“She is.”

Maybe it was my tone, or the fact that I responded to her, or to the mention of Frances, because Emma spun her bike around, glared at me, and said, “Very beautiful. Are you . . . are you in love with her?” Her entire face spoke ridicule and incredulity and bitterness.

I refused to answer. I lifted up the wheelbarrow to return to the front yard.

“Or . . . is it that you’ve been hurt so many times before, you can’t trust anyone? Is it that?” She hurried after me, trying to catch up. “Because I know. I heard about your mother. *Everyone* knows.”

I left the wheelbarrow where it was, figured if I got the ladder, went up to clean the gutters, she wouldn’t be able to follow me up there with her stupid bike.

“I wished you’d called. I wished you’d talk to me.” She was relentless, following me back to the shed and standing there while I wrestled an old folding aluminum ladder out of the back. Sammy was with me and I hit something in the rafters, a bucket or some clamming gear. It crashed to the floor and the cat went bounding out of the shed.

“Herbie, I want to talk. Why won’t you talk to me?” Emma demanded. She was standing in the door to the shed; I made a great act of dragging the ladder around her. “Damn you, Herbert Sawyer!” she cried as I headed back to the front of the house. “Damn you!”

“You don’t need girls. They’re worthless,” I told Samson as he sat before me, his broad tail pounding down on the wooden floor of the shed. “And untrustworthy.” I was wrapping a rag around my hand where I’d cut it on a broken gutter. The ladder was outside, lying on the ground. It was raining now; there was a steady drip-drip on the wooden eaves



overhead. I needed to go inside, make some tea, and work, or maybe read. I had something to read, but I couldn't even remember what novel we were doing in English class. I shut my eyes and leaned forward as Sammy's tail went thump-thump-thump on the warped floorboards. "Come on, Sammy."

I got up, went to the door, but Samson didn't move. I turned around; he was still sitting in the middle of the little shed, his tail continuing to thump-thump-thump, but not the floor. He was sitting on something painted a pale green, something with . . .

I walked forward. Something with a brass handle attached to it. A trapdoor. A cellar door.

I was the caretaker, which meant it was my job to take care of things, right? Probably an old root cellar. Storage. We were far enough from the ocean to make cellars possible and the house itself had a cellar, so I didn't think much of it when I leaned over, scooted the cat off the door, and pulled up on the handle.

“Well, looks like we found Dan Church,” the medical examiner said in passing to me and Jake. His gray eyes took me in severely. “Not a word, Herbie, until we notify next of kin.”

Jake had made some tea, then spent the next half hour making a swift round of phone calls, one of which was to Frances in New York.

The rain was coming down in a steady torrent. The medical examiner owed me nothing, but he was drinking Frances's tea and I was the caretaker, and even if I was only fifteen, I deserved some explanation. Besides, this man knew me, and if he was going to fill Jake in, then he had to fill me in, too.

“Looks like the door hit him in the head. That's my first guess. He doesn't seem to have been shot, and there are no apparent wounds on the body, but he's been down in that hole a while, at least four, five weeks, or more. He was reported missing when?” He looked at Jake.

“About six weeks ago.”

“Well,” the man wasn't ready to make any hard and fast pronouncements, “it might be accidental death. He was going down into the cellar and the door fell forward on his head, and then he tripped, broke his neck. But then again, someone might have . . .”

“Dropped it deliberately on his head.” I refused to be sick, despite the odor, despite the awful knowledge that had hit me with that odor.

“Won't know anything definite until the autopsy. Until then . . .” He looked at Jake, then to me. “Thanks for the tea,” he said.

No way Frances had anything to do with this,” I found myself saying. “No way she even knew. She told me he had just left, that her sister said . . .” I clutched my arms to myself and stood in the front room where it was dark except for the candles in the windows. “No way. She's com-



pletely . . . she wasn't even here when he disappeared. She . . . *he* was her sister's handyman."

"No one's under any suspicion," Jake cautioned. "This investigation has just begun and if the autopsy shows it was an accidental death . . ."

"Except the cat knew he was there," I said. I felt sick again. Okay, not the first dead body I'd ever found, or seen; I'd been unfortunate enough to come across a few. But this was different, and unexpected, and suddenly I felt like I couldn't breathe again. I turned to look at Jake. "Can we go home? I got a test tomorrow. I need to study."

"Hey, I heard a body was found on the Carter property in one of the sheds," the senior said to me, actually leaning over my desk. I didn't turn my head, just my eyes, to look up at the jerk who'd stopped to talk to me. There are always a few like him, a kid who has to repeat a subject so many times he takes most of his classes with sophomores and freshmen. But since I hadn't said a word, he worked his face into a kind of smirk and speaking up louder (so everyone would hear, including the teacher writing on the board), said, "So what does this make, Sawyer? An even dozen? You just kick up dead bodies wherever you go, don't you?"

"Take your seat, mister . . ." the math teacher barked suddenly; he was all of five foot two, but he spoke with the unchallenged authority of a veteran teacher. The kid jerked a little, then moved away from me.

Jake wasn't surprised to get the call, but he didn't come get me at school. He sent Officer Abe Andersen, who drove me straight out to the Carter house, as I'd requested. That didn't surprise Jake either.

"Jerks at school," I tried to explain. "I took my test and then told the school nurse I was sick." I stood at the back door of the house, staring out at the shed as the rain came down.

"The cycle of flies, maggots, and reinfestation indicates six weeks." Jake cringed; for a tough cop, he had his weaknesses. "Or so the preliminary findings suggest. There won't be an official report for a few days more, but it looks like he had the door propped open, and when he was going down, it fell forward on him. The top of his head was caved in. Literally. Death was instantaneous."

"My fingerprints are in that shed," I reminded Jake, though he knew; he'd probably already given orders to screen me out. I'd been fingerprinted before, part of my unusual legacy—and one to which the kid in math class had referred when he mentioned my "kicking up dead bodies." "They'll be on the door, the handle, the ladder, and some of the tools out there."

"We've taken care of that," Jake said.

"You'll need a precise date of death, won't you?" I asked. "So you can tell if, well, Sophie Carter was still alive when he . . ."

"No one is under suspicion." Jake looked out the back door; the drive-



way was full of cars, including the county crime scene van. I hadn't gone out there; I knew I'd just be in the way even though my days of being told, "Back off, kid; nothing for you to see here," were over. Many of them knew me and had even spoken to me in a friendly, familiar way when we crossed paths. I was Herbie Sawyer, son of Sergeant Valari's suicidal girl friend. I was Herbie Sawyer . . .

"Though I do have a man talking to the neighbor—Mrs. Jean Pritchard, is it? She might be able to tell us when she last saw Dan Church." Jake sort of shrugged. "Though I think this one's going to turn up accidental death due to blunt trauma to the head. That door must weigh a good sixty pounds, at least. Oak, Abe Anderson says, and Abe knows his wood."

"Why would he go down into that cellar?" I asked. From the kitchen door I looked out at the shed. Small, drab, and dilapidated in the drizzle, it looked like a miserable place to die. Members of the state forensics crime lab were out there now. I'd seen them arrive with the usual equipment: cameras, bags, small suitcases. Every few seconds there was a flash of light from the shed.

"Well, he was Sophie Carter's handyman. Maybe he was looking for a tool, or putting something away."

"Is it a root cellar?" I asked. "The house has got a big cellar with lots of junk down there. Are you going to take a look around here, too? I mean, in this house?"

"As soon as we contact Frances Carter, maybe."

"Maybe she's just out," I suggested. Jake had been trying to reach Frances, using the number she'd given me, ever since I'd found the body, about eighteen hours ago, and still no response from her. And if I knew Jake—and I did—he had the New York police looking for her right now.

"No one's seen or heard from her since last Wednesday," Jake said.

"So," I swallowed, felt my heart skip a beat. "She's out of town. Took a few days off."

