

ALFRED HITCHCOCK'S Mystery MAY 2003 MAGAZINE

The Case of the Breathless Martian

A curious puzzle for
Sheriff Huck Finn...

BY JOE HELGERSON

\$3.50 U.S. / \$4.95 CAN.



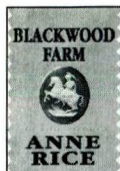
**AHMM's First
Humor Issue
— It Kills!**

ALFRED HITCHCOCK'S MYSTERY MAGAZINE

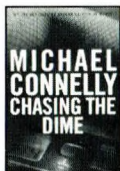
MAY 2003

MYSTERY®

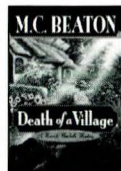
G · U · I · L · D



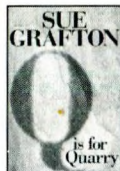
8367* \$26.05 20¢



8839 \$25.05 20¢



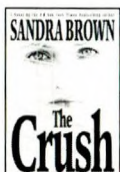
0034 \$23.05 20¢



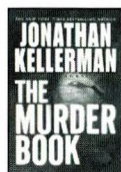
7179* \$26.05 20¢



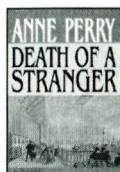
8672* \$26.05 20¢



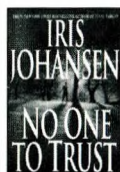
7492* \$26.05 20¢



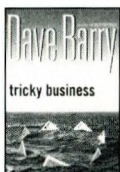
8722* \$26.05 20¢



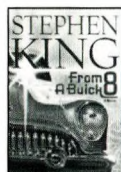
8797 \$25.05 20¢



8169* \$26.05 20¢



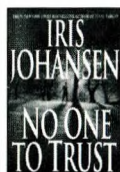
8789 \$24.05 20¢



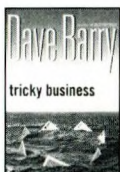
2428 \$28.00 20¢



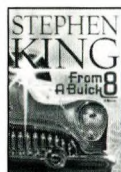
9050 \$26.00 20¢



9092* \$40.00 20¢



8920 \$26.05 20¢



0224* \$27.05 20¢

8169*

8789*

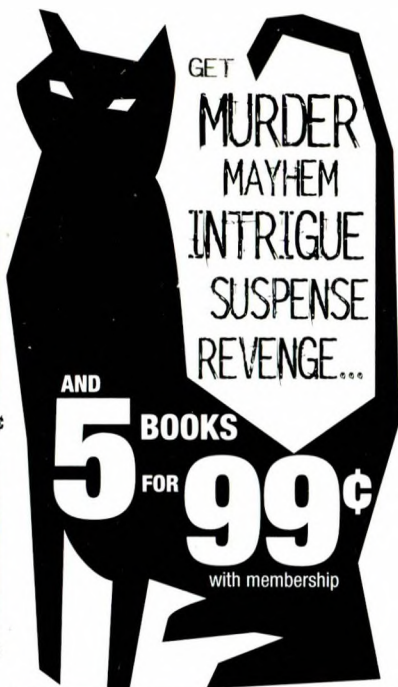
2428*

9050*

9092*

8920*

0224*



Save up to 60% Off every book as a member!

Enjoy these Club benefits: Membership is easy. Just buy 5 books for 99¢. Send no money now. Your 5 selections will arrive along with your bill (including shipping, handling and applicable taxes) when membership is confirmed (unless otherwise notified). You'll also receive your choice of a FREE Umbrella & Tote Set or a FREE 6th Book. **Your satisfaction is guaranteed.** If you're not happy with our introductory books, return them within 10 days *at our expense*. Your membership will be canceled; you'll owe nothing. The FREE GIFT is yours to keep as our "thank you" for trying us. **Save up to 60% off publishers' edition prices.** Every book we offer is a high-quality, full-text edition sometimes altered in size. Just purchase at least 4 more books at regular Club prices within 2 years. (Shipping, handling and applicable taxes are added to each order.) After buying 4 books you may resign at any time or remain a member for as long as you wish. **More savings now!**

Buy an additional book now for just \$4.99, plus shipping, handling and applicable taxes, and reduce your membership agreement to only 3 books. **A FREE Club Magazine** is sent to you up to 19 times a year (about every 3 weeks). Each issue reviews the Main Selections and a variety of alternate books. Some are exclusive Club editions you won't find anywhere else. **Ordering is risk-free.** Main Selections are sent to you automatically. To cancel shipment—or order other books—simply return your Member Reply Form or contact our Web site by the marked date. You'll always have 10 days to decide. If your Member Reply Form is late and unwanted books arrive, you can return them *at our expense* and we'll credit your account. **7. Easy ordering** through the mail or via our Web site.

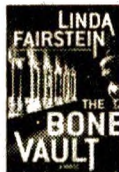
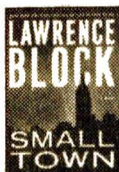
Act now and choose your
FREE GIFT
with membership



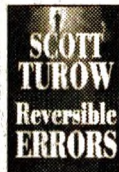
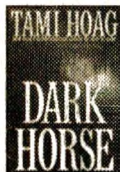
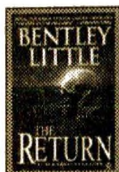
or



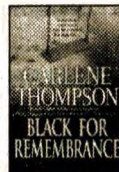
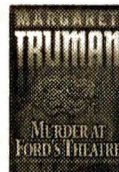
*Explicit scenes and/or language. All prices are current as we go to press. *Mystery Guild*® is a registered trademark of Doubleday Direct, Inc. Used under license. All rights reserved.



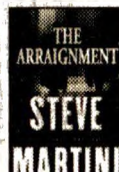
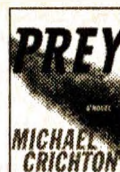
0331* \$24.95 20¢ 0265* \$25.95 20¢ 0323 \$25.95 20¢ 9118* \$25.95 20¢ 8664* \$24.95 20¢



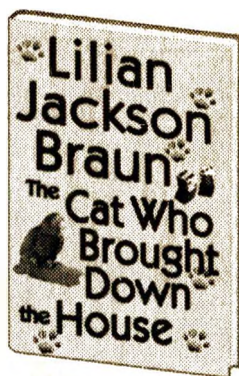
7773* \$40.00 20¢ 8094 \$23.00 20¢ 7187* \$26.95 20¢ 7120* \$26.95 20¢ 7211 \$27.00 20¢



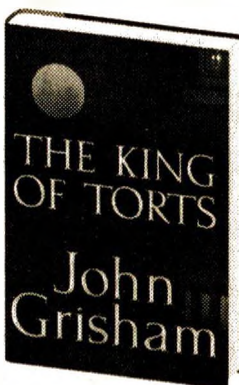
8805* \$27.95 20¢ 8953 \$24.95 20¢ 7559 \$27.95 20¢ 9076* \$40.00 20¢ 8979* \$25.00 20¢



8904 \$23.95 20¢ 2246 \$24.00 20¢ 9019* \$26.95 20¢ 9084* \$24.95 20¢ 9100 \$25.95 20¢



9027 \$23.95 20¢



9043 \$27.95 20¢

Find an even larger selection at www.JoinMysteryGuild.com or AOL Keyword: Mystery Guild—enter the online code.

Z274 AHC 5/1/03



MAIL TO: Mystery Guild, 6550 East 30th Street, P.O. Box 6362, Indianapolis, IN 46206-6362

Choose your FREE GIFT with membership

Please write book numbers here:

| | | | | |
|--|--|--|--|--|
| | | | | |
| | | | | |
| | | | | |
| | | | | |
| | | | | |
| | | | | |



YES! Please enroll me in Mystery Guild according to the risk-free membership plan described in this ad. Send me the 5 BOOKS I've indicated. I'm sending no money now. Bill me just 99¢, plus shipping, handling and applicable taxes. Also send the FREE GIFT of my choice. I agree to buy 4 more books in the next 2 years.

Mr./Mrs. Miss/Ms. _____ (please print)

Address _____ Apt. _____

City _____

State _____ ZIP _____

Home telephone, please: (____) _____

Please sign (if under 18, parent must sign) _____

Sales tax added where applicable. Membership accepted in U.S.A. only. Membership subject to approval.

08 ### ## 20 21 HT051 ← Online Code

Choose your FREE BONUS GIFT here:

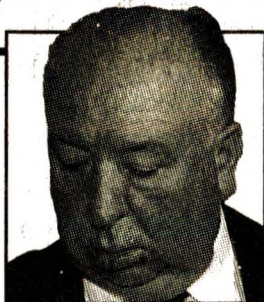
- FREE Umbrella Tote (#9977) OR FREE 6th Book

Please write book number here: _____

SAVE MORE NOW! Send me this book now and reduce my commitment to 3 books. Bill me an added \$4.99, plus shipping and handling.

Please write book number here: _____

CONTENTS



SHORT STORIES

- COMIC** by Gary Alexander **6**
THE CYCLEPATH OF MORTIMER DRIVE
by Debbie Moon **18**
THE CASE OF THE BREATHLESS MARTIAN
by Joe Helgerson **27**
BE LUCKY by Mat Coward **58**
A. J. RAFFLES: THE MAHARAJA'S JEWELS
by John Hall **74**
THE BIG BAILOUT by R. T. Lawton **90**
MORE DEADLY TO GIVE by B. K. Stevens **101**

MYSTERY CLASSIC

- THE FAMOUS GILSON BEQUEST** by Ambrose Bierce **132**

DEPARTMENTS

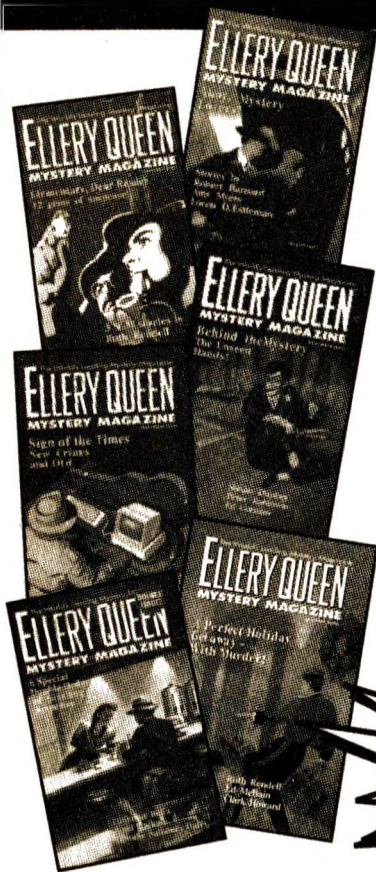
- EDITOR'S NOTES** **4**
THE MYSTERIOUS PHOTOGRAPH **73**
UNSOLVED by Robert Kesling **88**
SOLUTION TO THE APRIL "UNSOLVED" **131**
BOOKED & PRINTED by Robert C. Hahn **140**
THE STORY THAT WON **143**

ALFRED HITCHCOCK'S MYSTERY MAGAZINE (USPS:523-590, ISSN:0002-5224), Vol. 48, No. 5, May, 2003. Published monthly except for a July/August double issue by Dell Magazines, a division of Crosstown Publications. Annual subscription \$39.97 in the U.S.A. and possessions, \$49.97 elsewhere, payable in advance in U.S. funds (GST included in Canada). Subscription orders and correspondence regarding subscriptions should be sent to P.O. Box 54011, Boulder, CO 80322-4011. **Or, to subscribe, call 1-800-333-3311, ext. 4000.** Editorial Offices: 475 Park Avenue South, New York, NY 10016. Executive Offices: 6 Prowitt Street, Norwalk, CT 06855. Periodical postage paid at Norwalk, CT, and additional mailing offices. Canadian postage paid at Montreal, Quebec, Canada Post International Publications Mail, Product Sales Agreement No. 260665. © 2003 by Dell Magazines, a division of Crosstown Publications, all rights reserved. The stories in this magazine are all fictitious, and any resemblance between the characters in them and actual persons is completely coincidental. Reproduction or use, in any manner, of editorial or pictorial content without express written permission is prohibited. Submissions must be accompanied by a self-addressed, stamped envelope. The Publisher assumes no responsibility for unsolicited manuscripts. **POSTMASTER: Send Change of Address to Alfred Hitchcock's Mystery Magazine, P.O. Box 54625, Boulder, CO 80328-4625. In Canada return to Transcontinental Sub. Dept., 525 Louis Pasteur, Boucherville, Quebec, J4B 8E7. GST #R123054108.**

Printed in Canada

Cover by Janet Atkinson

6 Issues, Just \$9.97!



Subscribe today to *Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine* and you'll get every intriguing issue delivered directly to your door.

Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine leads the genre in critical acclaim with more than 50 major awards and nominations just since 1990! With suspenseful stories from the honor roll of mystery and crime fiction's great writers PLUS mystery limericks, poems and cartoons, book reviews, and an occasional mystery crossword!

SAVE 40%!

To order by charge card, call toll-free:

1-800-333-3311

Outside the U.S.A.: 1-850-682-7644



**Ellery Queen, P.O. Box 54052,
Boulder CO, 80322-4052**

Please allow 4 to 6 weeks for delivery of your first issue. Outside U.S.A.: Add \$4 per year for shipping and handling. All orders must be paid in U.S. funds. *We publish a double issue once a year which counts as two issues toward your subscription.

5E10

EDITOR'S NOTES

Linda Landrigan

I'll never understand why the standard response to a good pun is a loud groan. It's been my observation, however, that mystery readers are a little more appreciative of an arresting turn of phrase. You're likely to find plenty of evidence of wordplay just browsing the shelves of a mystery bookstore—on my shelves are *The Canceled Czech* by Lawrence Sanders and *The Marine Corpse* by William G. Tapply, to name a few.

Murder is a grim affair, but mystery fiction has a vibrant tradition of macabre humor. We have decided to celebrate that tradition in a special humor issue—just in time for April Fools' Day. Puzzles, puns, and a heavy dose of irony come together to

make light of the rogues and murderers—the usual suspects to whom we turn for escape and entertainment.

Each of the May authors is familiar to AHMM's regular readers, although Debbie Moon's previous story was published under the pseudonym Ceri Jordan. You may remember that her story "Rough Justice" (July/August) won the Shamus award for Best P.I. Short Story of 2001. Ms. Moon is a screenwriter based in Wales.

Mat Coward and John Hall also hail from the U.K. Mr. Coward has just published *Do the World a Favor and Other Stories* with Five Star, which will also publish his third novel, *Over and Under*, featuring Constable Frank Mitchell and Detective

LINDA LANDRIGAN, Editor

JONAS ENO-VAN FLEET, Assistant Editor

SUSAN KENDRIOSKI, Executive Director, Art and Production

VICTORIA GREEN, Senior Art Director

JUNE LEVINE, Associate Art Director

CAROLE DIXON, Senior Production Manager

ABIGAIL BROWNING, Manager, Subsidiary Rights and Marketing

BRUCE W. SHERBOW, Vice President, Sales and Marketing

SANDY MARLOWE, Circulation Services

JULIA MCEVOY, Manager, Advertising Sales

CONNIE GOON, Advertising Sales Coordinator

Advertising Representatives:

David Geller Publishers' Rep. (212) 455-0100 (Display Advertising)

PETER KANTER, Publisher

Visit us online at www.themysteryplace.com.

Inspector Don Packham, a duo reviewers have likened to Lewis and Morse. Meanwhile, World-wide Mystery will publish the paperback of the second novel in that series, *In and Out*, in May of this year.

Mr. Hall and his versions of A. J. Raffles and Bunny Manders make their second appearance in the pages of AHMM this month. Mr. Hall is a Sherlock Holmes aficionado—he has been the co-president of “The Northern Musgraves” Sherlock Holmes Society and has also written several Holmes pastiches. Raffles and Bunny, the gentleman thief and his biographer—in many ways opposites of Holmes and Watson—were created by Arthur Conan Doyle’s brother-in-law, E. W. Hornung.

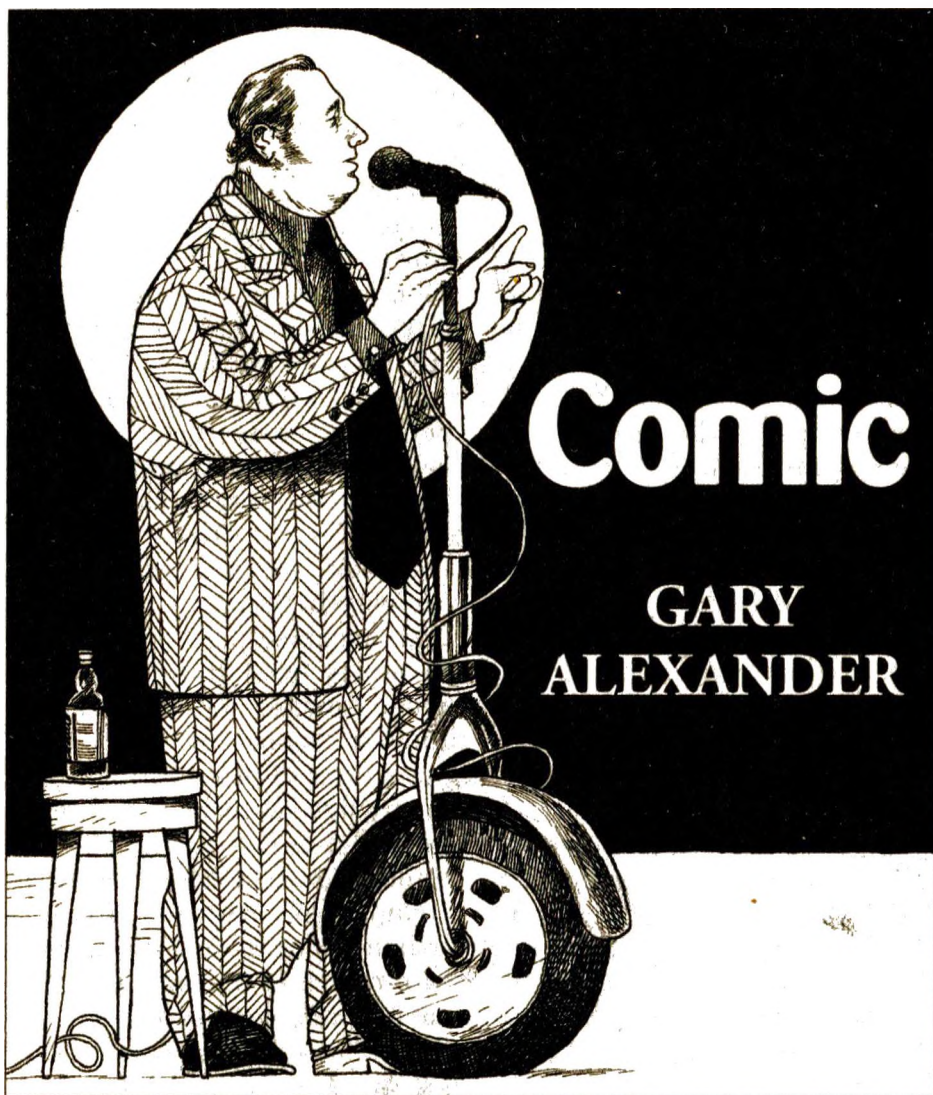
Stateside, Gary Alexander has written more than fifty stories for AHMM in the past twenty-three years. His Luongan Superintendent Bansan Kiet series is a particular favorite. If you like Buster Hightower, the standup comedian in Mr. Alexander’s newest story, well, the author promises more to come.

Joe Helgerson’s story “The

Case of the Breathless Martian” is based on the “1903 case files (all fictional) of one Sheriff Huck Finn, late of Marquis, Iowa, which is just a little north of Hannibal, Missouri,” he tells us. His previous Sheriff Huck Finn story, “The Case of the Floating Pearl Buyer,” appeared in AHMM last June. “I grew up on the Mississippi River and as a youth I fished, camped, and pollywogged for clams on the river, but I never found a pearl.” His novels include *Slow Burn* (1987) and three medical thrillers written under the name of Jo Bailey.

Meanwhile, a new Twin Brothers Bail Bond story by R. T. Lawton showcases the smooth moves of sharp-eyed proprietor Cletis Johnston and his faithful assistant Theodore Oscar Alan Dewey in “The Big Bailout.” And in “More Deadly to Give,” B. K. Stevens offers a sendup of academic fundrasing in a new tale featuring Professor Woodhouse, her private eye daughter, Iphegenia, and Iphegenia’s assistant and narrator, Harriet Russo.

We are considering making the humor issue an annual event. Let us know if you enjoy it.



Comic

GARY
ALEXANDER

“How come,” Buster Hightower said, sweating, bug-eyed, pausing to make quote marks with his fingers, “how come you gotta ‘allow four to six weeks for delivery?”

Chuckling and tittering. Knowing nods. A small but tuned-in house. Nobody heckling, nobody dozing off.

“I mean, you’re calling some 1-800 number, ordering Elvis’s

greatest hits, your choice of cassette or CD, or this miracle kitchen gadget that’ll julienne a Ford Expedition or that torture machine guaranteed or your money back—yeah, right!—to give you abs of iron, and they ask for your credit card number, which you give ‘em, and you know what happens? They ding your card at the *speed of light* is what happens.”

A smattering of horselaughs

fueled him. Buster was screaming now and the audience responded. This was the final number of his set. Buster came on strong in the homestretch as his energy built, but he'd never developed the knack of hooking them out of the gate.

"Next time you just gotta have that gen-u-ine cubic zirconia anklet and you grab for the phone, I'll tell you what you say. You say, okay, get the damn thing to me before I hang up, then allow four to six weeks for my credit card number.

"Hey, you guys, you been great. Before I dismiss class, I'm giving you a homework assignment. How come aluminum foil's shiny on one side and dull on the other?"

He waved the mike and hoisted his beer bottle in toast. Nineteen people altogether, but hey, they were putting their hands together for Buster Hightower, some even up on their feet.

Backstage, Mike, manager of Snickertown Comedy Club, was waiting with—uh-oh—a sourpuss face.

"Whoa, Nellie. I got another week," Buster said.

"Sorry, Buster. What can I say? It's not your fault business is lousy and we're going on hiatus." Mike clapped his shoulders. "Cheer up. We've both been through this before, big fella. You're a trouper. Look me up in the spring."

Buster got his jacket, thinking, Yeah, I've been through it before. A career comic, he had

whistle-stopped from saloon to lounge long before comedy clubs and TV stand-up came into vogue, and now when they were on the wane. A large, shambling, pear-shaped man, Buster Hightower mumbled to himself, "Happy flippin' birthday."

Today was his fiftieth.

He walked out the back door into the parking lot and saw the four round headlights of his old Caddy come on. Buster's 1959 Cadillac fishtailed ahead, rear tires smoking. It slammed to a halt, nose-diving, less than ten feet from its owner. The driver was wearing a Richard Nixon mask, a more lifelike one than the oldies from the 1970's. He turned toward Buster, flashed him twin V signs, then goosed it, bounding onto the street, the undercarriage raising sparks as the two-and-a-half-ton land yacht bottomed out.

"Happy birthday to you, happy birthday, dear Buster," the comic muttered as he lurched back inside to a telephone.

“You left your keys in it?” the investigating patrolman asked incredulously. “At night, in this neighborhood?”

“I forgot, okay? I was late for my set. I’m always running late. Story of my life.”

“You don’t often see a car that old on the street. Can you describe it?”

“Bright red. A 1959 Caddy Eldorado convertible with a white top. Absolutely immaculate. It’s a

mile long and has more chrome than a showroom full of Toyotas and is incredibly gorgeous.”

The police officer recorded Buster’s description of the stolen vehicle as “large red older vehicle” and asked, “You said he had this mask on of who?”

“Richard Milhous Nixon, former president of the United States of America. This was better quality than the plastic ones they wore to demonstrate against him. You know, over Vietnam and stuff.”

The officer stopped writing and stared blankly. “He was president in the old days, huh?”

This public servant’s been shaving for about five minutes, Buster thought. “Long, long ago. Ever hear of Watergate?”

“Oh yeah. Nixon was the peanut farmer.”

Buster sighed and said, “It was like he was waiting for me before he peeled out, like he was making a statement.”

“Sounds personal. Do you have any enemies?”

Buster’s mortality suddenly weighed on him, as if a gorilla had climbed on him piggyback. “Anybody my age has made an enemy or three, son. But nobody recently.”

The young officer sniffed and asked, “Sir, have you been drinking?”

“Of course I’ve been drinking,” Buster said, exasperated. “My audience in the lounge drinks. It’d be impolite of me not to. Please find my car. Believe me, it’ll be easy to spot.”

“You’re a stand-up comic, huh?”

“Guilty.”

“Like Seinfeld?”

“No, not like Seinfeld. Jer’, guys like him and Carlin, they don’t travel to gigs in a ’59 Cad, irregardless how cherry it is. They go first-class air and stretch limo.”

“Say something funny.”

“Would I ask you to catch criminals when you’re off duty? To shoot a crook just to entertain me?”

“C’mon.”

Buster Hightower’s trademark was his ranting and raving, a maniacal outrage over politics and infinitesimally small things. His routine contained neither obscenity nor cruelty. No misogyny, no racism, no bathroom humor. Never had, never would. Consequently, his appeal was seriously curtailed.

“Okay. How come aluminum foil’s shiny on one side and dull on the other?”

The officer glanced up from his clipboard. “That’s funny?”

Carla Chance’s apartment contained so many black balloons, it looked like it had the bubonic plague. Carla had cooked Buster his favorite dinner—prime rib and baked potato, hold the veggies—and stocked his favorite beer—anything cold. But Buster Hightower was not in a celebratory mood.

“Quit your ranting and raving,” Carla said, covering her ears. “That’s not gonna get your hunka junk back for you.”

“Not junk, a treasure,” Buster said, quieter but still pacing.

“Just cuz you can’t insure it. You who write policies on kamikaze pilots and axe murderers. Group life on the Seventh Cavalry, hull coverage on the *Titanic*.”

“How many times, Buster, do I have to tell you, it’s mainly you, not the jalopy? All your tickets.”

“What? I’m the only guy on the road with a lead foot?”

Carla Chance was an insurance broker, owner of the aptly named Last Chance Insurance Agency. They’d met at her office. He’d gone to seek an auto policy. Coverage was denied, but his request for a date was not.

“You’re uninsurable, Buster. How many times I gotta repeat this? You have the world’s worst driving record and your car’s older than Methuselah.”

“The cop’s right. It has to be personal. The perp took my favorite possession in the whole wide world and rubbed my nose in it.”

Carla pouted. “You said I was.”

“Yeah. And you said ‘possession’ was sexist and chauvinistic. You threatened to knock me flat on my oink-oink butt.”

“I was teasing.”

“Teasing with a clenched fist.”

Carla Chance was Rubenesque. Two years older than Buster and one inch shorter, she dressed tightly in primary colors. They made a noticeable couple.

She asked, “So what’s with the Nixon angle? Somebody find out you didn’t vote for him?”

“Impossible. I’ve never voted.”

“You sliced and diced him in a routine once upon a time?”

“*Everybody* did Tricky Dick

with the gloves off, but that was a kazillion years ago. I got a soft spot in my heart for Watergate. I ever mention that?”

“Only six hundred and twelve times. And the soft spot’s in your skull.”

“June 17, 1972. Saturday night. The break-in coincided with opening night of my first gig. A Holiday Inn in Toledo,” Buster continued, unhearing. “I was solo then. I played that joint for sixteen weeks and saved up to buy the Caddy Eldo. It was old then. Now it’s collectible, an investment.”

“Somebody’s having fun with you. Maybe your ex-wives, but you never indicated that they had senses of humor.”

“They were grouchy,” Buster agreed.

“Even June?”

June was the first of Buster’s ex’es. He carried a faint, flickering torch for her. Lately, out of the clear blue sky, June had appeared unannounced in his dreams. “Especially June.”

“Well, you’re not exactly a barrel of laughs yourself.”

Buster threw up his hands. “If I was a plumber, you want I should come home from work every night and take apart the flip-pin’ sink?”

“Think. Who’s got it in for you?”

“Nobody. I’m not saying everyone loves Buster, but I can’t think of who disloves me. Without my pride and joy, how am I gonna get to work?”

“You’re unemployed as of tonight, remember?”

“Lucky me.”

"Have I ever said you could get your insurance license and come to work with me?"

"Only six hundred and twelve times."

"Do your bit in living rooms. You're a natural. Have I told you what the commission is on a hundred thousand dollar whole life policy?"

"Yeah, yeah, yeah."

Carla nestled on his lap and fed him beer from his bottle as if he were an infant. "You're also the sweetest guy in the world. So who?"

Buster shrugged. Carla planted a wet kiss on him and trilled, "Oh by the way, happy birthday to you, happy birthday, dear Buster, et cetera, et cetera."

She handed him two envelopes. One was lavender and potently perfumed, obviously containing a greeting card. The other was a plain business envelope with no return address. "Open mine first."

"Thanks, kiddo," Buster said, sniffing Carla's card. "Who else remembered my birthday?"

"Don't know. It was left on the stoop this afternoon like an abandoned baby."

Buster held the mystery envelope up to the light. "How do you tell if it's a letter bomb?"

"We could soak it in the bathtub."

Buster tore open Carla's envelope. "Woo-ee!"

She had purchased the card at an adult book and video store. It made extravagant promises in explicit language.

"Let's see your secret admirer top that."

Buster tentatively removed a folded letter from the envelope. The text was succinct and in the form of words clipped from magazines pasted to plain paper: BE READY TO PAY BIG RANSOM. MESS WITH US AND YOUR CAR WILL BE RETURNED TO YOU A PIECE AT A TIME. WE WILL BE IN CONTACT.

Buster gasped. "You mean like where they chop off an ear and mail it back?"

"Carnappers are a cruel breed," Carla said, somewhat unsympathetically.

"It'd be a tail fin or a slab of chrome, the perverts."

"Don't whimper," Carla said. "This makes no sense."

"This makes no sense," Buster repeated, pacing again. "They knew in advance they were gonna kidna—steal my car. And they obviously know me. They gotta know I'm not exactly rolling in dough."

"Buster," Carla said, looking at him. "They didn't say what the ransom was."

Next morning, Buster dropped Carla off at her insurance office, which was sandwiched between a teriyaki restaurant and a dry cleaner's at a strip mall. He borrowed her car, a Hyundai that would fit into the trunk of his abducted Caddy, and drove to his agent, Smiling Sid Fetlock.

Sid's office was in an old fringe of downtown that nobody in their right mind would ever try to gentrify. The elevator was on the fritz

again, so Buster trudged up three flights of stairs.

No comedian client had ever made Sid smile. Not even a non-client legend like Robin Williams could cause him to break into so much as an ugly smirk. Sid entered entertainment management in the 1950's, supplying carnivals with the world's hairiest, the world's fattest, the world's most tattooed, the world's grossest.

By the time that market died, stand-up was gaining popularity. Then a glut of comedians and stale material flattened demand. As Buster was nervously aware, Smiling Sid had been thinning out his stable of comics. Thanks to the popularity of TV talk, tabloid, and "reality" shows, freak acts had made a comeback, and Sid was a kind of clearinghouse, matching loser to medium. And TV paid much, much better than either carnivals or comedy clubs.

Buster explained his employment plight and the Cadillac-napping to an unsmiling Smiling Sid.

Fetlock was gnomish, had a vampire's complexion, and smoked cigars that were disproportionate to his size. He lit up a bratwurst-like stogie and said, "I'll phone Mike regarding your last check, on account of he's known to come down with amnesia on such matters. The Cadillac, is that that junker you've had like forever?"

"A classic, Sid. A classic."

"Which reminds me, Blinko Potts is back in town."

Blinko.

Blinko and Buster had done a two-man shtick during the Watergate brouhaha, one playing a snarling Senate subcommittee interrogator, the other a weaseling unindicted co-conspirator. They were frisky young pups and had had great fun.

"Aha. Should've known. I learned in high school physics that nature abhors a coincidence."

"What the hell's that mean, Buster? Your set could use fine-tuning, but not necessarily in that direction."

"Maybe nothing. How's the Blinkster doing?"

Sid looked at the ceiling and blew a smoke ring. "You're wondering if he's holding a grudge, you running off with his wife?"

"Crossed my mind."

"Nah. After the shock of that and your act breaking up wore off, he was grateful. He said June was a paranoid schizophrenic manic-depressive with attention deficit disorder, permanent PMS, and the headache she developed on their wedding night never went away. To Blinko it was the principle of the thing."

"Yeah, well, that's our June. It didn't work out for us two kids either. Look, Sid, guy in a Nixon mask swipes my most beloved possession and Blinko just happens to be in town."

"Sincerely, Buster, it wasn't him. Blinko's as mellow as anybody can be."

"Good," said an unconvinced Buster. "Glad to hear it. Haven't

seen him in twenty years. How's he doing?"

Sid fluttered a cadaverous palm. "Same as you. Hit and miss."

"Got a gig for him?"

"I wish. In the good old days, you guys really clicked as a team."

"For me? *Moi?*"

"At a club? Not at the moment. A TV spot's opening up, but I didn't see an acting background in your folder."

"That's cuz there ain't any. What?"

"Playing a guy living in a trailer park who's balling his stepdaughter's half-brother's girlfriend. The money's okay, but you gotta sign a liability waiver if anybody gets carried away and takes a punch at you during taping."

"I thought they were real people, these freaks."

"Some are. But, hey, what's the diff? It's entertainment."

"I'll pass, Sid."

"Yeah, that's what Blinko done, too. I gotta admire your integrity, considering your options. Hey, know any homicidal dwarfs?"

"Excuse me?"

"Need five of them."

"How come?"

Smiling Sid said glumly, "A feature on dwarfs who killed their mothers. Jeez, these producers, they think they grow on trees."

Buster knew where he stood priority-wise with Sid. Don't call me, I'll call you. Anyway, the comic's first priority was the safe return of

his beloved Cadillac. And if it took a reunion with Blinko Potts to establish his involvement in the dastardly deed, so be it.

Sid gave Buster the address of Blinko's motel in a none-too-swanky area on the old highway that got itself jilted by mainstream society when the freeway went in.

Blinko, Buster thought as he wheedled Carla's anemic rice burner through traffic. Blinko and Watergate, they'd been defining moments in Buster's career, such as it was. They'd really clicked together at the beer joints and clubs, and almost made the cut for a "Merv Griffin Show" appearance.

The Watergate hoopla fizzled and so had they. Blinko's wife, June, was along for the ride. Buster was single then and they'd barnstormed in the Eldorado as a threesome. One thing led to another.

Buster knew romance hadn't been the entire cause of his meteoric descent into mediocrity (his wording on stage when he'd sink into self-deprecation). He'd never dazzled on his own and evidently Blinko hadn't either.

A runt with a cowlick, Blinko was Buster's age and a fraction his size. They could play off the Mutt and Jeff bit without saying a word. Buster had often wondered if an important part of their success was them as a living, breathing sight gag.

Buster had stuck with the political angle, maybe too long.

This was the comic's mother lode, and the eighties and nineties were rich with Reaganomics, Iran-Contra, bimbo eruptions, Dan Quayle, Slick Willie. On and on and on.

But it had grown harder and harder to do politics without a toilet mouth. And standing up there by his lonesome, he'd never been able to pull it off, to connect in that intangible combination of joke and timing that doubled them up in laughter. How many zillion times had he wondered what ever happened to the ol' Blinkster?

He turned into a 1930's relic of a motor court, a U-shaped affair of moss and peeling paint. The clientele sported a grand total of three scuzzy vehicles that his Cadillac outweighed combined. Management hadn't turned on the VACANCY sign for so long that the only thing supporting the neon tubing was cobwebs. The young lady outside the office giving Buster the eye was selling something, but not Girl Scout cookies.

A door in the rear was ajar. He'd recognized Blinko's high, squeaky voice from fifty feet away.

"I hate clichés. Hate 'em like the plague. You know—when someone says they know such and such like the 'back of my hand?' Don't lie. We've all done it. But next time you hear it, do this. Snap a picture of the back of their hand. Put it next to some other pictures of backs of hands. How many times outta ten are they gonna match

'em to faces, I ask ya."

He walked in to Blinko rehearsing in front of a mirror.

"That ain't bad," Buster said, clapping. "Not too shabby."

"Buster Hightower, king of the yuksters," Blinko said with a loopy grin and the constant blinking that had christened him Blinko since childhood.

Buster hadn't the foggiest what kind of reception to expect. He wasn't ready for the hug. Just as Buster hadn't gotten petite throughout the years, Blinko seemed to have imploded. The squirt nearly disappeared into his bosom.

"Hey," Buster said uncomfortably. "Sure been a long time."

"Yep. Sure has," Blinko said, breaking the clinch. "A cold one?"

Buster said fine, and they drank warm beer the fridge had tried loudly and unsuccessfully to chill. They small-talked to avoid the bigger issues, how Blinko had drifted in recent years, how Buster was hanging on, too, but had more or less stayed put lately because of Carla.

"Don't know if I could handle the road these days."

"The road, it's tough," Blinko said, nodding and blinking.

"Speaking of the road, what'd you do with my Caddy?"

"It's in a safe place." Blinko fished Buster's keys out of his pocket and tossed them to him. "Didn't need these. I still had mine from the old days."

"Did you know yesterday was my birthday, Blinko?"

"Ah, hell, Buster, I'm sorry. If I'd

remembered, I'd've poached it today or the day before yesterday."

"June and me split the sheets. Not long after, uh, her and me, you know."

Blinko shrugged narrow, sloping shoulders. "No hard feelings. It wasn't working anyhow. The last of the flower children, she was. I hear she swore off whatever it was she smoked and those magic mushrooms you don't find in the stores. She's happily married to an accountant, lives on a cul-de-sac, and is president of the PTA."

"I always knew she'd come to a bad end," Buster said.

"Some gals just don't know when they had it good," Blinko said.

"She never got over you," Buster lied.

Blinko digested Buster's falsehood in silence. They had sipped and fidgeted for a few minutes when Buster finally said, "So, I guess you touched base with Sid? He have anything for you?"

"Nah. I don't have to tell you this town's kinda dead."

"So, Sid called you, or you called Sid?"

"Sid's got jobs for dwarfs with attitudes. At first I thought it was a crack."

Buster let Blinko's evasion of his question ride. "Sid's into TV freak shows. Says the money's fantastic."

"Big bucks," Blinko said. "Makes the world go round."

"Well, Blinko, do I ever see my car or is it payback?"

"No sweat. I figured it'd be as

tough, if not tougher, for you to contact me than for me to contact you. I had to make it—how'd you say?—compelling."

"Compelling's an understatement. The Nixon mask was cute. The ransom note, too."

"A joking situation, those touches seemed natural," Blinko said modestly.

"We never used Trickster masks," Buster said.

"We didn't have to. We didn't need any props."

"I hope you're taking care of my baby, Blinko. You realize how much it's worth?"

"A ragtop of that vintage and condition, the Eldorado being especially prized, sixty grand."

Buster whistled. "That much? How'd you figure?"

"Outta curiosity, I ran it by an appraiser this morning."

"Guy offered me thirty last month, the crook," Buster said. "Sixty?"

"If you were in no hurry, he said you could hold out for sixty-two five."

"I never had it appraised 'cause I can't get insurance and I never planned on selling it. C'mon, Blinko, enough's enough."

"Hey, Buster, why do they say on potato chips 'one or more of the following oils?' Why don't they say which oil? What're they hiding?"

Buster laughed and said, "Hey, Blinko, how come everybody slows down to the speed limit when a cop's writing a ticket? Hell, he's already got a customer."

“Those little envelopes you get in the mail box from the carrier saying he paid fifty cents overdue postage outta his own pocket so you could get your piece of mail? C’mon. Is that a scam or what? Do ten envelopes a day for thirty years and what’s that add up to? Lotsa pocket change, I’ll tell ya.”

“Void where prohibited,” Buster cried. “I mean, what’s void where? They don’t tell you.”

“Just like the old days,” Blinko said, snapping his fingers. “You and me brainstorming. Bam bam bam. Whadduya think?”

“I dunno.”

“You and me team up again on a trial basis. Sid likes the idea.”

Might work, Buster thought. Lord knows their careers were as hot as Neptune’s moons. Although stealing a man’s wife was not as dastardly as stealing his classic set of wheels, Buster was ready to forgive and forget. “Yeah, let’s give it a shot.”

They shook on it.

“Now that you met my ransom demand, we’ll ride to Sid’s in style,” Blinko said.

He directed Buster to a garage four blocks from Smiling Sid Fetlock’s and said, “We’ll idle out front and honk like big shots till Sid comes to the window. He’ll flip.”

“Better that he smiles,” Buster said, parking Carla’s Hyundai on the street and taking the elevator to the fourth level where Blinko had left the car.

“Appreciate you stowing it indoors,” Buster added. “That baby

ain’t partial to droppings of either rain or bird persuasion.”

Blinko’s head swiveled and his blinking accelerated. Bad flippin’ news.

“Where the hell is it?” Buster asked.

“Level Four, I swear. I even wrote down the space on the ticket, like any dummy knows you’re supposed to do.”

“Lemme see the ticket.”

Blinko patted his pockets. “Must’ve laid it on the dashboard.”

Buster was not mean enough to remind Blinko that he’d been the brains of the outfit when they had teamed up. No, he thought further. He recalled that June had been, even when she was hallucinating.

“Swell,” he said. “We gotta scour the floors of this concrete dungeon? Stop and smell the carbon monoxide?”