"Frances Carter resigned from her job a week ago, Herbie." Jake walked across the kitchen floor and turned on the gas to make a cup of tea. I remained in the doorway, watching as the professionals outside did their work. Jake had been out there with them but came into the house as soon as Abe dropped me off. "She worked for a nonprofit conservation group in New York. It was put together by some philanthropists about thirty years ago. She was in their research division."

"Conservation," I murmured. "She's not a suspect, Jake. She wasn't here when this happened. If anything, maybe her sister . . ." I bit down on my lip, turned back. They were removing Dan Church's body in a black body bag. Large, silver-colored raindrops bounced off the thick plastic. "And so what if she resigned from her job? She told me she was planning to move back here, that's why she's fixing up the house."

"In the spring."

"So she's on vacation."



"If she is, she told no one about it. I've spoken to her colleagues, Herbie. They were very surprised she resigned like she did. She gave no notice, just put a letter on the chairman's desk and walked out the door. She had already emptied out her office."

"Does that mean she's a murderer?" I demanded.

"It means that we need to talk to her. A man was found dead on her property."

"She wouldn't hurt anyone."

"Herbie, you barely know her."

"I know her well enough! I know that she wouldn't . . . that she's too gentle, she's too . . ."

Jake walked toward me. "Herbie, you can know someone your whole life and they can still surprise you."

I turned away and watched as the police van backed out of the driveway and the other officers got into their cars to leave. A distraught woman was out there now, she'd just pulled up in a tan Saturn. She was arguing in the rain with one of the men. Dan Church's girlfriend?

"Truth is, we never do know people, not really. Even those closest to us, those we love . . ."

"Go to hell," I told him. The officer and the woman were heading up to the house. I turned around and walked off toward the darkened front room.

"It was a good job. Dan was making good money, for a handyman, that is. He liked it here and he liked her, Miss Sophie he called her. I think she was a little sweet on him, too, which was kind of weird, you know, her being so much older than him. But anyhow, after he didn't show up, well, we'd had a fight, so I didn't . . . But all the other times when we had a fight, he came home in a week or so. I figured he was staying with a friend, but when I finally called . . ."

I sat in the dark just outside the kitchen in a chair still covered by a sheet and listened. They were questioning her here. I wasn't surprised; Jake often did things in an unorthodox way. Sometimes, he said, people need to be questioned where they feel comfortable and safe; other times they need to be brought to the station. All depends on the circumstances and the situation.

"So Jack, that's the friend, he says he hasn't seen Dan in a couple of weeks, though Dan did leave him a message, he said. Wanted to borrow Jack's truck, and he'd let him know when, that he'd make it worth his while. I met the woman, the one who killed herself? You think I didn't get sick when I heard she did that? I thought then maybe she had fallen in love with Dan, the old bag, and after she killed him, she took her own life. I called you people; I asked questions. I reported Dan missing; you got records of that. I reported him, but . . ." The woman started to cry.

As I leaned forward in the chair, my hands crushed together, the can-



dles in the windows came on. They saw it from the kitchen. Jake quickly explained that they were on a timer.

"But he was careful, he . . . Dan was no carpenter or electrician or nothing like that, but he knew how to do things. He said it was good money here and a lot of work, enough to keep him busy all winter. He was even going to ask if we could stay here through till spring, that she could take a little out of his pay, if she wanted. It's a nice house, better than where we were staying, but then we had a fight . . ."

"What did you fight about, Miss . . ." Jake asked.

"Oh, nothing important. I drink a little, I say things I shouldn't. Mostly about money and him helping out with the bills. I let him stay with me for practically nothing. I mean, I used to let him stay . . ."

"We need to find this Jack, the friend with the truck," I heard Jake say, not to the woman, but to the officer with him.

"I already asked about that," the woman interjected. "Jack didn't know why he wanted the truck, just that Dan said to be ready at the end of the month, that he had some stuff he wanted to haul away. Probably just junk, trash, who knows? Dan was a good guy; he didn't mind doing dirty work for other people, just so long as he got paid for it."

"It's an egg," I murmured. I got up, went into the front room, and took the squares of paper from the shelf and looked at the fourth clue again: "Of course, it's an egg, and birds lay eggs, so HS stands for . . ." I'd done this before, run through every kind of bird I could think of with a name beginning with H. "Hawk. Hen. Harrier, which I think is a bird, maybe not. Two words. Hard . . . high . . . ho . . . ham. Damn it, when I think of the letter *H*, I just think of house! House?" I looked around the room, then down at the cat now sitting on my feet. "Sammy, where can I find a picture of a house sparrow egg around here?"

Twenty minutes later I had my treasure, two movie passes tucked into Audubon's *Birds of the World*, the chapter on egg identification.

"Yeah . . ." I muttered to an attentive Samson, "too bad I don't have a girlfriend to use them with."

"Of course I'm sure it was October thirty-first when he came by. Trick-or-treat. I had to go buy candy. And there I am out in the yard planting crocuses, and he shows up with a truck at the Carter house. I came over to talk to him—Franny wasn't home—but he was very rude to me. He said he was one of Dan Church's friends, but no, he never gave his name. I told Franny about it later, but she just shrugged it off. I told her she had to be careful. There's a lot of antiques in this house and it wouldn't have surprised me to hear that Dan Church was planning to steal her blind when she wasn't looking."

"Did Mr. Church ever say anything to lead you to believe he was stealing from Miss Carter?"



I wandered into the kitchen slowly, softly. Dan Church's girlfriend was gone, replaced with Jean Pritchard. Though Jake's eyes lifted to me briefly, he gave no sign I was unwelcome. He turned his attention back to the woman.

"You were saying, Mrs. Pritchard?"

"Well, Daniel Church and I, we seldom spoke." Jean Pritchard was a bit flustered. She looked at me suspiciously, then said to Jake, "I never trusted him. Just one look at him and I could see he was no good. He had a shifty look in his eye. I read just the other day that we should trust our instincts more, and mine told me not to trust Dan Church."

"If you saw this man, Mrs. Pritchard," Jake said with labored patience, "you would recognize him?"

"The man with the truck? Of course I would."

"No word from Frances?" I asked. I had my books all spread out in the waning afternoon sunlight; I had my snacks ready to eat; I had the Christmas candles on; I had an affectionate cat rolling into a ball between my outstretched legs. I was on the floor, facing the sun, facing the street and the naked sycamores in the front yard.

"New York City's finest are in the process of interviewing her neighbors. It seems that Frances Carter has walked off the face of the Earth." Jake sat down on a hassock next to me, then reached out to touch the cat. "And I have something for you. Totally unofficial, Herbie, and the only reason I'm in this house now is because you have been left in her absence owner of Frances Carter's house."

He reached inside his jacket, pulled out two sheets of ordinary copy paper, and placed them down on top of my history text. On one was the familiar outline of a small yellow square shape about two and half inches on each side. On the other was a picture of a chain with a small curved object hanging from it. If this were to true size, the object was about three inches long and looked like a miniature horn. It was off-white in color.

"So Frances Carter left a little treasure hunt for your amusement. What are the chances her sister did the same thing with Dan Church?"

I looked up at Jake, then back at the first paper. On it, written in plain block capitals, was: *IV S H E D CELLAR*. The letters *H E D* had been underlined and were written in a different handwriting.

"Is it clue number four?" Jake asked.

"I don't—where did these come from?"

"The small piece of paper and this object, which is probably a key chain, were both found in Dan Church's clenched fist. The clues Frances Carter left for you were numbered, correct?"

"Yeah." I felt like something was stuck in my throat.

"It looks like someone might have wanted Dan Church to go down into that cellar."



“Or he had a list, Jake, and the fourth thing on that list was to . . . well . . . do some work . . .”

“In an empty root cellar? Because that’s what it is. Nothing down there but some rotten wooden shelves and a few empty Mason jars. Where are your clues, Herbie? We need to look at them.”

He took them all away, the four I had and the books I’d found them in, even the two movie tickets. But after he’d gone, I found a notepad in the kitchen and from memory wrote down exactly what Jake had shown me on the photocopy: IV S H E D CELLAR. It was unmistakable. Someone had given Dan Church, or Dan Church had found, a slip of paper, or maybe he had written it himself, or maybe . . .

“If this is one of those initial games, then the initials are SC,” I told the cat as he studied me contentedly from the kitchen table. “Sophie Carter, or Sophia Clara. So this game probably wasn’t made for Dan Church. But if it was a clue, then it’s too easy. Dan Church filled in the letters to make ‘shed cellar.’ Which is where he went, looking for the next clue. But this is clue four, so where are the first three, and did Dan find this one? Or is this the one Frances said her sister found? Or is it a fake, a game Sophie made up, a game that went wrong . . .” I was so confused by then and it was getting late. I walked to the back door and looked out toward the shed. It was wet and dark out there now, and just a thin ribbon of police tape flapped in the wind. “They’ll check the handwriting, find some copies of Dan Church’s and see if he wrote that clue, if that’s what it is. Or maybe they’ll check it against Sophie Carter’s.” I turned around, studied the room I was in, the ancient rafters overhead, the countertops I’d scrubbed and cleaned, the gas stove sparkling with its copper kettle boiling on top. I’d been given custody of this house, and even if it weren’t mine, it felt like it was.

“And as for that key chain, maybe it was his and has nothing to do with anything.”

“All our treasure hunts started here.”

It was like she was there, like I could really hear her voice.

“The trophy room, Sammy. That’s where they began.”

It occurred to me then that I shouldn’t touch anything in the room. Though I’d effectively destroyed any evidence of Sophie Carter or Dan Church that might once have been in the other rooms of the house, here in this room their fingerprints and their presence might still be preserved. It was one thing to know that this house’s former owner had killed herself, but to know the man who had worked for her was also dead, accidentally or otherwise, lent a kind of awful chill to the house. Maybe I had felt it the day I brought Jake here, when I’d wanted to leave. For the last few weeks I’d loved this house despite the weirdness of this room filled with dead animals. But now it seemed large and strange and



very dangerous, and if the house had a heart—an evil, blackened heart—then it was centered here in the trophy room.

“They all start here,” I said as I squeezed the paper in my hand. “He was working on clue four, so where are the first three? If he’d had them on his body, Jake would have told me.” I stood at the door and turned on the lights. “Save this room for last, she said.” I hesitated before walking in, but instead of looking at the heads, or the full-body mounts under their plastic coverings, I walked over to the wall of photographs. Lyman Carter kneeling over an African lion; Lyman Carter posing between a pair of antelope with scimitar-shaped horns; Lyman Carter . . .

Lyman Carter everywhere posing with death. I wondered then where he’d killed himself, and with what weapon. One of the same guns he’d used to kill all these animals?

I walked along the line of photographs, not knowing what I hoped to find, to see, to learn. I counted six pictures of him with lions; over twenty with him crouched next to antelopes of various kinds; another half dozen with elephants, every one an enormous beast with tusks as long as a grown man.

But it was pointless. I had one useless clue, and if the forensics team had found another, either on Dan Church’s person or in the cellar of the shed, then Jake would have said so. Yes, odd comfort that, if Jake knew anything else, he’d have told me.

The sound of the furnace, just below me, woke me up. It sounded like a large animal was down there, clearing its throat and turning its enormous body under the floorboards. Then it gurgled, sending hot steam up through the ancient heating system. I was startled, though I instantly knew where I was. The electric candles were still glowing, so it wasn’t past ten o’clock yet. But there was darkness everywhere else. Something brushed against my leg and I reached out. Sammy.

So where was Jake? And why had he let me fall asleep in the front room? Had he assumed I’d gone home long ago, or had he just forgotten me? It was still raining—certainly he didn’t expect me to walk home? For a moment I had that sensation again like I couldn’t breathe; then the cat bolted out of the room and made a dive for the kitchen.

So, with a catch in my breath, I got up and followed him.

How do cats know when there’s a mouse around? Samson was on the counter, his head pointed up, his eyes filled with avid interest, staring at one of the doorless cabinets.

“A mouse, Sammy?” I said, and the cat twitched his tail. I grabbed a chair, climbed up, not that I was set on catching a mouse in my bare hands, but because I figured I’d clear a space to put out some traps. The weather was turning cold and that’s when mice come in; I might as well stop them in their tracks.

One item at a time I began to empty out the cabinet, filled with all sorts



of odd little containers: gravy boats, butter dishes, cruets, that sort of thing. But no mouse, though there was plenty of evidence where a mouse had been. Then, because I was tired, I gave up, and climbed down from the counter. Jake's cell phone was still on the counter and I figured I'd call him, have him come and get me.

Then my eyes fell on the pad of paper where I'd written IV S H E D CELLAR. "What if Daniel Church guessed wrong?" I said to the fat cat. "What if . . ."

Yeah, what if it was an accidental death? What if . . .

"I think she was a little sweet on him, too, which was kind of weird, you know, her being so much older than him."

"Sophie told me she'd found an old clue tucked in our father's desk."

"We'd play the game together. That was part of the fun."

"So Dan Church, or Sophie Carter, or both of them together . . . they fill in the word and make it . . . *Shed* Cellar. They find an old clue out of sequence, clue four, and that's all they find." I sat down at the kitchen table, the cat in my arms. "They play the game together and something goes wrong and Dan dies. And Sophie . . . she goes home and . . ."

I shut my eyes, shook my head. This house was starting to get to me. I couldn't let it go; Jake could walk in right then and there and I wouldn't have been able to leave. With my eyes shut I heard myself start talking. "Stop cellar. Start cellar. Too many letters. Shed cellar. No. Slow cellar. Soft cellar. South cellar. Too many letters. Snow cellar."

There came a loud clank from the rear of the house. Just the pipes—but as I turned I thought of the trophy room again. So many animals and for each there was a picture, and the real animal. A picture and the real animal. A record of each. Isn't that what Frances had said?

"Snow leopard? Snow leopard cellar. That's stupid. Stupid cellar. Sane cellar. Insane cellar. So . . . sun . . . sat . . . slow . . ." I looked across the kitchen, over the counters, the stovetop, to the dishes I'd cleaned, washed, stacked. Among them was a pair of salt and pepper shakers.

"Salt . . . salt cellar. Salt cellar." I said it maybe a dozen times. Maybe I screamed it. I don't know; I don't remember. What comes next is a blur. I was tired, I was confused, and I was angry, too. But I found the salt cellar; it had been in the assortment of bric-a-brac I'd pulled out of the top cabinet, and in it I found the next clue to a long-forgotten and unfinished game. Then I found the clue that came after that one.

"What the hell have you been . . ." Jake said to me as he rushed into the house, my keys in his hand. "Are you all right? Herbie?"

Did I see fear on his face, a flicker of concern? Well, why not? I was a mess, wasn't I? Covered with soot and dirt and God knows what else had come down that chimney in the last thirty years.

"I'm okay," I told him. "Just been fishing around a dirty fireplace. I



found two more clues, Jake, the ones that follow Dan Church's. I think his was the first, not the fourth."

It took a while to convince him I was all right. I put on water for tea, and he sent Abe Andersen home. Abe had been parked outside in the driveway, incidentally, while I slept in the front room. Jake had asked him to stay until I wanted to go home, and without any entertainment in the house for Abe, he'd gone out to sit in his patrol car and listen to the radio, which is where he'd promptly fallen asleep.

But then, once we got past all that, I showed Jake what I'd found and explained that Dan Church, Sophie Carter, or both, had made a mistake in figuring out that the clue had read *SHED CELLAR*. They were supposed to go to the salt cellar, left forgotten in a cabinet with other equally useless culinary items.