“I know it was Four,” Blinko said. “The attendant’ll remember seeing it go out.”

They went to the cashier kiosk, to the individual with the power and authority to raise the barrier. He was a headphone-wearing gum snapper who looked to Buster to be twelve years old. The comic feared an attention span of a guava, but, yeah, dude, said the cashier, who could miss the Jolly Red Giant, you could go to war in that tank.

“Watch your language, you whelp,” Buster said pleasantly. “When?”

“He came out at like eleven.”

“What did he look like?”

"Big heavy dude. Had a plastic Halloween mask on."

Buster looked at Blinko, who said, "Guess the mask was on the dash with the ticket."

The cashier said, "You go trick-or-treating wearing that thing, you ain't gonna make out too good."

"You'd be surprised," Buster said.

At the car, he asked, "Who else might have had a key?"

"Older cars are easy to hot-wire," Blinko said. "I may have done one or two myself in my formative years."

Buster cringed at the prospect of mechanical violation. "I'm thinking. Who had a key? June?"

"Could be she forgot to take it off her ring, but she's probably got an alibi, such as baking cookies for the soccer team two time zones from here. That was years ago, too. She's forgotten us. You should be asking yourself who has a key, Buster."

"I am. Nobody."

"I guess you'll be calling the cops?"

He shook his head. "Nah. They already have a report. It ain't exactly a needle in a haystack."

"Thanks, Buster. Stop and smell the carbon monoxide. That's a dandy. We could work it into our set. Except."

"Except?"

"Except it's an odorless and colorless gas, right?"

"Search me."

"So we could substitute partially-burned hydrocarbons."

Buster said they could and pulled away from the curb, wondering if he'd ever see his Caddy and wondering if they should have a name other than Buster and Blinko, or vice versa.

Carla Chance made that call, tagging them the Gold Dust Twins. And she was at a front table in the Westside Bowling Alley and Casino Lounge as the emcee-bartender asked everybody to put their hands together and give the Gold Dust Twins a hearty welcome.

On her feet, clapping and shouting "Bravo," Carla was also thinking that Buster hadn't talked about his floozy ex-wife in his sleep since he and Blinko partnered up. The subconscious fascination with June had been exorcised.

If Buster refused to sell insurance—she could train him and have a million-dollar-seller plaque hanging on the agency wall inside of eighteen months—he might as well be happy and successful in his chosen profession, such as it was. She'd put his ancient Cadillac safely in storage. Buster didn't have a pot or a window and never would. She'd arrange for its miraculous reappearance when he was ready for retirement, whether they remained a couple or not.

The monstrosity would be his nest egg. It would continue to appreciate and Buster wouldn't have to pull into every gas station he passed.

Carla and Smiling Sid Fetlock

shared the table. Sid lit up a mile-long cigar. He'd explained that the Westside wasn't "Saturday Night Live," but it was a start, and the nicotine Nazis hadn't yet invaded the joint.

Sick of hearing "June" mixed with snores, she'd called Sid. He said he was no shrink, but if we could reunite those two boys, bury the hatchet, it would solve a lot of problems. As a team, they were pretty decent stand-up artists. Alone, well, they were out there treading water.

Sid said it hadn't been too difficult to persuade Blinky. He was bitter—the principle of the thing and so forth. Then he passed along Carla's plan. Blinky had never been able to resist a practical joke. Carla imagined grinding gears and peeling rubber from behind the Nixon mask helped purge the ill will from his system.

Carla hadn't told Blinky that she was going to borrow one of Buster's jackets, slip on the Nixon mask, and re-steal the Caddy with a key she'd had made. She had sworn to Buster she would never drive the environment-befouling gunboat, and once was plenty, maneuvering the thing along streets that

were amazingly wide enough.

Blinky had had the good sense to keep his yap shut.

There was just one itty-bitsy little problem. She had left the mask on the dashboard and when she went to retrieve it this afternoon, the '59 Caddy roared out of the storage yard, almost knocking her down, fishtailing, U-turning, coming back to slam on the binders and whip the twin Vs on her. Everybody was a blankety-blank comedian.

She would call some of her law enforcement contacts in the morning, see what they could do. But first things first.

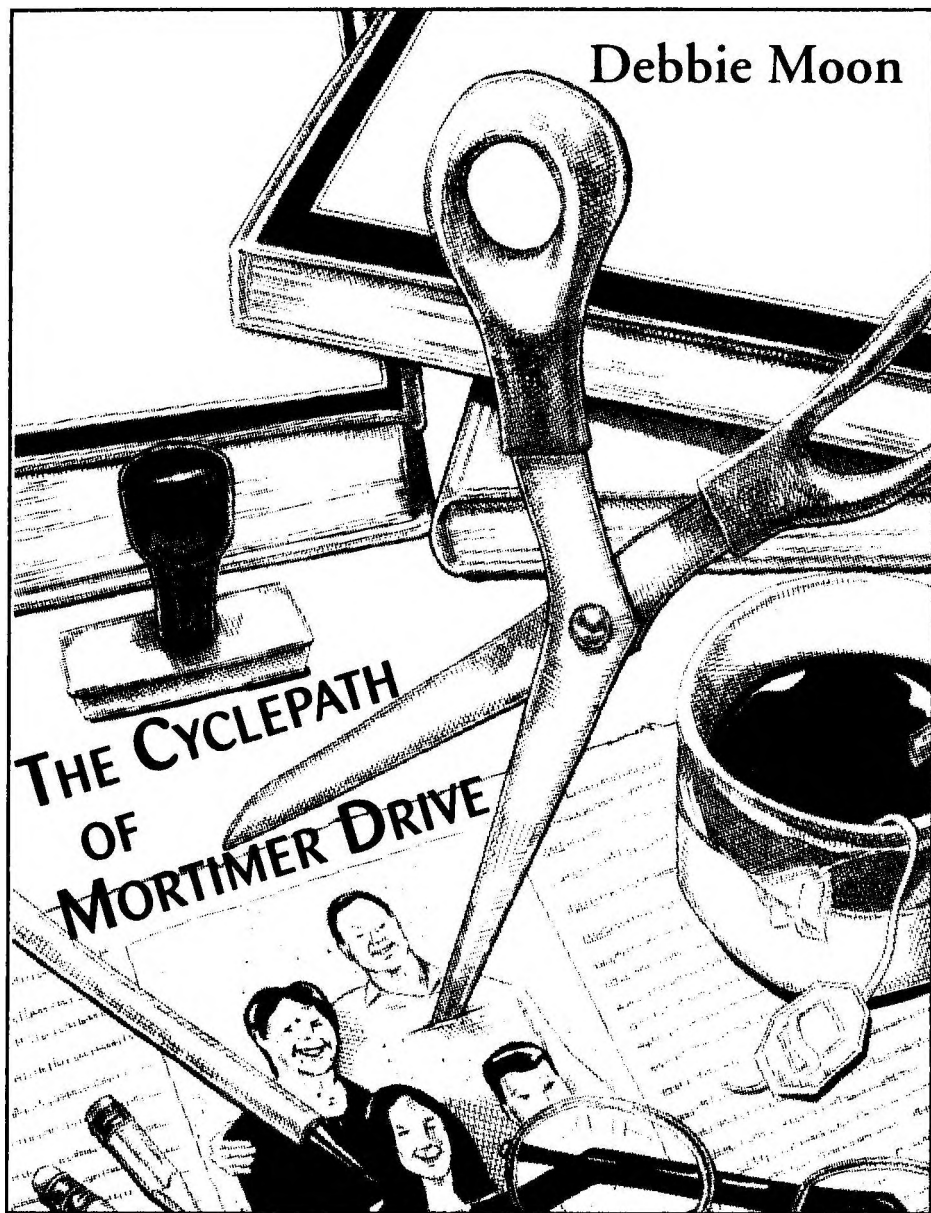
The Gold Dust Twins were playing opposing candidates in a political debate. Their voices were rising, their fingers pointing and jabbing. Just look at them, they were a how!! They were accusing each other of the same lie and of twisting each other's words. Carla knew they were improvising on the spot. A guy at the next table was laughing so hard he was crying.

Carla watched Sid. He was puffing, nodding his approval.

There may or may not have been a slight curl at the corner of his mouth, a suggestion of a smile.

Note to Our Readers: *If you have difficulty finding Alfred Hitchcock's Mystery Magazine at your preferred retailer, we want to help. First, let the store manager know that you want the store to carry this magazine. Then send us a letter or postcard mentioning AHMM and giving us the full name and address of the store. Write to us at: Dell Magazines, Dept. NS, 6 Prowitt St., Norwalk, CT 06855-1220.*

Debbie Moon



The best thing of all is that I'm not sorry. Not one little bit. Oh, well, I'm sorry about the cat. I've always liked cats. And as for what happened at the church picnic, none of that was supposed to happen. Though it certainly made a change from the usual standard of entertainment . . .

Here I am, about to confess to multiple murder, theft, adultery, and criminal misuse of flypapers, and I'm not in the least repentant. Me, Maureen Smith, the inoffensive librarian with the frowsy hairdo and the wardrobe of flowery dresses and cashmere cardigans.

Because that's how they all thought of me, you see. I never knew it at the time, but that's why I managed to wreak so much unintended havoc for so long. Because I was Maureen Smith, dedicated stamp collector and "doesn't she take good care of her poor old mother, what a devoted daughter . . ."

It's a good thing Mother's not here to see all this. The shock would have killed her. If the arsenic biscuits hadn't already done the job. I always told her midnight snacks would be her undoing. I was worried about her falling down the stairs rather than poisoning herself with the contents of the wrong biscuit tin, but I was right all the same . . .

I suppose you'll want me to start at the beginning. That's what they say on these police series, don't they? I prefer romance dramas. Always a sucker for a good sob story. Which is how I got into this mess in the first place.

Donald worked at the day-care center where I took Mother twice a week. I used to drop her off on the way to work, and one of the staff would come out to walk her inside. She always hated that. Being frog-marched, she called it—frog-marched, in her Lady Bracknell voice, as if it were some dreadful offense against her person.

Then one day, it was Donald who came out to fetch her, and everything changed.

He was a dapper-looking man, Donald. Said he'd been in the army. Still wore a little regimental badge or something on his coat. I noticed that straightaway. Well, straight after his neatly slicked-back hair, just a hint of gray, and his lovely, big brown eyes . . .

He was semi-retired now. Gammy leg. Helped out at the day center four days a week, for the money and the company. I only found all this out later. The first couple of times I just sat in the car, looking at his smiling eyes and his big shoulders as he steered Mother down the path, and simpering like a lovesick girl.

I was head over heels in love. After all these years. I flapped around the library all day, letting people off their fines, my heart fluttering like a bird in a cage until four thirty, when I got to go and pick up Mother again. Planning what I was going to say: "Hello, Donald, how has she been today? Well, it's very good of you to take such care of her, you really must let me make it up to you . . ."

No, that wouldn't do at all. How about, "We must have such a lot in common, caring for the elderly . . ."

Even worse. I was obviously going to need some help.

I went out and bought some of those glossy magazines, the sort that are supposed to tell you how to organize your love life. Not a thing in there about how to make advances to your mother's care staff. Wouldn't you have thought that's exactly the sort of thing people really need

to know, especially now that our parents are living longer? But no. Clothes you can't afford and sexual positions that look more like yoga. Nothing useful at all. Though there was an interesting feature on Indonesian cookery . . .

As it happened, I didn't have to worry about it. Everywhere I went after that, Donald just happened to turn up. The shops, the library, even the swimming pool. And the next thing I knew, I was agreeing to meet him for coffee, and then it was lunch, and then dinner . . .

Mother was furious, of course. She'd always had me to herself—I had Gormandsley Stamp Collectors' Club on Wednesday nights, of course, but apart from that, nothing. Next time I dropped her at the center, she swept past Donald without a second glance and went tottering off down the path without him.

He just winked at me, like we were engaged in some wickedly delicious secret. I winked back, and that was when Mother fell into the flower bed and broke her ankle.

Mother was in the hospital for twenty-four hours, and Donald took the rest of the day off to recover from the shock. And that's how we ended up sharing a bottle of wine on the chaise lounge in the sitting room, laughing about the look on Mother's face and refilling each other's glass, and one thing led to another . . .

And there I was. Happy. Blissful. Just waiting for the marriage proposal. Not straightaway, of course. I didn't want to make it look like a condition. A few more weeks, some more meetings—I was going to have to get Mother out of the house more often . . .

And that was when I found out.

It was the way it happened that really annoyed me. By accident. I would never have known Donald was married if it wasn't for the Silver Wedding photo in the celebrations section of the local paper. The one he put in himself.

There was Donald with his arms round some skinny, face-lifted woman with a chest you could have used for an ironing board. There were children, too. Of course. A scowling girl and a boy in a football shirt—late teens, I thought, judging by how embarrassed they looked to be seen in public with their parents.

I sat there for a while, just staring at the photograph. Wondering what on earth I was going to tell Mother. She'd laugh at me either way—if I told her I'd left him, or he'd left me, or if I just told her the truth. I was a failure. I didn't earn enough to get her the nursing care she was convinced she needed, I couldn't take her on expensive holidays like Mrs. Pritchard's daughter did, and I couldn't even get myself a man except for an adulterer.

And then I made my decision.

Donald was going to have to go the way of all flesh. It was per-

fect, you see. Mother need never know there was anything wrong with our relationship. He'd just die, and I'd get her sympathy. I could Interflora myself some cards and bouquets, as if they were from Donald's friends, if I had to. To keep up the pretense. She never read the papers any more; she just sat there squinting at them as if she were, too proud to admit her sight was so bad. So she'd never see the obituary. I could read it out loud to her—with a few subtle adjustments, of course.

All I needed to do now was to find a way to dispose of Donald without getting caught.

There are great advantages to working in a library. For one thing, you can tell people to be quiet whenever you feel like it. One of my primary school teachers used to come in a lot, just after I started working there. I used to take as much pleasure in shushing her as she used to in shushing me all those years before. Shush, Maureen. Be quiet. Be good. Put up with whatever's thrown at you, let everyone else get away with treating you as a doormat, there's a good girl . . .

Well, I wasn't playing that game any more. I was bad Maureen again now. The girl who pulled the other girls' plaits while they were immersed in their arithmetic. The girl who yelled and shouted and played rough games. The girl they'd thought I'd grown out of.

It felt wonderful.

The other advantage of working in a library is that you can borrow books on any subject you like, and no one need ever know.

Once Mother had gone to bed, I opened the bottle of sherry we kept for the visitors we never had, skimmed through the books on famous murders and encyclopedias for crime writers, and started drawing up my plans.

Poison. Now that was a possibility. Unfortunately, everyone who tried it seemed to get caught. All these technical advances, I suppose. Tests and autopsies and all that clever stuff. No, there was no way I could risk that, I was thinking . . .

And then I heard Mother rooting around in the kitchen.

When I went out there, she was standing in her nightgown, rummaging in the fridge for a box of cream doughnuts well past their date that she just refused to allow me to throw away. "I was a little peckish," she said, standing there with cream all down the nice embroidered panel on the nightgown.

"You'll get food poisoning one of these days," I told her.

And that's when I realized. Food poisoning. Happens all the time, doesn't it? And there's no way to prove that an outbreak was started deliberately.

The next day, as I dropped Mother off at the center, I handed Donald a little present. A lunchtime treat, I told him, with my best broad

smile. He looked quite chuffed. It was a decent-looking piece of sponge cake. I'd worked very hard on it. Even iced it. The icing helped to hide the part where I'd laced it with the scrapings from the back of the fridge, after all.

And then I went to work.

The first customer who came to the desk was a nice little old man carrying a copy of *The Toxic Substances Report 1995* and a Delia Smith book on cakes and pastries. I was shaking so much the scanner misread the codes on the book labels and tried to fine him for having them overdue since 1907.

And then the phone rang, telling me to come and pick Mother up early. Half the old dears were in hospital with food poisoning.

I suppose I was lucky that only three of them died. It was "bring and share" day, you see. Mother hadn't told me, so she'd turned up without anything and stomped off to the other lounge to watch "PrimeTime Confessions" on cable TV. I sometimes think that was the only reason she went to the day center. She certainly didn't seem to enjoy the company.

And, as you've probably guessed, Donald hadn't brought anything either. But, very conveniently, he just happened to have this slab of sponge cake with him.

With so much home-cooked food knocked together in so many grubby kitchens and shared out among everyone, they never did find out what had caused the outbreak. Donald never gave any sign of believing that it might have been the cake. Still, I didn't dare try that again.

Time for another plan.

Donald used to park his car on the main road, just across from the day center. It was simplicity itself to slip over there and rummage around underneath it. The most annoying thing was all the men who stopped to try to help me.

"No, thank you, I can manage."

"Really."

"Yes, really."

"Are you sure?"

I was down there a while, breathing exhaust fumes and trying to decide which cable was the brake cable. In the end, I decided to cut them all. It seemed like the best way to be sure.

Then I picked up Mother, dropped her, loudly protesting, at the optician's to have that checkup she'd been refusing for years, and took a stroll along the road, toward the steep downhill slope between the day center and Donald's blissful family home on Galahad Avenue.

And I waited.

He had to come home this way. His address was in the Silver Wedding article, would you believe? He was really quite hopeless at this deception business, Donald, and I think that was what really made me angry. That he thought I was too stupid ever to find out. That I'd never guess why he wouldn't come round in the evenings, why he never talked about marrying or setting up house together.

People think librarians are stupid. Spend all their time with their noses stuck in books. On the other hand, people like scientists, who also spend all their time with their noses stuck in books, they're clever. What kind of theory is that?

The fact is, librarians, we're very, very clever. It's just that we don't want people like you to know.

From where I was standing, at the top of the hill, I could see his house. Nice little place. Red bricks, white paint. Children's toys scattered all over the lawn. How wholesome. I'll bet he hangs his coat in the hallway and shouts, "Hi, honey, I'm home!" and the children come rushing out to greet him . . .

And there he was.

I shrank back into the hedge, hardly daring to peek. Just listening to the engine rattling past, climbing the hill, reaching the top, and starting to coast down the slope. The screeching, the squealing, the crash. The silence.

And, floating back to me on the afternoon breeze, Donald's voice. "I say, does anyone know who owns this cat?"

Deceased, one small tabby cat. Missing in action, several saplings and a bed of primroses. Still very much alive, if rather shaken, Donald. He even had the nerve to come round the next morning on his way to work to show off his bruises.

I decided that, despite my fear of loud noises, I was going to have to take drastic action.

First, I was going to have to coax him along to the church picnic. Well, they call it a picnic, but with half the congregation down with lumbago and rheumatism and Lord-knows-what, we have it in the church hall round a table. Plastic knives and forks, though, to keep up the party atmosphere.

It took me a while to wheedle my way onto the committee. Mrs. Brooks had held the annual picnic in her iron stranglehold for nearly twenty years, and no upstart librarian was going to be allowed in to ruin her neatly laid plans if she could help it. Particularly in the year when we were very kindly allowing the congregation of St. Edward's on the Hill to join us.

"In spite of them being Catholic idol worshippers, we'll do our best to make them welcome. You don't think they'll want to bring any incense, do you? We've just had the fire alarms overhauled, and I

can't be held responsible for any false alarms caused by that sort of thing . . ."

The vicar, the Reverend Montenev-Rodat, African Missionary Of The Year 1956 and never quite been the same since, spent the whole meeting trying to quieten her down. "Well, yes, Mrs. Brooks, we will have to sit *mingled* with them, I don't think we can really ask them to sit at the other end of— No, Mrs. Brooks, there's no biblical evidence for that being contagious."

We calmed her down in the end. In fact, she was so pleased that we wouldn't have to say Hail Marys between courses that she didn't raise a whisper of objection when I was voted onto the committee. She realized her mistake afterward, of course. I had to promise to scrub the floor—twice—before she agreed to give me the keys to the church hall.

But it was going to be worth it. I'd been up all night, studying *Twenty-Five Reasons Why Arson Attacks Fail*, and all the other books I'd sneaked out of the library. This time, everything was going to work perfectly.

And it did go remarkably well, at first. We set up the plates and the cupcakes and the wilting quiche, and smiled at little old dears as they complained that the milk was off, the hall was cold, and it wasn't as good as last year . . .

And, after forty-seven minutes, exactly like clockwork, the Reverend Montenev-Rodat got up, brushed the crumbs off his best black clerical shirt, and announced the slide show. "I'd now like to take the liberty of entertaining you with some slides from my recent working visit to Tangayenkaka, including some fascinating tribal customs involving the dried scalps of the villagers' ancestors. Anyone of a delicate disposition might like to step outside for a breath of fresh air at this point. We'll be sure to call you back in before Mrs. Benigni and the Operatic Society begin their recital."

Personally, I thought Mrs. Benigni and the Rhinemaidens were far more likely to upset the delicately disposed, but there you are. No one tried to leave. Not that they had much chance, the speed the lights were dimmed at. Mrs. Brooks obviously didn't want any of those idolatrous St. Edward's-goers to escape a good dose of Taking The Word To The Heathen.

I leant across the table to Donald, smiling as sweetly as I could. "Will you go and see if the tea urn's boiled yet? This lot are going to want watering again as soon as the show's over."

Donald looked sideways at me, as if to say, Can't you do it? I just nodded at the people sitting on my right, between me and the kitchen door. Fancy Fred, who must have weighed twenty stone. An old dear in a wheelchair that only turned to the left. A mother with a lap full of cloned and identical three-year-olds slurping at lollipops.

I was stuck, and he knew it.

So he hauled himself out of his chair, tiptoed past a dozing grandmother, and opened the kitchen door.

I had it all planned out. Donald would sneak in over to the urn, which would have built up a head of steam by now. He'd turn it down to stop the lid rattling. Then he'd turn round, and he'd see what had happened.

The bicycle pump that I'd carefully balanced above the door as I left the kitchen would have fallen off and jammed through the wire loop on the back of the door and the one on the doorframe. Like a padlock. It would take him several minutes to unjam it—and before he'd done so, the timer on the central heating system would click on and ignite the gas.

Back in the hall, the slide projector just kept on clicking. Mud huts. Women in warpaint. More mud huts. Women without the benefit of brassieres—that certainly raised a few eyebrows.

I listened very hard. Couldn't hear him rattling the door. I'd fixed it so it should jam solid; he shouldn't be able to rattle it, but you never can tell.

Click. Men without the benefit of any clothing at all. I thought there was going to be a mass faint.

Click.

And then I looked up, and there was Donald. Large as life and twice as adulterous, wandering back to his seat. He sat down as quietly as he could and leant across to me and whispered, "You'll never guess what happened when I opened the kitchen door. A bicycle pump fell on my head!"

Click.

Bang.

It was all quite exciting, really. I was pulled from the wreckage by a fireman with such a nice Yorkshire accent. I almost asked him for his phone number, but I decided I'd better not draw attention to myself.

Mother was trapped in the toilet for three hours and had a fit of the vapors. I managed to get her into the car and home without her hearing about the two from St. Edward's who died of heart failure. Let alone what happened to the poor dear Reverend Monteny-Rodat . . .

Donald?

Oh, yes, Donald. The Man With Twenty-Nine Lives. Well, he walked out with a couple of scratches on his bald patch, and that was about it.

And then the police turned up.

They wanted to interview us about the explosion. They weren't sure

if it was arson or not—the pipes were old, they could have been damaged without anyone realizing—but they thought they'd do the paperwork anyway. Keeps them out of mischief, doesn't it?

I asked them what they thought about it all. The senior officer, the one with the Village People mustache, he said, "In my opinion, madam, what we are looking for here is a psychopath."

"That's easy," Mother piped up from behind the fumes of her mustard foot bath. "There's one right at the end of the street."

PC Mustache looked at the other officer, who didn't look old enough to be delivering papers, let alone battling criminals, and said, "A psychopath, madam?"

"That's right. A big red tarmac one. Kids come hurtling off it on their roller skates, no regard for anyone. Plain dangerous, that's what it is. I'm not surprised you've had complaints."

PC Mustache looked at me like he'd suddenly realized he was surrounded by complete lunatics.

"I think that's a cyclepath, Mum," I said.

"That's exactly what I said. A psychopath."

At least the police left in a hurry.

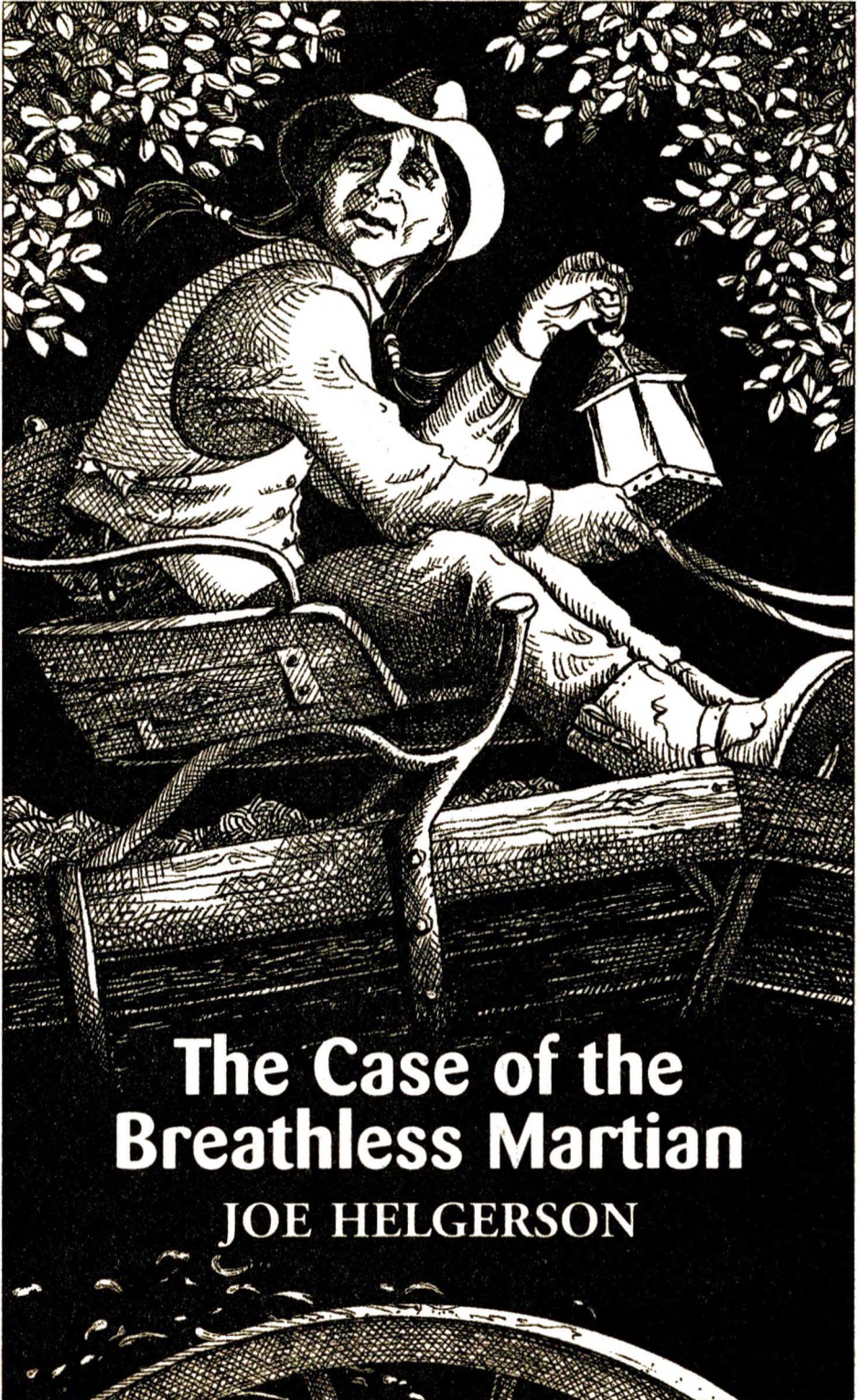
I decided I was going to have one more try. If this one turned into another Massacre Of The Innocents, I suppose I could always dump Donald and tell everyone he'd hinted to me he was the mass-murderer of Mortimer Drive. It would be a good reason for ending our relationship. I might even sell my story to one of those tabloid newspapers. The explosion had been all over the front pages of the *Gormandsley District Herald*, so they were bound to be interested.

I spent my lunch hour reading about a man who'd distilled arsenic from flypapers. That night, I made the biscuits—and at three in the morning, Mother decided to have a midnight snack.

And that's how it all happened. Oh yes, and I'm sorry about the arresting officer. That deadfall trap on the front door was meant for Donald. I'd given him my key and invited him to come round, you see. That's why I sat facing the door with the revolver. Grandad brought it home from the war, you know. Probably wouldn't even have fired after all this time.

And I still love him. Wouldn't you know? Perhaps I'll write to him from prison, try to explain myself.

Yes. Perhaps I'll send him a present. What did I do with that book on great letter-bombing campaigns?



The Case of the Breathless Martian

JOE HELGERSON

For the past two weeks there'd been a rash of thefts in Marquis, Iowa, that had soured Sheriff Huck Finn plenty. Somebody had been stealing mirrors from all over town. From the big one down to the Three Log Saloon to a hand-held one owned by the sheriff's wife Becky—mirrors had been walking off without the sheriff recovering a one of them. He was becoming a laughing stock, and with fall elections approaching, it had become dangerous to approach him any time of the day or night. That's why it surprised me hard when my fellow deputy, Tom Reywas, said he'd go fetch the sheriff. It was the middle of the night, and the sheriff wasn't going to be happy at all to hear that a dead Martian had been found. I tagged along to see the fireworks.

"A Martian?" the sheriff belted, standing at his front door in his white sleeping gown and tasseled hat. "What in tarnation do you mean by that?"

"I mean from Mars," Deputy Tom said.

"The planet?" the sheriff said, even louder.

"That's the one."

"And what do you mean by foul play?"

"I mean he ain't breathing."

"Well, what if these Martians don't need to breathe?" the sheriff asked. "What if they got themselves some different way of dying? What if he's just taking himself a rest? Before we go making this all official by calling a sheriff out of his bed in the mid-

dle of the dang-blamed night, maybe you better head yourself out to wherever the deed was done and have a look-see. It'd probably be best if we didn't go trusting every little bit of what Jasper Bulfinch has seen fit to report."

Jasper was the fellow who came busting into the jailhouse, where Deputy Tom and me bunk, with news of the dead Martian. He was prone to seeing wonders by the glow of fireflies, but that didn't slow my fellow deputy any, not in the least. When it came to stretchers, Deputy Tom was something of a legend himself, and he for sure never shied away from a chance to go chasing around town as though his tail was on fire. Nope, Martians who weren't breathing was his kind of pie. Checking up on dead bodies though . . . that was another matter entirely.

"Don't you think I'd be needing some daylight for such an undertaking?" Deputy Tom said, cooling fast on the project.

You see, Jasper had found this dead Martian up top of Mount Baldy, which was a fair-sized hill to tackle in the dark of night, with no saloons nearby. Deputy Tom didn't like to stray too far from a watering hole.

"That might be the case if you deputied somewhere else," Sheriff Huck said, "but around here we can tell right from wrong even in the dark."

Just as he was about to cut loose with more opinions concerning Deputy Tom's abilities,

the sheriff's missis called out a reminder from the back of the house.

"Election's coming up, Sheriff."

Biting his tongue, Sheriff Huck said: "After you've looked everything over real good, come back and tell me all about it. Sometime after breakfast."

Right about then I got the notion that maybe I ought to be sliding farther back into the shadows, but I was too slow about it.

"Deputy Joe," the sheriff called out, knowing I was there all along, "you best go along with him. Make sure he doesn't fall off the buckboard."

Martians were being talked up a good bunch that fall of 1903. It seems some astronomer fellows had spotted canals crisscrossing the red planet through their telescopes. That's what started all the hubbub. You could read about it in the newspapers, right along with all the reports of Ford building his cars and those invisible X-rays that could pass right through things and the flight of that German Count Zeppelin's airship.

The canals these astronomers had seen were straight as yardsticks and had a good stretch of length to them, too, which meant there wasn't any wind or water that could have carved them. Living on the Mississippi River, as we did, we all knew how water, when left to its own devices, was awful prone to curve here, there, and everywhere. Wind went about things pretty much the

same way. So it looked for sure as though someone up there was making those canals, and making them at a pretty good clip, too.

And that was only part of it.

The astronomers could also see red desert all over the planet, spiced up with blue-green splotches that had to be oceans or huge lakes. So didn't those Martians have plenty of need for those canals? How else were they going to do anything useful with all that desert if they didn't bring some water to it?

But there was more. The year being 1903, Mars was about as close as it got to Earth, which was something that happened about every two years. And since it was so close, all these astronomers were expecting big doings. It seems that some of them had seen flashes of light from Mars, as though the folks over that way were trying to talk to us with some kind of code.

It was all something to think on, all right, but this dead Martian fellow, he was the first one I'd ever heard of who'd bothered to make a trip over to see us.

By the time we got the wagon hitched up it was three in the morning. Bumping along on the dirt road up Mount Baldy, I got so busy dreaming away on all those Martian marvels that I didn't even notice that Deputy Tom had fallen off. He didn't call out for help either, just laid on the road with a death grip on the bottle of Doctor Kingsley's Surefire Everlasting Rejuvenating Tonic, which

he'd been hitting hard since our marching orders. He wouldn't wake up either, or at least not till I tried prying that bottle of tonic free.

"You thieving redskin!" Deputy Tom shouted, coming to life faster than lightning. "What'd you throw me down fer?"

That kind of blackout reasoning was pretty standard stuff for Deputy Tom, but don't think I was immune to it just because I'd heard it a dozen or more times before. Letting go of the bottle, I left him lying where he was and started back to the wagon. Didn't make it to her though. Long about then Sheriff Huck came thundering down the roadway, saddled up on his swayback and carrying a torch that was bold as day. He pretty near ran Deputy Tom over, which at the moment would have suited me fine, gone mostly unnoticed by the deputy, and probably wouldn't have bothered the sheriff much either, except that he would have had to go hunting up another deputy by the name of Tom.

The sheriff was awful persnickety about the names of his deputies, and it burned him no end whenever I reminded him that my real name wasn't Joe but Stanley. He wanted an Injun Joe deputy to match up with his Deputy Tom. That way we both went along with the handle he'd plucked for himself out of the pages of Mr. Samuel Clemens's work. The sheriff's real-to-life name was Humfredo Mullendorfer, which didn't hold many promises for a man determined to

be the sheriff of Marquis, Iowa. The voters thereabouts liked a little more dash in their lawmen.

"Get that tosspot off the road," Sheriff Huck barked.

"I was just going for a rope," I told the sheriff.

"That's using your head, Joe. Tie him down good and proper and follow along as best you can. Better hand me his bottle. He won't be needing it, but I might. I'm going up ahead to make sure everything's safe." After I wrestled Deputy Tom's bottle loose and handed it over, the sheriff managed to spur his nag into a half-bouncy trot. Me, I stood there in the dark, gaping. The sheriff on horseback? Riding off into possible danger? That wasn't a sight I expected to see again any time soon, if ever. Sheriff Huck generally took a more leisurely approach to keeping the law. He'd changed out of his nightshirt and hat and was even wearing his tin star, right over his heart, pinned to his vest. I'd seen it glint in the torchlight. As a rule, whole weeks could slip by without the sheriff's badge ever bothering to leave the top drawer of his office desk.

He had his holster and six-shooter on, too.

The sheriff only wore a firearm for high muckety-mucks and parades, neither of which ever made it to Marquis, at least not until lately they hadn't. But I'll get to that in a bit.

After tying Deputy Tom down good and solid, I stuffed the corner of a burlap sack in his mouth, so I wouldn't have to listen to him

tar-and-feathering my ancestors, and I bounced along after the sheriff.

But being passed up by the sheriff wasn't nothing. A minute later another horse came snorting and clomping up the hill. This time it was a newspaperwoman named Nellie Greeley who came thundering along. Her curly auburn hair flew loose in the breeze, and she had on her white starched blouse, which seemed to be something of a uniform for her. She was a finely knit woman, sort of on the plain side, though you never noticed that 'less you were able to look past the shiny ringlets of hair and the way her eyes all the time shimmered like wet stones. She'd pulled into town a few days back, fresh on the trail of a millionaire named Calvin James. He is the high muckety-muck I'll be getting to in a bit.

"There any reason to believe half of what Jasper says?" she called out, slowing barely enough to hear my answer.

At least her question explained the traffic headed up Mount Baldy. After visiting the jailhouse, Jasper must have turned town crier.

"Half might be generous," I said. "There anybody else coming up behind me?"

"Only most of town," she said, and giving her reins a shake, off she rode.

It wasn't till later it occurred to me that I'd just seen my first woman wearing pants. The reason it didn't strike me as odd at the time? Right about then a cou-

ple of things were sliding into place between my ears, things that helped make sense of all that was happening.

The millionaire that Miss Greeley was trailing had landed in Marquis maybe a week back, arriving on a steamer from St. Lou and traveling with enough trunks to keep two wagons busy ferrying everything to the Hostlebloom Hotel. Up to the hotel, he rented three rooms, one for himself, one for his manservant, one for his luggage. And then he went to ground. No one had seen hide nor hair of him since. Not even one of the Hostleblooms would own up to having seen him. All his meals were brought to him and taken at the door by his servant, who had never been heard to speak a word.

It all created quite a stir. Everyone spent their days wondering—out loud—what would bring such a man to our neck of the woods. The whole town was parading up and down Main Street all day long, hoping for a peek of the millionaire at his windows. The best they ever got was a scowl from the manservant, who had a jaw square as a sledge and a nose that looked like it'd spent more time being broken than it spent smelling.

Then, three days back, Miss Nellie Greeley, western correspondent of the *Albany Gazette*, blew into town and stirred the waters even more. She'd been trailing Mr. Calvin James ever since he'd publicly offered a fifty thousand dollar reward to the

first man, woman, or child who could prove they'd communicated with Mars. Pouring steaming water on a beehive couldn't have caused any more buzzing. And now we had a dead Martian on our hands. You weren't a deputy long without becoming mighty suspicious of them kind of things happening so close to each other.

Mount Baldy overlooked town—and the rest of the river valley, too—though it wasn't really a mountain, just the tallest hill for miles around. As you'd expect, there weren't any trees up top of Baldy, only buffalo grass. It was known for one other oddity, and that was owing to the labors of Jasper Bulfinch, who had dug a well up there. There ain't no explaining how ideas came to be lodged in Jasper's head, except to say he's a little weak between the ears. But whatever the reason behind his digging that well, he was awful protective of it, even if it was dry as a bone and nothing but limestone all one hundred feet down.

The wagon trail up Baldy ran out at an abandoned settler's cabin. After that, the hillside climbed too steep for horses, and everyone had to switch to foot. Some kids had set the cabin on fire again. They had an itch for burning things that year, but at the moment I didn't have much interest in smoldering old timbers.

Up ahead I could see Nellie Greeley's white blouse, and far-

ther ahead of her, the sheriff's torch. There was something else up there too, way up top, something that I hadn't been expecting to see. A lantern was giving off a kind of greenish glow. That glow was on the ghostly side and didn't sit quite right. Maybe it belonged to the Martian.

But by the time Deputy Tom and me had hiked all the way up top, I didn't care if the whole hilltop was on fire. I was puffing like a fish trying on wings, and Deputy Tom was as close to unpickled as he got. The newspaperwoman was busy peering down Jasper's well, but the sheriff was standing off to the side, looking bristly. You see, the eerie green light I'd spied from below didn't belong to any Martian. It was coming from a lantern that was the property of Pembroke Britches, the younger brother of Pericles Britches, who was the sheriff of Split Rock, Illinois, and also Sheriff Huck's bitter rival. Exactly what Pembroke was doing up top of Mount Baldy wasn't any mystery either.

The Britches boys were all handsome, strapping brutes, and didn't they know it! I believe they got all their muscles from fighting all the time over who got the looking glass first every morning. Matter of fact, it wouldn't have surprised me to learn that they were the ones behind the missing mirrors around town, though I supposed that was too much luck to hope for. There were five Britches all total, redheads every one, with blinding white teeth and clean-shaven chins. And

every one of those five roosters figured to have a barnyard of their own someday soon. Along those lines, Pembroke had recently moved across the river to our side and announced he intended to run for sheriff of Marquis this fall. That he'd gotten up Mount Baldy first had to be galling Sheriff Huck no end.

"He's down there," Pembroke was saying, talking of the Martian.

"I hope you didn't go tampering with anything," Sheriff Huck shot back.

"Not much to tamper with," Pembroke said. "He's a little fella. Got kind of a homesick look about him."

"You're sure he's dead?" Sheriff Huck said.

"Oh, he's a goner all right."

"Tug on his toe?" Deputy Tom asked.

"Well now that's a fresh idea," Pembroke said.

In addition to their good looks and popping muscles, all the Britches boys had a high regard for their smarts, as well as a low regard for everyone else's.

"I wish I could stand around here all night admiring you, Pembroke," said the sheriff, "but I've got an investigation to get rolling."

"Take her easy, old timer," Pembroke said. "I've already figured out how it happened."

Playing with a box of matches in an arsenal wouldn't have been any smarter than that crack, but Sheriff Huck kept his wick dry, though his cheeks did bulge a bit. He didn't have much choice, not

with a newspaperwoman hanging on his every word.