The next clue had been a snap to decipher: "*O. SC's greatest classic.*"

"*Tom Sawyer?*" Jake said swiftly. He was actually pretty good at this.

"No," I told Jake, "*Huckleberry Finn*. There's a copy in the trophy room. The next clue was tucked in the frontispiece. And here's where I get stumped." I showed it to him. And so maybe we don't solve who killed Dan Church, if anyone did, or absolve either Sophie or Frances of complicity in his death, but with this I'd thought I could figure it out. But I hadn't. Either I'd deciphered it incorrectly, or the next clue had been found, destroyed, lost, or just burned up in a fireplace twenty years ago.

"*RY. Where SC comes down,*" Jake read, immediately coming to the same conclusion that I had. "Santa Claus? A fireplace?"

"There's a fireplace in the trophy room, but no luck, Jake. Though I have to talk to Frances about getting a chimney sweep in here. Thing is filthy. Looks like it has an old bird's nest stuck in it and . . ."

"You looked already."

"Yeah, I could have waited for you, but I couldn't sleep." I shrugged. "Where've you been?"

"At the station talking to an overseas operator and a lieutenant in the Paris Sûreté." He watched me, waiting for this choice piece of news to sink in. "We found Frances Carter—with her fiancé in Paris. She's honeymooning in Europe."

So sometimes you can look for evil intent—and find none. It now seemed fairly obvious that Dan Church's death, though tragic, had been accidental, happening because he had been on a little treasure hunt when he died.

Because a lot of the rest was done by Jake. The friend Dan Church had contacted, with the truck he'd wanted to borrow, was turned up. Seems Dan had told this friend he'd soon have a "load of merchandise," which he needed "help to move." Phone records also revealed that Dan had contacted a Japanese auction site the week prior to his death.

When Frances Carter finally made her reappearance, a week before



Christmas, and was shown the clues of the unfinished treasure hunt game, she looked at me and shook her head.

"You checked the fireplace?" she asked, but she knew I had. "My goodness, though . . ." She sank down on the faded sofa in the front room. "Thirty years ago." She looked up at Jake and me, then at the clues spread on the worn hassock before her. "Yes, this is my father's handwriting, which can be verified if you . . ."

"We've already done so, using some old bank drafts," Jake told her.

"It must be the last game he made for us, but it's so foolish, so silly. Why would Sophie, if she were involved, or Dan care about a box of old candy and some chocolate coins?"

"Put the letters together, Miss Carter," Jake said, rearranging the clues in front of her. "IV, O, and RY. That plus the key chain."

She turned to looked out the windows. Their panes, uninsulated from the cold, were covered with frost patterns. "If you'd known all this would happen, Herbie, would you still have climbed up that tree and got Sammy down for me?"

I didn't even hesitate: "Yes."

She turned back to me. "So . . . how many fireplaces did you check?"

"Just . . . the one in the trophy room."

There were five, including the central chimney which came right down straight into the front room. And so, with Frances's permission, Jake and I got a crowbar and a hammer, then broke and peeled away the paneling which had covered it. Then we went upstairs and did the same to the three in the upstairs bedrooms.

"He left a good portion of his money to found the society," Frances explained to Jake and me over tea. "But the ivory . . ." She sighed heavily. "I think he always felt badly about that. He said it never occurred to him when he was a younger man. There were so many elephants, he said, and so few hunters. I did ask him once where it was, if he'd sold it or had it destroyed, and his answer was, 'It's all been taken care of.' He must have hidden it there when the furnace was put into the house and the fireplaces boarded up. My goodness, that was so long ago, in the fifties, perhaps, and . . ." She shook her head sadly.

"The Japanese black market will pay over three hundred a pound for it," I informed her.

"That biggest one is over seven foot long," Jake said, looking at the soot-covered tusks he and I pulled down out of the chimney in the front room. "And well over a hundred pounds."

"My father killed only the best specimens," she said sadly. "I think he meant for us to find this the summer he died. We didn't need the money, or maybe . . ." she looked away, ". . . we did. I don't really recall. We didn't play that last game. We had a funeral to arrange."



"But you were just a kid," I said. "How could you be planning . . ."

Jake cut me off: "Miss Carter, we think Dan Church did know about the ivory, that maybe your sister told him about it. She might have known when she found that first clue in your father's desk."

"She knew?" Frances looked up at Jake. She had a dazed look on her face. "Oh yes, I see. It seems obvious with the key chain. But how do we do we know that Sophie didn't just find that and gave it to Dan?"

"There's the friend with the truck," Jake said to her.

"Come to pick up some trash! Some old furniture, that's all. Maybe Sophie said, well, you can have this and this, and . . . no, Sergeant Valari, the medical examiner has told me that Daniel Church's death was accidental, and that my sister . . ." Her lips, then her entire face, began to tremble. ". . . was depressed, and her death had nothing to do with Daniel. So if you're suggesting that she . . ."

"I'm suggesting he was using her," Jake said as gently as he could. "She told him about the game, perhaps in a moment of excitement when she found that first clue. The letters IV and the key chain together tipped her off to . . ."

"No," Frances whispered.

"But when she found out that Dan planned to sell it on the black market . . ."

"No," she said again, almost frantically, shaking her head.

I hated then to see her so upset, and though I wanted to go to her defense, I couldn't. Not even when she got up and walked away, straight out of her big house, down the steps, and into her back yard.

"I didn't work you, you know, not with Sophie, and not with me." She didn't seem to be talking to me, not exactly, so I walked over to her slowly.

"My wedding," she said over her shoulder. "I got over to Paris and found that marriage to a younger man wasn't going to work, though we did have a lovely vacation together."

"I'm sorry."

"Don't be. Thirty years ago I stood in this same yard wondering what I was going to do with my life, and here I am, still wondering."

"Thirty years ago . . ."

"I saw the look on your face, Herbie, in the kitchen, and I take it as a compliment you think I'm so young. But I'm not young. I'll be fifty-five my next birthday."

So I was a little surprised; I was off by about twenty years. It really didn't matter.

"So, what was it, then?" she asked suddenly. "How did it happen? Did she . . . did they go on a hunt together? Did she tell Daniel what the clues were probably leading to, especially with that key chain? It was our father's. I haven't seen or thought about it since he died." She turned



away from me, hands clasped together inside her sleeves as she stared at the shed. "But Sophie knew the two together could only mean one thing. So did he deceive her, then she killed him? And then she killed herself? Or was it an accident, and when she found him . . ."

"Jake says there's no prints of hers on the trapdoor, or the handle."

She threw out her arms. "So Sophie wore gloves!" And then her face folded, grew heavy, and was not so much pale now as gray. "Do you know how that sounds? She wore gloves. Did she? In the middle of October? Did she wear gloves when she threw down that door on Daniel Church's head? Did she go home that night, and kill herself the next day? Is that how it happened? My fifty-eight-year-old sister, who was foolish enough to fall in love with someone twenty years younger? Did she really think . . ."

"We may never know," I said, for what it was worth.

"It could have been an accident. She might have found him later. She might have been in love with him and couldn't . . . if she . . ." Her eyes grew wet. "No. It's wrong. I can lie to myself only for so long." A door slammed behind us and we both turned to look up at Jake, coming to join us. Frances turned back to me. "If Sophie found that clue, she knew what it referred to, and it wasn't the shed cellar. That's ridiculous. She'd have known the only thing which would have fit was *salt* cellar. It would have been the first thing that came to her mind. There'll never be any doubt for me . . ." She moved a step away as Jake walked over to us. ". . . that my sister sent Dan Church into that shed . . . to die."

Two weeks later and I was back in the house. Under the floorboards the furnace was gurgling again. The candles had just flickered on and in the front room Jake was asleep on the sofa, Sammy curled close to his side. I walked in and looked down at the remaining elephant tusks on the floor. I knelt down and touched one of them; it felt warm, like some part of the animal was still there. Lyman Carter had killed it nearly eighty years ago. Incredible.

Most of the ivory was already gone, trucked off to a company that bought estate ivory for legitimate use. Pens made from ivory were popular now; I'd read that on the Internet.

As for the animals of the trophy room, most of them were gone, too, sent off to several children's museums. The snow leopard was out in the kitchen awaiting its new owner, some fellow who was putting together an Endangered Species of the World exhibit. All proceeds from sales were being rolled back into the conservation group Lyman Carter had helped start, and for which Frances had worked.

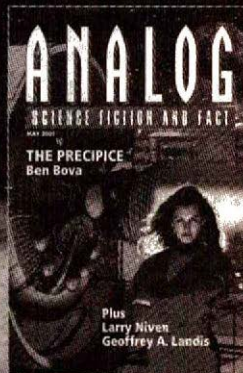
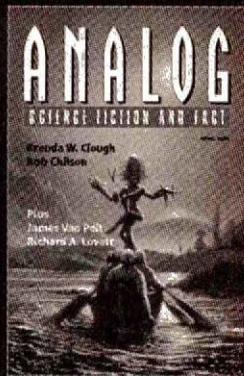
"Frances," I muttered, shaking my head. How had I ever thought that she . . . I looked over at Jake, snoring in his sleep, then walked back across the room, grabbed my copy of the *Green Hills of Africa* off the floor, and settled down on the sofa to finish reading it.

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The Trouble with Ruth

Henry Slesar



Henry Slesar 1927-2002

Henry Slesar has been associated with AHMM since the magazine's inception, and over the years we have published more than one hundred stories by him (some written under pseudonyms). He also wrote for the television series *Alfred Hitchcock Presents* and *The Edge of Night*.

In honor of his memory, we are reprinting the first story he wrote for us; it appeared in the second issue of AHMM. He passed away on April 2, 2002.

The sound of the apartment door closing behind Ralph had an abruptness that struck Ruth like a blow.

The wall was growing between them; they both hated it and could do nothing about it. They'd been married almost ten years, and by unspoken agreement had never slept or said goodbye on an argument. But their lips were cold as Ralph had kissed her goodbye.

Ruth sighed and went into the living room. There was an opened pack of cigarettes on the television set. She lit one. It tasted black and horrible; she stamped it out. She went into the kitchen, poured herself a second cup of coffee, and sat down to wait. She knew just what to expect. In half an hour, her husband would arrive at his office. Five minutes later, he would be on the telephone tactlessly informing her mother about yesterday's episode, the third in three weeks. Her mother's voice would be marvelously steady as she replied to him, but by the time she dialed Ruth's number the sobs would begin in her throat and the first words she uttered would emerge choked and grieving.

At a quarter of ten, the telephone rang.

Ruth picked it up, almost smiling at the accuracy of her prognostication. "Hello?"

It was her mother, of course, and the thin voice was gulping out words of sorrow and commiseration.

"Mama, please!" Ruth shut her eyes. "You'll just have to get used to the idea. I steal, Mom. I can't help myself. Try to understand that—"

There was talk about doctors, and trips out of the country; things that Ruth said she and her husband could not afford.

"I know it's a sickness," she said. "I know it's not nice. It's better to be a murderer or an alcoholic nowadays. You get more sympathy . . ."

Her mother was crying.

"Please, Mama. You're not helping. You're not helping me this way at all."

When she found a silence long enough to say goodbye and hang up, Ruth returned to the living room, and put her head against the arm of the sofa.

The questions troubled her again. How does it happen? Why does such a thing begin? Why do I steal? Could a doctor—one of *those* doctors—help her? She shuddered. She had been a perfectly normal child. Her family had money, *some* money, anyway. They had lived in a fine two-story house overlooking San Francisco bay. And she had been bright in school, a top-of-the-class student. Nobody brought home a longer row of A's on their report card, not even the two cool, distant young ladies who were Ruth's older sisters. Also, she was popular.

But she had stolen, even then. Her first crime—Fanny Ritter's

pencil box, a beautiful thing of blue binding and secret compartments. She had made the mistake of displaying her new possession at home, and then they knew. *Everybody* knew. She was a thief!

Ruth Moody, now twenty-eight, sobbed in her living room for the troubles of a thirteen-year-old girl.

No, Ruth decided at last, as she had decided before. It couldn't be something in the past. Her past was good and innocent.

But the question remained unanswered: Why did she steal? Why did she take the spools of thread from the department store on Washington Avenue? The cheap pearl buttons from the notions counter? Why did she leave the dress shop on Fourth Avenue with an unpurchased evening bag?

They had understood. All of them. They had called Ralph. They realized she was not a shoplifter, really, but a woman with a problem. Everything was handled very simply. Ralph paid for the merchandise taken, a proper bill of sale was tendered. Her name and her description recorded in the files for handy reference if ever it happened again . . .

At eleven o'clock, a ringing sound roused her. She had fallen asleep and first looked towards the telephone, then realized it was the doorbell.

The man in the doorway took off his hat when she appeared, but that was his only courteous gesture. He stepped inside without invitation, closing the door behind him. He was short and his face had the hot, quick-burned look of sunlamp treatments. His thick hair was glossy, and his clothes had too many sharp corners.

"You Ruth Moody?" he said.

"Yes." She was more annoyed than frightened.

He smiled, uncovering tobacco-stained teeth. "I got a little business to talk over, Mrs. Moody." He nodded toward the living room. "Can we go inside?"

"What sort of business? If you're selling something—"

"I'm buying, Mrs. Moody." He chuckled. "All right if I sit down?" He was already sitting down, on the sofa, lifting his trousers at the knees to preserve the knife-edge crease. "I think you better listen," he said carefully. "It's about your husband."

Her hand clutched at her houserobe, and she took a seat across the width of the room.

"What do you mean?"

"I know something about your husband," he said. "And I know a lot more about you. Put them together—they can spell trouble." He laid his hat down on the cushion beside him.

"Mrs. Moody," he continued, "how would you like to make a thousand dollars?"

"What?" Ruth asked, puzzled.

"You heard right. I got a little proposition for you. If you go along, you'll get a thousand bucks in the mail. If you don't—well, your husband might have a hard time making ends meet. You get what I mean?"

"No!"

"Let me put it this way. If you were a man's boss, and you found out that the man's wife was a shoplifter—"

Ruth's hands flew to her mouth.

"There. You see what I mean? It makes a difference, don't it? I mean, these days a man's family is important in his work. Gotta think of the firm's reputation, and all that. You see what I mean, don't you?"

"How did you know?" Ruth said miserably. "Who told you that?"

"Don't ask me that, Mrs. Moody. Let's just say I got sources. But don't get upset. It's a sickness, you know, like pneumonia, or hay fever. You can't help yourself—"

Ruth looked at the man hard. Then she said: "How much do you want?"

He waved his hand. "I don't want your nickels and dimes, Mrs. Moody. Didn't I tell you? I'm here to *buy*."

"Buy what?"

"Your services. All you got to do is play along with us, and you can have a thousand bucks. Take my word for it, you got nothing to lose."

"What do you want me to do?" Ruth said.

"I can't spell it out for you. But I got a friend, see? He'll tell you the details. All you gotta do now is put on your hat and coat and come with me. My friend'll outline the whole deal. It's real easy, believe me. You won't regret it for a minute—"

She stood up. "I'm not going with you!"

"Suit yourself." He seemed genuinely unconcerned. "We're not desperate for your help, Mrs. Moody. But we thought we'd give you a break." He sighed, got up, and took his hat off the sofa. "But if you don't want to play along—"

"You don't really mean this."

He smiled, reached into an inner pocket and withdrew a small business card. He read a penciled notation.

"Otto Mavius and Company, 420 Fifth Avenue. That's where your husband works, right?"