"That's mighty kind of you," the sheriff said, sweet as a snapping turtle.

"No problem," Pembroke said. "The fella down this well imbibed a little too freely, I'm afraid, and took a tumble. That's about all there is to it."

"If he's a Martian," the sheriff said, "he came an awful long way for such foolishness."

"Oh I reckon he's a Martian all right," Pembroke said. "Dresses like one. Got a pretty fancy set of extra ears, too. Poor little fella probably never had run into the likes of Doc Kingsley's rejuvenating tonic before. Didn't know what hit him."

Doc Kingsley was one of the Founding Fathers of Marquis. His tonic had a mighty high reputation with drunkards.

"How do you know the Doc's tonic did him in?" the sheriff said, hiding the bottle that he'd confiscated from Deputy Tom.

"There's a bottle of it smashed down the well," Pembroke said. "Looks like you should have taken my advice and stayed in bed, sheriff. Those old bones of yours could have used the rest."

You can bet that started Sheriff Huck to grinding his chompers, but that's how the Britches boys handled themselves—kind of low and sneaky and awful braggy. Seeing as how there was five of them, it almost made them an even match for the sheriff.

"You given any thought to what he was doing up here in

the first place?" the sheriff asked.

"Now Sheriff," Pembroke said, "don't go boiling your brain on this one. I've pretty much got her all wrapped up. If you want to head home to your hot water bottle, I'll try and make sure these two deputies of yours don't mess up getting the remains back to town."

Deputy Tom was getting ready to let fly a fist, which for once I wasn't going to try stopping, when Miss Greeley called out kind of excited like from the mouth of the well: "There's something moving down there."

"No need to fret," Pembroke said, putting a protective hand out so that Miss Greeley wouldn't lose her balance and fall. "It's just my brother Paxton hauling up the Martian. Give him some room now. That ladder's a long one."

The Martian that Paxton Britches hauled out of that well and dumped on the ground was on the small side, not more than three feet long. He was bloodied up plenty, too, but once you got past that, he didn't look a whole lot different than you or me. He had two brownish eyes, which needed a couple of coins for decency, but for now just lay there staring at the sky, off toward his home I guess. His nose was of the button variety. His mouth had teeth that looked sort of brown stained. Made you think that maybe they chewed tobacco on Mars, same as us. None of that

was out of the ordinary. Where he took off different than us was the matter of hair: He didn't have a sprig of it. Not anywhere. Not on his head, or up his nose, or on the back of his hands, or in his ears, of which there were four. That extra pair of little ears, which were jutting off his neck right below where we keep ours, attracted some comment.

"Looky there," said Deputy Tom.

Everybody but the sheriff and that newspaperwoman gasped something along those lines too. Nellie Greeley took one peek at him and lost interest, which struck me as strange, seeing as how there hadn't been a stone she'd left unturned since hitting town. Sheriff Huck seemed kind of amused by the Martian's ears, saying: "He must have been tar-nation for sneaking up on."

I suppose he was right. All I can say is that this Martian could have strolled down Main Street and been mistook for a puffy, seven-year-old boy most any day of the week. 'Course his clothes would have drawn a look or two. He was wrapped up in a dark cloak that stretched all the way from his shoulders to his ankles. Beneath the cloak he had on a shiny silky outfit that was scarlet colored and looked pretty comfortable. His boots didn't appear comfortable, though. Not at all. Pointed as nettles, they were, and painted blue.

"How do you suppose he got here?" the sheriff asked, kind of thinking out loud, the way he

does from time to time.

"Ain't no mystery there," Pembroke said. "There's one of them hot-air balloons hung up in the trees over thata-way. I guess that's what brought him."

By then a pretty good collection of townfolk had joined us, and every one of them stampeded toward where Pembroke was pointing. Everyone but me, that is. Sheriff Huck grabbed me by the arm and pulled me aside before I had a chance to follow the herd.

Fierce like, he whispered, "Take a lantern down that well. See if there's anything the Britches boys missed."

So on top of missing out on seeing a hot-air balloon what might have traveled all the way from Mars, I had to climb down Jasper's well, which was about the last place I would have picked for a vacation, even in broad daylight.

The wood ladder dropping into that well was made out of branches and scraps that Jasper had salvaged from all over, but at least it was sturdy. Jasper may have been slow, but I'll credit him for knowing how to put a hammer to a nail. The well itself was a sight. The light off my lantern glinted and blinked around that well like a dozen or more wildcats. Climbing down the ladder couldn't have been much different than crawling inside one of them fancy kaleidoscopes. Not knowing what I was getting into, I moved slow as a hog thinking about ham, but when I got ten feet or so down the ladder, I saw what was caus-

ing all the fuss. There were mirrors sunk in the walls of Jasper's well. Mirrors all over the place, which explained why the Britches boys' lanterns had added such an addled glow to the hilltop.

Well, at least I'd solved the mystery of the missing mirrors, though it was an intolerable strange place to go sticking 'em, but that was Jasper for you. Thinking about what else might be waiting for me down below, I sure wasn't in any hurry to hike down that ladder. I did though, on account I wasn't about to give the sheriff or Deputy Tom the satisfaction of asking why I didn't.

The quiet in that well swallowed me, then the darkness got me, too. Just after I hit bottom, one hundred and four steps down, my lantern ran out of kerosene. It burned just long enough for me to spot a busted up bottle of Doc Kingsley's tonic.

Soon as the dark hit, I lost my grip and thrashed around some, thinking that something was all of a sudden trying to grab me from behind, another Martian or something, but it was only the handle of a mirror sticking off a ledge. My coat sleeve hung on it. I had to force myself to breathe deep and stand still, the way my grandfather had taught me to sit in the woods years before. Pretty soon I calmed down enough to realize that I was all right and could start back up, which I did lickety-split.

Up above, I found everyone still gathered over to the balloon,

which was hung up in a good-sized maple. A couple of young fellas had climbed up for a look and reported there were two little stools inside the balloon's riding basket, though not much else. It sure didn't look rigged for long trips, but nobody paid much attention to that fact. They were all too busy crowing about what they'd do if they met any more Martians.

Just as I got there, the sheriff raised his voice to call out, "You can all head on home now. You've had your look-see and can go tell the rest of creation how brave you were about it. As for what happened up here, your sheriff will get to the bottom of it."

"Particularly since I already told him what happened," Pembroke added.

That about did it.

"Deputies," Sheriff Huck said in his brassy voice, "I want you to arrest these two Britches boys for the murder of this Martian fella."

Well, that was one way to shut up Pembroke, and it worked for all of five seconds, too, until Pembroke nearly bust a gut laughing. The sheriff was serious though. Arresting somebody was a trump he played from time to time, when he didn't have even the foggiest of who the bad guys were. As a trick of the lawman trade, it generally worked to sober folks up fast, provided that the fellas you arrested went along peaceably. This time around, the Britches brothers came without a tussle. Mindful of the upcoming sheriff's election, Pembroke didn't

want to go flaunting the law too direct, though he did manage to have his say.

"If this is what you call sheriffing," Pembroke said, "we're going to have villains and desperadoes moving here from far away as Texas."

That earned a cackle or two, which hushed up quick when Sheriff Huck answered back: "Lock 'em up, Deputies."

Around the village of Marquis, Iowa, suspects weren't usually locked up. They was mostly allowed to come and go as they pleased. I sure hoped we could find the keys to the jail cell.

While Deputy Tom was herding the Britches boys down to the wagon, Sheriff Huck tugged me aside.

"Find anything?"

"That well's stuffed full of mirrors," I said.

"Well now, ain't that interesting," the sheriff said, sounding as though he already seen that much for himself. "Anything else there?"

"A smashed bottle of Doc's tonic," I said, doing my level best to act as though seeing all those missing mirrors wasn't nothing to be excited about. This was the kind of game that me and sheriff was playing with each other all the time.

"We already knew that'd be down there too," the sheriff said.

"That's all I saw before my lantern gave out," I told him. "You really want us to lock up the Britches?"

"Just to breakfast. I ain't aiming on feeding those plow horses. Why don't you cart this Martian back to my laboratory and give him a once-over. See what else you can find."

The sheriff's laboratory was the shed out behind his house, where he went to duck his missus and read dime novels.

"And Joe," the sheriff said, "you're going to need to round up a few folks for questions."

"Who you have in mind?"

"Jasper and Doc Kingsley, for starters. Better bring along the Doc's assistant too."

"Miss Priscilla?"

"Yup. She tends to see better than the Doc, and I'm mighty curious to hear when he was selling tonic to Martians."

"Anybody else you'll be wanting?"

"That millionaire fella and his bodyguard. The Britches boys. We also might be needing a little help from Wilhelm and Barnabas and Tom."

"Which Tom?" I asked, there being three in town to choose from.

"Tom from the livery," he said. "Better make sure that newspaperwoman's around, too."

"Think she knows something about all this?"

"If she don't, it's got to be the one place in town where she hasn't stuck her nose."

"Well, she's up here," I said. "Want to talk to her now?"

"Not yet, Deputy. You've got to let stews simmer together for a while if you aim to get a good flavor."

So now solving a murder mystery was like cooking a stew.

"You really think that dead fella's a Martian?" I asked, eyeing up the body he'd told me to remove.

"Got my doubts," the sheriff said. "But I'm kind of hoping he is."

"Why's that?" I asked, surprised to hear it. As a general rule, Sheriff Huck was as against wonders and unexplainable marvels as a preacher was against sin.

"If he's a Martian, my job's all done. Far as I know, there ain't no law on the books about killing Martians."

The Britches boys didn't take kindly to life as suspects, and Deputy Tom made the most of it.

"Don't worry," Deputy Tom told 'em on the way back to town, "you two will get a fair trial, same as any low-down polecat would."

"If you're so all-fired sure we did it," Paxton Britches said, "maybe you'd like to explain what you were doing with old Doc . . ."

He didn't get the rest of it out, not with his brother Pembroke elbowing him hard enough to knock the wind out of him.

"You and Doc up to something earlier?" I asked Deputy Tom. If they had been, it would have explained how both Deputy Tom and the Martian got their hands on some of Doc's tonic, which didn't go cheap.

"You never mind what I been up to," Deputy Tom said, "if you know what's good for you."

After that, the rest of the ride

was snorting horses and creaking wagon wheels. At the jail, I stopped long enough for Deputy Tom to march the Britches boys inside, then headed over to the sheriff's house with the Martian. There was a cot in the sheriff's laboratory that got used pretty regular, and that's where I laid out the Martian.

First off, it wasn't entirely true that he was hairless. When I got to looking closer, he had some hair on his chest, for one place, and stubble of it on his chin, and maybe even a few wisps atop his head. I discovered something else interesting about Mars too: They spoke English up there, or at least they wrote in it. Our Martian had a tattoo about halfway between his elbow and shoulder. It was a thin blue line with two words in red ink just below it.

General T. Thumb

A little lower on the same arm was another blue line with two words below it.

Admiral Dot

So it appeared Mars had an army and a navy.

As for his extra ears, I took a real close squint at 'em and decided they weren't much good for hearing, not plugged with wax as they was. Matter of fact, they were made entirely out of wax and held to his neck with some kind of stickum. They sure had some strange fashions up on Mars.

From the sheriff's laboratory I headed over to the Hostle-bloom Hotel to start fetching people on the sheriff's list. On the way I got lucky and ran into Tom from the livery stable. Him and a couple of extra hands were hauling trunks down Main Street on a wagon. Mighty handsome trunks they were, too. Some of 'em looked big enough to live in, so I figured they belonged to that millionaire who'd been a-visiting us.

"Where you heading with all that?" I asked.

"Levee. That blankety-blank millionaire fellow's got it in his head to be moving on."

"That a fact? When'd he get that notion?"

"Bright and early this morn-ing."

"He still back to the hotel?"

"Oh yes. Ordering up his blankety-blank breakfast and bossing that blankety-blank man of his around."

After asking Tom to head up to the jailhouse for a word with the sheriff, I aimed for the hotel, where I waited around out front till Wilhelm Hostle-bloom stepped out on the porch to see what I was after. Wilhelm and I got along just fine, so long as I didn't go traipsing into his hotel without an invite. To Wilhelm's way of thinking, hotels meant civilization, whereas redskins—such as myself—meant blood-curdling wilderness, and the two weren't intended to mix. Except that today, when I told him that the sheriff wanted to have a word with that millionaire fella, he invited me in like I was

some long-lost kin. He ushered me upstairs to Mr. Calvin James's suite, as he called the three rooms the millionaire had taken. All the way up there he hovered beside me, nervous as a moth in candle time.

"This connected to the doings up on Baldy?" Wilhelm asked, even though him and every other person with at least one working ear knew it did.

"Not at all," I said, just to bedevil him.

"Something to do with Priscilla?"

Now here was a case of the town grapevine knowing something its lawmen didn't, which happened pretty regular, but wasn't something to be admitted to. I chose my answer careful like.

"Doc Kingsley's Priscilla?" I asked, even though the only other Priscilla thereabouts was Arty McGuire's mare out Slick Bottom Creek way.

"Well yes," Wilhelm said, confused. "Hasn't she been missing all morning, too? The Doc was by looking for her and so I just naturally figured . . ."

"Why would Doc stop by here for her?" I asked.

All I can say is, hotelkeepers sure do have their secrets.

"The answer requires some delicacy," he whispered. "You see, Priscilla and Mr. Calvin James have enjoyed each other's company a good deal of late."

"Did Doc come up and talk to 'em?" I asked.

"Now I couldn't very well let him do that," Wilhelm said, gush-

ing red clear up to his bald spot. "What would my other guests think?"

"Wouldn't know about that," I said, "but I did hear that this millionaire fella's checking out this morning."

"Right after breakfast," Wilhelm said with a serious nod.

When we got to the millionaire's closed door, there was a breakfast tray outside it, so the stories I'd been hearing about him refusing to dine with the other guests appeared to be true. The tray hadn't been touched, except by a fly who was learning to swim in the creamer.

"Mr. James must be catching the nine thirty steamer to St. Louis," I said. It was either that or the seven thirty boat headed upriver to St. Paul, and it was getting a little late to make that one, if he still hadn't had his breakfast.

"That's what his man told me," Wilhelm said. "I'll leave disturbing him in your capable hands."

I'd never known that Wilhelm felt so kindly disposed toward my hands, but capable or not, when I knocked on the door, I didn't get an answer. I tried louder, same result. Without an invite, Wilhelm all of sudden stepped around me to have at the door himself. Still no answer. Opening the door, we found an empty hotel room. Upon seeing that, old Wilhelm sprayed out some language that I was surprised to hear he knew. It appeared our millionaire was skipping out on his bill.

Once Wilhelm put a lid on his

fulminations, I asked him exactly what this Calvin James had been doing all week.

"Nothing much," he said, scornful like, now that he'd got a fresh introduction to this millionaire. "Just stayed to his room all day."

I figured I had him there and pounced, saying, "So how'd he get to know Priscilla?"

But when it came to hairsplitting, you couldn't get one up on Wilhelm so easy.

"I didn't say anything about his nights, now did I? Every night, about eleven, he went sneaking off with Miss Priscilla."

"Where to?"

"Wouldn't know about that. They didn't confide in me."

I never got an answer to that question. Right then the early steamer blew its whistle down to the levee and Wilhelm bolted out the door, realizing that his millionaire guest probably wasn't waiting no two hours for the downriver steamer.

"Hurry, Deputy," Wilhelm cried. "He's getting away."

Calvin James dressed pretty smart but talked even smarter.

"Why am I leaving?" he said, not taking kindly to my asking. "Because I can't stand to stay and be faced by the glory of what might have been."

His face turned a bluish kind of purple whilst spelling that out for me. We had found him waiting at the levee to load his trunks onto the upriver steamer, the one bound for St. Paul. Average in height and sort of soft looking,

with the small hands of a child, he'd hooked his thumbs in his vest pockets and stood gazing away from me as he spoke. You might have thought he owned everything for as far as the eye could see, lordly as he posed. His manservant stretched up a full head taller and maybe three times thicker, and when it came to hardness, I don't believe I'd ever seen anything to beat this fella's stare. His eyes reminded me of the buzz saw up to the lumberyard. The two of them were dressed in shiny black, boots to bowlers, though of course the millionaire's outfit was the shinier.

"I'm afraid our sheriff was sort of thinking he might like a word with you before you leave," I said, all apologetic without really wanting to be. There was something about this Calvin James that got you bending over backwards against your will. I guess maybe because he was so expert at expecting it.

"He can manage that through correspondence with my lawyer," he said.

He had himself some airs, all right. And that manservant of his backed him all the way, sort of looking hopeful that I'd try to stop them from leaving. I had a hunch that manservant was thinking of showing off a little with his fists, which were clenched and quarter raised and looking big as hounds' heads, and not some hounds you'd ever care to pet.

It put me in a fix for sure. On the one hand I had Sheriff Huck to answer to, and on the other

hand, I had this millionaire acting as though he wouldn't listen to me, not even if I shouted right in his ear. Well, I was used to willful people. After hiring on with the sheriff, that wasn't hardly anything new. And I was more than used to folks that didn't take kindly to putting up with an Indian deputy. But having someone order me about confident as a child might boss a rag doll, that set me back on my heels a ways. Big as I am, I just wasn't used to it. Even Sheriff Huck didn't try dealing with me so high-handed. Maybe this millionaire would have gotten away with it, too, if only Wilhelm Hostlebloom hadn't all of a sudden pushed me forward while clearing his throat.

"Hold on now," I said, bringing a hopeful grin to the manservant's face. "What about your hotel bill?"

You couldn't have believed the change that question brought on. Mr. Calvin James froze in his tracks. By the time he turned around to face me, there was a fury to his eyes that could have smote ten grown men to ten piles of ash. Stranger still, the manservant now pointed his grin toward his boss, as though tickled good to see him wrestle with such a question. Lucky for me I wasn't alone on that levee, or I do believe that soft-bodied millionaire might have somehow sprouted horns and tried to gore me. But thanks to all the loafers watching his every move, he reined himself in and turned all haughty.

"I put payment on the breakfast tray. I thought the innkeeper was experienced enough to check there," he said.

"Did you look on the tray?" I asked Wilhelm.

"Well, no," Wilhelm mumbled.

"Maybe you should," I said, which sent Wilhelm scurrying back up the street. I'm willing to bet that those legs of his hadn't seen such excitement for ten years or more. Passing town-folk stopped to stare.

"I'm not planning on missing my steamer because of such foolishness," Calvin James said.

"Oh, I doubt that it's a hotel bill that will make you miss this steamer," I said, by then having come up with a plan.

"And pray tell what will?"

Raising my voice, I called out, "Men, raise your right hands."

At first only two or three of the loafers watching caught on to my business and lifted up their right hands. But by-and-by the rest hoisted their arms up too, not wanting to be left out.

"By proxy of the sheriff of Marquis, Iowa," I said, all formal like, "I hereby deputize the bunch of you."

I didn't know if that was the proper way to go about it or not, or even if I had the authority to do it, but it sounded pretty good and there wasn't a hanger-on worth his salt who'd pass up such a chance as I was offering. An opportunity to do some lawmaning to such a high muck-a-muck as Calvin James didn't come along but once in a lifetime. All

my new deputies kind of scrunched together, to make themselves seem bigger, I guess. The millionaire's manservant was eyeing them up like a flock of tenpins. Safety in numbers, though. Calvin James came to his senses enough to grimly say, "Not now, Sullivan."

"When?" the manservant growled.

"Oh there's always another steamer coming along," I said, which was mostly true, though rickety as steamers were getting these days, it could be a challenge to predict exactly when the next boat might make it. If I thought about it, I was kind of surprised that such a wealthy man as Calvin James wasn't boarding the train, which offered twice the luxuries and none of the livestock.

"Maybe we should all relax a bit," I said, "and head on up to the sheriff's office. He'll be along directly."

Of course that last bit was a lie. Sheriff Huck had never gone anywhere directly in his whole life, but I got people's minds off that by slipping this millionaire fella a question or two on the way to jail.

"Know anything about who killed this Martian?" I said.

"Just one thing," Calvin James said. "Whoever did it cost your Doctor Kingsley the fifty thousand dollar reward I have posted. But I'll make this offer—" and here he raised his voice so all the crowd of deputies around us could hear "—whoever catches the scoundrel responsible for the

Martian's demise shall receive that fifty thousand dollars."

Don't think that didn't make a stir.

"So you're sold on this Martian being real?" I asked, while the crowd around us was scheming on what they might do with such a heap of cash.

"Name another place he could be from."

He had me stumped there, so I moved on to something different, saying, "So it was Doc Kingsley who got the Martian to come all this way for a visit?"

"Your doctor's theory on the magnifying power of a vertical shaft of sufficient depth, when aligned with our planet's terminator, is nothing less than astounding."

"I don't doubt it," I said. "What do you mean by a vertical shaft?"

"I mean a deep hole. A well."

You might have thought he was talking to something low as a snail, but you can't be a deputy—or an Indian—without hearing some of that from time to time. It didn't slow me down any.

"And what's a terminator?"

"I'm speaking of the line that separates the Earth's dark side from its sunlit side. By lining up a series of mirrors at dusk, your Doctor was able to flash sunlight into the heavens."

At least I'd found out what the mirrors were doing down Jasper's well.

"You weren't by any chance up top of Baldy last night, were you," I asked, "waiting for this Martian?"

"Last night, no. Every other night, yes. But last night I was struck low by something the hotel served me for supper."

"That's been remarked on before," I said. Mrs. Hostlebloom had been known to round a few corners while choosing her cuts of meat. "You got any witnesses as to your discomforts?"

"Sullivan here," he said, nodding toward his servant. "He attended to me. And Miss Priscilla too, of course. When she came by to take me up the hill, I had to refuse. I can see now that decision is the single biggest mistake of my life. If I'd been on that hill last night, I not only would have met my Martian, I might have been able to save his life."

He was a strange fella, this millionaire. His regrets sounded sincere enough, but you didn't get the idea he was too broke up for the poor dead Martian. No, he seemed more troubled by the opportunity he'd missed. That's what he seemed sincere about.

By then we'd reached the jailhouse, where I left Mr. Calvin James in the care of Deputy Tom, who no doubt would ask a few questions guaranteed to take this millionaire fella's mind off his woes. Just as I was about to take off, Wilhelm came puffing back to say there hadn't been any money left on the breakfast tray.

"There most certainly was," Calvin James said. "Did you check under the teacup? That's the customary place to put it."

Back Wilhelm went, though I

was beginning to have my doubts he'd find much of anything.

I went looking for Doc and Priscilla, but found that newspaperwoman instead, although maybe I should say she found me. Miss Nellie Greeley was about to dismount from her horse over to the hotel, but seeing me, changed her mind and rode right up to me on Main Street.

"Have you had a chance to examine the dead Martian?" she asked.

"Well, yes ma'am, I have."

"Was his left arm tattooed?" she asked, not one to beat around the bush. "There would have been two thin blue lines. Under the upper line would have been the words 'General T. Thumb' and under the lower line the words 'Admiral Dot'."

"There a reason those names seem familiar?" I asked.

"Can you keep a secret?" she asked, leaning forward so no one else could hear. Before I had a chance to tell her I wasn't worth a darn when it came to keeping secrets, she went on to say, "Those are the names of two midgets who were part of P. T. Barnum's famous traveling show about a quarter of a century or more ago."

"You reckon Mr. Barnum ever took his show to Mars?"

"Not that I've ever heard of, and to the best of my knowledge, it's not something Mr. Barnum would have kept under his hat."

"So how do you suppose this

Martian fella got his arm inked up with 'em?" I said.

"Four or five years back," she said, "there was a midget who called himself Boy Hillman. He claimed to be the shortest man who'd ever lived. It was a lie, of course. Both General Tom Thumb and Admiral Dot had him beat by several inches. When one of my colleagues exposed his lie, Boy Hillman claimed he wasn't done shrinking yet and that before he was through, he'd have both the General and Admiral beat by an inch or better."

"What'd he mean, he wasn't done?" I asked.

"He claimed to have once been seven feet, nine inches tall. Trouble was, he fell in with a circus and met up with a midget lady who was part of the show. He fell in love with her the first time he saw her, but she wouldn't have anything to do with such a monstrosity as him. It wasn't long before he hated every inch of himself."

"Must have been mighty hard on him," I said, having had some experience at unrequited love.

"Well, when it comes to love," she said, "there's almost always a way. Boy Hillman vowed to shrink himself down until Lady Smallest, that was the lady in question, would have him.

"How'd he manage that?"

"Claimed to have bought a secret shrinking potion from the very last of the Mahicans. That's when he had the two lines tattooed on himself. Goals to shoot for, he called them. Claimed when

he'd started shrinking they were tattooed right below his knee. The smaller he shrank, the higher those lines moved."

"That's some story. He ever get the girl?"

"Oh yes, they traveled with the circus for a time, then sort of dropped out of view when my fellow newspaper writer blew the whistle on his shrinking story. Appears he'd always been a midget."

"Know anything about who might have done him in?"

"Not as much as I'd like to," she said. "But I do have one thing to tell you. The sheriff wants you to round up everybody he mentioned and bring them back up to the scene of the crime."

"Those the words he used?"

"No. I believed he called it this dag-blasted, bug-infested hilltop."

Tipping my hat, I thanked her for the message and asked real nice like if she wouldn't mind heading over to the sheriff's office while I rounded up the Doc and Miss Priscilla for the trip back up Baldy. She said she wouldn't mind at all. She said that'd give her a chance to interview those handsome Britches boys.

There were two places to look for Doc Kingsley, his tumbled-down house or the Three Log Saloon. I headed for the saloon, which was closer and also more likely, and sure enough found him curled up under the rear table he called his office. Curled up with him was a bottle or two that didn't have nothing to do but remember the good old days, back when

they used to be full. You wouldn't have known by looking at him right now, but some days the Doc was a respectable-looking gent. At the moment he resembled three-day-old bedding from down to the livery. He didn't do nothing but grunt-whistle when I tucked him over my shoulder and hauled him up to the jail, where I dumped him in the back of the wagon.

Next I swung by Widow Julia's Boarding House to collect Miss Priscilla. Trouble was, she hadn't come home last night, or any night in recent memory, according to Widow Julia, who—same as Wilhelm Hostlebloom—had a mighty fine memory when it came to the comings and goings of her boarders. Time was running short on me by then and I guessed the sheriff would have to proceed without Priscilla.

On the way back to the jailhouse, I stopped off at the telegraph office to tell Barnabas, the operator, that the sheriff wanted a word with him.

"'Bout what?" Barnabas asked. He was fat as a catfish, slow as one too, and hated getting up off his chair once he'd got himself down on it.

"This dead Martian fella."

"What am I going to add to that?" he said.

"Don't know. He just said to get you."

There was grumbling, but he come along.

Once at the jailhouse, I told everyone that the sheriff wanted 'em back up Baldy so that he

could settle this business.

"I have no intention of traipsing up that hill," Calvin James said.

"Suppose you want us to bring the hill to you," Deputy Tom said.

"You'd best humor the sheriff," Pembroke Britches said from his jail cell. "Sheriff Huck may be a rusty old saw, but he is the law, and we can't none of us be shirking our duties."

Most of that was said for the benefit of the all the voters crammed in the jailhouse, and it played pretty well, too. Such sentiment and numbers was more than Calvin James could buck, so we all started toward the trail. It was quite a troop, including ten or twelve deputies, the millionaire, his manservant, Nellie Greeley, Doc Kingsley, Pembroke and Paxton Britches, telegraph operator Barnabas, Wilhelm Hostlebloom, and Tom Hooley from the livery.

Another twenty or thirty hangers-on brought up the rear. Some of them were carrying picnic baskets. At the very last minute Jasper Bulfinch came busting out of the bush to say that we didn't need to worry about finding Priscilla, the sheriff had found her.

"Where?" about a half dozen of us asked at once.

"Up to the settler's cabin," he said. "Dead."

Such news started everyone but Jasper stampeding up Baldy. Jasper stayed behind in the middle of Main Street, looking kind of

lost. One of his shoulders drooped lower than the other, the way it had ever since there'd been a cave-in to his well a couple of years back. His scraggly hair and beard made him look like a hermit, though he ain't. Jasper was always happy to talk, though he didn't always make a lot of sense. He's better at watching things than talking about things. That's why I went over to have a word with him before following everyone else out of town. I was curious to hear what he'd been watching.

"Not coming along?" I said

"The sheriff wanted me to do a little something for him," Jasper said, a flutter to his words.

"Anything I can help with?"

"Well," Jasper said, sounding relieved to hear my offer, "I could maybe use some help with one thing. You got any ideas on how a fella should go about talking to a lady from Mars?"

"You know where there's one to talk to?" I said, kind of taken aback.

"I sure do," Jasper said. "Strange little lady, smokes a corncob and rides a little rocking chair. She's been hanging low over to Doc's house since I saw the hot-air balloon float in three days ago. I mentioned it all to the sheriff."

"He's told me what a good job you'd been doing," I said, though of course the sheriff had kept it all under his hat. Seeing a chance to go one up on Sheriff Huck, I said, "I never did hear how you found that dead Martian."

"Well, at first he wasn't dead,"

Jasper said. "He was arguing with Miss Priscilla about something or other. Right by the well. I was watching from off a ways, ready to help Miss Priscilla if she needed it, though she seemed to be holding her own. They were fighting over money, I maybe think, 'cause the Martian kept saying it wasn't enough, and Miss Priscilla kept saying it was all he was getting, and he was saying he'd see about that, and that's all I can remember 'cause right about then a big wind snapped a tree branch behind me and I got knocked out."

"There ain't no trees on Baldy," I pointed out.

"I hadn't thought of that," Jasper said, and he didn't think much about it now either. With a shrug, he said, "Whatever it was, it conked me good. When I came to, Miss Priscilla and the Martian were gone, so I went over to the well and that's when I saw him."

"Down a black hole in the middle of the night?" I said.

"Well, maybe I didn't see him so much as hear him, kind of moaning away, he was. He didn't sound none too good, so I went down after him, but it didn't do no good. He wasn't breathing by the time I got to him."

"I see. And Miss Priscilla was gone."

"Down to the settler's cabin, I guess. I didn't notice her on account it was on fire."

"It was burning when you came down?"

"Surely was," Jasper said. "But I didn't think much of it, what

with the way those Rodgers boys and their gang like to set things ablaze, and I figured the sheriff would want to know I'd found the Martian, same as he's been wanting to know everything else since I told him I'd seen that balloon."

"What's that everything else including?"

"Not much," Jasper said. "I've kept an eye on the Martian and on that millionaire fella, but don't either of 'em come out, except at night."

"So what they been doing?"

By then Jasper was near bursting with the urge to tell someone all the adventuring and spying he'd been doing on behalf of the sheriff, but what he had to spill wasn't much different than what Calvin James and Nellie Greeley had already told me. Even the part about Doc borrowing all the mirrors in town to talk to Mars was the same. The only new thing he added was how Doc Kingsley was renting his well from him till he was done talking to Mars.

Figuring I knew enough to point a finger where it needed to be pointed, I sent Jasper on his way, hoping he could handle one Martian lady without my help. Be polite, I told him. Call her ma'am, I said, adding that he shouldn't forget to take off his hat. I suppose it was kind of cowardly on my part, but I just didn't want to be the one telling this Martian lady about her husband. If the sheriff had picked Jasper to be the messenger of that news, I figured that this once I'd just guess the sheriff knew best.

The crowd gathered at the smoldering cabin was listening to the sheriff tell how he'd discovered Priscilla. He'd stayed up top of Baldy till dawn, so he'd have some light to scout around by. Not too long past dawn, he decided he'd found all he would and started back down, with Miss Greeley and Jasper for company.

When they got to the settler's cabin, he'd noticed something unusual about the part of the cabin still smoldering. There was a foot sticking out from beneath a timber. It was a foot that wore a ruby-red leather boot of the kind that Miss Priscilla was known to gad about in. It was also a foot that Nellie Greeley hadn't bothered to mention to me, proving she could keep a secret if she had a mind to. That was how the sheriff had discovered Miss Priscilla, though he somehow or other managed to make it sound a lot more heroic and brave, and it was why he'd sent Nellie into town with orders to bring everyone back up the hill. I guess you could say he was stirring his stew.

"I suppose," the sheriff said, turning to the Britches boys, who were gazing down at the ruby-red boots, "that you've got some easy explanation for this one too."

"Don't wet yourself, old timer," Pembroke said. "I didn't do this one either."

"That remains to be seen," Sheriff Huck said. Spotting me on the edge of the crowd, he said, "Deputy Joe, I know you usually

like a go at such mysteries as these. Maybe you can shed some light on all these doings."

"There's been so much going on here," I said, "that it might be hard to unravel."

"Don't be shy, Deputy."

"All right then," I said, rising to the bait the way I always do. "Well, first off, we better straighten out that this here Martian ain't nothing of the kind. He's a circus midget who Doc Kingsley cooked up some kind of deal with, on account of Mr. Calvin James over there was offering a sizable reward to talk to Martians."

"That part about him being a midget is an ignorant lie," said Mr. Calvin James.

"From where I'm sitting," the sheriff said, "it don't sound so ignorant. We all know how Doc Kingsley is."

The Doc, still passed out in the wagon, was unable to spout anything in his own defense, so I plunged on.

"Miss Greeley here recognized the Martian from his circus days," I said. "And identified him by a tattoo."

'Course everyone wanted to know all about the tattoo. Folks just love that kind of stuff, so I filled 'em in quick as I could, then went on with my story.

"The rest of it is pretty easy to follow," I said. "Priscilla and the Martian got to arguing about money. Jasper saw that much. He would have seen more but somebody bushwhacked him from behind. That somebody was Doc Kingsley's hired bodyguard."

That news hiked some eyebrows, 'cause Doc always traveled alone.

"That's the prettiest bunch of hogwash I've heard all week," Deputy Tom said from over beside the sheriff.

"Glad you think so," I said, right back, "seeing's how you were that bodyguard."

"Now hold on here," Deputy Tom said.

"Simmer down," Sheriff Huck said to him. "You'll get your turn. Go on ahead, Deputy Joe. Let's hear it all."

"Not wanting to be outdone by any millionaire fellow from back east, Doc decided he needed to get himself a bodyguard, too. Deputy Tom was available for such work at a pretty reasonable price. A bottle or two of rejuvenating tonic would have been all the payment he took."

"So that's how you managed to stay on a tear all week," Sheriff Huck said to Deputy Tom.

"That's the size of it," I agreed. "Then last night, everything came to a head. Doc sent Priscilla over to his house for the Martian, while he and his bodyguard came up the hill a different way, so it wouldn't seem like him and the Martian had come up together. Doc's bodyguard saw Jasper, who'd followed the Martian and Miss Priscilla, and conked him a good one for some privacy, but it didn't matter none. The millionaire didn't make it up the hill last night on account of something he ate at the hotel."

"Well that part's believable

enough," the sheriff said before Wilhelm could say different.

"Without the millionaire to put on a show for," I said, "the Martian went to arguing with the Doc about what his share of the reward ought to be. He'd already been chewing it over with Miss Priscilla. Pushing led to shoving, and the Martian fell backwards, down the well, accidental like."

Knowing Doc Kingsley as I did, I sure couldn't tolerate it was anything but an accident. He may have fleeced a few pockets, but he was all the time putting bandages on stray dogs and refusing to protect himself in fights. As for Deputy Tom, I figured he was only good for bopping town half-wits from behind. Drunk as he was, he'd never have got the better of any Martian, big or little.

"Soon as it happened," I said, "Deputy Tom ran back down the hill and dove under the covers, so he'd have an alibi—namely me—in the cot next to him."

"Mighty neat work," the sheriff said, eyes twinkling a little too much for my comfort.

Most everyone else was pretty impressed, with a notable exception or two, namely Deputy Tom and the millionaire. Pembroke Britches didn't look exactly ready to sign on either, though he did mutter how it maybe might have gone that way. He no doubt saw some advantages to having one of Sheriff Huck's deputies called out for a crime.

But Miss Greeley had a question, wouldn't you know, and she

called it loud and clear: "You got any explanation for how Miss Priscilla ended up cooked?"

Well, that's where my story fell down kind of bad. All I could think to say was: "She tripped and fell?"

'Course nobody got any satisfaction from such an answer as that. They weren't shy about saying so either. The sheriff quieted 'em all by shouting out:

"Hold on now! Let's hear what my other deputy has to say for himself."

Several people called out that it was only fair, so Deputy Tom stepped forward, kind of crooked like, and looking like he'd been sneaking nips all the way up Baldy, he said, "Old Injun Joe got most everything wrong as usual. The Doc didn't have nothing to do with killing this Martian."

"Well who did?" several asked at once.

"The Martian's wife," Deputy Tom said, half-baked and matter-of-fact like, as only a drunk trying to stand up straight can sound.

"Wife?" several gasped out at once.

"So why she'd do in her husband?" Sheriff Huck asked after everyone quit clucking.

"According to Doc," Deputy Tom said, "that Martian fell head over heels for Miss Priscilla, and was trying to run off with her to Venus, or some such place. When Mrs. Martian caught wind of it, she didn't take kindly to Miss Priscilla at all."

"So the scene was set?" the sheriff said.

"Yes sir, it was. Last night when I came up old Baldy with Doc . . ."

"Hold on now," the sheriff said. "What were you doing with Doc last night?"

"Well," Deputy Tom said, sheepish like, "I guess Injun Joe got one thing right. Doc did hire me for protection. He was mighty scared of that millionaire fella's bodyguard and figured that having a lawman around couldn't do nothing but help."

"Not much it wouldn't have," said the millionaire's manservant, but even he quieted down, what with thirty to forty pairs of eyes all of a sudden looking him over.

"So I signed on," Deputy Tom said, "and when we got up top, there was Jasper conked out, just like he said, and the Martian was lying dead on the ground next to the well . . ."

"Not down the well?" the sheriff asked, sharp like.

"Nope, beside it, and Miss Priscilla wasn't nowhere to be seen."

"And you're saying that Mrs. Martian did 'em both in?" the sheriff asked. "Mighty convenient for us if she did. What makes you think it?"

"'Cause soon as we seen the Martian done in, the Doc wanted to right away race down and get the Martian lady, to help earn the reward, you see. But it wasn't meant to be. When we got back to Doc's, we found out that tricky little old Martian lady had high-tailed it out of town. Near broke Doc's heart. When he saw his last

chance for the reward had gone up in smoke, he heard the bottle calling loud and clear."

"'Course you gave him a hand with that," the sheriff said.

"I sure wasn't going to leave him alone at such a time," Deputy Tom answered back.

"The cabin on fire when you went back to town?" the sheriff asked.

"Nothing smoking yet," Deputy Tom said.

"How do you figure this Martian lady did in both her husband and Miss Priscilla?" the sheriff asked.

"Ain't that what guns is for?"

"They work pretty well that way, yes," the sheriff said. "Deputy Joe, there any gunshots to that Martian?"

"Nope," I said, taking more satisfaction from the answer than I maybe should have.

"And how do you suppose," Sheriff Huck went on, in his thinking-out-loud voice, "the Martian went from lying beside the well when Deputy Tom and Doc got up here, to lying down to the bottom of it by the time Jasper came to?" Raising his voice a notch, the sheriff called out, "Jasper, you did find him down the well, didn't you?"

Jasper stepped out from behind Barnabas, where he'd been hiding himself since rejoining us. The sheriff may have been a rheumy-eyed old cuss, but he sure didn't miss much.

"Yes sir, Sheriff sir," Jasper said. "It was down to the bottom. And Deputy Tom's right about that

Martian lady. She ain't down to Doc's house, nowhere."

We all thought on that a bit, till Deputy Tom had a bright idea and piped up, "Maybe that newspaper woman shoved the Martian down there."

"Miss Greeley?" the sheriff said, as everyone turned to look her over. "How'd she get up top of Baldy in the middle of all this?"

"When the Doc and me were tearing back to town," Deputy Tom said, "we heard someone riding rough up the trail and jumped to the side in time to see that newspaper woman go charging by. She was moving so fast we didn't get no chance to warn her off what was waiting up ahead."

"And why would I have shoved Boy Hillman down the well?" Miss Greeley asked, amazed looking as everyone else.

"Maybe you thought it'd make for a better story," the sheriff said. "More mysterious sounding if he was found down a deep, dark well. I hear tell that writers have been known to gussy up the truth when a certain kind of mood settles over 'em."

"All right," Miss Greeley said. "I'll admit I was up there. But I didn't shove Boy Hillman down the well. He was laying right where your deputy says he was."

"And no Priscilla?"

"Not a jezebel in sight," she said.

"And Jasper?"

"Playing possum right where everyone said."

"I weren't no possum," Jasper said, desperate like.

"I think we can all agree on that," Sheriff Huck said, trying to ease Jasper's mind. "So Miss Greeley, then what happened?"

"I scouted around. Found nothing else and resolved to come back at first light to see if I'd missed something in the dark."

"And what brought you up Baldy in the first place?"

"My story. I'd been following Calvin James up there every night since I got here. Only trouble was, last night he somehow gave me the slip."

"So you're saying he wasn't laid up sick at the hotel?"

"Not by a long shot, he wasn't. He sneaked out the back way."

"And how are you knowing that?"

"I heard him go by my room, which was just down the hall from his, but by the time I got outside, he was gone."

"Any witnesses to what you're saying?" the sheriff asked.