"But I'm not dressed!" she said frantically. "I can't come with you now!"

"I can wait, Mrs. Moody. I'm in no hurry."

They looked at each other for a while; then Ruth whirled and ran towards the bedroom.

In half an hour, they were in a taxi, and the man with the sunburn was giving the name of a modest downtown hotel to the driver. Ruth slumped in the other corner of the cab, not looking at him, her arms folded tightly against her chest to conceal the trembling of her body. The man was inclined to silence, too, eyes fixed thoughtfully out of the side window. But when the cab pulled up to the undistinguished entrance to the hotel, his face brightened.

At the door of Room 408, the man said, "You just relax, Mrs. Moody. You'll like my friend. He's a gentleman."

The gentleman was wearing a brocaded houserobe, and smoking a Turkish cigarette. He had made himself at home in Room 408, but the room had an air of sudden arrivals and quick exits. He was seated on the lumpy sofa, using an oblong coffee table as an impromptu desk. There were papers scattered in front of him and he was scrawling something on the top sheet, his tongue poking out of his mouth exploring his upper lip.

He looked up when Ruth and the sunburned man entered, his pale, youngish face suddenly cordial. He finished what he was writing, put down the pen, and invited them inside.

"You must be Ruth Moody," he said pleasantly. "Come sit on the sofa. It's the only comfortable thing in the place." He looked at the other man. "Why don't you fix Mrs. Moody a drink?"

"Sure. What would you like, Mrs. Moody?"

"Could I have some coffee?"

"Certainly," the gentleman said; he nodded to the sunburned man to get it. The man went to a table still cluttered with the remains of a hotel breakfast.

"Now then, Mrs. Moody." The gentleman leaned back and folded his hands over one knee. "Did my friend tell you very much about our plan?"

"No."

"That's just as well. Let me outline it for you."

He put out his cigarette.

"It's very simple," he continued airily, watching the other man place the coffee before her. "We happen to know that you're a kleptomaniac, Mrs. Moody. Now, now. Don't get upset over it. Both my friend and I are aware that doesn't make you a criminal. We respect your illness. Don't we?"

The sunburned man nodded.

"So," the gentleman said, "we'd like to make you a little offer. We hope you won't refuse, because if you do—"

"I told her, Harry."

"Good. Then I needn't go into that part. But the important thing I want you to remember, Mrs. Moody, is that no matter what happens,

you're safe. Do you understand that? You can't be arrested for what we want you to do."

She gasped. "Arrested?"

"Yes. You see, legally, you're not liable for your little thefts. Surely, you've found that out already. You steal because you *have* to; no other reason. If you're caught—well, you merely return what's been stolen, and that's that."

"I don't understand this." Her voice was going shrill, and she fought to control it.

"Please. Let me explain. We know that you've been picked up three times."

She sipped the luke-warm coffee, her arm trembling as she raised the cup.

"This means that you're already a recognized klepto, Mrs. Moody. The stores and the police know all about you. If you were caught stealing something else—something, shall I say, a little more valuable than spools of thread . . ."

Her eyes widened, and the other man chuckled.

"I think you see our point now, Mrs. Moody. Now let me explain our plan in detail."

He picked up a sheet of paper from the coffee table.

"Here is exactly what you have to do. At twelve-fifteen tomorrow afternoon, you're to enter a shop called Travells, on Forty-seventh Street. You may not know the place; it's a rather *soignée* jewelers, not exactly Tiffany's perhaps, but well-recognized in its own right. You are to approach a certain counter, which I will diagram for you, and engage the attention of the salesman. You will ask to see a certain tray—I'll designate that, too—and then, a moment or so after you are examining that tray, there will be a disturbance in the store."

The short man laughed, with much enjoyment.

The gentleman went on: "It's ten to one the salesman will leave you alone with the tray since the disturbance will occur nearby. In any event, his attention will be drawn away from the business in hand long enough for you to take the pin without his noticing. In either case, you'll merely pick up the diamond sparkler on the upper right hand corner and walk out the door. Simple as that."

Ruth Moody's skin went damp and cold.

"You needn't run, you understand. Merely walk out the door. As you come outside, you will see a man with a yellow cannister, collecting funds for Children's Welfare. You just drop the diamond pin in the opening on top of the cannister, and walk to the corner. There will be a taxi waiting there; it's a hack stand. You will get in, and give him your home address." He leaned back and smiled. "And that's all there is to it."

She couldn't say anything. She looked towards the door, and then

the window, aimlessly. She picked up the coffee cup but the liquid was cold and tasteless.

"I can't do it," she whispered. "I can't do such a thing."

"As I said before," the gentleman said smoothly, "you're safe—you have absolutely nothing to lose, Mrs. Moody. If you're stopped before you reach the exit, simply give yourself up. When Travells learns of your—idiosyncrasy, no harm will come to you. You know that. It'll be just another—medical incident. And that's all."

"I couldn't! I wouldn't have the nerve."

The gentleman smiled again. "Nerve, Mrs. Moody? Now, really!"

He looked at the short man.

"Where did you say Mr. Moody worked?"

Grinning, the sunburned man reached into his coat.

Ruth said, "All right. Tell me exactly what I have to do."

The facade of Travells was fastidiously designed, but unpretentious. One gem per window seemed to be the limit, but each needed no expert's eye or jeweler's loupe to proclaim its value. Ruth Moody, wearing her best dress, her good coat, and her newest hat, walked through the front entrance and felt like the thief she was going to be.

She recognized the store layout quickly from the comprehensive sketch the gentleman had shown her the day before. Some fifteen to twenty counters, each under the stewardship of a genteel salesman in a dark suit and silvery gray tie; a ceiling that rivaled a cathedral's, with a reverent hush to match. About a dozen people were paying their respects to the gems in various showcases.

Ruth went to the counter that had been described to her. The salesman bowed slightly as he asked if he might be of service.

God help me, Ruth whispered to herself. "This tray," she said softly, supporting her nervous body with both hands against the counter. "The one on the second shelf. May I see it, please?"

"Certainly, Madam!" He reacted as if her taste were remarkable. He unlocked the rear of the case, and produced a velvety tray that flashed brilliant, blinding stars in her eyes.

"Some of the loveliest stones in our collection," the man said enthusiastically. "Did you have anything in particular in mind?"

"I'm not sure." Her eyes went to the spectacular sparkler on the top row. *What's going to happen now?* she asked herself.

The answer came almost immediately. Not ten feet from where she stood, a gentleman in a topcoat with a velvet collar, and a homburg with a pearl-gray band, suddenly cried out some word that might have been "Heavens!" But his cry was lost in the unnerving sound—terrifying, in this place—of smashing glass. She saw the

salesman's face whiten by shades when the noise came.

The gentleman in the homburg had been carrying an umbrella, with a heavy metal handle. He had swung it about, far too carelessly, and the motion had smashed the glass.

"Excuse me—!"

The salesman paused a split-instant as if to take up the tray, then he rushed to the scene. Ruth heard the commotion and it was five precious seconds after he had gone that she recalled what she had to do. Her hand darted out and closed around the huge diamond pin in the upper right-hand corner of the tray. She slipped the gem into her coat pocket and began the long walk to the exit.

It was only some fifteen yards, but she was exhausted by the time the door swung behind her. The street was bright with sunshine, and the people were walking briskly by. There was laughter, and the click of heels, and many normal, everyday noises to give her renewed confidence. But she was frightened. When she saw the familiar sunburned face, and heard the jingle of coins in a cannister, she was actually grateful.

"Help the Children's Fund, lady?" He grinned at her.

"Yes," Ruth said dreamily. "Yes, of course." She deposited her contribution.

"There's a cab on the corner," the man said quietly, shaking the can. "Go home, Mrs. Moody."

"Yes," Ruth said.

As he turned to go, in the other direction, she saw an elderly lady drop a quarter in the cannister, and the sunburned face beamed with gratitude.

She got into the taxi but couldn't remember her own address until they were halfway up the street.

When Ralph Moody returned home that night, he found his wife in tears.

"Honey! What is it? What's wrong?"

"Oh, Ralph—"

His face darkened. "It happened again? Is that it?"

She moved her head, miserably.

"What was it this time?" he said, trying to keep the anger out of his voice. "What did you take?"

"Travells," she sobbed.

"What?"

"Travells. The jeweler's—"

"No, Ruth, Not *jewelry*—"

"You don't understand. I didn't *take* it. I *stole* it, Ralph. Don't you see? I *stole* something—"

After a while, when his anger subsided, gentle persuasion drew the whole story from her.

"I was so frightened," she said. "I didn't know what to do." She clutched his sleeve. "Ralph, I'm going to do what you and mother suggest. I'm going to see a doctor."

"Maybe it's too late for a cure," he replied. "This isn't a spool of thread or a handbag you took, Ruth. This is something valuable—God only knows *how* valuable."

"But they forced me to do it! They blackmailed me into it!"

"Is that what we're going to tell the police?"

"Police?"

"Of course. We have to call them, Ruth. Don't you see that?"

"Why? Why must we?"

"Because it's dangerous not to. If you were recognized—if that salesman can give your description—then things will look worse than they really are. Don't you see that? We must call them!"

As he dialed the operator Ruth said: "But, Ralph—what if they don't believe me?"

Captain Samuel Wright, a graying, intelligent policeman, wasn't that incredulous. But his words of advice weren't encouraging when Ruth Moody told her story.

"Listen, Mrs. Moody. If you're holding anything back, don't. I'm not saying your story is a phony. My own subtle viewpoint is it's too cockeyed to be phony. But I could be wrong, dead wrong. Now, if you could *identify* those men—"

Ruth's husband said hotly, "Why should she lie about this? What does she have to gain?"

The Captain shook his head. "Uh-uh. That's no argument. She *could* stand to gain a diamond, a diamond worth maybe eight to ten grand. She could be double-crossing her accomplices. She could have figured that she had been spotted in Travells, so she's playing it safe with this screwy story." He held up a hand. "I don't say that's what's happened. But I don't sit on the judge's bench, Mr. Moody. I'm a policeman."

"But it's true," Ruth said plaintively. "So help me, it's the truth."

"It's a heck of a way to pull a robbery, though. You'll have to admit that. How many people are going to believe it your way?" He lifted his wide shoulders in a gesture of doubt.

He paced the floor a moment.

"If you could only give me a better description. Except for one being sunburned, we got nothing to work with, really. You say they looked 'ordinary.'"

"But you checked that hotel, you know they were in that room."

"We only know *somebody* took the room, Mrs. Moody. Somebody

who signed the register as a Mr. Fred Johnson, from Cleveland. We got no way of knowing whether it's an alias or not, now that the guy's checked out."

"But doesn't that prove—"

"It doesn't prove a thing. They might have colored their hair, changed their appearance. The sunburn for instance—that's not going to last too long." He chewed his lip.

Ralph snapped his fingers. "The thousand dollars! They promised to mail Ruth a thousand dollars if she played along. Wouldn't that prove at least that my wife's innocent?"

"Don't count on that thousand dollars, Mr. Moody. If your wife's telling the truth, you'll never hear a peep out of those guys again."

The Captain sat down, his face strained. "Okay! So maybe you're right. So maybe it's a new dodge. Maybe those guys can pull these 'safe' robberies of theirs all over the place. Maybe one of them works in a department store, and has access to the names of recognized kleptos—"

"Couldn't we check the stores? Identify the employees?"

"You know how many people work in those places? You're asking for an awful lot, Mr. Moody."

The tears were coming again and Ruth reached for her purse and a tissue. She applied the corner of it to her damp eyes.

Something inside her purse caught her attention as she was about to shut it.

She took the object out and stared at it. Then she turned it on its side and studied it again.

When she looked up once more her eyes were bright and miraculously dry.

"Captain!—"

"Yes, Mrs. Moody?"

"You need better information. Would the name of the man in the hotel room help?"

"His *name*?" The Captain put his hands on his hips. "Are you kidding? You can really tell me his *name*?"

"I can. I can!" Ruth said. Then she started to laugh. The sound of it frightened her husband until he realized that it was genuine, honest mirth.

"Here," she said, handing him the object from her purse. "I don't know why I did—but I did. I took it from that hotel room yesterday."

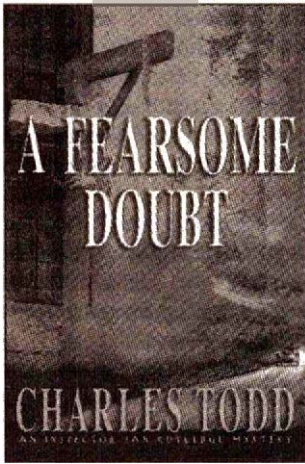
The Captain turned the object over in his hand. It was a fairly high-priced fountain pen, gold, with a black cap. He peered closely at the gold letters engraved on the side: *Harrison V. Moyer*.

He grinned at Ruth, and went to the telephone. He used the end of the pen to dial headquarters. □

BOOKED & PRINTED

Robert C. Hahn

Three very successful American writers are enjoying their best success by writing British mysteries. Charles Todd, Laurie R. King, and Elizabeth George are Americans whose primary residences remain in America while their mysteries set in England continue to win high praise and wide readership in both countries.



Charles Todd's series featuring Inspector Ian Rutledge of Scotland Yard combines well-plotted mysteries with a fascinating examination of the inner turmoil of its hero and the aftereffects of World War I on British society.

Rutledge's three years in the trenches—watching men die, leading men to their deaths, killing enemy soldiers, and even worse, executing one of his own—has left him shell-shocked. Rescued from a near catatonic state by a caring doctor, he eventually was able to return to Scotland Yard though he is viewed warily by his superior officer, Chief Superintendent Bowles.

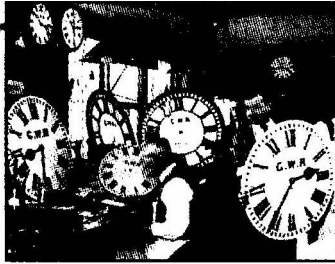
Rutledge remains haunted both literally and figuratively by the war. The literal manifestation is the presence of Hamish Macleod, the Scottish soldier executed by Rutledge. The inspector frequently hears Macleod, commenting, questioning, sneering, and he responds when they are alone. Rutledge feels Macleod as an almost physical presence. It is a daring device, but Todd makes it work. The closeness of the comrades coupled with the trauma of the war and the final bond forged by the execution makes it believable that memories of Hamish would continue to visit Rutledge.

In his latest case in *A Fearsome Doubt* (Bantam, \$24.95), the sixth in the series, London-based Rutledge has to confront doubts about a murder case from before the war as well as deal with a serial murder case in an outlying village. In a case early in his career, Rutledge had helped convict handyman Ben Shaw of the murders of several elderly women. The case appeared airtight and Shaw was tried, convicted, and executed. Now, his widow confronts Rutledge with a piece of evidence that casts doubt on Shaw's guilt. Simultaneously Rutledge is assigned to investigate a series of deaths in

(continued on page 142)

THE STORY THAT WON

The July/August Mysterious Photograph contest was won by Chris Well of Nashville, Tennessee. Honorable Mentions go to Henry Miller, III of Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania; Alisa Crouch Ballard of Oklahoma City, Oklahoma; Jeff Rutherford of Conway, Massachusetts; Saralyn



bor, Michigan; and Kent Brown of Waukesha, Wisconsin.

Romanishan of Minneapolis, Minnesota; Randall J. Covill of Atkinson, New Hampshire; Thom Johnston of San Francisco, California; B. Jackson of El Cajon, California; Robert Kesling of Ann Arbor, Michigan; and Kent Brown of Waukesha, Wisconsin.