"Why would I need any?" she said. "Your own deputy's said the Martian was already dead by the time I got there."

"Maybe that wasn't your first trip up Baldy last night."

"Now why in the world would I go up there twice?"

"Maybe you forgot a murder weapon?"

"Now just a minute, old timer," Pembroke Britches said, breaking in. "If you've got a mind to hang this whole mess on Miss Greeley, I think you're way off the mark."

"Any particular reason you're thinking so?" the sheriff asked,

sounding willing to entertain confessions from anyone.

“’Cause I followed her up Baldy last night myself.”

That drew a chorus of well-I-nevers from everywhere, including Miss Greeley, who looked shocked herself.

“If that’s so,” Deputy Tom said, “how come me and the Doc didn’t see you?”

“’Cause I heard the two of you arguing on the trail and rode off it behind some trees. Sheriff, I’m bound to say this deputy of yours might not catch a ray of sunshine on a clear day.”

“Maybe not,” the sheriff said, “but then he wasn’t sneaking around after some newspaper woman in the dark either.”

I’d have to say that right there was the line that sunk Pembroke Britches’s chances at ever being elected sheriff in Marquis, Iowa. Sheriff Huck, he had himself a rock-solid feel for what the citizens thereabouts would tolerate, and sneaking around after ladies on horseback wasn’t on the list. Miss Greeley, though, she looked maybe thrilled to have such a big galoot on her trail.

“So what’d you see up Baldy?” the sheriff asked Pembroke.

“Same as everyone else,” he said, stubborn like.

“Except you did something about it, didn’t you?”

“That’d be interfering with the law,” Pembroke said.

“You’re a Britches, ain’t you?” said the sheriff. “There ain’t nobody in that family can stop

himself from meddling with the law.”

“I just didn’t want anybody thinking Miss Greeley had anything to do with all this.”

“So it was you what shoved the body down the well?”

“He was already dead,” Pembroke said, “and I didn’t want any coyotes getting at his remains till you had a chance to see him.”

“I’m flattered,” Sheriff Huck said, “but I’d say it’s more likely that you thought she’d done the deed. Maybe you were hiding the remains so she could get away before the body was found.”

“Is that true?” Miss Greeley said, sounding considerably flattered.

“Oh, I reckon it’s true,” the sheriff said. “The Britches clan is known for jumping to false conclusions wherever they go.” Then, without even turning his head, he added, “Deputy Joe, I think you better go collect Jasper. I expect he’s sneaking off right about now.”

Everybody turned this way and that, soon as he said it, and sure enough, there wasn’t any Jasper to be found. But he hadn’t gotten far. A sharp-eyed boy on the edge of the crowd shouted out, “There he is.”

We all looked where he was pointing and saw Jasper running up the hillside, which wasn’t a smart direction to take off in, not unless you thought like Jasper. He was trying to get to the safest place he knew of in the world—his well. Didn’t do him any good though. Some boys with young

legs ran him down before he got halfway up there. They dragged him back, with him digging his heels in all the way.

While that was going on, some folks were busy recalling all the times they'd spied Jasper mooning around outside Widow Julia's Boarding House, where Miss Priscilla lived, and some were remembering how strong Jasper's hands and arms were from digging his well all these years. There was even some who would have strung him up on the spot, if there had been a tree handy.

Sheriff Huck cooled all that off by raising his six-shooter in the air and pulling off a shot.

"Jasper hasn't done nothing to be strung up for, have you Jasper?"

"I—I don't think so."

"Except maybe pretended to be knocked out longer than you really were. Am I right?"

"Maybe so," he said, hanging his head.

"So you seen all these people traipsing up the hill, just the way they said?"

"I did."

"And you saw old Pembroke shove the body down the well, just the way he said? That's how you knew he was down there, right? Not because you heard him moaning, the way you told earlier."

"That's so," Jasper said.

"Were you worried people would think you'd done it?"

"Sort of."

"That must mean you got some-

thing to tell us about Miss Priscilla, too," the sheriff said.

"I guess so."

"Spill her out," the sheriff said. "You can only help yourself."

"When I came to from being knocked out, the Martian fella was laying on the ground, dead. Miss Priscilla was lying there dead, too. I got to worrying how I'd be blamed for both of 'em, so I was going to hide 'em both, but I only got so far as dragging Miss Priscilla into the tall grass before Deputy Tom and the Doc came tearing up the hill. So I laid myself back down and played dead. And after them came Miss Greeley. And after her came Mr. Britches. And he took care of the Martian. And after all them people had seen the dead Martian, I thought maybe I better do something about Miss Priscilla, excepting I couldn't think where to hide her. Then I remembered what a good job a fire does of making big logs disappear, so I thought maybe that was the best way to hide her, and I dragged her down to the cabin, but it turned out it didn't hide her good enough either."

"There now," the sheriff said, kindly like, "don't that make you feel better?"

"Some. But I still wish Miss Priscilla wasn't gone. She was awful pretty to look at."

"We'll miss her too," the sheriff said, sounding like he'd done some looking her way on occasion. "That's why we all come here. To find out what happened to her and right the scales of justice."

The scales-of-justice stuff was one of the sheriff's routine speeches, and I expected him to go on about it awhile. He surprised me though, launching off in a whole new direction.

"Barnabas," he said, "I've got a question or two for you."

Everybody's head snapped toward Barnabas, who tried to straighten up and look intelligent at the same time.

"How many telegrams you write down this last week?" the sheriff asked.

"Oh twenty or thirty, give or take."

"Any of them have anything to do with Martians?"

"Martians?" he said, scratching his whiskers. "None that I recall."

"How about dealing with men offering rewards for Martians?"

"Now that's a different story," Barnabas said. "There was one telegram come for that millionaire fella over there, but I already told you about that one, Sheriff."

The sheriff and Barnabas spent a lot of time playing checkers, which had always sort of puzzled me, 'cause the sheriff mostly hated games of any kind—they required work. But now I began to see there was a reason he'd put up with all those checker games over the years.

"Now just a minute!" Calvin James sputtered. "That telegram was of a personal nature."

"When it comes to murders," the sheriff said, "personal kind of flies out the window. Tell us what it said, Barnabas."

"Just two words," Barnabas said. "Insufficient funds."

"I see," the sheriff said. "Tom Hooley, has Mr. Calvin James here settled his accounts at the livery?"

"Not blankety-blank yet, he hasn't," Tom Hooley said.

"Sizable one, is it?"

"He's been renting a blank-blank buckboard and my best gold-darn trotter every night for a week. That ain't cheap."

"How about over to the hotel?" sheriff said. "Wilhelm, you seen any of this millionaire's money yet?"

"Not a dime," said Wilhelm. "Not under the teacup or anywhere."

"Seems you're spreading yourself a mite thin," the sheriff said to Calvin James.

"I was intending to settle all those accounts before leaving town."

I saw my chance to chime in and did, saying, "That why you was trying to sneak off on the early morning steamer?"

Mr. Calvin James got mighty quiet, but that didn't slow down the sheriff any. He was getting his pace now.

"I'm going to lay out what I think happened up here, and if I'm wrong, you just holler."

Of course the sheriff had to cup a hand to his chin a minute before beginning. He loved drama, when he was at the center of it.

"The way I'm seeing it, Mr. Calvin James here is a man mighty hard up for funds. Too hard up to be paying a fifty thou-

sand dollar reward to Doc for putting him in touch with any Martians. On the other hand, from everything I've seen, he just might be the only fella hereabouts who was hard up enough to believe that a dead circus performer was really a Martian."

"He was a Martian," Calvin James said, all stubborn.

"Says who?" said the manservant, though at the moment he didn't sound like much of a servant.

"Or," the sheriff went on, ignoring the interruption, "he might just be hard up enough to think he maybe could line his pockets some if he went around appearing to believe he was talking to a Martian. There's probably some money to be made with a real live Martian. People might shell out hard cash to see such a creature. So Mr. Calvin James here, he put his head together with Miss Priscilla and came up with a scheme to steal this Martian away and take him on a tour of the world, excepting that the Martian fella got to wanting a bigger slice of the pie than is proper. In fact, the little fella was arguing with Miss Priscilla 'bout it when Mr. Calvin James and his manservant got up here last night. They saw Jasper spying on the Martian—on my orders—and so took him out with a knock to the head. After that, Mr. Calvin James got a little hot over some circus performer trying to get more than his share, so told him he'd maybe find a Martian who'd tour for less, to which the Martian probably said, fine, just you try it

and I'll blow the whistle on it. At which point I'm thinking things got a little out of hand, and this here giant that Mr. Calvin James calls a servant, but what looks to me more like a prize-fighter down on his luck, started roughing up the Martian. Miss Priscilla, sweet child that she was, tried stopping him, and the first thing you know, there were two dead bodies up top of Baldy."

Everybody stood still as coffins after hearing all that. The manservant had raised his fists, so nobody wandered in too close to him, though some of the younger hot-bloods were circling and snapping at him, the way hounds will worry a bear. Calvin James broke the silence by saying defiantly: "Prove it."

"Why that's just what I aim to do," the sheriff said. "'Cause I think there's probably one last witness to all that occurred up here, and I think it's a witness who's still alive 'cause you need her to rebuild your fortune. I'm talking about that Martian's wife."

"And where would she be?" Calvin James said, sounding might smug about it.

Where indeed? The sheriff went to holding his chin again, but he didn't have to do it for long, 'cause in a flash, I knew where the lady Martian had got to.

"I'll bet she's in one of them big trunks of his," I blurted. "Down to the levee."

The sheriff, liking the way that news turned Mr. Calvin James worse than ashen white, said,

"That's a funny place to keep her. Maybe we better go see how she feels about all this."

The whole crowd of us headed back to town, with one exception. Deputy Tom got told to stay with Priscilla's remains. He whined considerable about it, but Sheriff Huck told him the jury was out on whether he'd still have a job deputying after the way he forgot to mention a little thing like finding a dead man atop Mount Baldy. There wasn't much Deputy Tom could say back to that, except to hang his head and mutter that it was the bottle that did it.

"Well," the sheriff said, "if you don't go thinking it's the bottle that will undo it, maybe you'll still be a lawman come next week."

Like I've said, the sheriff was awful partial to having a deputy named Tom who he could get the better of on a regular basis.

The rest of us plunged down the hill. As usual, I brought up the rear, driving the wagon. Doc was snoring in back. Barnabas was in back, too, complaining about bumps. Mr. Calvin James was sitting up front with me, where I could keep an eye on him with the sheriff's six-shooter. For once Mr. Calvin James wasn't complaining about nothing, at least not out loud, but you could sure feel him thinking it. Sullivan, the manservant, was tied up in back with the Doc, where he couldn't do any harm. He was doing his complaining out loud.

"If you bunch of gnats would

have come at me one at a time, like men, you wouldn't have me here now."

I didn't dispute him on that point. I didn't say nothing at all, except for when Doc woke up, saw the manservant tied down next to him, and wanted to know if he'd gone to hell or was just waiting his turn in purgatory.

"Neither," I said. "We're headed to the levee."

He passed out again, looking relieved.

Down to the levee, Sheriff Huck was cracking open the lock on a fair-sized steamer trunk that was rocking back and forth ever so slightly. Inside, we found the Martian lady, all tied and gagged. She may have been small in stature, but she was plenty big in heart.

"Calvin James," she said, once ungagged, "if you think kidnapping me's the answer to your troubles, then you're dumber than you look."

Seeing as how Calvin James didn't have a word to say back, that Martian lady went on to tell pretty much the same story as the sheriff had laid out, with one exception. She swore up and down that no husband of hers had any plans to run off with some painted medicine-show floozy. The way her eyes looked all wetted up and ready to flood her out, no one disputed her on it, not in her grief.

So the sheriff had wrapped up another murder case, though he didn't look none too happy over it. He looked like all he wanted to do was go home and sleep for a

week. I guess maybe he'd earned it, and whether he had or not, that's what he did. Deputy Tom kept mighty sober for a week or two, but Doc Kingsley hit the bottle for just as long, moaning that he'd warned Priscilla not to trust a millionaire. It wasn't too long after Doc drank himself sober—as he liked to say—that the missing mirrors started showing up in folks' homes, put right back where they belonged.

Calvin James somehow or other hired a fancy lawyer all the way from Quincy, Illinois, to represent him, but that only lasted till the lawyer caught wind of how many unsettled accounts Mr. James had spread around Marquis. After the lawyer left him high and dry, Calvin James tried to blame it all on his manservant, and his manservant tried to throttle him good in return. After we got the two of them separated, we soon enough had a confession

from both of 'em, each accusing the other one, of course. The judge said he wished he could send 'em both to Mars, but in the meanwhile, since he never did get to the bottom of exactly which one had done what, he sent 'em both away for a long, long time.

The Martian lady took up residence right there in Marquis, where she opened up a little breakfast counter that became a town fixture. Jasper showed up at Lady Small's Café for breakfast every morning, ordering a short stack of buckwheats to fortify him for his day of well digging.

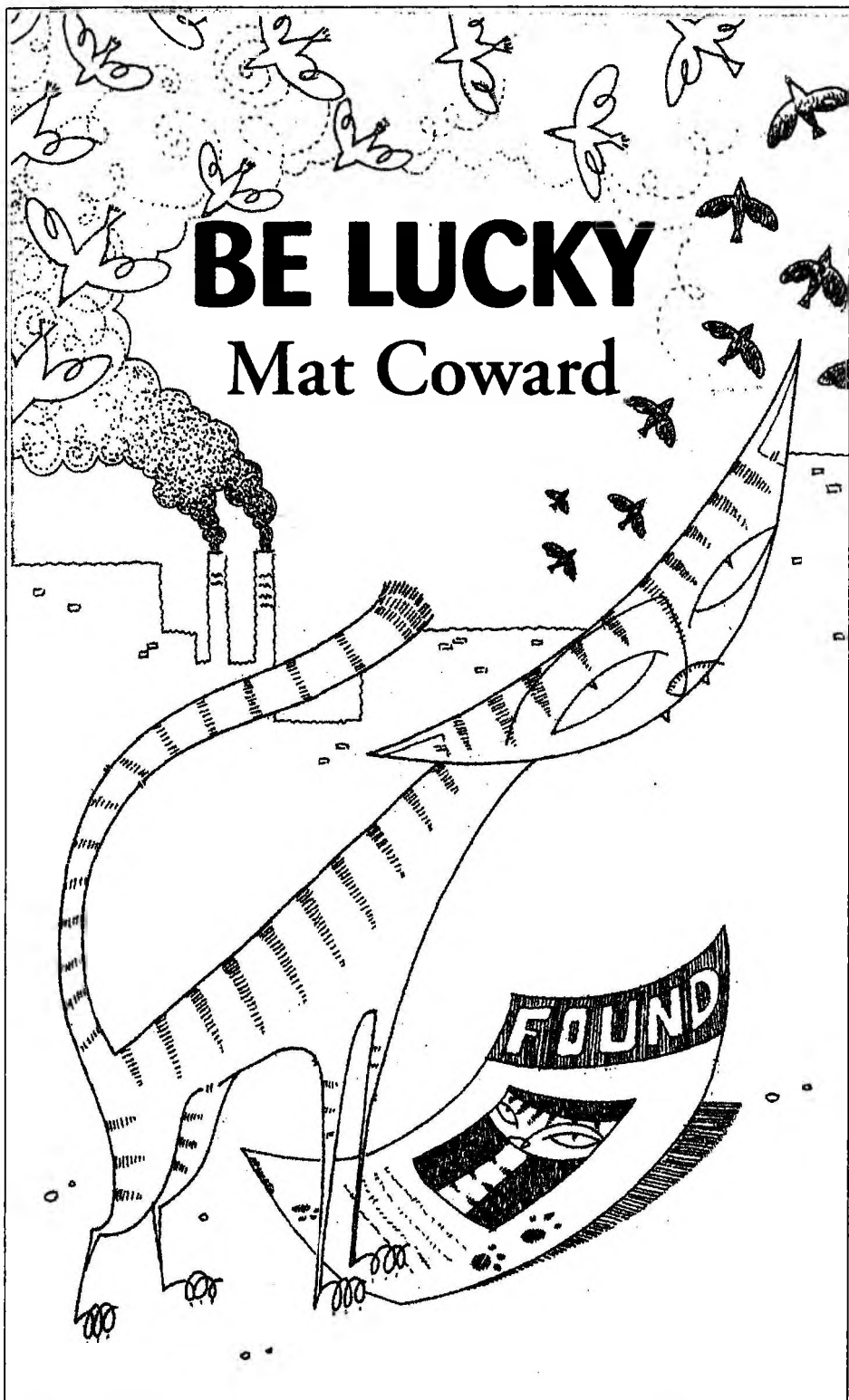
There was one other shocker came of all this, and that involved Pembroke Britches and that newspaper lady, Miss Greeley. They ran off to St. Louis together and got hitched. Sheriff Huck said it served 'em right, but he said it kind of quiet like. As a politician, he knew that nobody liked a sore winner.

Important Notice to Subscribers: Please direct all change of address or other subscription inquiries to P.O. Box 54011, Boulder, CO 80322-4011. For change of address, please advise six to eight weeks before moving. Please send us your current mailing label and new address.

For Back Issues: Send your check for \$5.00 (U.S. funds) to Alfred Hitchcock's Mystery Magazine, Suite 100, 6 Prowitt Street, Norwalk, CT 06855-1220. Please specify the issue you are ordering. Add \$2.00 per copy for delivery outside the U.S.

BE LUCKY

Mat Coward



We all have our own prejudices, of course, except that in my more extreme moments of self-loathing I sometimes think that I have not only my own, but everyone else's, too. Why else should I feel such a deep, instinctive dislike of small men with wigs? As far as I could remember, no syrup-wearing shrimp had ever done me any harm.

All prejudices are irrational. They're even more so when the object of the phobia is offering you paid work.

"I fully comprehend that this is slightly outside your usual line of work," Mr. Thorpe said, as he led me through the quiet factory to the courtyard behind. "Charlie WFYC—that's what it says on your flyer, isn't it?"

"That's right," I said. "Charlie—"

"Will Find Your Cat. Right, absolutely, I figured that one out."

"Oh." I usually enjoy the moment when the client asks me what WFYC stands for—and God knows, I don't enjoy much that occurs in the life of the professional cat finder. Time to get a new slogan?

"What we would want you to do, if you can see your way to helping us out here, is to go about things sort of arse-backwards."

I checked out his expression with a quick downwards glance. If he was making humorous reference to my very slightly pear-shaped figure, he might live to regret it. As a rug-carrying titch, I mean.

In the event, I saw nothing on his face but friendly openness and an unconvincing fringe. "Backwards in what sense?"

"Well, here's the thing, Charlie." He pushed the sleeves of his short-sleeved shirt farther up his short arms. It was a warm autumn Sunday in outer London, and I found myself wondering whether he wore the wig during heat waves. "We've already got a cat—what we'd like you to do is find out where it's come from."

That was a little out of my line, he was right. What usually happened was that a cat went missing, its owners called me in, I set a few baited live-traps in nearby gardens, and waited for the mog to trigger one of them. It was pretty much a percentage game; often, the animal would be dead or gone before I showed up, meaning I wouldn't get a result. But if it was still in the area, the chances were high that I'd find it. Or, strictly speaking, that it would find one of my traps.

There again, we live in an exciting era of corporate diversification.

"Shouldn't be a problem, Mr. Thorpe. Reuniting cats with their owners is my business, whichever way you look at it."

"Excellent!" Mr. Thorpe smiled and stood back politely to usher me through the back doors. "With any luck, Runover should be around here somewhere now, and you can get a look at him."

"Runnaver?"

He spelled it for me. "That's what one of the lads in the factory calls

it. You know how you're always seeing posters on lampposts for lost cats called Lucky?"

I nodded. "And you think to yourself—if he's so lucky, why isn't he at home eating pilchards?"

"Exactly. Well, Jim—the employee I mentioned—he said maybe if you gave them *unlucky* names to begin with, it might protect them from harm."

"Not a bad idea," I lied. We were standing in a space about the size of a large suburban garden. Judging by the cracked tarmac, infiltrated over the years by buddleia and stinging nettles, it had once been used as a loading area or perhaps a parking space. Judging by the ankle-deep layer of cigarette butts, it was now used primarily for smoke breaks. At the far end, the yard resembled a young jungle.

"Now, let's see." Mr. Thorpe put his arm into an old oil drum and produced a packet of cat biscuits which he rattled vigorously. Without even a second's delay, a yowl and a thin tabby exploded from the bushes. I'm not sure which reached us first: the cat or the cat's noise. A physicist could probably tell you—but then, could a physicist do what I do?

"That's Runover," said Mr. Thorpe.

"Right," I said, but in fact Mr. Thorpe was mistaken and I was lying. The cat's name wasn't Runover. It was Lucky, and he and I had met before.

I find lost cats for a living, but I make it a rule not to get involved in anything related to social work. Good deeds always lead to complications.

At the same time, rules always lead to exceptions.

The previous summer, my shambling path through the misadventure men call life had happened to cross with that of a young tabby named Lucky—and no matter how hard I'd tried not to notice, I was unable to escape the conclusion that Lucky's owners were about as fit to keep a pet as I was to own a health farm. Mr. Harvey worked in insurance. Mrs. Harvey drank vodka. They were both dedicated to their work, but I hadn't taken to them.

So I stole the cat. (I prefer to avoid using terms like *rescued* or *liberated*, because I fear they have the potential to become habit forming.) Even at the time, I knew it was a mistake to intervene. I told myself that I had to stop letting my soft head rule my hard heart.

But Lucky had an untreated cut on one of his paws, predating his adventures in the wilderness, which was starting to stink, and I was perfectly certain that neither Mr. or Mrs. Harvey were going to cough up for a vet to look at it. They seemed, to put it mildly, somewhat self-involved types.

Lottie Edwards—or Dotty Lottie, as she always introduced herself—was not a full-blown Cat Lady, as such. She was merely an old woman of limited income and unlimited vigor who enjoyed the company of mistreated animals, neglected children, and even weary, middle-aged cat finders. Her chief hobby, by her own admission, was “causing posterior pains to them as deserves it.”

She was the daughter of a Welsh miner, a man who had fought against Franco’s fascists in Spain and been killed by Hitler’s fascists in North Africa. She was also the nearest person I could think of who, upon having a stolen cat with a stinking wound dumped on her in the middle of the night by a disheveled, beer-scented man, wouldn’t react in a tiresomely predictable bourgeois manner. Like slamming the door in my face, or dialing 999 and screaming “Police! Fire Brigade! Psychiatrist!”

Lucky soon recovered under her care and on the two or three times I’d seen him since, he’d seemed to be enjoying life. At any rate, he’d sat on my lap and licked his bottom while I ate Lottie’s cherry cake, which I took to be a sign of contentment.

Yet according to Mr. Thorpe, the cat had been living rough at the factory for a week. I couldn’t think of any reason why Lucky would want to leave home. Worse, I couldn’t think of any reason why, if he *did* leave home, Lottie wouldn’t get in touch with me and ask me to find him.

Except one reason.

With the economy booming—which is a word economists use to describe an economy during those rare phases when it’s actually doing what it is supposed to do all the time—the bedding factory was taking on more workers and planned to reclaim its backyard jungle from the weeds and the urban foxes. And, obviously, from Lucky. The guys who worked there were worried about what would become of “Runover” and were willing to pay me to find his owner. In the meantime, I agreed to trap Runover there and then, and take him into protective custody.

I thought I was being clever, winning myself a few days’ wages for free, since I already knew who owned the cat and where she lived. I really should have remembered: another of my rules, in addition to avoiding good deeds, is to avoid cleverness. It always leads to complications. By the time I’d settled Lucky in his cage on the back seat of my alleged car and chauffeured him back to my place, I was already feeling uneasy.

Lottie’s house was in the middle of a quiet, horseshoe-shaped road about a mile and a half from the factory. I rang the front doorbell, but wasn’t too surprised when I didn’t get a reply. Lottie refused to wear a hearing aid on the grounds that there wasn’t “a damn thing

wrong with my hearing." It was my opinion that she was so deaf she wouldn't be able to hear her own heart through a stethoscope, but when I had once mentioned this to her she'd demanded to know which medical school I'd graduated from, and what my patients thought of me spending all day chasing cats.

I went round the back and rapped on the glass of the kitchen door. If she hadn't heard the doorbell she was hardly likely to hear my knuckles, so after waiting a ceremonial couple of minutes, I slid her spare key from underneath a concrete hedgehog and let myself in.

The first thing I saw was an unwashed saucepan in the sink, and I knew straight away that Lottie was dead.

That generation, that type, that background—they didn't neglect or postpone doing their washing-up for precisely the same reason that they didn't neglect or postpone helping a sick neighbor, or taking sandwiches to a man on a picket line, or fighting fascism. Because life is hard, and you do what needs to be done, and you do it neatly without making a big fuss about it.

I sat down at her kitchen table and smoked a cigarette, and flinched with shame when a speck of ash fell on Lottie's linoleum. Not that the speck was especially noticeable on the grimy floor; Lottie was house proud, but even she couldn't clean up dirt she couldn't see, and she'd always refused to wear glasses because there wasn't a damn thing wrong with her eyes.

The tobacco having fortified me, I set to searching the house for her body. There were only two bedrooms and two living rooms in Lottie's house, but the search took me longer than it might have simply because Lottie wasn't there.

She wasn't in the downstairs lavatory. There was a pile of post and free newspapers on the floor in the hall, the dates on which told me that Lottie hadn't been home for at least five days.

She wasn't in the bathroom upstairs. On the landing, I looked up at the tiny trapdoor leading to the loft, several feet above my head. There was no ladder. Allowing for perspective, I compared the dimensions of the trap with those of my bottom, and decided that if Lottie was up there then she could bloody well stay there, since she was clearly in better shape than I was, dead or alive.

I went back out through the kitchen door and looked around the small garden. The lawn could have done with a trim, and the sweet peas needed picking, but other than that everything was neat enough. Certainly, there were no corpses littering the flower beds.

Maybe she wasn't dead. Maybe she was in hospital. No, that couldn't be it: she had a niece in south London. They didn't get on all that well, but the niece would surely have been informed if her aunt had been admitted to hospital and would have come to the house at least once

in the last week to pick up the post, wash the pan in the sink. Feed the cat.

The cat . . .

Supposing Lottie had found Lucky missing, what would she have done? Eventually, she would have phoned me—I hope—but first she would have done what everyone with a lost cat does: walked the neighborhood, checking the curbsides for furry death. It's a job that just about every cat owner since the dawn of roads has had to do at least once in their lives. It was also the only job I could think of that held sufficient urgency to cause a woman like Lottie to leave her washing-up undone.

But I knew that Lucky wasn't lying dead in a gutter. So—was it possible that Lottie's imaginings might eventually have turned to Lucky's original owners? She knew who they were, and she knew where they lived. If she thought there was any possibility that the Harveys had stolen their cat back, she would have gone to see them. She would; she was that sort.

A noted feature of life is its tendency to create unpleasant patterns. I had reason to ponder on this as I stood outside the Harveys' house, looking at the estate agent's For Sale sign stuck on a pole in the mossy front lawn. A quick squint through the downstairs windows was enough to confirm that the house was empty: no furniture, no Harveys.

It was a semi-detached house. I knocked at the door of its other half. The woman who answered was older than me, not as old as Lottie, and thinner than both of us put together and divided by six. She shivered against the cold on this mild, sunny day.

"Sorry to trouble you. I was hoping to have a word with your neighbors, the Harveys. But they don't seem to be in."

"No, they wouldn't be. They've gone."

"Gone? Oh, dear, I didn't know they were planning to move."

She smiled. "No, well. I expect you're a debt collector, are you?"

"Well, you know, I'm not really allowed to talk about that." That was where I'd ended up, early in my sixth decade: preferring to be taken for a debt collector rather than face the embarrassment of explaining what I really did for a living. "You don't happen to know where they've gone?"

"No idea, love. They were here one day, gone the next."

Everyone's always here one day and gone the next, I thought. How could it be otherwise? "Well, I never," I said. "How very strange."

"Strange," she said, "isn't the half of it. First thing I knew, one morning about a week ago, crack of dawn, almost before the birds got up, him—Mr. Harvey—he parks a big van outside the house, and him and her—Mrs. Harvey—they start loading everything onto it. Then they were off, him in the van, her following in the car."

“A self-drive van, then?”

She looked puzzled. “Well, you *have* to drive them yourself, don’t you, love? I mean, they don’t go on their own, do they?”

“Of course. Good point. And did they—”

“Parked it outside *my* half, naturally. Which was typical. Not that I care, just glad they’ve gone. Not very nice people.”

“No?”

“Nooo.” She shook her head. “Very abrupt, not friendly at all. Not even with each other, if you ask me, let alone their neighbors.”

“Good riddance, then,” I said, which earned me a wrinkled smile and a throaty chuckle. “It came as a surprise, though, their decision to move?”

“Complete surprise. The For Sale sign didn’t go up until the day after they left. They won’t sell it in such a hurry, though. The housing market’s dead around here just now.” She pulled her cardigan tighter around her bosom and added: “If you ask me, they’ve done a moonlight flit. That’s what we’d have called it in my day. A moonlight flit.”

I tutted. “In daylight, too.”

She sniffed. “Well, that’s the sort they were, frankly. Mind, that never has been a very happy house, that one hasn’t.”

“No?”

Her gray-orange hair rattled with horrified delight. “No, no indeed. Not the previous owner, but the one before that—he was murdered!”

“Murdered?”

“Yes, yes he was. By his own wife!”

I looked up at the bedroom windows. I don’t know why I assumed the owner before the previous one had been killed upstairs rather than downstairs. It just seemed right, somehow, this being the suburbs. “So, this is a bona fide House of Death.” I smiled at the old woman like an idiot, hoping to impress her with a display of shared enthusiasms.

“Yes! Yes, indeed. Oh, yes. Well, no, not technically. He was actually murdered in Torquay.”

“Torquay?”

She nodded. “They’d moved down there to be nearer their daughter.”

“That’s nice. So many families don’t get on that well.”

“It was their eldest daughter.” She pushed her face closer to mine and added, in a conspiratorial croak: “She was married to a *chiro-podist*, if you like!”

I couldn’t think of anything to say to that, so I said it. “Well, I never. It’s a funny old world.”

“Funny,” she said, “isn’t the half of it.”

Two houses suddenly empty, within a mile of each other, and a cat to connect them. It didn’t sound like coincidence. Or rather, it *did*

sound like coincidence—because that’s what the word means, after all—but it left me feeling ill at ease.

I couldn’t care less what had happened to the Harveys. But I was worried about Lottie. And, to be honest, I didn’t want to get landed with her cat.

I considered phoning her niece—her name and number would presumably be in the house—but if I did do that, and it turned out I was wrong and Lottie wasn’t dead . . . well, she’d kill me. Lottie was keen on independence, and significantly less keen on interference. Unless it was her doing the interfering, needless to say.

Same went for the police—for now, at least. If I hadn’t found her by the next day, I’d have to rethink.

It wasn’t that I wasn’t sure she was dead, because I was. It’s just that as long as there was any slight doubt about the matter at all, I didn’t want to risk facing her wrath. They built them tough in her day. The Lotties of this world reckon it’s human to err, and unthinkable to forgive.

Meanwhile, I still couldn’t figure out how Lucky had ended up at the factory.

Back to Lottie’s street, therefore, and a door-to-door canvass. It struck me that I talked to more neighbors in the course of an ordinary working week than most suburbanites do in a leap year. None of them were my neighbors, granted, but still.

Next door to Lottie lived a short, hostile man wearing a wig. Perhaps being short and wearing wigs was this year’s look for the discerning gent, and no one had bothered to tell me.

He also wore thick specs, and spoke with a fake posh accent. I dimly remembered Lottie mentioning him; they weren’t on neighborly terms, for reasons I either hadn’t heard or couldn’t recall. Or maybe it was just because he was an unfriendly little tosser.

A pair of expensive binoculars hung around his neck. I wondered if he needed these to supplement his poor sight, or his lack of height, or whether he had a legitimate use for them, such as chronic voyeurism.

I didn’t get a chance to ask him. Our conversation was brief. No, he didn’t know the “old bat next door” was missing; no, he didn’t know where she might have gone; and no, he didn’t give a damn, thank you very much, as he had better things to worry about.

Several other neighbors were out. Or hiding. Or maybe they’d vanished, too. Eventually, on the other side of the street and several houses along, a door was answered by a girl of seventeen or eighteen. Her hair was about seven different colors, perhaps to offset the uniform gray-blackness of her clothes. Her face was pretty and her eyes showed she knew it. I asked her if she knew Lottie. I described Lottie and pointed out her house.

The girl flicked her hair out of her eyes. "Oh yeah, sure."

It wasn't the most convincing witness statement I'd ever heard. "Do you?"

The girl nodded. "Almost certainly."

"Almost certainly."

She flicked her hair back into her eyes. "Well, if not almost certainly, then definitely almost possibly."

You've got to admire some of these youngsters. In my day, we had to take drugs to get so vague. "Okay. Well, have you seen anything odd around here lately?"

She flicked her hair out of her eyes. Why didn't she just get it cut? "Who are you, police?"

"No," I said and gave her my card.

She stared at it for about a year, flicking her hair to and fro and simultaneously wrinkling her nose. I believe that's called multi-tasking. "Charlie WFYC?"

"Will Find Your Cat," I said. "I find cats," I added, in case she hadn't got that bit.

"You're a *cat detective*?"

"Well, yes, you could say that."

She shook her head. A pity, after all the work she'd put in on her hairdo. "Nah—there's no such thing. Ridiculous idea."

"It is a ridiculous idea," I allowed. "But then so are kangaroos, and nobody doubts their existence."

She stared at the card for another eon. "Can you prove you're what you say you are?"

I was almost flattered; the very idea that someone might *pretend* to be a cat finder. "Well, I have written testimonials."

"Really?"

"Sure. Though none of them are actually published yet. Look, why don't you just take my word for it, and then if it turns out I'm lying, you can sue me for trauma."

Sudden boredom descended on her almost visibly. She shrugged. "Yeah, whatever. We've got a cat, you know."

"Oh, yes?"

"Yeah. Woofy."

"Woofy?"

"Yeah. We were expecting a dog." She shielded her eyes against the sun, and smiled at me for the first time. "Do you want to come in and have a look at him?"

More than I want to wake up tomorrow, I thought. But what I said was: "No thanks, I'm in a bit of a hurry."

She nodded. "Looking for a lost woman."

"Sort of."

"Suppose it makes a change from cats."

“But you don’t have any idea where Lottie might be?”

“Lottie?”

Oh, for heaven’s sake. “The lost woman.”

“Oh, right. No.”

“Okay, then. Thanks for your time.”

I got as far as the pavement before she called me back.

“Oh hey—cat detective. Few nights ago, I saw an old girl jogging down the street in her dressing gown and slippers.”

“What time was this?”

“Five-ish? I was just coming home.”

I walked back up the path. “From work?”

She snorted. “From out. Five in the *morning*.”

Right. Obviously. Charlie, you are not only not as young as you used to be, you’re not even as young as that any more. “Why didn’t you mention this earlier, when I asked if you’d seen anything odd?”

She shrugged. “I didn’t know if that was the kind of thing you meant.”

Maybe Lottie wasn’t dead, I thought. Maybe she just ran screaming from her nut-job neighbors.

I was wearing ruts in the road between the Harveys’ place and Lottie’s.

Hoping, for once, not to encounter any helpful neighbors, I went down the Harveys’ side path and into the back garden. The garden was a mess—the kind of mess that comes from long-term neglect, rather than sudden abandonment. Picking my way through ankle-high grass and patches of brambles, I peered in through the living-room windows. I suppose I was looking for one of those clue things you hear about, something that might tell me where they’d gone. But if there were any clues there, I didn’t spot them.

The garage window was thick with old dust, and all I could see through it was a lot of large cardboard boxes—packing cases that had proved surplus to requirements, presumably—and several bottles of what looked like paint thinner. It occurred to me that the Harveys’ garage wouldn’t be a good place to smoke a careless cigarette, but other than that I remained uninspired.

I drove home and fed Lucky, then sat on my front step for a while, trying to work out a sensible course of action. Or even any course of action, if sensible was asking too much.

Lucky disappears from his home, and ends up at a bedding factory more than a mile away; I didn’t know how or why. Lottie presumably goes searching for him, possibly at the Harveys’. The Harveys then take off in a self-drive furniture van, possibly or probably (I couldn’t remember which, if I’d ever known) on the same day. Could

Lottie have followed them? What—in her dressing-gown and slippers? On foot?

Towards the end of my second cigarette, I had an idea. I only get about one idea a year, on average, and there's no guarantee that it's going to be a good one.

I went back inside, checked the Yellow Pages, and started dialing. The van hire company—or so my annual idea had suggested—must have the Harveys' new address, in order to collect their vehicle.

I told them I was from the estate agency selling the Harvey property, and that I needed to get in touch with the Harveys urgently, and that our computer was down. That was an expression I'd heard bank clerks use: "Our computer is down." I didn't really know what it meant, but it sounded like the sort of excuse that covered most eventualities.

My seventh call turned out to be the one I should have made first, which wasn't bad—usually it's the twenty-seventh. I told Lucky to make himself at home (looking meaningfully at the litter box as I did so), got in my car, and set off for a village in Suffolk.

Suffolk was a fair drive away, but frankly I was relieved to hear they hadn't moved to Torquay. There are only so many unpleasant patterns I can stomach per case.

At dusk, I arrived outside a small cottage on a large plot in a flat part of the country that looked as if it had approximately the same population density as the North Pole.

There was no reply from the front door, possibly because I didn't knock there. I'm more of a back-door man, by experience if not by nature.

Round the back, the first thing I saw was Mr. Harvey digging over the empty vegetable plot. It looked as if he was coming to the end of a few days' work: almost the whole patch of land had been turned. You could tell from his awkward posture that he was an insurance man by trade, not a spade wielder. From where I stood, I could hear his joints popping.

I strolled down the path towards his aching back. "You must be a keen gardener." I could see packing cases through the window; he was such a keen gardener that he'd dug the garden over even before they'd finished unpacking.

He jumped at the sound of my voice. "What?"

"I said it's hot work, all that digging."

He stabbed his spade into the sandy earth and wiped a grubby sleeve across his brow. "Oh well, you've got to keep up appearances, you know. Can't let the weeds get out of control."

I put my hand out and he took off a glove and we shook hands. "Hello, Mr. Harvey. Don't know if you remember me?"

He looked away for a moment, as if he was hoping that when he looked back I'd be gone. I wasn't, so he answered my question. "Yes, I remember you. You're the guy that found our cat for us. Waste of time, as it turned out."

"Oh?"

"Yep. Bloody animal disappeared again a few days later. We should have called you in again, I suppose, but—I don't know, we just couldn't face going through all that again."

Or couldn't face spending the money. Or couldn't afford it, maybe. Or they bought themselves a cat trap and tried the DIY approach. "I'm sorry to hear that. You never got him back the second time?"

"Nope. It was very upsetting for my wife. Well, for both of us really."

The strange thing was, looking at his sweaty face as he spoke, I believed him. They couldn't be bothered to take good care of their cat, but that didn't mean they didn't miss having it about. People are complicated. That's one of the main things I have against them.

"Anyway," he said. "What brings you here?"

I nodded towards the spade sticking out of the soil. "Oh, I was just passing," I said. "Thought I might give you a hand digging your garden."

His sigh said that from the moment he'd jumped and looked round and recognized me as someone from the old neighborhood, he'd known it was all up. "You wouldn't believe what a mess . . . Look, we didn't kill her."

"Okay."

He took his glasses off and rubbed violently at his eyes. "We didn't kill her. It was an accident. The whole thing was—it's just a big mess."

"If I found a dead body in a van, and the body was nothing to do with me and I'd done nothing wrong, I'd simply ring the cops and let them sort it out. I don't think I'd bury her in the garden of a cottage I'd just that day moved into, and hope that was an end to it," I said. "I trust that doesn't make me sound like too much of a goody-goody."

We were sitting in the kitchen of the cottage. Mr. Harvey and I were drinking coffee. Mrs. Harvey was drinking a colorless liquid from a tall glass. Mr. Harvey and I were smoking; Mrs. Harvey wasn't. Perhaps she was a health freak.

They were both pale-faced and dark-eyed, and both were trembling. They looked as if they'd been subjected to intimate outrages by a tribe of wild vampires. Neither of them were saying much. Presumably, they wanted to find out how much I knew. Which made three of us.

"Just insurance money, isn't it, Mr. Harvey? Not like real money. Doesn't really belong to anyone. A victimless crime."

“Oh God,” said Mr. Harvey.

So, I knew more than I’d realized. “But fire . . . people do get hurt in fires, or so it’s rumored.”

He drew on his cigarette and said, “Only a small fire. Just enough to make the house unsellable.”

“Oh, I see. Right. One of those *small* fires. Yeah, of course, you buy those in special tins. ‘Small Fire Only’ written on the lid.”

Mr. Harvey went back to saying nothing.

“Doesn’t the fact that the house would be empty at the time of the fire affect the insurance policy?”

He smirked. Down and out for the count, he could still raise a smirk. What a tough guy. “I am in the business, you know. I do know how to read a policy.”

I went over to the fridge and mixed myself a glass of what Mrs. Harvey was having. Not that it seemed to be doing her much good, but then different medicines affect different people in different ways. After taking half of it internally, I certainly felt a little better.

“If you leave a house empty and a few days later it burns down, won’t that have the claims people sniffing pretty hard?”

“Sure. And what they’ll find is a total lack of motive.” He gestured at the walls around us with a twirling finger. “This place. We own it, as of a fortnight ago.”

“A late aunt?”

“Some sort of cousin, in fact. Of the wife’s. I never met her. Point being, appearances matter. We have assets, and no debts.”

“You now own two houses—surely you wouldn’t be greedy enough to rip off the insurance as well. Yeah, I see your thinking.”

He nodded enthusiastically. “Right! Nobody suspects a rich man of being a pickpocket.”

“I’m not sure about that. You ask anyone who works in a hotel—more towels get nicked from the penthouse suite than from anywhere else.”

“Timing, you see,” Mr. Harvey continued. He nodded very slightly in the direction of his wife. “Money goes nowhere these days.”

I almost felt guilty about the vodka in my glass. He was right; that stuff isn’t cheap. Even the cheap stuff. “You certainly thought it all through, Mr. Harvey.”

“Well, naturally.” He looked very pleased with himself now. He was still pale and he was still shaking and his wife was still just staring at me, sucking in vodka through a closed mouth; but he did look pleased with himself, as if he knew that he’d given a tricky client his best spiel, and was confident that it had, as usual, done the trick. “Who better to rob a bank than a bank clerk?”

“Absolutely. And who better to dig a garden,” I said, taking out my

mobile phone, “than half a dozen big fat coppers with an inflatable tent and a growly dog?”

Mrs. Harvey spoke to me directly for the first time. “Get your thieving hands off my vodka, cat-man,” she said.

One thing about mornings that really gets me, amongst all the many things about mornings that really get me, is the way that a new morning seems to come along when you’re only just beginning to get over the previous one.

It had been a late night. A long day, a grisly evening, and a late night.

The police had found Lottie’s body buried in Mr. Harvey’s vegetable garden. I formally identified her, in exchange for which a chatty young DC, wearing big earrings and bright lipstick, told me that there seemed to be “no immediate signs of foul play.” She had probably died from suffocation or hypothermia or heart attack or old age or a combination of all the above.

The Harveys claimed they’d found her dead in the van when they came to unpack it on the morning after their move, and I was inclined to believe them. I could only give the cops a guesswork version of the story, but since that was all they had to go on, they were happy enough to hear it.

Lottie thought the Harveys had stolen her cat. (“Why would she think that?” the DC asked me. I didn’t want to get into my own cat-stealing history, so I just shrugged and said, “Well, you know, she was old, confused,” thinking all the while *I hope the afterlife is a myth, or else she will definitely come back and haunt me.*) When she arrived at their house, she saw they were moving—taking her cat with them, she feared. She had no car, so her only hope of following them was to hide amid the packing cases in the van. The journey was long and the night was cold and Lottie was wearing her nightclothes.

“Her father fought the fascists in Spain,” I said.

“Really?” said the young DC, who clearly had no idea that there had ever been any fascists in Spain to fight. She smiled kindly, though, through her bright lipstick.

The Harveys didn’t know who Lottie was, what she was doing there, or how she had died—but they knew they couldn’t afford to have the police nosing around while they were planning their victimless arson. Hence the horticulture.

Mr. Harvey’s own version was slightly different. He and his wife, traumatized by their recent bereavement, had been unable to deal rationally with the death of another old lady so soon. Hence the horticulture. By the time I arrived, he’d recovered from his panic and was in fact in the process of digging the old girl up before dialing 999. As for the conversation we’d had in the kitchen, it never hap-

pened. I was making it all up—no doubt suffering from some species of trauma myself.

The police clearly preferred my story but admitted that a prosecution concerning the insurance scam was unlikely. The Harveys would be charged with failing to report a death, but Lottie's intervention—and mine—had saved them from more serious trouble, as Mr. Harvey had never got round to actually lighting the cardboard and paint thinner fire in his garage.

Lucky was pleased to see me when I finally got home. At least, he felt comfortable enough to spend most of what remained of the night on my pillow, slowly sicking up a hairball the size of an otter.

Mr. Thorpe at the bedding factory was delighted to hear that I had managed, through various brilliant feats of detective work, to find Runover's true owner. I didn't mention that I'd found her under a couple of feet of sandy soil in Suffolk; it didn't seem relevant.

"As it happens," I said, once my fee was safely in my pocket, "the old dear who owns the cat can't really cope with it any more, so I was wondering if any of your lads might take it on?"

"Doubt it, Charlie. There were no takers, frankly, when Runover first appeared on the scene." He shook his head. The wig wobbled slightly.

"Just as a matter of interest, Mr. Thorpe, you haven't got a brother living nearby, have you? You look familiar."

"Desmond? Yes, you might well have run into him, I suppose. He lives round here. He won't take the cat, mind—he can't stand them. Hates 'em. He's a birdwatcher, see. Reckons the neighbors' cats scare off all the birds. Mind, he's not too keen on people, either. Family included."

Which might well explain how Lucky came to be at the factory: trapped and then dumped there by the Evil Twin, satisfying two hatreds in one short journey. Ah, the lovely suburbs.

Meanwhile, I had a tabby to relocate. Again. Not so close to home, this time: I wouldn't make that mistake twice. I'd be doing Lucky a kindness, after all, placing him somewhere of which he had no bad memories. Glasgow, maybe. Or Torquay.

I drove down Lottie's street on my way home, and idled a moment outside her house—and the house of her bewigged, binocular-toting neighbor. I didn't see him. I'm not sure what I would have done if I had. Stuck my tongue out? Clapped my hands to shoo the birds? I looked from his house to Lottie's—the latter empty now, thanks to him. Well, maybe I'd make it my business to ensure that our paths crossed again, some day; life's unpleasant patterns needn't always be random.

THE MYSTERIOUS PHOTOGRAPH



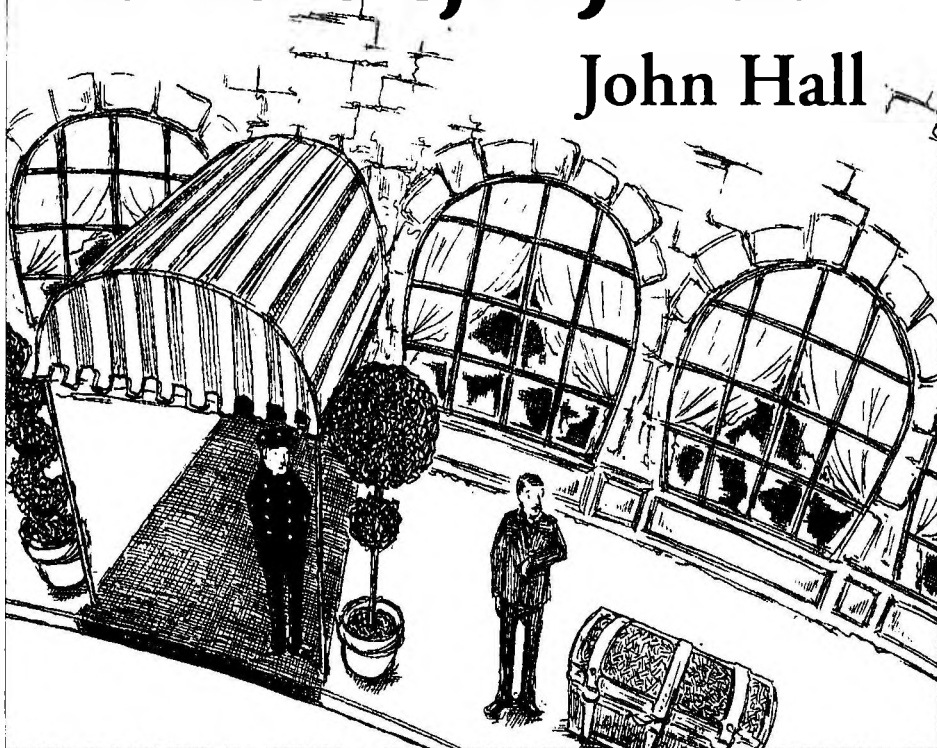
AP/Wide World Photos

Nine times out of ten. 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 "May 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 December Mysterious Photograph contest will be found on page 143.

A. J. RAFFLES: The Maharaja's Jewels

John Hall



“**T**he start of a new season, Bunny,” said A. J. Raffles. He spoke in an absent-minded fashion, and he did not look at me as he said the words, nor did he look out of the window at the sunshine of a beautiful morning in late April. Instead his gaze was fixed upon the great wooden chest that had given me some dreadful days during the previous year when Raffles, all unbeknownst to me, had hidden in the wretched thing in order to rob a bank vault.

Since his re-emergence from

the secret sliding panel in the lid of the chest, rather in the manner of some saucy wood nymph, or whatever more appropriate creature of Greek myth the classically learned reader may choose to imagine, the chest had stood in a corner of his rooms in the Albany, filled with the proceeds of our various villainies. He lit a Sullivan and turned to face me, raising an eyebrow as if to ask a question.

“If you’re thinking what I think you’re thinking—” I began.

“Try not to sound like a third-



rate music hall comedy turn! And above all, be reasonable, Bunny!"

"Reasonable!"

"If you had any notion of the work that went into that chest, you wouldn't quibble like this. Weeks it took to get it right! And I had to do it all myself, for of course I could never trust any workman with the job. It's a crying shame to have it stand there useless, when it might be earning its keep."

"It is earning its keep," I said shortly. "It's full of silver, which is, when all is said and done, its primary function."

"Ah, and there's another thing," said Raffles earnestly. "It's high time I emptied the thing and sold off the bits and pieces of plate which are in there. Too dangerous by half, my boy! Especially with Mackenzie nosing round," he added thoughtfully.

"Oh, Mackenzie's nosing around, is he?" I asked with all the scorn I could manage. Raffles said nothing, but his eyebrow lifted again. I was not to be fooled quite that easily, though! You may perhaps recall that on the last occasion that Raffles used the chest, he pretended that Inspector Mackenzie of Scotland Yard, our old adversary, had been suspicious of us, and that he—Raffles, I mean—wanted to clear some stolen silver out of his rooms for safety. The idea was, said Raffles, that the chest, complete with the plunder, would be lodged at my bank, in the vault. Meantime, Raffles himself would quit London, and thereby leave the field

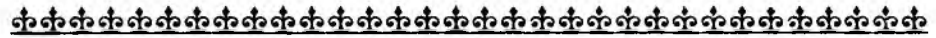
clear for Mackenzie to search the rooms and prove them blameless. A less complicated scheme than many which Raffles had proposed to me, and a convincing tale. I was taken in. In all innocence I took the obnoxious container to my bank.

I then heard that the bank vault had been robbed, and you may imagine my sentiments when I realized that the police would be all over the place and that they might open the chest to see if it had been rifled! A second thought was that the chest might already have been opened by the criminals and the stolen goods laid bare to the public gaze! The hours subsequent to these reflections are best left unmentioned.

Of course—as anyone but myself must have known from the very outset—it was Raffles himself, hidden in the chest, who had committed the robbery. Well, as I say, there would not be a second time, and I set my features into what I fervently hoped was a cynical sneer.

"Oh, Mackenzie really is suspicious, I assure you," said Raffles. He went over to the chest and threw the lid back. "In fact, I've made a start, as you may see."

Much against my better judgment, for I had resolved to have naught to do with his madcap scheme, I cast a glance at the interior of the chest and was surprised to see that it held nothing but a couple of small dishes, little bigger than ashtrays, and a delicate silver cup and stand, some four inches high. "And the cup's



my own," Raffles complained. "First one I was ever given for my cricket back at school." He took it from the chest and stood it on the mantelshelf, then placed the two dishes on the little table by the window. "Safe enough, I fancy, they are ordinary enough not to be positively identified." He tapped the chest significantly. "All ready for action, Bunny."

Doubt began to creep upon me. "So Mackenzie really and truly is sniffing round this time?"

Raffles nodded. "'Fraid so, Bunny. Which means that the whole scheme is dashed dangerous."

"As far as I'm concerned, it means that the dashed scheme is damned from the start," I told him plainly.

He said nothing, but took a copy of one of the popular weekly papers from the table and threw it across to me. It was folded open at the society gossip page, and I saw the usual nonsense about who was expected to arrive in London for the season, and when, and where they would be staying. "Read it," Raffles told me.

"Oh, very well! 'Arriving next week is a glittering array—' really, Raffles!"

"Carry on. Just the names, if you wish."

"Names, then. 'The alert observer may hope to espy the Duke and Duchess of —; the bearded and rugged features of Sir Paul Chapman, the African explorer and gold magnate—' Drivel, Raffles! '—the American tobacco magnate Mr. John T. Hardiman III and Mrs. Hardiman; the Hon.

Marmaduke Danby, younger son of the Earl of —' I know him, Raffles, the silly young ass! 'The Maharajah of Cumberbund—' "

"Stop there."

"What, the Maharajah of Cumberbund?" I put the paper down. "I don't believe there is such a place!"

"Oh, there is," said Raffles. "What d'you think the article of natty gent's evening apparel is named after, then? Famous hill station. Very famous club there, too, the Cumberbund Club. In fact, with your aspirations to social climbing, I'm surprised—"

"And even if there is any such place, I've certainly never heard of a Maharajah of it."

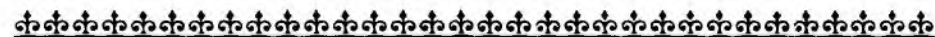
"There's a photograph of him on another page," said Raffles, waving a hand at the paper. "Fabulously wealthy is, I believe, the correct, if hackneyed, phrase. I played for IZ against him back in '81. Of course he was only the Rajah then. And younger, too—*eheu, fugaces!* And about twenty stones lighter."

"A lot of fellows go to seed a bit as they get on. Matter of fact, I myself have noticed—"

"Oh, there's a reason for the corpulence, Bunny. His Royal Fabulousness has himself weighed against jewels on every birthday."

"What, and then gives them away to the deserving poor?"

"Bunny, Bunny! No, if he tips the scale, which he invariably does, then his tax-gatherers go out and make up the difference by grinding the faces of his people. Yes, he always was a rotter, even



as Rajah. And no great shakes as a cricketer, come to that, would never have made the team had his father not owned it. It would be a positive benefaction to relieve him of some of his ill-gotten gains. A work of charity, my boy."

"Well, charity begins at home, so you can count me out."

He shook his head sadly. "For a literary man, your phraseology leaves much to be desired, Bunny."

"Perhaps it does. Hang on, though—is this fellow weighed against the jewels here or back home?"

"Back home, of course. The Savoy, grand though it may be, has no facilities for that sort of thing."

"Well then, since I take it you have your eye on these jewels, and since I further take it that we are not traveling to India, he must bring the jewels over here, yes?" Raffles smiled and nodded. "Now, why does he do that?" I asked suspiciously.

"Fear," said Raffles shortly. "He's terrified that he might be slung out in absentia and thinks that if he leaves the jewels there they might be seized if his people do rise up against him."

"Hmmm. That makes sense." (From which you will deduce that Raffles's persuasive powers were already beginning to set at naught my better judgment!)

He went on: "As it is, this would be the one and only opportunity for the determined thief, for he has an entourage of guards as villainous as himself, armed to the teeth."

"Eunuchs?"

"Very likely," said Raffles. "Not that it's the sort of thing a chap likes to ask about. But it would be typical of the man. And since deficiency in one department is often compensated for by overdevelopment in another, they're as strong as horses—geldings, then—and ill tempered to boot."

I shook my head. "Be that as it may, if you insist upon doing this stupid thing, you do it alone."

"So be it, Bunny. I won't go on about never thinking you were one to let a fellow down, or anything of that sort, but I confess I'd sooner have had you in it with me."

"Consider the risk!" I said with all the fervor of which I was capable. "If Mackenzie is, as you say, suspicious, then he will surely be paying special attention to you, and to me, and to these rooms."

"And yet the trick worked once," said Raffles, a faraway note in his voice. "Even you never suspected!"

"But don't you see that it was because I never suspected that the trick worked, Raffles? You yourself have said that my innocent face is worth—oh, I don't know—a whole regiment of cracksmen!"

He laughed at this. "Perhaps I don't esteem you quite that high, Bunny, but I take your point. Your face is indeed my fortune, or it has been more than once, and I've said so more than once. But don't you, in your turn, see that now you are in on the trick, it would be

that much easier? You take the chest to your bank—”

“And there’s another thing. How on earth can you know that this Maharajah will deposit his worldly goods in any bank, let alone mine?”

“He always does,” said Raffles, very seriously. “Each season he sends his jewels and what have you over in advance, lodges them at the bank—your bank, my Bunny, the City and Suburban, Sloane Street branch—to be called for. The dibs are there a good week before he turns up to collect them. I’m rather surprised you didn’t know; I’d have thought the clerks would have boasted about it. Must be very discreet, your bankers. His wife’s picture is in there, too. Rather fine woman, don’t you think?”

“He only has the one, then?” I sneered. “I should have thought it wouldn’t be worth stealing just one Maharani’s jewels.”

“No,” he answered, with not the slightest trace of anger at my words, “the one is, I assure you, quite sufficient. But not a serious proposition, for I know the lady carries her own jewels about her person, never lets them out of her sight, which is very wise, given her husband’s criminal tendencies. No, Bunny, it’s the gentleman’s own sparklers that attract me. And, as I keep telling you, the trick worked once and there’s no reason why it wouldn’t, and shouldn’t, work again. The crook hides in the chest, which you take—his accomplice, that is to say, takes—to the bank. The

Maharajah’s goods are already in there, so the crook waits for nightfall, makes his selection, and leaves a bit of a mess, breaks open the door, or what have you, just like last time. The very next day the bank officials discover the theft, assume the crook has left with the takings, call the police, and there’s the devil of a fuss. What’s more natural than that you—the accomplice, I mean—and the other customers, should want to recover their goods to make sure they’re safe? It worked last time, and it’ll work this. All you have to do, Bunny—”

“Raffles!”

“Very well, then, all you would have had to do is take the chest to your bank, wait for tomorrow and the fuss—”

“Tomorrow?”

“Oh, yes. I am somewhat better informed than the writer of that society column. The Maharajah’s wealth is safe and secure even now, now, very now, my Bunny. So, tomorrow there would have been a fuss, and you would recover the chest! What could be—could have been, I mean to say—more straightforward or simple?” And he lit another Sullivan.

“Raffles!” I looked out of the window, my heart full of sorrow, anger, and bitterness in equal parts. He never spoke, and I stood there, miserable and silent, for a long moment. Then: “Raffles?”

“Well?”

“Raffles, are you really determined to go through with this?”

“Absolutely and irrevocably,



Bunny. If you won't help me, there's an end of it, I'll send for the doorman and spin him some yarn or another."

"And expect him to recover the chest in case of alarm, I suppose?" I said sardonically, or as sardonically as I could manage.

He shrugged.

"It's a two-man job, Raffles, and well you know it! Very well, then—if I must, I must."

He clapped his hands, and smiled broadly. "I knew I could rely on you, Bunny! Now, go down and get the man to send for a cab, and then bring him back up here, for it's also a two-man job moving the chest, as you know."

"To my cost! But what of the necessities?"

For answer, he held up a silver hip flask and a paper packet of what I took to be sandwiches. "I dare not take cigarettes," he said quite seriously, "for the aroma might give me away. But this will do for the one night, I fancy. Now lock me in and keep the key, purely in case of emergency, and then be off with you, Bunny, and fetch the doorman up here!"

He stepped into the chest and lowered the lid carefully. I did as he had told me, locked the lid and pocketed the key, and then sought out the doorman and brought him back to Raffles's rooms.

The doorman looked round. "Mr. Raffles gone out?" he asked, not in any way suspicious, but merely making conversation. "He did say he might be away for a day or two."

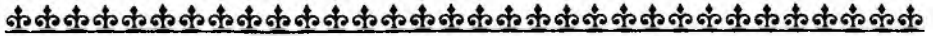
"Yes, that's right," I said. "He

wants the chest lodged safe at the bank during his absence."

The man shook his head and clicked his tongue, obviously chagrined that Raffles should so mistrust the alertness of the staff of the Albany, and the doorman in particular, but he made no remark as we toiled down the stairs with the chest—which was of a solid, not to say weighty, construction.

Now, I have told you all the thoughts and misgivings that had gone through my mind, so you will readily believe that I was in what might be described as a somewhat nervy condition as I stood beside the chest waiting for the cab, which the doorman had summoned. I could not swear to it to this day, but as I glanced about me and took out a cigarette, on the opposite side of the road I fancied I saw the lean and angular form of Inspector Mackenzie! I looked away hastily, lest he catch my eye and come over, and when I ventured to glance back, the road was empty.

It might be pure nerves, sheer imagination, I told myself. Might be? It must be. Still, had the doorman not been waiting patiently less than six feet away, I think I would have made some remark, for I knew that Raffles would have heard perfectly well a warning spoken within a few feet of the chest; the holes he had cut in it to permit observation and breathing also allowed him to hear tolerably well. But the man stood there like a rock, so I dare not speak. The best I could do was tap gently on the lid of the chest,



and hope that Raffles had seen Mackenzie, if indeed Mackenzie it had been. I was considerably heartened when my tap was answered by the gentlest of knocks from within the chest.

Still, heartened or no, I could have kicked myself. So Raffles had been telling the truth—for once! To be frank with you, reader, I had suspected that all that nonsense about Mackenzie had been just that, nonsense told by Raffles to impress me with his crackpot scheme. And I had gone along with it, half fearful, yet half laughing to myself at the secret knowledge that Raffles was exaggerating, that there was danger, to be sure, but no more danger than the usual. But if Raffles had not been spinning me a yarn? If Mackenzie were taking an interest in us, if Mackenzie had been lurking outside the Albany—and I dared not finish the thought, it was too horrible to contemplate.

The fact that I had tapped upon the chest and Raffles had answered, I was now inclined to discount. It might all too easily have been that he thought I was reassuring him that all was well and that he was acknowledging what he imagined was a message of support and solace! If that were so, if Raffles had not seen Mackenzie, not realized the true import of my impromptu message—

Before I could attempt to formulate some strategy to take account of my changed frame of mind, the cab drew up, and the doorman bawled out the address

of my bank to the driver! And then, before I could speak—not that I had the least notion of what I might have said—the doorman and the cabbie had lifted the chest on to the roof of the cab, and the doorman was holding the cab door open for me. In my agitation I entirely forgot to tip him, and his reproachful, “Thank you, sir!” as the cab pulled away was about the single redeeming feature of the whole sorry business.

As the cab rattled along Piccadilly I slumped back in my seat and thought furiously. What on earth was I to do? Damn Raffles and all his rotten schemes, for they invariably caused me more grief and heartache than the proceeds warranted! My anger at Raffles grew as I sat there, until it ousted all thoughts of anything else, so that it was not until the cab actually drew up outside my bank and the doorman stepped forward, that I realized what I ought to have done. I ought, of course, to have told the cabbie to take me to my own rooms in Mount Street! It was obvious, now I realized it! Home, my own fireside. Once there, I could have moved the chest, and Raffles, to safety and explained the whole situation to him at leisure. As it was, it was still not too late, though, and as the cabbie and the bank doorman between them made a start on lifting the chest down from the roof, I bleated, “I say! I should have said Mount Street, not—” and I broke off, for advancing towards us from the



bank doorway was—of all men—Inspector Mackenzie!

The cabbie and the doorman had placed the chest on the ground, and were looking at me with that curious expression of men who feel they have just wasted valuable time and energy at the behest of a fool. Mackenzie stopped in front of me and regarded me with a cynical eye. "A fine day, Mr. Manders."

"It is indeed—Inspector Mackenzie."

"You'll be leaving your chest for safekeeping, I take it?"

"Oh, absolutely, Inspector Mackenzie," I said, as loudly as I dared.

"It's surprising the number of people who are doing the same just now. I suspect it's a consequence of the press reports that the Maharajah of Cumberbund patronizes this branch of the bank."

"Is that so, Inspector Mackenzie?" He stepped back involuntarily at the blast of sound I produced. "I haven't seen any of those reports, Inspector Mackenzie." How I hoped that Raffles would hear me and modify his plans accordingly!

"No? Well, that's what I think would account for the large numbers of folk leaving chests and the like. You may be sure we'll take care—good care—of your possessions, Mr. Manders, for we've been asked special to keep an eye on the Maharajah's goods, and yours will be in there with them."

"Is that so, Inspector Mackenzie? It's very reassuring to know

that the POLICE are paying the bank such particular attention, INSPECTOR Mackenzie." To the waiting men, I said, or croaked rather, for my voice was going with the effort of trying to make Raffles hear me, "That's right. The chest is to go down to the vault. If Inspector Mackenzie would just be so kind as to step to one side?"

I fancied I heard a muttered remark or two from cabbie and doorman as to the advisability of making up one's blinking mind, but they took the chest into the bank, leaving me standing there perspiring more freely than the spring weather could account for.

Mackenzie looked at me, then his gaze wandered down the street. "Your friend Mr. Raffles isn't with you?" he asked casually.

"Raffles? Raffles? Oh, no, he's—that is, I understand he's out of town at the moment."

"Indeed? I'd have thought he'd be watching the cricket or something of the kind, him being so fond of the game."

"Cricket? Is there any cricket? No, no, I fancy he's out of town. Couldn't say for certain, though, I haven't seen him for a day or two." I babbled away all unthinking and regretted the lie as soon as it was told, for if it were Mackenzie I had spotted at the Albany, then he would know that I had been at Raffles's rooms not an hour before! But he made no reply, merely nodding thoughtfully, then he raised his hat and strolled casually into the bank.

My emotions are perhaps bet-



ter imagined than described. Surely Raffles must have heard me, for I had bawled out "Inspector Mackenzie" a dozen times at least at the top of my voice! Raffles would hear, he would understand, he would make no move, commit no robbery as planned, but remain safe within the chest until I collected it and him.

With that thought, which should have brought me some ease from the turmoil of mind I was in, came a new horror. With Mackenzie lurking round the bank premises, how could I possibly collect the chest immediately after I had left it? I would have to wait, do nothing for a respectable interval, or it would look idiotic, and not merely idiotic but downright suspicious as well! Raffles had his flask, true, and his paper of sandwiches, but that would scarcely suffice for more than a day, two at best.

I took the cab back to my own rooms, poured myself the largest and strongest whisky and soda for many a long year, and sat down to think the matter over. After half an hour I came to the conclusion that there was only one sensible thing to do. The very next morning I would go round to the bank and tell them that I needed the silver—no, that wouldn't do! Very well, I would tell them that I had forgotten to put some other pieces in the chest and must take it away with me. True, that would add to the reputation for idiosyncrasy, if not downright eccentricity, which my financial dealings at the bank

had already earned me, but what of that? The main, the essential, the only thing was that Raffles must be rescued at all costs. My mind made up to that, I set off for my club, to stop, horror-stricken, at my door. Suppose that Raffles had not heard all my bellows of "Inspector Mackenzie" and the rest? Suppose that he had not seen the inspector outside the Albany? Suppose that I arrived at the bank to find alarms and excursions, the police in possession, Raffles taken, myself sought as an accomplice?

I told myself a dozen, a hundred, a thousand times that I was being foolish. But I could not face the club, and I found that I could not bring myself to sleep, or even to rest, such was my agitation of mind. I sat up in an armchair for the whole of that wretched night, falling asleep at last in the small hours of the morning and waking with the dawn with a stiff neck and a most appalling headache.

I had no mind for breakfast but found that I could manage a cup of strong coffee. I will confess that I toyed with the notion of something stronger yet but dismissed it quickly, for if I were to extricate Raffles from this shambles of his own devising I would need a clear head; moreover, if Mackenzie were to put the darbies about my wrists, it would be for burglary alone, and not for being drunk and incapable to boot!

I fretted as the hours dragged by until the business world would start work, and as soon as I de-



cently could I summoned a cab and drove round to the bank. It seemed to me that I could spot one or two men of the detective persuasion hanging about the premises, but I told myself I was being overly mistrustful.

The clerk—the same one who had supervised the depositing of the chest the day before—regarded me with a sardonic eye as I stammered out my tale of having forgotten to put some pieces in the chest, but he had his men bring the vile thing from the lower depths, and load it on to the cab. I was about to climb in myself, when I felt a light touch upon my elbow.

I looked round, and almost fainted when I saw that it was none other than Mackenzie! At his side was a tall, slim Indian gentleman in a beautifully tailored suit.

Mackenzie turned to his companion and said, "Your Highness, I don't believe you know Mr. Manders? Mr. Manders, His Highness the Maharajah of Cumberbund."

"Aah—" I could not tell you just what I tried to stammer out, but the Maharajah shook my hand, a firm, manly grip, then told me, "You must excuse me, Mr. Manders. We appear to have a small emergency." And he nodded at Mackenzie and strode off into the bank.

"Was that really the Maharajah of Cumberbund?" I whispered.

Mackenzie nodded. "A pity Mr. Raffles isn't here, for he knows His Highness well. Indeed, the Maharajah holds the distinction

of being the only man ever to score six sixes in one over off Mr. Raffles's bowling. Or so they tell me; I don't follow the cricket myself." He looked curiously at me. "Are you quite well, Mr. Manders?"

"Oh, yes, yes!" But I lied, for the man whose hand I had just shaken—tall, slim, handsome, athletic—was a far cry from the image which Raffles had planted in my mind! I could not tell you what else I may or may not have said; in any event, Mackenzie brushed my feeble whimperings aside. "Taking your chest away so soon, Mr. Manders?" said he.

"Yes, yes, I—that is, I quite forgot to put some bits and pieces in there—"

"I'm afraid I shall have to ask you to open the chest, Mr. Manders."

"Open it? But why?"

Mackenzie looked round and lowered his voice. "The fact is, sir, we have information that some enterprising criminal plans a robbery here at the bank. That's why the Maharajah's here; he keeps his own bits and pieces at this branch, as you know."

"Information? Plans, you say? But this—this robbery—this planned robbery—it hasn't taken place yet, has it? That is—"

"Well, sir," said Mackenzie, a grim glint in his eye, "that's what we're trying to find out. Now, it's true that there is no sign of forced entry—"

"Ah, well! There you are, then!" said I, recovering my scattered wits slightly.

"But we're by no means sure



that the thief hasn't opened some of the chests and boxes and what have you, removed some of the contents, and locked up again after him."

"Surely—"

"So," Mackenzie continued inexorably, "we're asking all those who take their boxes and so on away if they'll be so kind as to cooperate with us and take a quick look, just to be sure. After all, Mr. Manders, you wouldn't want to find your valuables missing when you do open your chest, now would you?"

"Oh, no, absolutely not! So I'll be sure to check, first thing, once I get home, and let you know at once if—"

"If you'd be so kind as to take a quick look now, sir. I'll just stand here, and you can tell me if anything's gone."

"Look here—"

"Of course, if there's some good reason why you'd rather not—" and Mackenzie left the rest unspoken.

"Oh, no! Rather not!" I stared at him unhappily and then at the chest.

Mackenzie stood there for a long moment, then he cleared his throat delicately. "You'll have the key there, sir?"

"Oh, yes. Rather." I stared at him again. "Look here, Inspector—"

"Sir?"

I squared my shoulders. This was it, was it? Well, we had had a good innings, Raffles and I, but we had always known that one day the wicket must fall to Macken-

zie, or someone like him. I had wished it might be otherwise, but now that our doom was upon us, I would play my part as best I could. "I really don't think it's at all appropriate to open the thing here in the street, do you, Inspector?"

He nodded, understanding. "Perhaps not, sir. Shall I have it taken into the bank again, where we can be a touch more private, as it were?"

I nodded dumbly. Mackenzie waved to a couple of the men whom I had earlier suspected of being policemen, and they silently carried the chest into the bank, past the astonished clerks, and into the assistant manager's office. The assistant manager had evidently been alerted to the fact that something was in the wind, for he shot me a venomous look and then made himself scarce, leaving Mackenzie, a couple of plainclothes policemen, and myself.

"Mr. Manders?" Mackenzie nodded at the chest.

Reluctantly, I took the key from my pocket. "The lock hasn't been opened or tampered with, or anything, you see," I said, in a last desperate attempt to salvage something.

"If you would, sir."

I put the key in the lock, turned it, and took hold of the lid. Before I could open the chest, Mackenzie held up a hand. "Mr. Manders, I must ask you formally if this chest is your property."

"What? Yes, of course it is."

"Only you were seen bringing it from Mr. Raffles's apartment in the Albany." So he had been there,



thought I! "That being the case," he went on, "I just wanted to be quite sure that it is yours, and that you were, and are, not simply acting for Mr. Raffles."

For a moment, I hesitated. I could say that the chest was not my property, but that of Raffles, and that I was merely acting on his instructions when I took it to and from the bank. That would not help Raffles himself, it is true, but then he was lost anyway, once Mackenzie opened the chest. By denying Raffles, I might help him; I could stay at liberty and—somehow—work to free him. As I say, I hesitated, but only for a moment. Then, with what dignity I could muster, I squared my shoulders a second time and told Mackenzie, "The chest itself is Mr. Raffles's property, but he let me borrow it. I take full responsibility for the contents." I have always thought that Iscariot was virtuous in the extreme compared with the other chap—whose name escapes me, who twice—or was it thrice—betrayed a man he had called a friend.

"Very well," said Mackenzie and threw open the lid.

I was looking at Mackenzie, not at the chest, and I saw his face change. But it was not a change which indicated that my worst fears were justified; on the contrary, it was sheer astonishment.

Following his gaze, I glanced into the chest, to see—three dented and tarnished salvers in EPNS, and bad EPNS at that, one pewter beer mug with a dubiously comic inscription and illustration en-

graved upon it, and a German silver candelabrum of the most hideous design it has been my misfortune to encounter. Total value, perhaps three shillings and sixpence was my estimate.

For a long time, Mackenzie stared in silence at this egregious display of bad taste. Then he swallowed with some difficulty and said, "Is this really what you deposited in the bank vault?"

"Certainly!" I told him airily. "It may not be much, but it's all mine, honestly acquired. And if you were wondering, nothing has been stolen."

"Stolen?" he said quickly.

"You recall that you wanted me to open the chest lest any property of mine had been stolen," I reminded him gently.

"Ah, to be sure." He flushed, but then recovered his composure somewhat. He lifted the candelabrum cautiously and stared at it. "Alloy, Mr. Manders?"

"Well, we can't all afford the real thing, Inspector. Immense sentimental value, you know."

"And you say you omitted to deposit more of the same?"

"Absolutely. Stacks of it. Easily overlooked. I'm sure you know how it is? Anyway, if there's nothing more—" And I left him standing there, swept regally past the assistant manager—ignoring his halting offers of assistance—and in a lordly fashion I called the bank's messenger to take the chest outside.

The cab was still there, the cabbie sitting with a look half bemused and half amused, and the



messengers loaded the chest onto the roof. I was about to climb into the cab when my ingress was halted a second time by a touch on the arm.

"Bunny! What are you doing, old chap?"

"Raffles? Raffles!" That was all I could manage. I think I may flatter myself that I had recovered my composure in an exemplary fashion under Mackenzie's gaze a moment before, but by this time I did not even have sufficient wit left to stammer out my tale about taking the chest home.

"Ah, Mr. Raffles." It was Mackenzie, who had followed me out of the bank and stood staring at Raffles with a curious expression. "We hadn't seen you for a while, and were wondering just what might have become of you."

"Oh," said Raffles vaguely, "I've been out of town for a day or so. Heard my old pal the Maharajah of Cumberbund was here, so thought I'd come back and look him up. But what on earth is happening here? Bunny, where on earth are you going with that prestigious coffer?"

"Home, Raffles!" Of that, if of nothing else in the great wide world, I was certain. And I was equally certain that my first action would be to prepare for myself a brandy and soda that would dwarf all others of its ilk; a B&S that men would write poems—nay, positive sagas—about; a B&S that would be remembered in the annals of self-indulgence for several centuries. And my second action? Why, to eliminate Raffles, of

course, remove him from the face of the earth before he could devise any more idiotic schemes. I gripped his elbow firmly, lest he harbor thoughts of escaping my just and righteous vengeance. "And you are coming with me, Raffles."

"If you insist, then by all means I shall go with you, Bunny." And he leapt into the cab and gave the driver the address.

It took a while for me to recover my wits, and I tried to stammer out a question, but Raffles would have none of it, waving me to silence and handing me a Sullivan. "Later, my Bunny," he said. "Later."

We arrived at Mount Street and somehow or other got that damnable chest upstairs and into a corner. I poured myself that brandy and soda and drank deep thereof. "And now," I began.

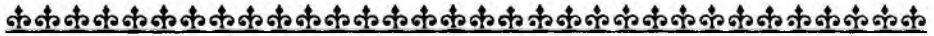
"One of the best schemes yet, I fancy, Bunny," said Raffles, lighting a Sullivan.

"But how did you get out of the chest? When?"

"Through the secret door, of course, even you knew that. As for when, it was naturally when you left my rooms to fetch the doorman. I nipped into the bathroom, and there you are—or, there I was."

"But you can't have been!" Raffles raised an eyebrow, and I hurried on, "I tapped the lid of the chest out in the road, and you answered!"

"Not I, Bunny, I assure you. How could I, when I was upstairs in my rooms?"



"But I heard you!"

He shook his head, then smiled. "I fancy it was the contents of the chest shifting that you heard, Bunny. Quite likely, given that you had just lugged the thing down the Albany stairs. A certain amount of settling was only to be expected."

"Good Lord! Yes, you must be right. And I thought it was you! It was that which made me so anxious when Mackenzie—oh, but you couldn't know, could you? Mackenzie met me at the bank, mentioned the Maharajah, said the police had been tipped off—oh!"

Raffles nodded gently. "And of course when Mackenzie received the anonymous letter, he naturally thought of you and me. Most unworthy of him!" And he blew a smoke ring at the ceiling.

"And there's another thing—you lied to me about the Maharajah! You said he was a rotter, and surrounded by eunuchs, and—and—"

"How on earth did you ever gain that impression from my murmurings, Bunny? You can't have been listening. Why, old Chandra is a marvelous chap, brilliant cricketer, great philanthropist—"

"But what on earth was the point of it?" I asked, puzzled.

For answer, Raffles put a hand in his pocket and pulled out a fistful of jewels: an emerald necklace and bracelets, sapphires, diamonds. "Formerly the property of Mrs. John T. Hardiman III," he said.

I put a hand to my head, then remembered. "The wife of the

American tobacco millionaire?"

"The very same. I needed a distraction, Bunny, for Mackenzie really is becoming dashed suspicious. But even he cannot guard two places at once, and since he was looking after the bank, the way was clear for me!" He glanced at the clock and stood up. "And I must be off, Bunny, for the lady herself should be getting up any time now—she is, I understand, a late riser—and she, or more likely her maid, will soon discover that all is not as it should be. It wouldn't do for Inspector Mackenzie to find me here with these trinkets, so I'll away and dispose of them safely."

"You think Mackenzie will suspect you?"

"Oh, he must, Bunny! I make fun of the fellow, but he's nobody's fool. He'll wipe the egg from his face and do what he can. Let's just hope it isn't enough." He paused at the door and gazed at the chest. "But it really was a shame not to work that trick properly. There really are some truly remarkable treasures in that bank vault, you know, Bunny. And I don't think that even Mackenzie would dare to inquire of you again, for no man enjoys being made to look foolish a second time. That being so, I suppose—"

By that time, though, I had recollected what my second action was to have been. I turned to the fireplace and picked up the poker. When I turned back, Raffles had gone, so I never did learn just what it was that he may, or may not, have supposed. □

UNSOLVED

Robert Kesling

Unsolved at present, that is, but can you work it out?

The answer will appear in the June issue.

Two years had passed since we six became friends at the Olympics—Adam, Brad, Carl, Doris, Elena, and Flora—but here we were together again at the International Games in Innsbruck. One of the young men had become my special boyfriend at the Olympics and I was overjoyed to be with him again.

We hugged and kissed all around just like old times, although we came from different countries and some had traveled around the world to get here. Everyone was excited.

One afternoon my boyfriend suggested a picnic up in the mountains “I’ve already rented a Jeep and mixed a jug of lemonade,” he said. “You girls get some food to go with that, and we’ll be off for the highlands.”

It seemed like a marvelous idea. We three women gladly packed a picnic hamper with plenty for all.

1. Adam remarked to Hawkins, “I’m game—but let’s not forget that each of us has an important meet tonight.”
2. We set off. I sat in front, wedged between one of the other women and my boyfriend, who was driving. In the back seat were Granger, Hawkins, and Larson, who included Elena, the entrant from Spain, and the expert in the 100-yard dash.
3. As we wound our way up the mountain, Brad said, “A perfect day—with three lovely young women along: Miss Granger, the gal from Panama, and the swimming champ.” Everyone laughed.
4. We found an ideal spot and parked. I watched as the athletes from Russia, Taiwan, and Uruguay played with a frisbee. Carl flipped it to Jackson, who quickly sent it flying to the high jumper.
5. The experts in archery, diving, and gymnastics (which included both my boyfriend and myself) were Adam, Krasny, and the one who came from Uruguay.

6. Igelhof asked, "Well, how does the gymnast like this rarefied air here in Innsbruck? Think it will make a difference in our performances?"

7. Doris said to the swimmer, "Gee, this mountain air makes me hungry!" "Me, too," added the one who came from Taiwan. "What's in that hamper?"