Hulton Archive

TIME FLIES by Chris Well

From the start I knew Chester A. Cobblefield was either just a weird old coot or a criminal mastermind. There really was no middle ground with that guy.

So Lenny brings me an' Jerry in on a gig with this guy Cobblefield, who's got this crazy scheme to end all crazy schemes. Some of the details were lost of me—like I must'a told the guy a half dozen times, "Look, you don't hafta over-compliment things; they get plenty complicated on their own"—but it had something to do with making the Brinks truck run early, making the train run late, and somewhere in there would be this great opportunity for us.

It took a lot of legwork, but we scrambled all over, fiddlin' with the clocks—and Cobblefield rewired 'em to work on his own peculiar schedule.

So everything ran like, well, clockwork. The truck showed up early, the people they was expecting were late, and we hit 'em like there was no tomorrow. It prob'ly would'a worked, too, if we hadn't missed our ride.

Who knew *this* would be the day the buses ran on time?

(continued from page 140)

Kent, where each of the victims was a crippled war veteran and the local police are at a loss.

With his series set in the years just after World War I, there are few forensic tricks that Rutledge can call upon, so the physical evidence of the crimes is of lesser importance. Instead, he must strive to understand the people involved—victims and suspects. Only by unraveling those threads can he understand the crime and then solve it. In the process, Todd reveals a Britain undergoing immense and turbulent changes: the landed class has been decimated by the war and by new taxes which are forcing many to sell their estates to the nouveau riche. The working class has been equally decimated, and the fate of the families that lost breadwinners during the war or who must cope with crippled veterans is dire indeed. Todd is a skillful and sensitive writer able to limn characters quickly and convincingly and Ian Rutledge is a unique and uniquely compelling sleuth.

In a half dozen books—the latest of which is **Justice Hall** (Bantam, \$23.95)—Laurie R. King has not only created a very memorable sleuth but has also recreated the world's most famous detective in remarkable fashion. King introduced teenaged Mary Russell in *The Beekeeper's Apprentice* in 1994 and she went on to become not merely the "apprentice" but ultimately comrade and partner to the great Sherlock Holmes.

King resists the notion that her novels are Sherlockian pastiches, preferring to have them stand on their own (very considerable) merits as Mary Russell novels. In the series one watches her grow from bright, troubled teen to assured young woman to formidable and implacable sleuth.

And Sherlock? The great detective is in semi-retirement when first met, but Russell has a rejuvenating and transforming effect on him. King has taken Holmes from where Arthur Conan Doyle abandoned him and led him from the Victorian period into the post-World War I era in absolutely brilliant fashion.

In *Justice Hall*, Russell and Holmes come to the assistance of colleagues met in a previous novel under very different circumstances. The result is a fine mystery set in one of those grand old English country houses, but one that like Charles Todd's books deals seriously with the aftereffects of the Great War.

King often builds her mysteries around profound or weighty issues and in *Justice Hall* she seamlessly incorporates the legacy of the battlefield executions of British soldiers for desertion or cowardice. The sheer number of such executions—often conducted without meaningful defense—is still shocking.

I, Richard (Bantam, \$25.95) is Elizabeth George's first collection

of short stories published in this country, and it is a collection that should pique the interest of writers and readers alike. The five stories include introductions detailing how the story was conceived and written.

"Exposure" was originally published in *Sisters in Crime, Vol. 2* and was her first published crime fiction short story. Her dissatisfaction with it led to this rewritten version. This is the only story featuring Thomas Lynley, but it is a fine piece of pure detection.

In her novels, George thrives on the leisurely development of relationships and the entertaining interplay of the cast. Here she proves equally adept at pulling off a clever twist ("The Surprise of His Life") or beguiling the reader with the warped reality of "Good Fences Aren't Always Enough." In "Remember, I'll Always Love You," the unexpected death of her young husband is only the first shock as a widow discovers a web of deceit that has a surprising well-spring. In the title story, George takes an oblique approach to answering the question of Richard III and the death of the princes in the tower. George couches her theory around an entertaining story of a historian and tour guide of Bosworth Field who sees his route to fame and fortune leading through the bed of a friend's wife.

Elizabeth George's fine ensemble series featuring Thomas Lynley and Barbara Havers combines elements of police procedurals with features of a superior kind of soap opera. In eleven novels beginning with 1988's *A Great Deliverance*, George has combined suspenseful mysteries with a cast of characters whose growth and evolution is avidly followed by devoted fans.

And in a first for American writers who use English settings, George's Inspector Lynley novels have recently been adapted for Public Television's *Mystery!* series.

Robert C. Hahn has been an avid reader of mysteries for decades and has reviewed hundreds of mysteries for Publishers Weekly during the past six years. Prior to that he was book editor for the Cincinnati Post and has been a contributing reviewer to a number of print and online services. He is currently head librarian for the Cincinnati Post.

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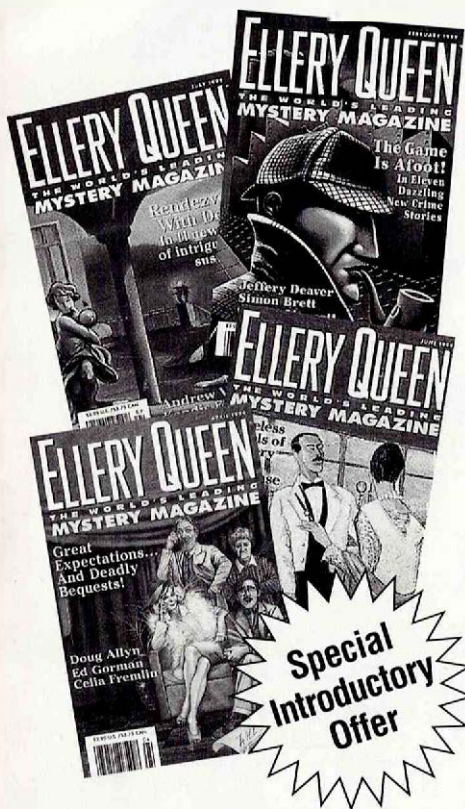
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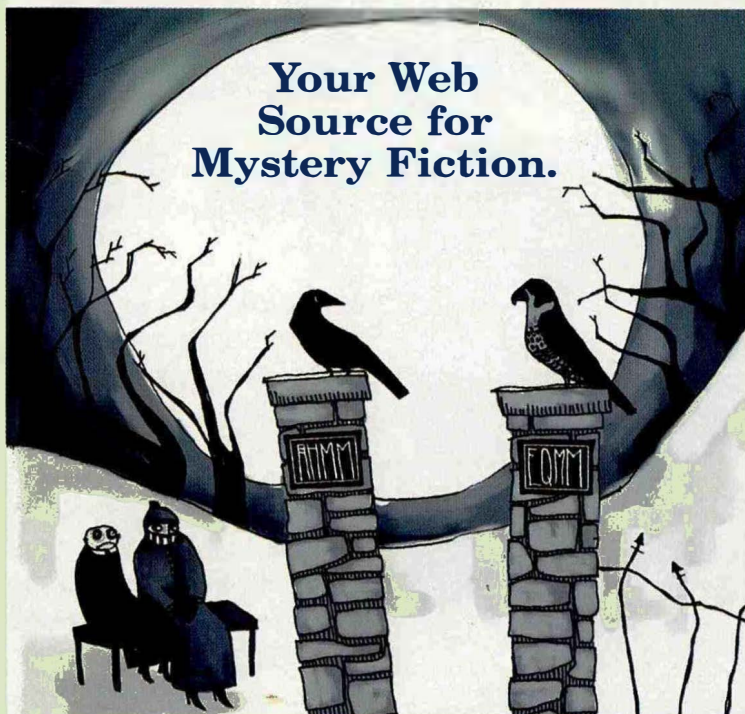
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