"Help yourselves to lemonade," invited my boyfriend. One of the women said, "I think I'll stick to mineral water." I decided to do the same—for which I was thankful later.

8. Suddenly two of the men slumped to the ground: the diver and the athlete from Queensland. Seconds later, the Taiwanese woman joined them, completely unconscious.

"Help, somebody!" I called out. "Hurry!" I looked up just in time to see my boyfriend and one of the women zoom off downhill in the Jeep. Both laughed and waved back as they swung around a hairpin curve.

I couldn't believe it! My boyfriend isolating us up here on the mountain and leaving three of his friends drugged and helpless! We were certain to miss the meet that night. After reviving the others, I sat down and cried.

The woman from Taiwan sympathized. "No way you could have known he would do this, dear. I suppose he got paid by some other competitors to strand us up here."

But my *ex*-boyfriend and the young woman got a taste of justice after all. The four of us testified that he had prepared the doped lemonade and that she had accompanied him down to the town, leaving us stranded. Both were barred from future international competition—for life.

Who were the treacherous duo? Who is telling the story?

See page 131 for the solution to the April puzzle.

.....
 Need help working these puzzles?

Go online to **www.themysteryplace.com**
 for "Solving the 'Unsolved'" by Robert Kesling.

The Big Bailout

R. T. Lawton



Once again, Theodore found himself at the San Mateo County Jail pushing a business card across the grey metal table to a potential client. The card read:

TWIN BROTHERS BAIL BONDS
CLETIS JOHNSTON, PROPRIETOR

"When no one else
will go your bond,
we'll do you."

Bail Agent: T. O. A. Dewey

Warren Janowski appeared to analyze the card before placing it back on the table. Finally, he spoke in a soft voice.

"I tried a couple of other bail bond companies first, but they didn't think I could come up with enough money for them to post such a high bail, so I called you guys."

Theodore blinked his bulbous eyes.

"We haven't been in the Yellow Pages for years. How'd you get our number?"

"Well, it was several years ago that your company bonded out a friend of mine. He seemed satisfied with your service, so he gave me one of your old cards. I kept it in my wallet in case I ever got into trouble. I guess that's where I am now."

Theodore ran his left hand across the top of his balding head. His left pinky finger, the now permanently rigid one with the two-carat yellow diamond ring, stood straight up like it was pointing at the ceiling of the jail. Mostly, this finger served as a reminder to Theodore of mistakes that should not be repeated.

With that thought in mind, he hoped to resolve quickly this unprecedented situation of a detainee in the Bay City's holding institution calling up the office and specifically seeking bail from the Twin Brothers Bail Bonds Company. At least, no one had called them since Cletis Johnston had taken over as sole owner of the firm—from his disappeared brother—several years ago. These days, in the normal course of events, it was the bond company's proprietor, Mr. Cletis Johnston, who selected those destined to become special clients. Never was it the other way around. But now that the man had called, he must be handled delicately and with discretion until Theodore could determine how much this Mr. Janowski knew about the firm. And, almost as important, did he qualify to be one of their special clients?

"Merely as a personal matter, Mr. Janowski, is your friend that we bonded out still alive? I mean, maybe he could vouch for you."

"No, tragically, he took a wrong step and fell from a high building, so I'm on my own here as far as references go."

Theodore's short, stocky body relaxed somewhat.

"Under those particular circumstances, I believe one does have to obey the laws of gravity. Which brings us to your situation. Tell me which laws you've broken and I'll see if our company can do anything for you."

"That's just it. I haven't broken any laws."

"Please, Mr. Janowski, it's been my experience that the police do not make it a practice of using a grand jury indictment to arrest innocent people. Perhaps you'd care to tell me the full story."

"Sure, but can I ask you a question first? It's been kind of bothering me."

"Go ahead."

"Well, frankly, it's your business card. Have you taken a close look at it?"

"Not really. The boss gave them to me just this morning. Said what with all the corporate downsizing going on and low company earning reports showing up on the stock market lately, he thought maybe it was time for us to economize. And, with the printer charging for every letter he had to put on the card, my boss told the man to save money wherever he could. I think the embossing still looks pretty elegant. So what's wrong with the card?"

"Did you read the way they printed your name?"

"Sure, the printer used my initials instead of my full name. The T stands for Theodore, the O for Oscar, the A for Alan and you can

see that Dewey is my last name, so what's the problem?"

"Oh, well, if you don't see a problem then I guess there isn't one. Maybe I should just go ahead and tell my story."

Theodore frowned as if he were missing something and didn't know what it was.

"Yeah, why don't you do that."

"To start with, I've been charged with embezzlement of company property and/or funds. I know all prisoners say the same thing, but I'm really not guilty."

Theodore opened his briefcase and took out a lined, yellow legal notepad and a ballpoint pen.

"Just tell me what you can and I'll see if this is the type of bail bond our company is interested in."

Janowski leaned forward across the table.

"I'm the CEO and owner of Scientific Chips Manufacturing, a small, closely held corporation. We make leading-edge computer chips for some of the world's fastest computers. Our problems began when the independent audit firm came in for their annual check of the books. Nothing balanced, but some of the entries made it look like I'm responsible for either money or materials missing from the plant. To be honest, I don't know if the computer chips were disappearing out of inventory or if funds were being diverted from proper accounts, or both. It's hard to tell which, but now the company is down over a million dollars."

Theodore scribbled furiously.

"What about your upper man-

agement, the people that help you run the company. Who are they?"

Janowski began counting on his fingers.

"There's my vice president, Biff Morgan; the sales manager, John Wayne Hansen; the production manager, Lance Jorgenson; and my financial officer, Trevor Jones. They've been with me since the company started, about four years ago."

"Give me a brief rundown."

"All good people, they were surfing buddies from years ago, you know, sport parachuting, live-on-the-edge type guys. About two years ago, the four of them, each young and single, pooled their money and bought a quarter section of meadowland with lake-front access. It's a ways out from the city. That's where they built their homes. Sometimes I think they're crazy, but we do have a great time together. Lately, they took up sky diving at night."

"Sounds like a tight-knit group."

"That it is, which works well for me. My loves in life, other than my company, are practicing magic tricks and flying an airplane. So when they want to go sky diving, which is about once a week, I'm the pilot who takes them up."

"You don't jump with them?"

"Not my thing; I like the flying part. Any kind of aircraft will do. Actually, the one we use for the parachute jumps is the company plane. We have a landing strip and hangar right on the premises. Makes it easily accessible and we can go anytime we want."

Theodore nodded dutifully.

"That's nice. Had any trouble with your accounting records before?"

"Not until last year. It seemed to start about then."

Theodore scribbled a few more notes.

"What's your security like? You know, in case someone's taking the chips out the front door."

Janowski thought for a while.

"There's a cyclone fence with barbed wire on the top all around the premises. Cameras are trained on the length of the fence and armed guards patrol the wire once every hour. No personal vehicles are allowed inside the fence. All employees go through the front door of the main building where two guards, with a walk-through metal detector arch for people and an X-ray machine for packages and briefcases, check for weapons and cameras coming in. The same equipment is also used to check for any materials, including computer chips, which someone might be trying to take out the front door. Each service and delivery vehicle and its driver are thoroughly checked both upon entering and exiting."

"Any ideas about the shortage from either the books or the inventory?"

"No, but if the situation isn't cleared up soon, SCM may go bankrupt. All of my personal assets now have liens against them and those funds have been channeled into the company to keep it solvent. There's a competitor in

the wings ready to bail us out with a buyout program, except now they want an explanation for the losses before they'll proceed with the purchase of my company. I can't do much while I'm sitting in jail. You gotta go my bond. I'm getting desperate here."

Theodore tapped his short, chubby, almost webbed fingers on the tabletop.

"You're not our usual type of client and your situation, assuming what you tell me is true, does sound a little unusual. Best I can do is call the boss and run it by him. As the proprietor, he makes all the final decisions."

"That's fine, just loan me a quarter."

Theodore raised one pudgy eyebrow. "I brought a cell phone. We don't need a pay telephone for the call. Besides, calls are more than a quarter now. How long you been in here?"

Janowski smiled slightly.

"No, no. I want the quarter to entertain myself while you're busy."

Theodore fished a quarter out of his pocket and slid it across the table. Then he opened his cell phone, punched in the numbers of the Twin Brothers Bail Bonds Company, and waited for the secretary to put Cletis Johnston on the line. While he waited, he watched Warren Janowski do magic tricks. The quarter seemed to walk across the knuckles of Janowski's right hand, suddenly disappear in mid-air, then quickly show up in Janowski's left palm.

When Mr. Johnston's deep, rich

baritone finally came on, Theodore explained the circumstances surrounding their pending client. As Theodore answered Cletis's questions, he kept his eyes on the loaned quarter as it was placed into a white handkerchief. The white square of cloth was then stuffed into the closed fist of Mr. Janowski. When the handkerchief was taken by one end and snapped out into the air, the quarter had evaporated. It magically reappeared from beneath Theodore's nose as Janowski flashed his hand in that vicinity. Then the quarter vanished again.

Theodore physically and mentally moved back in his chair. It wasn't wise to trust someone who was so good at sleight of hand, deceitful moves, and the dark practice of misdirection. Who knew what other tricks he might have up his sleeve? The world was dangerous enough without having to watch out for magic, black or otherwise.

At the end of his phone call, Theodore folded up the phone and cleared his throat.

"Our proprietor, Mr. Johnston, says he's checked out your financial situation and our company will go your bail. The fee for said bond is ten-percent ownership of your computer chip corporation. He further says this offer is non-negotiable."

"Ten percent of a multimillion dollar firm? That's astronomical."

"Quite so, but in bankruptcy, your firm is barely worth salvage value. Would you prefer to have ninety percent of a thriving

corporation or one hundred percent of nothing? Plus, my boss says that whereas we are not a detective agency and do not claim to be as such, he does hold the opinion that we may be able to clear your name of the embezzlement charges. This additional service would be provided as a free bonus to our bonding agreement."

Janowski crossed his arms across his chest and stared at the ceiling. Several minutes ticked slowly by. Finally, appearing to have reached a decision, he slumped in his chair.

"Okay, give me the documents. I'll sign."

Theodore quickly provided the contract, filled in a couple of blanks and indicated where the signature line was. When all was finished, he securely stored the papers back in his briefcase.

"Now, I need three more things and we'll get you out of here."

"Such as?"

"First, a map or drawing of the company's buildings, premises, entrances, exits, checkpoints, guard positions, camera locations, that sort of thing."

"We can do that. Come out to my office early tomorrow morning. I'll have it all ready for you."

"Secondly, I'll need open access to all areas of the buildings and grounds."

"No problem. I can escort you personally or get you an all-areas pass. What else do you need?"

Theodore stuck out his hand.

"I want my quarter back."

Janowski stood up from the table and laughed.

"I already stuck it back in your pants pocket with your other quarters."

Startled, Theodore reached in his pocket and extracted a handful of change. He sorted out several quarters.

"How do I know which one it is? I could've had these in my pocket all this time and you're just playing a trick on me."

Janowski walked over to the exit door for prisoners and called for the guard before turning back to Theodore.

"Oh, it's there. Trust me, I'd never lie to a bondsman with such elegant business cards."

And then he was gone.

The following afternoon, Theodore knocked on the door to the proprietor's inner sanctum. At the time, Cletis Johnston, outfitted in his new shantung silk suit in a dark shade of olive drab, was standing at the window with his hands clasped behind his back. An ebony shirt, with glistening, black-onyx cuff links to match his midnight skin, was offset with a subdued yellow-silk French tie. Expensive Italian leather shoes completed the ensemble.

"Have you brought me all the information I requested?"

"I believe so, sir."

Theodore began laying out the drawings of the manufacturing plant on the executive desk. On the corner of the richly polished mahogany wood nearest to him-

self, he lined up a neat stack of reports.

"Where would you like to start, sir?"

"In the matter of theft on a large scale, one should always follow the money. Let's start at the top. I assume you ran financial backgrounds?"

Theodore took the green file folder off the top of the neatly stacked reports.

"Right here. What our Mr. Janowski said about mortgaging himself to the hilt is true, although I wouldn't trust him on anything else."

"Why not?"

"I believe he swindled me out of a quarter. I loaned him one for some magic tricks in the jail, and I think he lied about putting it back into my pocket when we were finished. There's no way I remember how many quarters I had in my pants pocket that particular morning."

"Get over it, Theodore, it's only twenty-five cents. If that's all any sleight of hand ever costs you, then consider yourself well entertained. Continue with your report."

"I'm just saying he's not the kind of person a guy should trust. But putting that aside, all the financial transactions on paper do show the proceeds of any personal loans from banks to him as going directly into the company treasury. He's evidently not worth much at the present time. Are you sure taking ten percent of a dying company is good business?"

"Business opportunities are

what you make of them, Theodore. Now tell me about the other four executives."

Theodore removed the four red files from the stack.

"You're correct to focus on these guys. The VP, sales manager, production manager, and financial officer are spending way more than their salaries account for. The lakefront meadowland where their residences were built is top dollar. So's the houses themselves, regular mansions, plus they got all kinds of computerized gadgets inside. If you drew a line from one mansion to another, it'd make a hollow square large enough to enclose at least nine football fields. When they go sky diving, that's where the four executives come down. The one landing closest to a marker in the center of the square wins their weekly pool."

"How do they know what area to aim for on their night dives?"

"Remember I mentioned computerized gadgets? Well, each one of the four has a blue strobe light attached to the roof of his house. When it comes time for a night dive, they call home and their voice-activated computers turn on the blue strobes. The center of the four blue lights is their target area. After that, it's a short walk home."

Cletis steepled his fingers.

"Very ingenious. They've planned well."

"What do you mean, sir?"

"Later, Theodore, later. Fill me in on the layout of the company now, if you would please."

Theodore pointed out on the drawings where buildings, gates, doors, hangar, and the airfield were located.

"All employees go through the front door only?"

"Yes, sir. Everyone walks through the metal detector both ways and all packages and briefcases are run through the X-ray machine coming and going."

"No personal vehicles allowed in the compound?"

"Correct."

"Did you observe how the guards handled the truck traffic through the gates?"

"A very thorough search, Mr. Johnston."

"Cameras cover every inch of the fence, plus once an hour guard patrols?"

"That's right."

Cletis leveled his eyes on Theodore's lumpy face.

"Do you have any ideas how they're doing it?"

Theodore quickly realized he was being tested, the apprentice by the master.

"Well, sir, I doubt they're throwing boxes of computer chips over the fence, then driving around the outside and picking them up at night because the cameras would catch that kind of action."

"Go on."

"I guess they could tunnel under the fence and get the chips out that way."

Cletis shook his shaved-bald head slowly from side to side.

"These four like to play, digging a tunnel would be too much like work for them. Try again."

Theodore frowned in concentration.

"The only route left is them jumping out of the plane and taking the computer chips with them. They do have a jump scheduled for tonight after dark, if you want me to investigate that."

"Think, Theodore. Do they carry any packages in their hands when they jump? Any bags tied to their bodies? How about throwing a bag out before they jump?"

"No, Mr. Janowski says the only things going out the airplane door are them and their parachutes. I don't think their jumpsuits would conceal a package of any size to carry enough computer chips to make it worthwhile, so it's not that."

Cletis stroked his long, silky black mustache.

"I think we've eliminated several possibilities here, Theodore. All that's left is the obvious."

Theodore wasn't sure he'd kept up with the same conversation.

"What do you want me to do, sir?"

Cletis gazed off into the dark corners of his dimly lit ceiling. The inner sanctum grew deadly quiet.

"I have a plan," he said, "and it puts you at absolutely no risk."

Theodore, who knew this stage of the operation usually concerned that segment of the proprietor's plan where he, Theodore, got stuck with the dirty part of the work, was now visibly relieved at not being placed in any danger.

"I can't tell you how much I appreciate this, sir."

"Not a problem, Theodore, but I do have a list of actions for you to conduct tonight. I've written them out so you won't forget anything. As it will be a moonless night, I suggest that you settle into your position well before dark. You can take along a flashlight, but I recommend you use it sparingly as there may be others out there who could be violently unhappy to see you wandering around looking over their shoulders."

Theodore accepted the list and turned for the door.

"And, Theodore . . . be in early tomorrow morning. We will have lots of work to do if everything goes well."

"Yes, sir, but I still don't trust that Janowski guy."

Cletis picked up his cell phone and prepared to make a crucial call.

Early the next morning, Theodore entered the proprietor's executive office. Dried mud and recent grass stains coated his lower pants legs and his black Oxfords with the thick rubber soles. He was immediately directed to remain standing in the doorway until newspapers could be appropriately laid down in order for him to not leave tracks on the expensive oriental carpet.

"I trust you spent a profitable night?"

Theodore wasn't sure where to start.

"A lot of things happened."

"Very well, put them in chronological order and tell me what you saw."

Absentmindedly, Theodore ran his fingers through what little hair he had remaining on his prematurely balding head. Miniature pieces of wood debris from the ends of broken tree branches fell to the floor.

"I showed up at the lakefront property and hid in the woods on a small hill before dark, like you said. From there I could see the four mansions, the landing square, and the lake. When the sun went down, it was pitch black out there without a moon. About an hour later, the blue strobe lights lit up on top of the four houses. I assumed they were getting ready for their night jump. Then, suddenly the strobe lights on top of the houses went out."

"About what I expected, Theodore. Then what happened?"

Theodore frowned in recollection.

"Right after that, four blue strobe lights came on down at the lake, two on one side of the cove and two on the other side."

"Continue."

"The sky divers had red strobe lights on one side of their body and white strobe lights on the other, so they wouldn't run into each other in the dark. It also meant I could see them coming down. But, when they lined up to land in the middle of the blue square, they came smack down in the deep water. I tried to holler at them, but even if they would've heard me, it was too late. I think they all drowned."

"Exactly," said Cletis, as he held

up the front-page portion of the newspaper that had not been laid out for Theodore to stand on. The headlines reported the sky divers' mishap. "And what did you see next?"

"After a while, the blue lights at the lakeside went out and the ones on top of the houses came back on. I didn't know what to do, so I stayed a while longer without moving, just like you told me. About ninety minutes after the jump, a car drove up to the lakeside and recovered some electrical equipment and a couple of strobes from the second set of blue lights. I watched the movement of his flashlight as he walked around the lake to recover the last two lights. Later, he dumped all the equipment in the trunk of his car and drove off."

"Did you get a look at his face?"

"No, but while he was on the far side of the lake, I crept down and got his license plate number."

"Good, good, we will use that later."

"But, sir, I just automatically assumed it was you that . . ."

"No, Theodore, not me at all. You jumped to an erroneous conclusion, much the same as our four young gentlemen did in that moonless sky. If you stop to think about it, there is no profit for us if I kill them."

"Then who . . . ?"

"I suspect our client, Mr. Janowski, made all the arrangements."

"You're talking about the guy with the magic tricks?"

"Exactly. Who better than a ma-

gician to make an object disappear and seem to reappear in another place?"

"But, why?"

"After you left, I telephoned Mr. Janowski about my suspicions of the four young executives smuggling the computer chips out while they were sport parachuting from the company airplane. His reply was they took no bags with them. I then reminded him that parachutists carry a safety or reserve chute in case the main one doesn't open. A perfect space for a package of contraband. I must say, he took the betrayal by his four friends rather badly."

"I'll bet he did, being friends and all."

"Yes, well, after that, I merely emphasized the night jump, the nearby lake, and the landing field lit by strobe lights. I fear his distraught mind devised this diabolical method of revenge that appears on the surface to be an accident."

"Man, I said not to trust that guy after he stole my quarter."

"Very astute, Theodore, very astute."

Theodore's face flushed with the rare compliment as he brushed a small torrent of broken leaves and torn vine tendrils off his sport jacket. Then he turned pensive.

"Is that how they smuggled the stuff out?"

"This morning's newspaper confirms three of the four reserve chute spaces were loaded with packages of computer chips from SCM."

"Are you saying one of them was innocent?"

"Not at all. We may never know for sure, but I suspect that three of them bailed out of the aircraft with only their main parachutes workable, while the fourth kept his reserve chute intact. The four of them then joined hands in the air to form a square. One at a time, each one pulled his ripcord to ensure his main parachute opened. The man with the intact reserve chute waited until last to open his main chute. That way if anyone had a malfunction, that person could ride double to the ground on the last man's parachute. They may have lived on the edge, but they weren't stupid."

Theodore solemnly nodded his head.

"So now, Mr. Janowski gets his company back into the black and all his troubles are over."

"Not quite, Theodore. I assume you followed the vehicle when it left?"

"I had to run like hell through the woods to get to my car, but I managed to catch up with the other vehicle and tail it to the SCM plant. Unfortunately, the driver walked inside before I could see who it was, but the car was still sitting in their parking lot when I broke off to come back here to our office. Why?"

"A brief *anonymous* call to my friend the police captain should result in a search of that car trunk. I suspect the lab boys will find our Mr. Janowski's fingerprints all over the second set of blue strobe lights. What a pity.

We clear Mr. Janowski of embezzlement and he's immediately arrested for homicide."

"Are we going to bail him out again on the new charge?"

"I do believe it is in our best interests, Theodore, and in the best interests of the SCM Corporation, of course. However, if we do post his bond, which will be much, much higher this time for murder than it was for embezzlement, you should tell him the bail fee will now be an additional forty-one percent ownership of the corporation. The higher costs of doing business, you understand."

"But that gives you a total of fifty-one percent of the corporation."

"Quite so. I don't believe in equal partnerships. It's too difficult to do business when equal partners disagree. If you'll remember, I tried that with my twin brother, Daryl, and one of us had to go."

Theodore reflected on the circumstances concerning the firm's prior partnership and quickly decided that being drawn into a conversation about Mr. Johnston's disappeared twin brother might not be conducive to his own continuing existence. Therefore, he immediately returned to the subject of their ongoing client's future.

"I don't know if Mr. Janowski will go for that high a figure."

Cletis stroked his black, silky mustache.

"Then we must sweeten the offer. Perhaps the added inducement of a personal loan in the amount of one hundred thousand cash to help him pay his many expenses. Think about it, Theodore, if you were about to be convicted on four counts of premeditated murder would you stick around? I rather assume our Mr. Janowski will consider the one hundred thousand dollars as traveling money for the wild blue yonder."

Theodore let his mind play with that concept for a while.

"I must say, sir, you're a bit of a magician yourself."

"How so, Theodore?"

"The way you make that company gradually disappear right under the CEO's nose and he doesn't even see it coming."

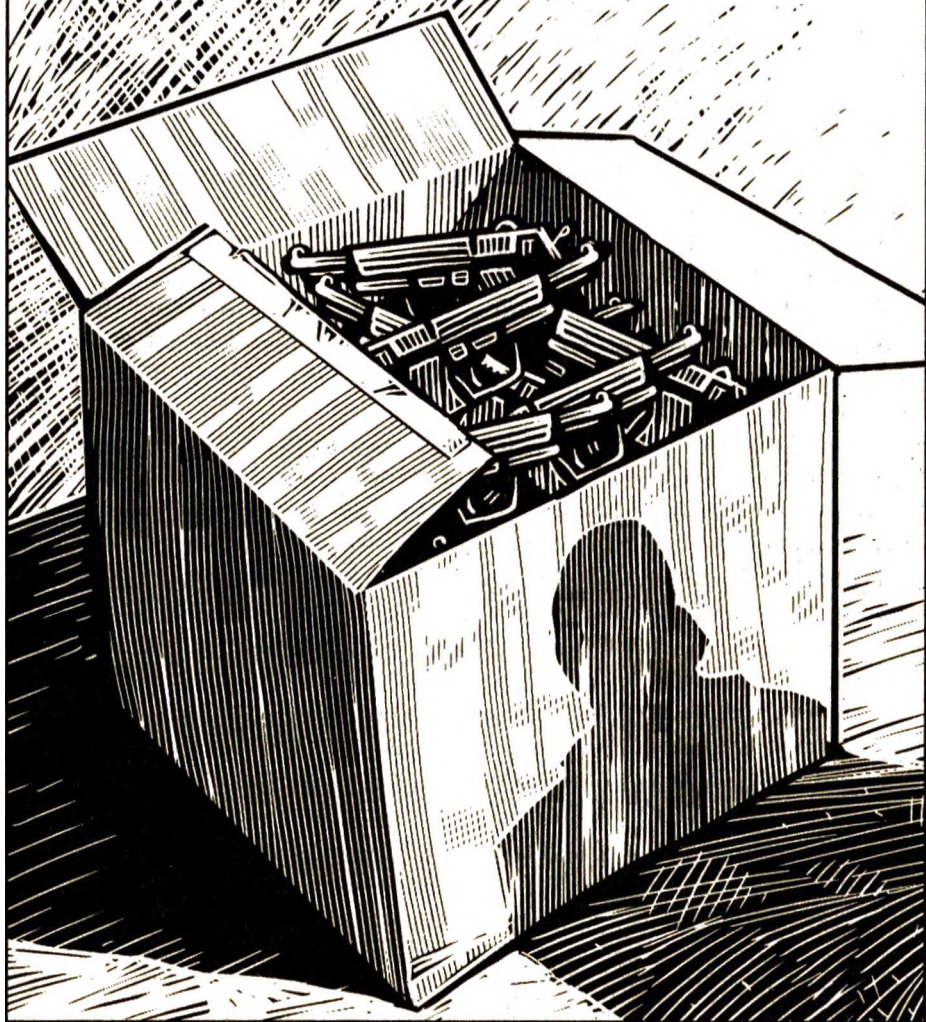
"It's not all blue smoke and mirrors, Theodore, but thank you."

"One more question if I might, Mr. Johnston? I don't suppose you had any prior dealings with any of those four young executives, say in the last couple years?"

"Ah, Theodore, you know a good magician never gives away all of his secrets. Now go clean up. Tomorrow, we have to see one of our manufacturing competitors about negotiating a future bailout for our newly acquired computer chip firm. After all, one should never let opportunity get away from a firm grasp."

MORE DEADLY TO GIVE

B. K. STEVENS



The Professor didn't look up when the two men entered the room. She sat, as usual, in her rocking chair near the bay window in the big, sunny parlor that serves as the office for Woodhouse Investigations. Today, she was snipping. Dozens of sheets of plastic canvas, in shades of brown and tan and beige, lay on the mellowed hardwood floor, all within reach of her quick, gnarled fingers. Working with a small pair of orange-handled scissors, the Professor cut one sheet into a neat stack of slender rectangles, then seized another sheet and snipped again. Squares this time, I observed. Soon, she'd take needle and yarn from the wicker basket near her feet and stitch all the shapes into something magnificent. But I knew better than to ask what that something would be.

Her daughter stood up to welcome the visitors. Miss Woodhouse looked good today. She looked imposing, of course. Almost six feet tall, broad-shouldered, and lean, she always looks imposing. But today she'd ironed especially crisp creases into her boxy beige suit and pulled her slightly frizzy gray-black hair back with even more than usual precision, catching it smartly at the nape of her neck with a bright blue rubber band. And her eyes shone so brightly, and her skin glowed so warmly, that you'd almost think she'd put on makeup for the first time in her life.

"Dr. Church!" she said, holding out her hand. "How nice to see you, sir. And Dr. Marner—welcome to our home. This is a pleasure."

At that, the Professor looked up. "Why, young Ben Marner," she said, smiling. "Indeed, Iphigenia, this is a pleasure, a providential pleasure. Thank heaven you were preserved from that accident, Ben. You're quite recovered? You look fit."

"Splendidly fit," Ben Marner said, and walked over to kiss her hand. The walk took a while—the Professor might consider him "young Ben Marner," but he looked well past seventy as he made his slow progress across the room, leaning heavily on a cane. I'd read about the overpass outside Annapolis that collapsed three months ago as Ben Marner drove under it. The people in the cars just ahead of him and just behind him had all been killed, but he'd emerged from a two-month coma with only a broken hip.

Finally, he made it to the rocker and claimed his kiss. He was a tall, bony, sweet-faced man, wearing a suit three decades out of style, his thick white hair cut so jaggedly I suspected he doubled as his own barber. "As you see, Minerva," he said, "I'm fine. A slight limp, but it's diminishing—soon, I won't need the cane. The cancer's in remission again; last year's quintuple bypass left me feistier than ever. I have nothing to complain of—not if Iphigenia can oblige us in an awkward matter."

"Then oblige you she shall." The Professor looked sharply at her daughter. "Did you hear, Iphigenia? Whatever these gentlemen ask of you, agree."

“Yes, Mother.” Miss Woodhouse cast her eyes deskward. “Please sit down, gentlemen, and allow me to introduce my assistant, Harriet Russo. Harriet, this is Dr. Church, headmaster of Sir Isaac Newton Academy, the preparatory school I was fortunate enough to attend. And this is Dr. Ben Marner, Newton’s most distinguished alumnus.”

“Oh, hardly that,” Ben Marner protested, blushing nicely. “But you may be our most distinguished alumna, Iphigenia—your brilliant career as a police detective and many successes as a private investigator testify to that.”

“I was perhaps too successful when I investigated a case at Newton,” she said, her blushes overlapping with his. “I’m surprised you want my help, Dr. Church. When I investigated Matilda Arnold’s murder, I nearly demolished your English department.”

“That department,” Dr. Church said evenly, “deserved demolition.” He was a dapper little man—perhaps sixty, perhaps less, wearing a precisely fitted pearl-gray suit that somehow managed to look both academic and affluent. “Thanks to your diligence in uncovering scandals, we could dismiss some people outright, pressure others into early retirement. The department’s stronger now; I’m grateful to you for purging it. I’ll be still more grateful if you help us with our present difficulty—which concerns, as you might guess, this afternoon’s dedication of our new gymnasium.”

“Ah, yes.” Her lips curled inwards. “The Horst Athletic Center, paid for by a multimillion dollar gift from Brett Horst, founder of Lethal-Lookz Toys. Several weeks ago, I received my invitation to the dedication ceremony. I replied with regrets.”

“I know.” Dr. Church sighed. “I’m not happy about accepting a gift from Brett Horst—but one can’t pick one’s donors, any more than one’s relatives. We needed a new gymnasium, we’d searched for years without finding anyone with both means and inclination to make a naming gift—and then we found Brett Horst, willing to cover all costs of building and equipping a state-of-the-art athletic center. What were we to do?”

As a gloomy silence settled, the Professor nudged my back with a triangular wedge of plastic canvas. “Tea, little Harriet,” she hissed. “If you please.”

I raced to the kitchen, slapped a kettle on the stove, shoved cups and saucers and milk and sugar onto a tray, and raced back, not wanting to miss anything.

“But Brett Horst!” Miss Woodhouse’s eyes were sad, intense. “A manufacturer of toy guns so realistic in appearance that they’ve caused countless tragedies—”

“Not countless,” Ben Marner said wearily. “Seventeen, as of last weekend. On Saturday night, a twelve-year-old boy in Omaha, acting on a dare, pointed a LethalLookz Stag 87 at a police officer—”

“That’s the worst of them,” the Professor said, so upset she snipped

clear through the mesh of the plastic canvas arch she'd been shaping. "A toy handgun from hell, nearly impossible to distinguish from the real thing. The officer fired?"

"She did." Ben Marner rubbed his forehead. "You can't blame her—she had good reason to think her life in danger. So another child is dead, another family is devastated, another officer will struggle against guilt for the rest of her life. And this afternoon Newton Academy will honor the monster who put those things on the shelves of every toy store in America. Dr. Church, I *begged* you not to accept that gift—"

"And I listened," Dr. Church said. "You're the president and founder of the Heritage Society—how could I not listen? But I must deal with realities. I—"

The teakettle whistled, and I raced to the kitchen again, made the tea, raced back. Dr. Church had handed Miss Woodhouse a sheet of stiff, cream-colored paper.

"Ever since the gift was announced," he was saying, "protests have poured in. Over eight hundred phone calls, over seven hundred e-mails, over four hundred faxes. And nine actual letters. This was the first, received over a year ago."

Miss Woodhouse peered at it. "Let's see—Arial font? Fourteen point? Bold?"

Dr. Church nodded. "And no way to trace it. Authors of death threats needn't paste together letters cut from magazines anymore; word processors are far more anonymous than typewriters. The Eastport postmark on the envelope is our only clue."

"Unless content and style provide further clues," she said, and read out loud:

YOU MADE ME ASHAMED TO BE A NEWTON GRADUATE BY TAKING A GRANT FROM A CORRUPT CONTRIBUTOR. GIVE IT BACK. IF YOU KEEP THE TWENTY PIECES OF BLOOD-SOAKED SILVER FROM THIS MERCHANT OF MAKE-BELIEVE DEATH, YOU'LL HAVE REAL DEATH ON YOUR CONSCIENCE, REAL BLOOD ON YOUR HANDS. BRETT HORST MAY BUILD YOUR STADIUM, BUT HE WILL NOT LIVE TO SEE THE FIRST GAME PLAYED.

"So the author claims to be a Newton graduate," Miss Woodhouse said. "So perhaps our first step—Harriet, you left the burner on."

A loud buzzing sound had interrupted her. Again, I raced to the kitchen. "Sorry," I said, returning. "Thank goodness for our Burner Buzzer—it goes off two minutes after you remove the weight from a burner if you forget to turn off the stove. I'd have burned the house down long ago if—why are you grinning, Professor?"

"Because," she said, "I don't think you realize the inventor of Burner Buzzers is sitting in this very room. Ben Marner is perhaps the most accomplished domestic engineer in America. He invented Safety Snaps, too."

“Really?” I said, amazed. “Those gizmos you snap on cleaning fluids and other products that don’t have child-proof tops? They’re wonderful. I worked undercover at a daycare center once, and we put Safety Snaps on everything.”

“Yes, they’ve preserved many children from harm,” Dr. Church said warmly. “Most hospitals give them to new parents as parting gifts. Ben also worked on the prototypes for the first household smoke alarms, the first carbon monoxide detectors, the first infant car seats. You see why Newton is so proud of him.”

“Well, well,” Ben Marner said, looking embarrassed by the fuss, “my dear, late Martha and I were never blessed with children of our own—if I’ve made the world a bit safer for other people’s children, that’s a comfort. But time’s short, Dr. Church—shouldn’t we show Iphigenia the other notes?”

“Indeed.” Dr. Church took two sheets of white bond paper from his briefcase. “These arrived last week, two days apart. Same font, same print size, same Eastport postmarks. So we seem to be dealing with a very determined fanatic.”

“So it seems,” Miss Woodhouse agreed. She read the second note out loud:

AS AN ALUM, I’M SHOCKED YOU’D ACCEPT A GIFT FROM SUCH A SLEAZY DONOR. BRETT HORST IS A DISGRACE. IF YOU GO AHEAD WITH YOUR PLANS, WE’LL KILL HIM.

“Well, that’s direct,” Miss Woodhouse commented, and went on to the last note:

WE ALUMS DON’T WANT NEWTON TAKING GIFTS FROM BRETT HORST, AND WE HATE THE CHANGES YOU’RE MAKING. BETTER LOOK FOR NEW PROSPECTS—YOU’RE ABOUT TO LOSE YOUR BIGGEST DONOR.

“So this guy’s part of a group,” I said. “A renegade alumni group, maybe. But what does this reference to ‘the changes you’re making’ mean?”

Dr. Church looked at his hands. “When Mr. Horst made the gift, he asked for—adjustments. He was disappointed to learn Newton teams seldom have winning records, and thought they need a more—well, a more assertive image. A more assertive name, for example. Perhaps he has a point. Perhaps Newton’s Theorists isn’t an ideal name for sports teams. Undeniably, we haven’t won a championship in some time.”

“Not since the late sixties,” Ben Marner said, smiling, “when Miss Iphigenia Woodhouse led the Lady Theorists to victory at the national field hockey tournament. That was a glorious day, Iphigenia, one all Theorist fans still treasure.”

Miss Woodhouse nodded briefly, her teeth already clenching against the next shock. “And what,” she asked, “is the new Newton team name?”

Dr. Church winced. "The Lethal Lizardz," he said.

"'Lizardz' with a *z* at the end," Ben Marner put in, "to make the allusion to LethalLookz Toys clear. Brett Horst will use the Academy's teams—its *students*—to advertise his execrable products. That's not the worst of it. The worst is the new mascot he's forced us to adopt."

"A new mascot?" I cried. "You're dumping Sir Izzy? But I love him! He's so adorable, with his great big glasses, and his cute little plastic pocket protector, and—"

Dr. Church smiled feebly. "I'm fond of Sir Izzy, too. But Mr. Horst is right—he's not the sort of mascot likely to intimidate opposing teams."

"He brandishes a slide rule," I pointed out.

"That's not intimidating enough for Brett Horst," Ben Marner said. "The new mascot—Larry, the Lethal Lizard—brandishes a toy Stag 87."

The Professor dropped her scissors. "It is too much. I do not believe it."

"It's true," Ben Marner said. "At the groundbreaking ceremony last spring, Mr. Horst unveiled his new mascot, brought out several crates of toy Stag 87s, and distributed them to everyone in attendance. A few students turned away in disgust, but most were delighted. Even some teachers and administrators accepted them."

"We couldn't insult Mr. Horst by refusing his gifts," Dr. Church said, his voice plaintive. "His idea, you see, is that we are to bring our toy Stag 87s to games and fire them whenever a Newton player scores a point. Many people plan to bring their toys to today's ceremony and fire a salute when Mr. Horst is introduced."

"A nightmare," Miss Woodhouse said. "So, what do the police say?"

By now, Dr. Church seemed fascinated by his hands. "As yet," he said, not looking up, "we have not informed the police about the notes."

"But that's ridiculous!" Miss Woodhouse said. "You have a controversial figure coming to campus, you've had death threats—and you haven't informed the police? Have you made *no* security preparations?"

"To be sure, we have," Dr. Church said. "We put the Newton security force—dear old Chief Withers and his secretary, Edna Sue—on special alert. But I feared the police might not be discreet, and I didn't want it to become known that a guest we're honoring has been threatened. Think of the damage it would do to Newton's reputation!"

"It will do more damage," Miss Woodhouse countered, "if your honored guest is murdered at the dedication."

"Oh, those threats are most likely idle," Dr. Church said. "And even if someone does intend to harm Mr. Horst, he or she would hardly do it at a public ceremony."

"Unless he or she is deranged," Ben Marner said. "I agree, Iphigenia. When I arrived today to discuss plans for the ceremony, Dr. Church showed me the notes, and I urged him to notify the police. When he demurred, I suggested we consult you instead—there's no

questioning your discretion. But you think it best to inform the police?"

"I do," she said. "If you don't do it, I will. A man's life has been threatened—we have a moral obligation to provide all the protection we can."

"I suppose," Dr. Church said. "Still, I hate showing an outsider those notes, after I've worked so hard to keep them quiet."

"Who has seen the notes, Dr. Church?" Miss Woodhouse asked.

"Well, Ben, just this morning," he said. "And all the members of our advancement staff saw the first letter when it arrived—we discussed it at a meeting."

"Your advancement staff?" I asked. "What's that?"

"Our fundraising staff," he said. "Of course, we don't like to use the word *fundraising*; people think it's unseemly for schools to raise funds, although we couldn't keep our doors open a week if we relied on tuition alone. For years we used *development*, but even that seemed too direct. So we switched to *advancement*—a more positive word, don't you think? Most people don't suspect someone in advancement might be about to ask them for money."

"And who," Miss Woodhouse asked, "is on this staff?"

"I head it myself," Dr. Church said. "Really, we need a vice president for advancement—I've begged for one, for years—but the trustees say we can't afford one."

"They're coming around," Ben Marner said. "They're starting to see fundraising can make a difference. Score one more big success, and you'll get your vice president."

"I hope so," Dr. Church said, sighing. "As it is, I have to devote almost all my time to fundraising."

"A sad change," the Professor commented. "Not so long ago, headmasters could devote themselves to establishing the intellectual tone of the campus, shaping the curriculum, setting an example of scholarship for the faculty."

"Scholarship?" Dr. Church said sadly. "What's that? I rarely see the inside of the library any more; I'm too busy raising money to build new wings for it. And I hardly remember our curriculum, and as for intellectual tone—if the campus still has one, someone else must be setting it, because I never have time to give it a thought."

Ben Marner patted his hand. "You're not alone—most college presidents have to focus on fundraising these days, too. In reply to your question, Iphigenia, Dr. Church has a small but energetic advancement staff. Lance Ingram is in charge of alumni affairs, estate planning, and major gifts. Nicole Pierrot oversees public events and marketing. And Bessie Smith handles research and other duties as assigned."

"Those are the only people who saw the first threat?" Miss Woodhouse asked. "Did they see the other notes, too?"

"No, I've kept those to myself," Dr. Church said. "Well, Iphigenia? The

ceremony is at four o'clock—will you help us make sure nothing unpleasant happens?"

The Professor glared at her daughter. "Your answer," she said, "is yes."

Miss Woodhouse lifted her hands, then let them fall. "Yes, if you consult the police as well. But I'm not a bodyguard, and you've left me so little time to prepare—"

"Stop making excuses, you nasty girl," her mother snapped. "You must try your best. Harriet shall help you, and so shall I. I shall attend this ceremony."

"But you hate crowds," Miss Woodhouse protested, "and it might not be safe."

"I shall attend." The Professor seized yarn and needle and began whipstitching plastic canvas squares into long, curving rows. "Harriet shall pick me up at three fifteen. But hadn't you and she better get to Newton to become acquainted with the advancement staff? And Dr. Church, Dr. Marner—hadn't you better go see the police?"

They left within the minute. When the Professor tells people they had better do something, they generally do it fast. "Maybe we should head straight for the gymnasium," I said to Miss Woodhouse, "to check out potential security problems. We can meet the members of the advancement staff later, if there's time."

"Meet them first," the Professor said, frowning at a yarn tangle, "since one of them almost certainly wrote the last two notes."

Poor Professor, I thought. She's usually so sharp—even though she had some kind of nervous breakdown some twenty years ago, and that made her a little strange, and made her pressure Miss Woodhouse into resigning from the police and breaking her engagement, and still makes her awful hard on her daughter, though I know they love each other very much. But this time, the Professor had missed the point. "Don't you remember?" I said gently. "All three notes were mailed from Eastport, and they all used the same font, bold type, all that. Obviously, all three were written by the same person—"

"Or the second and third were written by someone who saw the first," she said, pulling her yarn straight, "and who had wits enough to copy the font and drive to Eastport to mail the notes—but not wits enough to duplicate the style of the first threat."

"As always, Mother," Miss Woodhouse said, clutching her purse in both hands and looking down meekly, as if wondering if complimenting her mother would seem presumptuous, "you're exactly right. The first note could scarcely be described as well written, but its style was flamboyant, melodramatic. The author attempted—clumsily—to use rhetorical flourishes such as alliteration, parallel structure, repetition—"

"—and metaphor and allusion," the Professor said impatiently. "Yes, yes, Iphigenia. I see all that. Any fool could see all that. Oh. I'm sorry, little Harriet. You, apparently, did not see all that—or, in fact, any

of that—but I certainly did not mean you are a fool, or less than a fool. No, no. You are *more* than a fool. You are in many ways cleverer than Iphigenia, and of course nicer and prettier and—”

“It’s okay,” I cut in. “I didn’t see the difference before, but I do now. The second two notes were blander, right? I mean, the first one was no big deal, but the writer tried to make it special, and whoever wrote the other notes didn’t even try. Those notes are more like—well, business letters. I mean, they talk about murdering a guy, and that’s not just business, but the *tone*—it’s like the writer just wants to get some things said, but doesn’t care how they’re said. It’s—businesslike. Is that why you think an advancement person wrote the last two notes, because those folks are essentially business people?”

The Professor clapped her hands. “Oh, brave Harriet!” she cried. “Roughly educated, barely articulate, yet you still have dim flashes of insight and the courage to attempt to translate those flashes into human speech. Yes, my dear. Those folks, as you quaintly say, are indeed essentially business people, and that is one reason to suspect them. Another reason—hardly worth mentioning, don’t be embarrassed if you didn’t think of it—is they were, according to Dr. Church, the only ones who saw the first note, therefore the only ones who could attempt, however ineptly, to compose notes that might seem to be written by the same author. And, of course, there’s the advancement jargon.”

I shrugged. “I missed that, too,” I said. “Go ahead and explain.”

Miss Woodhouse smiled—a brief, sympathetic, affectionate smile. “The first note has the jargon wrong, so it probably wasn’t written by someone in advancement. It says Horst gave Newton a *grant*—but grants come from foundations, not individuals. It calls him a *contributor*, hardly a term to describe a person who forked over all the millions for an entire building. And the writer calls himself or herself a Newton *graduate*. In the other notes, the writer uses the word *alum*—that’s advancement shorthand, I suspect. And those notes refer to Horst as a *donor*, and to the money he gave Newton as a *gift*—I’d guess those are the proper terms in the advancement world. The last note also uses the term *prospects*—more advancement lingo, I’d wager.”

“Maybe,” I admitted. “But why would anyone in advancement threaten Horst? He’s like the biggest contributor—donor—Newton has; landing his grant—gift—must be the greatest triumph these folks ever had. Why would they want to kill him?”

“That,” she said, smiling again, “is what we must find out.”

Administration Hall is the oldest building on the Newton campus. Its lack of a name is a clue to its age: It was built back when academic buildings didn’t need names, back when construction costs were low-

er and schools didn't have to search for wealthy egomaniacs willing to part with millions in exchange for tax breaks and the thrill of seeing their names carved in granite. There are disadvantages to being a building without a donor, though. Administration Hall is rich in cracked windows and dingy, musty halls, bereft of anyone who feels obliged to protect the family name by springing for a coat of paint or a decent ventilation system. Before long, I thought as Miss Woodhouse and I trudged up yet another sagging stairway, Newton Academy will be romancing Brett Horst again, begging him to pay for a sparkling new Lethal Lizardz Administration Lair.

Finally, we reached the advancement suite. A woman of forty or so sat at the reception desk, shoulders hunched, eyes fixed on her computer screen, all ten fingers tensed over her keyboard. She was reading—or rather, skimming: I could almost trace the rapid left-to-right eye movement. I had to clear my throat twice before she looked up.

"Excuse me," I said. "Are you the secretary?"

She made a sour face. "No," she said. "That's just how I'm perceived." She looked me over briefly, shrugged, and turned to Miss Woodhouse. "I. Woodhouse," she said. "Class of 1969. I should update your file—our last photo of you is three years old, and you're much grayer now. Well. You don't want to see me. You want Lance."

She stood up, and I swallowed a gasp. She had nice enough features despite the squinty eyes, and she was quite thin, generally speaking. But she had to have the biggest, flattest behind I'd ever seen. Too many hours at the computer, I guessed.

She knocked loudly on a door to the left of the reception desk. "Lance!" she said. "It's Woodhouse, '69. You talk to her. I'm busy."

She made it back to her computer before the door opened. A man stepped out of the office—thirties, trim, not gorgeous but not bad, wearing a turquoise shirt with a crisp white collar, a gold tie, khaki pants, and no rings on his left hand—a prospect, I thought, and squared my shoulders, deciding I could get used to a crewcut if I didn't have better options. He didn't pay attention to me, though. He just grabbed Miss Woodhouse's hand.

"Fantastic to see you, Iphigenia," he said, shaking enthusiastically. "Hey, that was some fabulous alumni dinner last month, wasn't it? That speaker was hilarious—I almost split a gut. But he wasn't really your cup of tea, was he? Know what you'd like? You'd like—you'd *love*—the brainy speakers we have at Heritage Society lunches. You finally made up your mind about joining?"

"I'm considering it." Miss Woodhouse gave him a last shake and pulled her hand back. "But I hope there's no need for a decision just yet."

He laughed—why, I didn't know, but he laughed a lot. "No, no need for a decision yet—not for many, many years, I'm sure. I hope. But when you do decide, don't forget us. Hell—what am I saying? The cap-

tain of the 1968 Lady Theorists champion field hockey team forget her alma mater? Not likely. Not possible. So, how can I help you? You want front row seats for the dedication? It's sorta late, but for you, sure. Two front row seats for you and your little friend."

Her little friend? What was he thinking? Not a prospect, I decided, and let my shoulders droop. Maybe I could get used to a crewcut, but not for this guy.

"Actually," Miss Woodhouse said, "my assistant, Harriet Russo, and I are here on business. Dr. Church asked us to help with security for the ceremony."

"Hey, great." He yanked his mouth into a reasonable approximation of a serious expression. "We can use security. You won't believe it, but some nuts are whining about us taking a gift from Brett, just because he makes squirt guns or whatever. Is that weird? Especially since he's a super guy once you get to know him. And if anybody knows him, I do. I flew to the West Coast a dozen times while I was working on the gift, I played golf with him at the best courses in the country, I helped him open his lodge at Aspen for the season, I spent a week deep-sea fishing on his yacht, I went to Vegas to keep his dice warm—you name it, I did it. And now, after all the hard work I did to land this gift—"

The woman at the computer snorted. "You did the hard work?" She began pounding keys, flashing from website to website at top speed. "You landed the gift?"

He smiled tolerantly. "Yeah, Bessie, I did. You found Brett, nobody denies that, but if we'd had to rely on your charm to reel him in—yikes." He turned to Miss Woodhouse. "Have you met Bessie Smith, our prospect researcher?"

"And I also write grant proposals and edit the alumni newsletter," Bessie said glumly, eyes still fixed on her screen, "and maintain the database, and proofread all Academy publications, and send out sports releases, and handle the front desk when the secretary's sick, and do other duties as assigned."

"That's our Bessie," Lance said, looking at her fondly. "Whatever you ask her to do, she says yes. She likes to keep busy. Well, Iphigenia. What can I do for you?"

"Show me a floor plan of the new gymnasium," Miss Woodhouse said, "and a schedule of today's events."

"Got 'em both in my office," he said, gesturing toward it. "Hey—let's do lunch real soon, talk over your long-range plans. You like McGarvey's?"

As soon as they were in his office, Bessie Smith turned to me. "So. What's your relationship with I. Woodhouse? Strictly professional?"

That caught me off guard. "We don't see each other socially," I said. She nodded. "Good. And she's not seeing anyone else socially? She hasn't gotten back together with that policeman?"

Too much, I thought. "It's not my place to say," I said, stiffly. "You can

ask Miss Woodhouse—if you think it’s any of your business.”

Bessie shrugged. “She’s not a top ten anyway,” she said, “or even a top hundred.” She turned back to her computer, seeming ready to let conversation drop.

A vague theory started forming. “Lance Ingram called you a prospect researcher,” I said. “What does that mean?”

“It means I research prospective donors,” she said, frowning at her screen.

“Like Brett Horst? Lance just said you found him. Is he a Newton graduate?”

“Not much glory in finding an alum,” she said, snorting again. “Brett Horst has no overt relationship to Newton. It took creative research to identify him as a prospect.”

“Can you tell me about it?” I asked.

It was the right question. Finally, she looked away from her computer, turning in her seat to face me. “Well, I subscribe to several e-mail news alert services—they notify me whenever Newton or Annapolis is mentioned in a news story. Two years ago, in a *Forbes* interview, Brett Horst said he’d attended the Naval Academy in the seventies.”

“So he’s a Naval Academy graduate?”

“No,” she said. “He was expelled after one semester, for being too militaristic. Thank God—if he’d graduated, he’d give *them* his money. He’s never forgiven the academy—he said so in the interview. But he also said he’s fond of Annapolis, because he met his first wife here—the one who died, the one he actually loved.”

“So he likes the city,” I said, shrugging. “That’s not much to go on.”

“Not in itself.” Bessie’s eyes brightened. “So I dug deeper. It turns out his mother grew up in Newton, Massachusetts, and attended Newton Academy of the Sacred Heart. She was devastated when the school went broke and closed. And eighteen months ago, Brett Horst’s mother died!” She sat back triumphantly.

“So?” I said.

“So it was the perfect time for Brett Horst to make a major gift to another Newton Academy, as a memorial to his mother.” She sat forward again. “And I knew he was a sports fan, and I’d checked his stock situation and knew he could lower his tax burden by gifting part of his portfolio, and naturally I’d been tracking the bad publicity Lethal-Lookz Toys was getting, and I figured Horst was ripe for a gesture that’d make him look like a public benefactor who cares about young people. It all came together beautifully.”

“And where did you find all this information about Brett Horst?” I asked.

“Websites, mostly.” She stroked the top of her computer monitor affectionately. “There’s lots of information out there, if you know where to look—and I do. I have 487 bookmarks. Wanna see them?”

Her tone had grown wistful. "Maybe later," I said. "So, then you handed the information over to Lance Ingram, so he could start wining and dining Mr. Horst?"

"Yes, wining and dining is what Lance does best." Bessie started to look bitter again. "It's *all* he does—he loves hanging out with rich people, acting like he's rich himself. He doesn't follow up on half the leads I give him, either. He picks and chooses, as if he's the one who can decide whether a prospect will come across with a gift."

"He seems to have chosen well this time," I commented. "It doesn't bother you that Brett Horst made his money selling toy guns?"

Another snort. "Money's money. As long as prospects give it to Newton, I don't much care how they got it." She paused, thought, and shrugged. "Actually, I don't much care whether they actually give it to Newton, either. The fun's in the hunt."

"So that's what prospect research is," I said. "Hunting for new donors."

"That's not all it is. I also research known donors, keep track of their assets, relationships, all that."

"Is that why you asked those questions about Miss Woodhouse? But she's not much of a prospect, is she? She's not rich."

"No." Her eyes starting glowing again. "But her mother owns a mint-condition house smack in the middle of the historic district—you wouldn't *believe* how real estate has skyrocketed there—and it's packed with antiques. And her mother comes from money—she's got sterling flatware and English bone china, service for twelve, plus a decent portfolio. The husband's been out of the picture for decades—I. Woodhouse is the only child, presumably the sole heir. And she's single and childless; she'll presumably be shopping for an heir herself some day. Not a great prospect—not top ten, not even top hundred—but not bad, long range. So, how's the old lady's health? They don't use the good china every day, do they? Have they broken any cups lately?"

"I wouldn't know," I said, my throat constricting with distaste. Thank goodness, another person walked into the office—a fretfully thin, narrow-faced woman of about sixty with a short, stiff, solidly grayless page-boy, wearing a close-fitting lavender suit, walking quickly despite her four-inch heels, despite the large cardboard box she carried.

"Just look at these programs!" she said, plunking the box down on the desk. "They're a disaster. Lance! Get the hell out here! *Look* at this!"

Lance came out of his office, followed by Miss Woodhouse, in time to look over Bessie's shoulder. Bessie took a program for the dedication ceremony from the box, glanced at it, and shrugged. "Looks fine," she said.

"Fine?" the other woman echoed. "Oh, sure. Except I told the printer aquamarine, and he gave me turquoise. I told him vellum finish;

he gave me linen. I told him forty-weight paper; he gave me thirty. And of course he got them out behind schedule, so there's no time to redo them. We'll actually have to give this trash to our guests."

"Hey, no biggie," Lance said soothingly. "Brett won't notice the difference. You worry too much about this stuff, Nicole. The point is, the gift's made, the check's cleared, the building's built. All we have to do today is put on a good show for Brett, feed him a big dinner, liquor him up a little, get him nice and mellow so I can start buttering him up for the next gift. The guests at the ceremony are just there to fill seats, make Brett feel important. Who cares what they think of the programs?"

"You should care," she said. "You think gifts are made in a vacuum, Lance? They are not. The only reason you nabbed Horst is because I do a damn good job of making Newton look like a class act. If I weren't so careful about programs, and invitations, and every last detail of our public events—"

"—which generally lose more money than they make," Lance said, winking at us. "Iphigenia, have you met Nicole Pierrot? Every year, she gets a nice big budget to stage auctions, mixers, all sorts of fundraising events. She doesn't actually raise funds, of course—every year, she runs straight through her budget and ends up in the red—but she makes sure the programs look nice."

Nicole threw her shoulders back. "I create a foundation," she said. "Even when my events don't make money, they build Newton's reputation. If it weren't for my hard work, Brett Horst never would have *heard* of Newton Academy."

"If it weren't for *my* hard work," Bessie Smith put in peevishly, "Newton Academy never would have heard of Brett Horst."

"Then I guess I'm pretty much superfluous here," Lance said, smiling. "Good thing, because I'm taking a limo to Baltimore—Brett's plane gets in at one fifteen, and I gotta meet it, take him to Annapolis. One more thing, Nicole—Brett called this morning. He heard the mayor's nephew is a midshipman, and he doesn't want anyone connected with the Naval Academy speaking at his ceremony. So cross the mayor off the program."

"Cross him off?" Nicole grabbed the desk for support. "Do you know what that would do to our relations with the city? And I can't cross anything off the programs. Crummy as they are, they're all we've got. I can't disfigure them—even if it were physically possible to do it in time, I couldn't. I won't."

"But you'd better," Lance said cheerfully. "You know the golden rule of fundraising: The one who has the gold makes the rules. Take care of it. I gotta go."

Before he could leave, the door to the reception area opened again, and Dr. Church and Dr. Marnier entered. "Hey, Ben!" Lance cried. "I was

hoping I'd see you. Let's do lunch real soon. I'll get us a table at McGarvey's."

Ben Marner smiled gently. "I'd be delighted to have lunch with you, but there's no need to squander the academy's money at restaurants. Drop by my house, and I'll fix you a fried egg sandwich and a glass of iced tea. Perhaps you can fix that broken porch swing—you did such a fine job of unclogging the basement drains last time."

"Always glad to help," Lance said. "And you know how I love your fried egg sandwiches—nobody else makes 'em half as good. Well, I gotta go pick up Brett."

"Perhaps," Dr. Church said anxiously, "during the trip back, you might subtly tell Mr. Horst how much we need a new science building, how frantic the trustees are getting. Perhaps, if it's not too awkward, you might just hint he consider—"

Lance shook his head. "Bessie found out Brett flunked Chem 101 twice after transferring to U. of Maryland. No way we'll get a science building out of him. An endowed chair for the football coach maybe, if he can pick the coach. Brett's got a guy in mind—winning record in the NFL, fresh out of prison after serving time for assaulting a player who dropped a pass. Sounds promising. See you later, guys."

"See us at three thirty *sharp*," Nicole said. "I need to go over the program with Mr. Horst. So no stopping for drinks on the way."

"No sweat—we got a bar in the limo," Lance said. He winked and left.

Miss Woodhouse turned to Dr. Church. "What did the police say?" she asked.

"They took the notes rather more seriously than I'd expected," he admitted. "A most congenial detective, Barry Glass, said that if you think police protection advisable, he'll send both uniformed and plain-clothes officers to the ceremony and attend himself."

Miss Woodhouse doesn't tend to gasp, but I think she came close to gasping then. So did I. Barry Glass is her ex-fiancé, the one the Professor made her drop all those years ago, the one who's still obviously devoted to her, the one she still obviously loves, the one the Professor still absolutely can't stand. Don't ask me why the Professor feels that way—I've met Lieutenant Glass several times, and he seems all-around decent. But the Professor about spits teeth if anyone mentions his name. And now both he and she were coming to the ceremony. Suddenly, the possible assassination of Brett Horst was no longer the most disastrous thing that might happen this afternoon.

"Police at the ceremony?" Nicole said incredulously. "In uniform? No, Dr. Church. Two congressmen are coming, the governor's coming, the mayor's coming—well, maybe not the mayor. But *television's* coming—even CNN's coming, because of the controversy. This ceremony will be on TV screens all across the country—and you want *police* there, to make Newton look like a ghetto? What'll that do to our image?"

“Regrettable,” Dr. Church agreed, “but necessary. Iphigenia and her assistant will also help with security—perhaps you could escort them to the athletic center.”

“Fine.” Nicole seized her box of programs. “Maybe they’ll station soldiers with machine guns in the bleachers. That’ll look nice on TV! All right, you two! This way!”

I wasn’t impressed by my first glimpse of the new gym. Most of Newton’s buildings are cozily Gothic—gray stone and pointy roofs and deep-set windows—but the Horst Athletic Center just squats there, a huge blond-brick rectangle with patches of aquamarine tilelike stuff that’ll look dingy next year. But once we got inside, I had to be impressed by the sleek hallways, the meta-Olympic-sized pool, the neatly laid-out handball courts and spacious offices. In the main gym, the walls shot up for two straight, uninterrupted stories, making the playing area look like the floor of a canyon. It felt intimidating, partly because one wall was dominated by a thirty-foot mosaic of Larry, the Lethal Lizard—sharp-toothed, long-tailed, wearing an aquamarine sweatshirt emblazoned with a huge gold N, gripping a Stag 87 in menacing claws and lifting it high above his snout. I drew my breath in, glad I wasn’t an athlete going up against a Newton team.

Nicole stalked to the temporary stage under the home basket and looked around sourly. “It’s a nice gym. I give you that. But I hate it that we took a gift from pond scum like Horst. Try selling *that* to the Chamber of Commerce. Newton Academy, champion of academic excellence, guardian of American values—and lapdog to a manufacturer of toy guns that make cops shoot kids. This gift cancels out at least five ad campaigns. Why fuss over programs when half the members of the city council hate the guest of honor so much they won’t come to a reception even if you give them free drinks?”

“At least you’ve got the place set up nice,” I said. “Aquamarine and gold bunting, a classy podium, five matching chairs—for the speakers, right?”

“Right.” Nicole started unpacking programs. “Horst sits to the right of the podium, with the president of the student council next to him. Ben Marner sits to the left of the podium, as Heritage Society president. The chair next to him is for the president of the Board of Trustees, and the last chair’s for the mayor.”

“No chair for Dr. Church?” I asked.

Nicole shook her head. “He’ll come up when the ceremony begins, but then he’ll sit in the bleachers with the students. He never stays on the platform. It’s his little trademark, to show what a regular guy he is. Students don’t buy it, but parents eat it up.”

“Where will the rest of the advancement staff be?” Miss Woodhouse asked.

“Oh, Bessie will find some obscure spot in the bleachers,” Nicole said. “She hates public events; people make her nervous. When she does

come, she hides. Fine with me: the sight of her doesn't exactly sell the place. And I'll be running around like crazy, dealing with the stuff that always goes wrong, and Lance will be gripping and grinning."

"Gripping and grinning?" I said.

Nicole sighed. "Shaking hands and smiling. It's his job. Everywhere he goes—our events, weddings, bar mitzvahs, funerals—he meets and greets as many people as he can, so later he'll seem like an old friend when he hits them up for gifts." She looked at the stage and frowned. "Damn—I forgot about canceling the mayor. We've got too many chairs. You're an assistant, right? So assist. Get rid of that fifth chair." Moving furniture isn't my favorite way of assisting, but my job description's infinitely flexible—I pretty much do whatever Miss Woodhouse wants. I looked at her, she nodded, and I picked up the chair. "Where do you want it?" I asked.

Nicole thought it over. "The concession stand, across from the entrance to this room. We're using it as a temporary storage area. Stash the chair behind the counter."

I carried the chair into the hall. Still four hours until the ceremony, but already people were milling around—students, parents, miscellaneous folks—sneaking advance looks. Behind the concession stand, I found a spot for the chair and looked around. Several boxes sat on the counter. Curious, I peeked in each. Aquamarine pennants with gold imprints of Larry the Lethal Lizard, toy Stag 87s left over from the groundbreaking ceremony, songsheets with the words to "Newton, Oh Newton, Honored Newton." I had to give Nicole credit. Obviously, a million details went into planning this kind of event. Coming back into the gym, I saw Nicole sitting on the stage, magic marker in hand, swearing under her breath as she crossed the mayor's name off program after program. Miss Woodhouse walked over to me.

"We should inspect the entire building," she said, "then see Chief Withers, then get some lunch. We should keep our strength up—this could turn into a long day."

It went quickly. Soon it was three o'clock and I drove to the house. When the Professor saw me, she smiled, put aside her circle of stitched-together plastic canvas arches, and stood. She now wore a floor-length black satin skirt, topped by a slightly moth-eaten aquamarine T-shirt emblazoned with Sir Izzy's bespectacled, pleasantly meditative face. "This was Iphigenia's," she said, adjusting her long white braid as she pulled on a faded gold baseball cap. "Someone at the ceremony should uphold the old, honorable Newton traditions. Well, little Harriet! I now feel sufficiently spiffed-up. Shall we go?"

I decided against warning her that Lieutenant Glass would be there. Before her breakdown, the Professor taught classics; I don't know much about that stuff, but I remember some Greek play where

a messenger who brought bad news got his head chopped off. So I just helped her into the car.

By the time we got to the Horst Athletic Center, a long, sleek white limousine was parked outside. So, I thought, the guest of honor has arrived. I saw police cars, too, but no Lieutenant Glass. Not yet. As I helped the Professor down the hallway, I noticed that somebody had straightened up the concession stand, stashing boxes and other clutter out of sight. The place looked nice. The Professor, however, was not impressed.

"It lacks true grandeur, true distinction," she said, "true character. It is a huge, shiny clone of thousands of other expensive stadiums. It tells one nothing of the character of the place, or the students, or the tests of strength and skill that will be decided here."

"Maybe that's just as well," I commented, "if Brett Horst and his Lethal Lizardz have anything to do with shaping that character."

"Too true." She sighed. "In that case, the less the building reveals, the better."

I spoke to the officer guarding the main gym and got us inside. Nicole stood up front, haranguing the four people seated on stage. Ben Marn-er looked pensively resigned in his chair to the left of the podium; the middle-aged man next to him had to be the president of the Board of Trustees. And the energetic girl on the far right had to be the student council president, and the man seated next to her had to be Brett Horst. I'd pictured him as fat, old, bald, and sweaty, but this guy looked like a male model—slim, fifty at most, hair styled with casual elegance, suit fashionable but not flashy, expression dignified. Just looking, you'd never figure him for an unprincipled, profit-hungry predator. But that's what he is, I reminded myself, and resolved not to be charmed.

I glanced around and spotted Dr. Church slumped morosely in a front bleacher, Lance Ingram giving some guy in a suit an enthusiastic handshake. And then Miss Woodhouse and Lieutenant Barry Glass emerged from the boys' locker room.

They were smiling—Lieutenant Glass actually seemed to be laughing. And I could've been wrong—I must've been—but it looked like Miss Woodhouse was blushing. The Professor gripped my arm, yanked her shoulders back, and pointed.

"Harriet!" she cried. "Is it—it cannot be, but is it—angels and ministers of grace defend us!—That Man? Why is *he* here?"

"Because he's a policeman," I said, trying to keep the teeth-chattering to an inaudible level, "and you agreed we should get the police to help. I'm sure he's just—"

Miss Woodhouse scurried over, sure as hell not blushing now. I've read books saying people look ashen, and I've wondered what that meant. Now I know.

“Hello, Mother,” she said. “You needn’t sit in the bleachers. See those rows of chairs in front? Those are for honored guests, and Dr. Church kindly reserved one for—”

“I do not see why I should be treated as an honored guest,” the Professor said icily, “when my own child blatantly disregards my wishes. If she does not honor me, why should the academy? I will, however, sit in a chair, to avoid offending Dr. Church. As for other matters, you nasty girl, we shall discuss those at dinner.”

I decided not to try to finagle a dinner invitation after all, even though I’d been broke all week and my mouth had been watering ever since I’d glimpsed the standing rib roast taking up half a shelf in the Woodhouse refrigerator this morning. Better a stale peanut butter sandwich in my apartment than roast beef in a house filled with scolding and sniffing. The Bible says that, I think, or words to that effect.

Nicole turned around, hands parked belligerently on hips. “Excuse me! If you’re done fussing with this ridiculous security stuff, can we *please* let people in? It’s three forty-five!”

“Fine,” Miss Woodhouse said, too rattled to give anyone an argument at this point. Nicole signaled the aquamarine-blazered students stationed at the doors. Within seconds, politely chatting hordes filed into the gym. We got the Professor seated, I set off for my assigned vantage point in the top row of bleachers, and Miss Woodhouse took her post in the front right-hand corner of the gym. Lieutenant Glass stood in the front left-hand corner, sweating quietly as the Professor glared.

The bleachers filled, the Newton band marched in stiffly, the drum major lifted his aquamarine-festooned staff, a hush settled, everyone rose, drums rolled, bugles blared, an usher handed me a songsheet, and I stumbled through “Newton, Oh Newton, Honored Newton.” A final cymbal clash, we all sat, and Dr. Church walked onstage.

I don’t remember much about his speech, except that it was shorter than I’d dared hope, and he looked embarrassed and wretched, and when he finished I nearly fell out of my seat as the sound of gunfire ripped through the gym. Already! I thought, and looked about wildly, trying to spot the assassin. At least three hundred people were waving toy Stag 87s over their heads, whooping and shooting. So these damned things don’t just look real, I thought, trying to act cool as I slid back into my seat. They *sound* real.

At least no one was dead. The student body president came to the podium and gave a speech, gracious and witty and packed with literary allusions. What an intelligent, articulate young woman, I thought—and then she whipped out a toy Stag 87, fired three rounds, led the crowd in a liver-curdling Lizard Hiss, and cavorted about in something she called the Lizard Leap. So much for that intelligent, articulate young woman.

I glanced around, looking for the advancement staff. Bessie sat near

an exit, a toy Stag 87 in her lap, squinting downward as if she didn't quite know what to do with it. Dr. Church also sat low in the bleachers, surrounded by students, grimacing with distaste as he lifted his gun and squeezed out one shot. Lance stood among the chairs for special guests, next to a seventyish woman with ring-heavy fingers, so caught up in talk that he barely glanced at his Stag 87 as he fired a series of rounds. I didn't see Nicole—probably, as she'd predicted, she was running around, defusing last-minute crises.

Then Ben Marner came to the podium and spoke, for one minute total. His words were quiet, serious, almost somber; even so, people responded with another volley of shots. The president of the Board of Trustees spoke next—a much longer speech, with the same burst of toy gunfire at the end. Finally, Brett Horst stood up.

This time, people couldn't wait until the speech ended, or even until it began. Before he reached the podium, they leapt to their feet, jumping up and down so hard I thought they'd crash through the bleachers, and fired off round after round, screaming "Brett! Brett!" and "Lizardz! Lizardz!" The bulky sophomore next to me bounced crazily, landing on my foot. I shrieked, shoved frantically until I got him bouncing at a safer distance, pushed the hair out of my eyes, looked at the stage, and saw Ben Marner crumple to his knees, a dark red stain spreading across his shirt.

The student council president screamed—for real this time. Awareness of what had happened seemed to spread upward through the bleachers, row by row. Miss Woodhouse and Lieutenant Glass raced to the stage; he cradled Ben Marner in his arms, and she shouted at the uniformed policemen now running toward the rear of the gym. I looked around, trying to see who might have fired a gun. Well, rats. Almost everybody had fired a gun. Some people were still firing, waving their toy Stag 87s merrily, yelling and bouncing, still without a clue. Rats, I thought again. This is going to be hard.

Just before seven o'clock, the police let the last guests go home. Lieutenant Glass came to sit next to me in my lonely perch on the edge of the stage. "It's no good," he said. "We searched everyone—except the twenty or so who ran out before we got the doors blocked—but we didn't find the real gun. We found fake guns, sure, hundreds of them—some still in pockets or purses, some on the floor, some hidden in weird places by folks scared of being shot by panicky cops if they held onto them. And those damned toy Stag 87s look so real it takes a full minute to make sure they're toys. Real ones feel a little heavier than fakes, but that's awful subjective—you wouldn't wanna bet your life on that. You've gotta actually take the things apart. We wasted hours checking all those toys."

"What about Dr. Marner?" I asked. "Any word?"

He shook his head. "I called the hospital an hour ago. The doctors stopped trying. His vital signs had faded to nothing—the priest gave him last rites. Well, hell. Three slugs square in the chest, at his age—what could we expect? So it's definitely a murder investigation, Miss Russo, and we're three hours into it, and we're nowhere."

"Not absolutely nowhere," I said. "You know you're looking for a lousy shot, for someone who could point a gun at Brett Horst and hit Ben Marnier instead, three times."

He shrugged. "They were barely five feet apart. So the guy didn't have to be a terrible shot, not if he was shooting from the back of the gym—and we won't have any idea of where he might've been till we get the coroner's report. That could take hours."

The door to the gym opened, and Miss Woodhouse and her mother walked in, the Professor leaning on her daughter's arm. Lieutenant Glass shot to his feet, trembling. But the Professor wasn't in a fighting mood.

"Poor little Ben Marnier!" she was saying. "His whole life devoted to making the world safer, and now to be cut off in his prime, in such a violent, senseless way, by an assassin too clumsy to hit the proper target! I cannot fathom it, Iphigenia."

"Nor can I," her daughter said softly. "But we can at least try to bring his killer to justice." She looked at Lieutenant Glass, her eyes brimming with understanding and pity. If she'd dared, I think she'd have taken his hand and squeezed it. "We just came from the banquet," she said. "I suppose you were right to let the academy go ahead with that."

"I was afraid Miss Pierrot might have a heart attack if we didn't let it go ahead," he said. "Besides, it was a pretty small banquet—just Mr. Horst, the other speakers, the advancement staff, a few honored guests—"

"Just all the people who should be your prime suspects, stupid boy," the Professor said sourly, "if you knew what you were doing."

He nodded immediately. "You're right, Professor. Thanks for pointing that out. I was probably wrong to let them go. No—I was definitely wrong. The only thing I can say in my defense—and it isn't much, it sure isn't—is we did treat them like suspects, searched 'em all before letting them leave. And we also searched the building carefully, and everyone else in it, without finding the murder weapon, so my assumption—and it's probably dumb, I know that—is the murderer ran out of the building before we got the doors closed, and took the gun with him. Or," he added hastily, "with her."

The Professor bared her teeth. "Do not suppose you can penetrate my affections," she said, "by using politically correct pronouns. I am not of *that* generation. So you claim to have searched the building carefully. But perhaps you will admit your search may not have been care-

ful enough. Perhaps you will at least make that concession."

Concession. The word actually triggered a thought. "Lieutenant," I said slowly, "did your people search the concession stand? This afternoon, a box of toy Stag 87s was on the counter. And if I was looking for a place to stash a real Stag 87, I might figure—"

"—that a box of fakes would be the perfect spot," he finished. "Good idea, Miss Russo. I don't know if my guys checked the stand or not. Let's go see."

Evidently, his guys had not checked the stand. We checked it, though, and found the box of toy guns stuck under a shelf behind the counter. And at the bottom of that box, Lieutenant Glass found a Stag 87 that looked just like all the others, but felt a bit heavier. He belated for the lab team.

They came running. They put on plastic gloves, they dusted and squinted, they took things apart and put things together. Finally, they nodded. It was a real Stag 87, all right—fired recently, three bullets missing, no fingerprints.

"This was smart," I commented. "Stashing the gun here was safer than holding onto it, or trying to sneak it out with so many cops around. Maybe the murderer figured nobody would look here, so he could come back after the excitement died down, get the gun, and throw it in the river. It's good we found it before he had the chance."

"Yes," Lieutenant Glass agreed, "but it doesn't help much. Lots of people were milling around this afternoon—anyone could've noticed the box of toy guns. And after the shooting, anyone could've slipped out here, found the box, and slipped the gun inside. After the first few minutes, we could keep folks from leaving the building, but we couldn't keep them from leaving the gym—we had to let them get drinks from the fountains, go to the bathroom, all that. But at least now, when I face the press, I won't look like a complete fool. At least I can say we found the murder weapon. I can say—"

"Please," Miss Woodhouse said, "don't say anything of the kind, not yet. If you give me one hour, Barry—Lieutenant Glass—perhaps we can catch your murderer."

"Sure thing, Iphigenia," he said promptly. "I mean, Miss Woodhouse. You can have your hour—or ten hours, a *thousand* hours. If anyone can catch the murderer, you can. Nobody else catches murderers the way you do—or burglars, or shoplifters, or—"

"Please," the Professor cut in. "End this outpouring of romantic drivel. Give Iphigenia her hour, young man, but say no more of your admiration for her—she is *my* daughter, and I will not have her admired by lovesick civil servants. And you, you nasty girl—you had better use this hour well, and have a murderer to show at the end of it."

"I believe I shall, Mother," Miss Woodhouse said. "I'm quite sure I know who shot Dr. Marner. The next hour may not give Lieutenant

Glass all he needs for a conviction, but it should assure him of the murderer's identity, and give him a path to follow as he determines how the murderer secured the gun. I'd like him to bring the advancement staff back, to re-enact the murder. And I'll need your help, Mother."

The Professor huffed and flipped her braid from shoulder to shoulder and pulled her baseball cap low on her forehead. "Then," she said, "my help you shall have."

"This is ludicrous," Nicole Pierrot said. She stood at the base of the temporary stage, one hand on the rail, one foot on the bottom step. "It's a waste of time, and I don't have time. I have to arrange Ben Marner's funeral. There are a million things to do, and he didn't have any family, so we have to do everything. I have to do everything."

"Nicole makes a good point," Dr. Church said. He'd climbed onstage meekly but looked pale and uncomfortable in his chair to the right of the podium. "Ben's funeral will be an important event for the academy. It's dreadful to have to think in such terms, but scores of alumni and other supporters are bound to come to Annapolis to pay their respects. It's an opportunity for us to make contacts, to console mourners by suggesting they make gifts in Ben's memory. We have to help them make hotel reservations, plan receptions and brunches for them—"

"—and figure out how much they can give," Bessie Smith put in. She sat next to Dr. Church, her fingers tapping her lap fretfully as if yearning for a keyboard. "I've gotta update my research on B. Marner's classmates, people who served on the Heritage Society board with him, other top prospects. I've gotta check their stocks, real estate, miscellaneous assets—otherwise, we won't know what our asks should be."

The Professor, sitting between Miss Woodhouse and me in the front row of the audience, looked up sharply. "Excuse me, young woman," she said acidly. "I cannot possibly have heard you correctly. You cannot possibly have used *asks* as a noun."

"Hey, it's just shorthand," Lance supplied. He sat to the left of the podium, looking cheerful and relaxed, as always. "Just a term for the amount we ask a prospect to give. Bessie's right—you gotta know what the ask should be. Ask for too little, and you walk away with less than the donor can give; ask for too much, and you might embarrass the guy. Bessie needs to get to her computer. And I gotta get to the Hilton—Brett was spooked by this shooting thing, so he's not spending the night. He's gonna fly his jet to Atlantic City, play some blackjack to settle his nerves. He wants me to come."

"But you'll be back for the funeral, won't you?" Dr. Church said anxiously. "I can't possibly work a crowd that size single-handedly."

Lance looked offended. "Me, miss Ben's funeral? Not likely, Dr.

Church. Not possible. I'll be back in plenty of time. Right now, I have to go."

"Right now," Miss Woodhouse said, "you have to stay where you are. This re-enactment is crucial to Lieutenant Glass's investigation. It won't take long—and wouldn't it be good to be able to tell mourners Dr. Marnier's killer has been identified and apprehended, to be able to tell Brett Horst he needn't fear another attempt on his life?"

For a moment, no one spoke. Then Nicole sighed, stalked up the remaining stairs, and plunked herself into the chair next to Lance. "Make it quick," she said.

"Good." Miss Woodhouse gestured to Barry Glass and three uniformed policemen, all waiting at the rear of the gym. "Lieutenant Glass's problem is that he has no idea of where the murderer might have been. The autopsy results might reveal something, but they won't be in for some time, and the police need to move ahead."

"Have you talked to the television crews?" Nicole demanded. "There must've been a dozen cameras in here during the ceremony—didn't any of them catch anything?"

"Unfortunately, no," Barry Glass said, stepping forward. "The cameras did pan the audience from time to time, but at the moment the shots were fired, Brett Horst was stepping up to the podium, and all cameras were pointed straight at the stage. The film's no use to us until we figure out where the killer was."

"Therefore," Miss Woodhouse said, "we need to test several possible distances and angles. And we need a gun." She bit her lip, considering. "The safest thing would be to use a toy Stag 87. May I have one, Lieutenant?"

He shrugged. "Sorry. We considered those toys evidence and carted them to the station. I don't think there's a single one left."

That was my cue. "There might be," I said. "This afternoon, I saw a box of toy guns on the concession stand. I bet it got stuck behind the counter. Should I get it?"

He nodded, and I ran out of the gym, returning a moment later with the box.

"Excellent," Miss Woodhouse said, plunging a hand deep into the box and pulling out a Stag 87. "Rather heavy," she commented. "These things are even more realistic than I'd imagined. Now, we'll need a shooter. Mother, could you assist us?"

"Delighted," the Professor said, standing. "But as you know, I have never in my life used a firearm. I haven't any idea of how to aim such an implement."

"No matter," Miss Woodhouse said. "It's only a toy. Please stand in the center of the front row, Mother, for the first shots. Here's the gun—I'm sorry. That's rather heavy for you, isn't it? Try holding it in both hands. Now, point it directly at the podium."

The Professor settled into her stance, spreading her feet slightly as

she lifted the gun to shoulder level. "Goodness," she said. "That *is* heavy. Now, what does one do, Iphigenia? One puts one's finger on the trigger, doesn't one, and pulls back?"

"Yes," Miss Woodhouse said, "but not yet. Dr. Church, you're sitting where Brett Horst was sitting. Would you approach the podium, please? Slowly. And, Mother, please try to keep the gun more centered. Your arms are wavering—it's distracting."

"It's the arthritis," the Professor said. The gun trembled in her hands, now a bit to the right, now a bit to the left. "Now, Iphigenia?"

Miss Woodhouse lifted her hand, waiting until Dr. Church was inches from the podium. "Now, Mother!" she shouted, letting her hand drop. "Fire!"

In that huge, empty gymnasium, the first shot sounded deafening. Dr. Church sighed, probably remembering the moment when Ben Marnier was shot; Bessie Smith yawned; Nicole Pierrot glanced at her watch. And Lance Ingram shrieked, leapt from the stage, and flattened himself on the floor, covering his head with his arms.

"Stop!" he cried. "You crazy old broad! Lieutenant, take that thing away from her, before she kills someone!"

"With a toy gun?" Miss Woodhouse inquired, cocking her head to the side and looking him over. "Or don't you think it *is* a toy, Mr. Ingram?"

"Of course it's a toy," the Professor said, taking careful aim. "And I shall now demonstrate that fact to everyone's satisfaction, by pointing it directly at Mr. Ingram's head and firing just one more—"

"No more!" Lance jumped to his feet and brushed his shirt off frantically, keeping an eye on the Professor. "Look, I'm outta here. I mean, good luck with your skit, but I can't keep Brett waiting any longer. He's our biggest donor."

"But only a new donor," Miss Woodhouse pointed out. "And, as far as anyone knows, only a one-time donor. Surely, Ben Marnier is the one who should be foremost in your mind. He was a longtime supporter of Newton, was he not?"

"For over half a century," Dr. Church said sadly. "Every year, on December 31st, he wrote a check for the annual fund. Five hundred dollars—never a penny less, never a penny more. And he helped in other ways, by founding the Heritage Society."

"The Heritage Society," I said. "People keep mentioning that. What is it?"

"A kind of club," Miss Woodhouse said, "for people who put Newton Academy in their wills. Lance is always after me to join—not that I'd be a major prize because I won't have much to leave. Ben Marnier, though—he was a major prize."

"Of course," I said, catching on, "because he invented Safety Snaps, and Burner Buzzers, and other home protection things—he probably still owned the patents, and they're probably worth a bundle."

"Millions," Bessie put in, eyes growing soft and dreamy. "And his stocks—God. Safety Snaps alone—he was majority shareholder. It went up four points just last week. I never calculated it out to the penny—I tried, but thinking about it made me dizzy."

"And I bet he left everything to Newton, didn't he?" I said. "He was a widower—he mentioned his dear, late Martha this morning, and he said they never had children. And Nicole said he didn't have any family—didn't you, Nicole?"

"I did," Nicole said, "because he didn't—not a sibling left alive, not a niece, not a second cousin. Ben outlived them all. So it was up to me to send him cards and flowers whenever he got sick—and he got sick a lot. Six heart attacks, the quintuple bypass, three minor strokes, decades of chemotherapy, four cancer surgeries—"

"And he always went into remission." Lance's eyes glazed over; he seemed oblivious to us now. "No matter how bad the tests were, he always went into remission. And then the overpass collapsed on him, and he went into a coma for two months—two months!—and the doctors swore—they *promised*—he couldn't recover. But he came out of it. He came out of it! That's when I realized. He wasn't human. No matter what happened to him, he wasn't ever going to die. Not unless somebody put a bullet in him."

"Or, to be safe, three bullets," Miss Woodhouse said. "That was your plan, wasn't it, Mr. Ingram?"

"What? No." The glazed look left his eyes, he shook his head, and he smiled. "Me, shoot good old Ben? Not likely. Not *possible*. Ben was my buddy. Nobody spent more time with him than I did. I loved the guy."

"I'm sure you loved cleaning his basement drains," Miss Woodhouse said dryly, "and eating his fried egg sandwiches. You enjoy wining and dining wealthy donors and taking cruises on their yachts, but I'm guessing you didn't much enjoy doing menial chores for a miser who considered restaurants a waste and wouldn't give the academy one extra penny no matter how charming you were. So when some lunatic from Eastport mailed in a death threat, you saw your opportunity. You could kill Ben Marnier, and make it look like a botched attempt to kill Brett Horst. You sent two more death threats, identical in format to the first—Arial font, fourteen point, white bond paper, all caps—"

"Oh, please!" Nicole said, frowning at a chip in her aquamarine nail polish, "not white bond. Vanilla, linen finish, forty-pound weight. Get it right!"

Miss Woodhouse smiled. "That's why I ruled you out as a suspect, Ms. Pierrot. The person who tried to create two more death threats identical to the first used the wrong paper; you wouldn't make that mistake, since it's your job to pay attention to such things. Mr. Ingram, by contrast, thinks it doesn't matter whether a program is turquoise or aquamarine, whether paper is thirty weight or forty weight."

“And that makes me a murderer?” Lance tried to look amused. “No offense, Iphigenia, but that’s lame. I’m not listening to any more of it.”

He started to turn his back on us; but the Professor dropped to one knee, held the gun straight out in front of her in both hands, her eyes cold and hard, her finger on the trigger knowing and firm. “Freeze,” she said. “You dirty rat.”

He froze, and lifted his hands in the air. “Please,” he said. “Don’t shoot.”

Miss Woodhouse nodded. “I’d hoped he’d do that once,” she said. “He has now done it three times. So he was not simply startled into an irrational response by the sudden report of a toy pistol. Obviously, he fears the gun might be real; presumably, he has reason to think so; arguably, that’s because he’s the one who hid the murder weapon in the box of toys. Well, Lieutenant? Is that enough?”

“Not for a conviction,” Barry Glass said, reaching for his handcuffs, “but for an arrest on suspicion, it’s plenty. Mr. Ingram, I’ll read you your rights.”

I’ve seen it several times, but it always gives me chills—the helpless panic in the eyes of the cornered suspect, the recital of the dry legal formula, the quietly decisive grating of metal against metal as the hands are bound, the fading thud of footsteps as the prisoner is led away. The door at the back of the gymnasium closed behind them. I forced air deep into my lungs, trying to steady my breathing. This is justice, I reminded myself. These are the consequences of crime. These are the steps that must be taken to set right a violent disruption of the social order. Even so, the spectacle of a fellow human suddenly forced to surrender his freedom felt awesome, and awful. I looked to the stage, to see how Lance Ingram’s friends and colleagues had been moved by his downfall.

Nicole stood in the middle of the stage, hands on hips. “Well?” she demanded. “Is that it? Finally? The florist closes in an hour—I have to pick an arrangement for the casket, negotiate a deal on lilies. And once news of the arrest breaks, I’ll get all kinds of crap from the press—I gotta figure out a spin strategy. So are we done here? *Please?*”

Bessie had already started down the stairs. “How do you adjust the asks if a development officer murders a donor?” she said, more to herself than to us. “There should probably be a reduction, but how much? What’s the percentage? I think that was discussed on one of my lists— I’ll check the archives.”

Within moments, they’d left the gym. Only Dr. Church was left—slumped in his chair, moaning, head in hands. Slowly, the Professor climbed the stairs to the stage, stood beside him, and patted his head softly. He looked up with tear-streaked eyes.

“Oh dear, oh dear,” he said. “The trustees are sure to fuss about this murder—whatever shall I say to them? And however shall I handle Ben Marnier’s funeral alone, without Lance to help me work the prospects?”

As it turned out, there was no need for Dr. Church to handle the crowd at Ben Marner's funeral. There was no funeral. Ben Marner did not die.

"The doctors can't explain it," Miss Woodhouse said. It was a week after the shooting, and we sat, again, in the sunny east parlor at Woodhouse Investigations. Miss Woodhouse and I held thick, steaming mugs of her mother's cream of onion soup, heavily spiked with olives; the Professor had drained her mug in four gulps and now set a few last, hard stitches in place in her plastic canvas project. "They'd felt sure he couldn't recover," Miss Woodhouse continued. "Of course, they've felt that before, often, but this time they'd felt really sure, especially after six days without a flicker of consciousness. But today he awakened suddenly, sat up straight, and asked for a fried egg sandwich."

"You think he'll be all right?" I asked anxiously.

"He finished the sandwich," she said, shrugging. "He had seconds on iced tea."

"I rejoice to hear it." The Professor forced a length of yarn through the eye of her needle. "So Mr. Ingram will face only a charge of attempted murder—a softer fate than he deserves. He will face that charge, will he not? The prosecutor will proceed with an indictment? That melodrama you staged did convince him of Mr. Ingram's guilt?"

"The prosecutor will proceed," Miss Woodhouse confirmed. "But not, primarily, because of our melodrama. He was convinced, primarily, by the slow, patient police work that Barry—that an officer—did to prove Lance Ingram bought a black-market Stag 87 in Baltimore last month. The man who sold it to him confessed; the link between Ingram and the gun is irrefutable; Ingram himself will no doubt confess soon, charm the prosecutor into a deal, and receive a regrettably lenient sentence."

"And you knew he was the killer," I said, "even before the re-enactment. How?"

She lifted one eyebrow, pushing an olive aside before taking another spoonful of soup. She always acts so above it all, as if she doesn't care if people notice how smart she is; but I know she gets a kick out of explaining stuff to me. "Before the re-enactment, I didn't *know* anything," she corrected. "I had suspicions, yes. You know I suspected someone in advancement wrote the second and third death threats, and you know why."

"And I know why you ruled out Nicole," I said, "because of the mistake with the paper. But how did you know the shooter wasn't Bessie, or Dr. Church?"

"I didn't know," she corrected. "I *thought* Bessie Smith didn't have much of a motive. She loves research; she relishes the intellectual challenge of finding and piecing together information. But she doesn't much care whether Newton actually gets a gift—she told you that herself. Her passion is for the quest, not the institution. And what could she gain

from Ben Marner's death? It would bring Newton millions—"

"It'd mean Newton would get a new science building," I supplied. "Dr. Church and Lance talked about how the trustees were hounding them to find a naming gift. If Dr. Marner died, Newton could use the millions he'd left it for a science building and name it after him. He's a big-time engineer—it'd be perfect. Wouldn't Bessie have liked that?"

"I doubt she'd have cared," Miss Woodhouse said. "Ben Marner is an alumnus; she'd get no credit for identifying him as a prospect. The gift might have so pleased the trustees that they'd give Dr. Church his vice president for advancement, but Bessie wouldn't be a candidate for that job, and she wouldn't want it. She's too blunt to romance donors, and that's a vice president's primary responsibility; she's far more effective at her computer than with people, and far happier. The trustees would have seen that in a moment. How, then, would she benefit from Ben Marner's death?"

"When you put it that way," I said, "not at all. Lance could've benefited plenty—he'd be the natural choice for vice president, since he's good at schmoozing with rich people. But then Dr. Church would benefit, too. He could leave fundraising to Lance and spend more time setting an example of scholarship, establishing the intellectual tone of the campus, like that. So how did you know Dr. Church wasn't the shooter?"

"I didn't *know*," Miss Woodhouse reminded me. "I suspected he wasn't because shooting Ben Marner—or Brett Horst—seemed inconsistent with his character."

"Well, sure," I said, shrugging. "I see what you mean. He's older, so he's probably more decent. And he talks about education and stuff, and that probably means he wouldn't shoot an innocent old guy three times in the chest. He probably does have more character than Lance. Still, a guy can have white hair, and talk nice, and wear suits, and still shoot people. I mean, it's not the sort of thing you can take to the bank, is it?"

"Or to the court." The Professor set her needle to rest and put her creation—three feet high, four feet round—on her mahogany table, giving it a final slap to jolt it into shape. "That is why Iphigenia staged the re-enactment, and enlisted—regrettably—That Man to trace the gun. Still, one can sometimes assess character with some degree of confidence. Can you identify this structure, little Harriet?"

I circled it slowly. "Maybe," I said. "All those levels, and rows, and arches—maybe. And it looks grand and intimidating—and beautiful, and horrible. And—well, I don't know much about history, but I did see *Gladiator*. Eight times. Is it the Colosseum?"

"Clever Harriet!" the Professor said, beaming. "Even this poor, stitched-together plastic model captures something of the character of the original, does it not? Something of its magnificence, something of its brutality?"

"It does," I said, thinking of slaves forced to battle to the death in

the real Colosseum. "It reminds me of what you said about the Horst Athletic Center. You said it was just big and pretty and bland, that it didn't reveal anything about the place or the people. You said it lacked character. So now you're saying some people lack character, too, but Dr. Church has character, so—"

"Not exactly," the Professor cut in. "We speak of 'character' as if it were some homogenous thing, some element of moral rectitude one either has or does not. It would be more precise to say that all people have character, and that everyone's character is a mixture of good and bad, of weakness and strength. In that sense, little Harriet, no person can accurately be said to lack character."

"A nice distinction, Mother," Miss Woodhouse said. "I weighed several facets of Dr. Church's character when considering him as a suspect. His habits of decency made it unlikely he'd shoot anyone; so did his timidity. He has high principles but lacks courage to act on them; he knows when something's wrong but bemoans and tolerates it, rather than taking steps to correct it. I judged him too principled to shoot Ben Marner to gain a vice president, too timid to try to shoot Brett Horst to rid Newton of an evil influence."

"But Lance would shoot Dr. Marner," I said. "He's not principled, he likes the high life, he likes winning, and he thinks he's got everything coming to him. He probably felt he had a *right* to Dr. Marner's money—and he's arrogant enough to think he can get away with shooting a man in front of hundreds of people."

Miss Woodhouse actually looked impressed. "That was indeed my assessment of his character," she said. "But I've known him for years—not well, but I've spoken to him many times. You, by contrast, met him only on the day of the shooting. How did you come to know so much about him so quickly?"

"I didn't *know*," I said, smiling. "But sometimes it's easier to get an impression of someone you just met than to figure out someone you've known a long time." I paused, then thought what the hell. "You two, for example. If someone asked me to sum up your characters, I couldn't. After all this time, there's still so much I don't know."

Mother and daughter looked at each other doubtfully, then looked at me, then looked at each other again. They're thinking it over, I realized, getting excited. Maybe, maybe they'll finally tell me what caused the Professor's breakdown, and why she dislikes That Man, and why she picks on Miss Woodhouse, and why Miss Woodhouse just takes it. Maybe I could help them talk things through; maybe the Professor would finally let Miss Woodhouse and That Man be together, and then everybody would be happier. I set down my mug, sat up straighter—the Professor never confides in people who slouch—and waited for revelations to begin.

It didn't happen. The Professor looked at me again, pursing her lips

thoughtfully; and then she shook her head, just once, and gazed at her miniature Colosseum.

"So," she said, "that's finished. I believe my next project shall be a tribute to General Ulysses S. Grant. Iphigenia, fetch me toothpicks."

Hastily, Miss Woodhouse got to her feet. "I doubt we have an adequate number in the house," she said apologetically, "not if you have in mind a sculpture of some magnitude. But I should be glad to go to the store and purchase—"

"Do so, you nasty girl," the Professor snapped. "And in the future, monitor supplies more carefully, and make sure toothpicks do not dwindle to such dangerously low levels. Dear Harriet, would you accompany me to the garden? I wish to see if my marigolds have made significant progress since this morning."

"You bet, Professor," I said, allowing myself one sigh. "I'll get your cane."

I heard the front door close softly behind Miss Woodhouse as she raced to her car. So, I thought, no revelations today. Well, really. What had I expected?

The Professor stood by the back door, waiting, her lime-colored lace shawl drawn lightly around her shoulders. She smiled at me kindly. "You are a sweet child, Harriet," she said. "And you are frustrated because you have an active mind, and a good heart—you wish to understand, and you wish to help. Another time, perhaps. Today, let us inspect my garden, and find solace in the bosom of nature."

A dozen scraggly marigolds in a city garden patch—that didn't sound bosomy to me; how much solace could we seriously expect to find? But there's no point arguing with the Professor. "Sure thing," I said, not able to keep the grumpiness out of my voice. "We'll check it out, see if we can find some solace, or some weeds, or whatever else might be lurking among those flowers of yours."

The Professor gave me a sharp look. "Thoughts that do lie too deep for tears, sometimes," she said, and put her arm around my shoulder, and led the way.

SOLUTION TO THE APRIL "UNSOLVED":

Cal Miller from Virginia switched fake rubies
for the genuine ones at Tiffany's Jewelers.

| CLIENT | WIFE | STATE | GEM | TIE |
|------------|-------|---------|-----------|--------|
| Abe Lutz | Ida | Utah | diamonds | maroon |
| Bill North | Gigi | S. Car. | emeralds | purple |
| Cal Miller | Jane | Va. | rubies | red |
| Dan Katz | Flora | Wisc. | amethysts | navy |
| Ed O'Hara | Helen | Tenn. | sapphires | orange |

MYSTERY CLASSIC

THE FAMOUS GILSON BEQUEST

Ambrose Bierce



It was rough on Gilson. Such was the terse, cold, but not altogether unsympathetic judgment of the better public opinion at Mammon Hill—the dictum of respectability. The verdict of the opposite, or rather the opposing, element—the element that lurked red-eyed and restless about Moll Gurney’s “deadfall,” while respectability took it with sugar at Mr. Jo. Bentley’s gorgeous “saloon”—was to pretty much the same general effect, though somewhat more ornately expressed by the use of picturesque expletives, which it is needless to quote. Virtually, Mammon Hill was a unit on the Gilson question. And it must be confessed that in a merely temporal sense all was not well with Mr. Gilson. He had that morning been led into town by Mr. Brentshaw and publicly charged with horse stealing; the sheriff meantime busying himself about The Tree with a new manila rope and Carpenter Pete being actively employed between drinks upon a pine box about the length and breadth of Mr. Gilson. Society having rendered its verdict, there remained between Gilson and eternity only the decent formality of a trial.

These are the short and simple annals of the prisoner: He had recently been a resident of New Jerusalem, on the north fork of the Little Stony, but had come to the newly discovered placers of Mammon Hill immediately before the “rush” by which the former place was depopulated. The discovery of the new diggings had occurred opportunely for Mr. Gilson, for it had only just before been intimated to him by a New Jerusalem vigilance committee that it would better his prospects in, and for, life to go somewhere; and the list of places to which he could safely go did not include any of the older camps; so he naturally established himself at Mammon Hill. Being eventually followed thither by all his judges, he ordered his conduct with considerable circumspection, but as he had never been known to do an honest day’s work at any industry sanctioned by the stern local code of morality except draw poker he was still an object of suspicion. Indeed, it was conjectured that he was the author of the many daring depredations that had recently been committed with pan and brush on the sluice boxes.

Prominent among those in whom this suspicion had ripened into a steadfast conviction was Mr. Brentshaw. At all seasonable and unseasonable times Mr. Brentshaw avowed his belief in Mr. Gilson’s connection with these unholy midnight enterprises, and his own willingness to prepare a way for the solar beams through the body of any one who might think it expedient to utter a different opinion—which, in his presence, no one was more careful not to do than the peace-loving person most concerned. Whatever may have been

the truth of the matter, it is certain that Gilson frequently lost more "clean dust" at Jo. Bentley's faro table than it was recorded in local history that he had ever honestly earned at draw poker in all the days of the camp's existence. But at last Mr. Bentley—fearing, it may be, to lose the more profitable patronage of Mr. Brentshaw—peremptorily refused to let Gilson copper the queen, intimating at the same time, in his frank, forthright way, that the privilege of losing money at "this bank" was a blessing appertaining to, proceeding logically from, and coterminous with, a condition of notorious commercial righteousness and social good repute.

The Hill thought it high time to look after a person whom its most honored citizen had felt it his duty to rebuke at a considerable personal sacrifice. The New Jerusalem contingent, particularly, began to abate something of the toleration begotten of amusement at their own blunder in exiling an objectionable neighbor from the place which they had left to the place whither they had come. Mammon Hill was at last of one mind. Not much was said, but that Gilson must hang was "in the air." But at this critical juncture in his affairs he showed signs of an altered life if not a changed heart. Perhaps it was only that "the bank" being closed against him he had no further use for gold dust. Anyhow the sluice boxes were molested no more forever. But it was impossible to repress the abounding energies of such a nature as his, and he continued, possibly from habit, the torturous courses which he had pursued for profit of Mr. Bentley. After a few tentative and resultless undertakings in the way of highway robbery—if one may venture to designate road-agency by so harsh a name—he made one or two modest essays in horse-herding, and it was in the midst of a promising enterprise of this character, and just as he had taken the tide in his affairs at its flood, that he made shipwreck. For on a misty, moonlight night Mr. Brentshaw rode up alongside a person who was evidently leaving that part of the country, laid a hand upon the halter connecting Mr. Gilson's wrist with Mr. Harper's bay mare, tapped him familiarly on the cheek with the barrel of a navy revolver and requested the pleasure of his company in a direction opposite to that in which he was traveling.

It was indeed rough on Gilson.

On the morning after his arrest he was tried, convicted, and sentenced. It only remains, so far as concerns his earthly career, to hang him, reserving for more particular mention his last will and testament, which, with great labor, he contrived in prison, and in which, probably from some confused and imperfect notion of the rights of captors, he bequeathed everything he owned to his "lawfle execketer," Mr. Brentshaw. The bequest, however, was made conditional on the lega-

tee taking the testator's body from The Tree and "planting it white."

So Mr. Gilson was—I was about to say "swung off," but I fear there has been already something too much of slang in this straightforward statement of facts; besides, the manner in which the law took its course is more accurately described in the terms employed by the judge in passing sentence: Mr. Gilson was "strung up."

In due season Mr. Brentshaw, somewhat touched, it may well be, by the empty compliment of the bequest, repaired to The Tree to pluck the fruit thereof. When taken down the body was found to have in its waistcoat pocket a duly attested codicil to the will already noted. The nature of its provisions accounted for the manner in which it had been withheld, for had Mr. Brentshaw previously been made aware of the conditions under which he was to succeed to the Gilson estate he would indubitably have declined the responsibility. Briefly stated, the purport of the codicil was as follows:

Whereas, at divers times and in sundry places, certain persons had asserted that during his life the testator had robbed their sluice boxes; therefore, if during the five years next succeeding the date of this instrument any one should make proof of such assertion before a court of law, such person was to receive as reparation the entire personal and real estate of which the testator died seized and possessed, minus the expenses of court and a stated compensation to the executor, Henry Clay Brentshaw; provided, that if more than one person made such proof the estate was to be equally divided between or among them. But in case none should succeed in so establishing the testator's guilt, then the whole property, minus court expenses, as aforesaid, should go to the said Henry Clay Brentshaw for his own use, as stated in the will.

The syntax of this remarkable document was perhaps open to critical objection, but that was clearly enough the meaning of it. The orthography conformed to no recognized system, but being mainly phonetic it was not ambiguous. As the probate judge remarked, it would take five aces to beat it. Mr. Brentshaw smiled good-humoredly, and after performing the last sad rites with amusing ostentation, had himself duly sworn as executor and conditional legatee under the provisions of a law hastily passed (at the instance of the member from the Mammon Hill district) by a facetious legislature; which law was afterward discovered to have created also three or four lucrative offices and authorized the expenditure of a considerable sum of public money for the construction of a certain railway bridge that with greater advantage might perhaps have been erected on the line of some actual railway.

Of course Mr. Brentshaw expected neither profit from the will nor litigation in consequence of its unusual provisions; Gilson, although

frequently "flush," had been a man whom assessors and tax collectors were well satisfied to lose no money by. But a careless and merely formal search among his papers revealed title deeds to valuable estates in the East and certificates of deposit for incredible sums in banks less severely scrupulous than that of Mr. Jo. Bentley.

The astounding news got abroad directly, throwing the Hill into a fever of excitement. The *Mammon Hill Patriot*, whose editor had been a leading spirit in the proceedings that resulted in Gilson's departure from New Jerusalem, published a most complimentary obituary notice of the deceased, and was good enough to call attention to the fact that his degraded contemporary, the *Squaw Gulch Clarion*, was bringing virtue into contempt by beslaving with flattery the memory of one who in life had spurned the vile sheet as a nuisance from his door. Undeterred by the press, however, claimants under the will were not slow in presenting themselves with their evidence; and great as was the Gilson estate it appeared conspicuously paltry considering the vast numbers of sluice boxes from which it was averred to have been obtained. The country rose as one man!

Mr. Brentshaw was equal to the emergency. With a shrewd application of humble auxiliary devices, he at once erected above the bones of his benefactor a costly monument, overtopping every rough headboard in the cemetery, and on this he judiciously caused to be inscribed an epitaph of his own composing, eulogizing the honesty, public spirit and cognate virtues of him who slept beneath, "a victim to the unjust aspersions of Slander's viper brood."

Moreover, he employed the best legal talent in the Territory to defend the memory of his departed friend, and for five long years the Territorial courts were occupied with litigation growing out of the Gilson bequest. To fine forensic abilities Mr. Brentshaw opposed abilities more finely forensic; in bidding for purchasable favors he offered prices which utterly deranged the market; the judges found at his hospitable board entertainment for man and beast, the like of which had never been spread in the Territory; with mendacious witnesses he confronted witnesses of superior mendacity.

Nor was the battle confined to the temple of the blind goddess—it invaded the press, the pulpit, the drawing-room. It raged in the mart, the exchange, the school; in the gulches, and on the street corners. And upon the last day of the memorable period to which legal action under the Gilson will was limited, the sun went down upon a region in which the moral sense was dead, the social conscience callous, the intellectual capacity dwarfed, enfeebled, and confused! But Mr. Brentshaw was victorious all along the line.

On that night it so happened that the cemetery in one corner of which lay the now honored ashes of the late Milton Gilson, Esq., was

partly under water. Swollen by incessant rains, Cat Creek had spilled over its banks an angry flood which, after scooping out unsightly hollows wherever the soil had been disturbed, had partly subsided, as if ashamed of the sacrilege, leaving exposed much that had been piously concealed. Even the famous Gilson monument, the pride and glory of Mammon Hill, was no longer a standing rebuke to the "viper brood"; succumbing to the sapping current it had toppled prone to earth. The ghoulish flood had exhumed the poor, decayed pine coffin, which now lay half-exposed, in pitiful contrast to the pompous monolith which, like a giant note of admiration, emphasized the disclosure.

To this depressing spot, drawn by some subtle influence he had sought neither to resist nor analyze, came Mr. Brentshaw. An altered man was Mr. Brentshaw. Five years of toil, anxiety, and wakefulness had dashed his black locks with streaks and patches of gray, bowed his fine figure, drawn sharp and angular his face, and debased his walk to a doddering shuffle. Nor had this lustrum of fierce contention wrought less upon his heart and intellect. The careless good humor that had prompted him to accept the trust of the dead man had given place to a fixed habit of melancholy. The firm, vigorous intellect had overripened into the mental mellowness of second childhood. His broad understanding had narrowed to the accommodation of a single idea; and in the place of the quiet, cynical incredulity of former days, there was in him a haunting faith in the supernatural, that flitted and fluttered about his soul, shadowy, batlike, ominous of insanity. Unsettled in all else, his understanding clung to one conviction with the tenacity of a wrecked intellect. That was an unshaken belief in the entire blamelessness of the dead Gilson. He had so often sworn to this in court and asserted it in private conversation—had so frequently and so triumphantly established it by testimony that had come expensive to him (for that very day he had paid the last dollar of the Gilson estate to Mr. Jo. Bentley, the last witness to the Gilson good character)—that it had become to him a sort of religious faith. It seemed to him the one great central and basic truth of life—the sole serene verity in a world of lies.

On that night, as he seated himself pensively upon the prostrate monument, trying by the uncertain moonlight to spell out the epitaph which five years before he had composed with a chuckle that memory had not recorded, tears of remorse came into his eyes as he remembered that he had been mainly instrumental in compassing by a false accusation this good man's death; for during some of the legal proceedings, Mr. Harper, for a consideration (forgotten) had come forward and sworn that in the little transaction with his bay mare the deceased had acted in strict accordance with the Harperian wishes, confidentially communicated to the deceased and by

him faithfully concealed at the cost of his life. All that Mr. Brentshaw had since done for the dead man's memory seemed pitifully inadequate—most mean, paltry, and debased with selfishness!

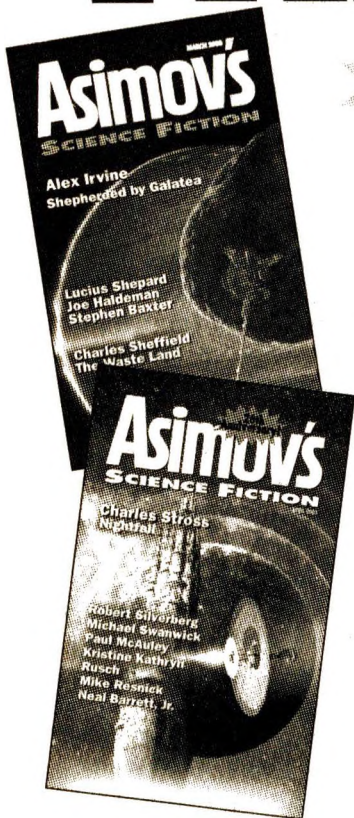
As he sat there, torturing himself with futile regrets, a faint shadow fell across his eyes. Looking toward the moon, hanging low in the west, he saw what seemed a vague, watery cloud obscuring her; but as it moved so that her beams lit up one side of it he perceived the clear, sharp outline of a human figure. The apparition became momentarily more distinct, and grew, visibly; it was drawing near. Dazed as were his senses, half locked up with terror and confounded with dreadful imaginings, Mr. Brentshaw yet could but perceive, or think he perceived, in this unearthly shape a strange similitude to the mortal part of the late Milton Gilson, as that person had looked when taken from The Tree five years before. The likeness was indeed complete, even to the full, stony eyes, and a certain shadowy circle about the neck. It was without coat or hat, precisely as Gilson had been when laid in his poor, cheap casket by the not-ungentle hands of Carpenter Pete—for whom some one had long since performed the same neighborly office. The spectre, if such it was, seemed to bear something in its hands which Mr. Brentshaw could not clearly make out. It drew nearer, and paused at last beside the coffin containing the ashes of the late Mr. Gilson, the lid of which was awry, half disclosing the uncertain interior. Bending over this, the phantom seemed to shake into it from a basin some dark substance of dubious consistency, then glided stealthily back to the lowest part of the cemetery. Here the retiring flood had stranded a number of open coffins, about and among which it gurgled with low sobbings and stilly whispers. Stooping over one of these, the apparition carefully brushed its contents into the basin, then returning to its own casket, emptied the vessel into that, as before. This mysterious operation was repeated at every exposed coffin, the ghost sometimes dipping its laden basin into the running water, and gently agitating it to free it of the baser clay, always hoarding the residuum in its own private box. In short, the immortal part of the late Milton Gilson was cleaning up the dust of its neighbors, and providently adding the same to its own.

Perhaps it was a phantasm of a disordered mind in a fevered body. Perhaps it was a solemn farce enacted by pranking existences that throng the shadows lying along the border of another world. God knows; to us is permitted only the knowledge that when the sun of another day touched with a grace of gold the ruined cemetery of Mammon Hill his kindest beam fell upon the white, still face of Henry Brentshaw, dead among the dead.

DISCOUNT TIME TRAVEL

Just \$6.95!

For 5 Classic Issues



You'll join the vanguard of science fiction when you order our **Asimov's Science Fiction Value Pack**. You get five of our most popular back issues for just \$6.95 plus shipping. **That's a savings of 60% off the regular price!**

Asimov's always delivers the most celebrated authors in the field. Share their visions now with dozens of stories that launch you into the fantastic worlds of tomorrow.

To get your **Asimov's Science Fiction Value Pack**, just complete the order form below and mail it back to us with your payment today.

PENNY MARKETING

Dept. SM-100, 6 Prowitt Street, Norwalk, CT 06855-1220

YES! Please send me my **Asimov's Science Fiction Value Pack**. I get 5 back issues for just \$6.95 plus \$2 shipping and handling (\$8.95 per pack, U.S. funds). **My satisfaction is fully guaranteed!** My payment of \$_____ is enclosed. (IAPK05)

Name: _____ (Please print)
Address: _____
City: _____
State: _____ ZIP: _____

Please make checks payable to Penny Marketing. Allow 8 weeks for delivery. Magazines are back issues shipped together in one package. To keep prices low we cannot make custom orders. Add \$4 additional postage for delivery outside the U.S.A. Offer expires 6/30/04. 53C-NN5VL1

BOOKED & PRINTED

Robert C. Hahn

“**T**he reading of detective stories is simply a kind of vice that, for silliness and minor harmfulness, ranks somewhere between crossword puzzles and smoking.” That famously dismissive comment of critic Edmund Wilson’s published more than half a century ago in the *New Yorker* has done nothing to reduce the ranks of either mystery readers or crossword puzzle aficionados. Indeed, crossword puzzles and mysteries have shared strong links long before and long after.

Crossword puzzles have been used in a variety of fashions in every form of the mystery. One can cite Dorothy L. Sayers’s short story “The Fascinating Problem of Uncle Meleager’s Will” (1928), which incorporates the crossword puzzle directly into the mystery with Lord Peter Wimsey eagerly tackling the clues. Or Ruth Rendell’s novel *One Across, Two Down* (1971) in which Stanley Manning’s obsession with crossword puzzles plays out nicely as he struggles to preserve the comfortable niche provided by his wife’s money. Or Colin Dexter’s fine series of novels in which the crossword-loving Inspector Morse capably solves word clues or crime clues.

And since a good mystery is often a good puzzle, it should be no surprise that some authors have recently gone to the extreme of building a series around the creation of puzzles that when solved (in one fashion or another) provide the solution to a murder mystery.

Veteran mystery writer Parnell Hall introduced Cora Felton, a.k.a. the Puzzle Lady, in 2000 with *A Clue for the Puzzle Lady* and followed it with *Last Puzzle and Testament* and *Puzzled to Death*. Ironically, Cora is not really the puzzle lady but a front for her niece, Sherry Carter. Grandmotherly Cora makes for a sweet-faced poster child for Sherry’s syndicated puzzle column, but that façade hides a hard-drinking, card-playing smoker who would much rather solve crimes than mysteries.

Sherry, divorced and hiding from her abusive ex-husband, relishes the anonymity Cora provides. But the two need to do some fancy maneuvering to avoid exposure of their ruse whenever someone tries to enlist Cora’s (non-existent) puzzle expertise.

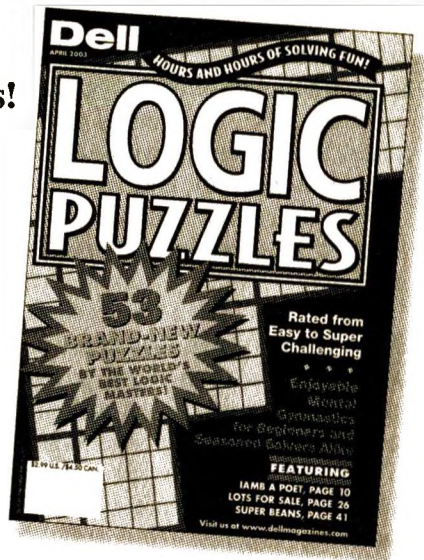
Hall’s series revolves around comically troubled relationships, including Cora and Sherry’s, with the aunt concerned about her niece’s lackluster love life and the niece concerned with her aunt’s drinking. Cora struggles with Harvey Beerbaum, a puzzle expert with his own suspicions about Cora’s puzzle abilities. And Sherry

Dell Logic Puzzles Direct to Your Door!

If you love solving mysteries,
you'll love **Dell Logic Puzzles!**

Each issue delivers more
than 50 spell-binding logic
problems by the world's
best logic masters.

Subscribe today and you'll
get every intriguing issue
delivered direct to your door
and save 10%. Six issues,
just \$15.97.



To charge your order by phone, call toll free:

1-800-220-7443 (9am-5pm EST) Orders only please!

Mail to: **Dell Magazines**
Suite S, 6 Prowitt St.,
Norwalk, CT 06855-1220

YES! Enter my subscription to **Dell Logic Puzzles (LOG)**
as indicated below.

1 year, (6 issues) \$15.97

2 years, (12 issues) \$28.97

My payment is enclosed (U.S. funds)

Bill me

Name _____
(Please Print)

Address _____

City _____

State _____ ZIP _____

Please allow 6 to 8 weeks for delivery of first issue. Canadian and foreign orders add
\$5 per year (U.S. funds). Offer expires 6/30/04.

53F-CMLSL

has an on-again, off-again romance with reporter Aaron Grant and a rivalry with local beauty Becky Baldwin for the same fellow.

In their fourth and latest outing, **A Puzzle in a Pear Tree** (Bantam, \$23.95), Cora and Sherry are mixed up in a Christmas play that takes a deadly turn when first a teenaged actress, then a stage hand are murdered. The killer confounds the community with warnings hidden in acrostic puzzles. While Hall doesn't require that his readers solve the actual puzzles presented in the novels, they are given the opportunity to do so. And whether you choose to do so or not, all will enjoy Hall's nimble wordplay.

Actor/authors Cordelia Frances Biddle and Steve Zettler have teamed up to create a series of puzzle mysteries under the pseudonym Nero Blanc. Their clever nom de plume combines the Italian "nero" (black) with the French "blanc" (white) just like a puzzle grid does. The authors, like their sleuthing couple, are married and share a passion for crossword puzzles that led to the creation of this collaborative series. Both had published several books before their collaboration. Cordelia Frances Biddle wrote the romance *Beneath the Wind* as well as *Murder at San Simeon* (with Patricia Hearst). Steve Zettler had written a number of thrillers such as *Double Identity* and *Black Venice*.

The fifth volume in their series, **A Crossworder's Holiday** (Berkley Prime Crime, \$22.95), starring crossword editor Belle Graham and private investigator Rosco Polycrates, is a collection of holiday-themed short stories. Each story contains a challenging crossword puzzle that when solved provides the solution to a crime or a mystery. (In the novels, a series of crossword puzzles provides clues that cumulatively lead to the solution.)

From Nantucket to Philadelphia to Vermont to England, the couple's vacation jaunts are never far enough to remove them from situations that require their joint talents. Not all the mysteries they solve are crimes. For instance, in "A Ghost of Christmas Past," their ability to solve a puzzle merely allows them to lay to rest a very old ghost. Rosco and Belle's vacation at the Cotswolds home of friends results in finding the answer to the disappearance of a lady reputed to have had an affair with her gardener. In "A Partridge in a Pear Tree," a woman creates a puzzle that allows her to reach back from the grave to protect her heritage by outsmarting her killer.

Nero Blanc's entertaining mysteries can be read without the reader undertaking to solve the puzzles or one can play detective by solving the puzzle and the crime at the same time. Answers to all the puzzles can be found at the end of the book.

The novels in the Nero Blanc series are (in order): *The Crossword Murder*, *Two Down*, *The Crossword Connection*, and *A Crossword to Die For*.

THE STORY THAT WON

The December Mysterious Photograph contest was won by Diane Perrone of Franklin, Wisconsin. Honorable mentions go to Teresa McNeely of Warrenton, Virginia; Bryan Steelman of Conover, North Carolina; Lorna M. Kaine of Oviedo, Florida; J. D.



Bowen of Tyler, Texas; Devon A. Dietmeyer of St. Louis, Missouri; Martha Jean Gable of Midland, Texas; Ila Winslow of Portland, Oregon; Mark Truman of Laguna Niguel, California; and Robert Kesling of Ann Arbor, Michigan.

BIRD SHOT by Diane Perrone

Blanch Conrad told the police, truthfully, that her husband “couldn’t have been responsible for that poor woman’s death. He was a loving man, not a killer.”

But the evidence was irrefutable. Letters to the sniper requesting a hit “on the blackmailing blonde” bore Neal’s fingerprints. They were also on \$10,000 in unmarked bills and a snapshot of Neal Conrad and Elaine Howard, the victims, all found in the shooter’s apartment.

The Conrads’ cook concurred with “Miz” Blanch’s perception of Mr. Neal as a lover. “Blimey, Mr. Neal had more ‘birds’ than the zoo aviary! And now, look, he’s got his self and the latest bird killt!”

The story under the headline PIGEONS FOIL GUNMAN DISGUISED AS BIRDWATCHER described the clever concealment of a gun inside a box camera. Pigeons, swooping down at the shooter, made his aim go wild. Mr. Neal was fatally shot, too.

The shooter, a recently released felon, admitted he and the victim had exchanged identification after a minor traffic accident months before. No one remembered that Blanch had been in the car and had access to the man’s address, too. She fingered the flecc-lined gloves she always wore to relieve her arthritis pain. The ones she wore while she regularly slipped twenty and fifty dollar bills out of Neal’s wallet after she found the snapshot, and when she drafted the letters on Neal’s Compaq.

Blanch didn’t expect to be rid of Neal *and* his mistress. Still, the grieving widow role was better than “murderer’s wife.” In memoriam, she placed Neal’s photograph on the piano. Framed.

CLASSIFIED MARKETPLACE

Alfred Hitchcock May '03

Advertise to the world's largest mystery magazine audience with our Alfred Hitchcock/Ellery Queen combined classified section. Ad rates per issue: \$4.95 per word (10 word minimum), \$350 per column inch (2.25 inch maximum). Special introductory offer: Buy two ads and receive a third ad FREE. Send orders to: Dell Magazines, Classified Department, 475 Park Ave. S., 11th Floor, New York, New York 10016. Direct inquiries to: (212) 686-7188; Fax: (212) 686-7414; or email: classifiedads@dellmagazines.com

BOOKS AND PERIODICALS

ADDICTED TO MYSTERIES! Free catalog! New and recycled detective fiction. Grave Matters, Box 32192-C, Cincinnati, OH 45232, www.gravematters.com

'BY BOOK OR BY CROOK' – Award-winning writer Tony Vellela's newest – now at Amazon.com

FREE CATALOG. Used paper and hardcover mysteries. Books West, POB 417760, Sacramento, CA 95841-7760. Visa/MC/Amex/Discover.

FREE LISTS. Quality used mystery paperbacks. Collections purchased. Steve Lewis, 62 Chestnut, Newington, CT 06111.

BOOKS AND PERIODICALS

Like the R.J. and Ginny Carr stories by S. L. Franklin? Find out more at: www.carrdetective.com

MYSTERY BOOKS. Quality Used Hardbacks & Paperbacks. Send want lists to: Mitchell Books, 1395 E Washington Blvd, Pasadena, CA 91104. 626-798-4438. Mb4mystery@aol.com


LITERARY SERVICES

Writers--Submitting stories to EQMM and others? Let a professional editor, experienced in acquisitions in addition to text editing, polish your work so it shines in the eyes of acquiring editors. Contact awordsmith@earthlink.net for information.

FREE AD OFFER FOR OUR MYSTERY COMBO

PLACE A CLASSIFIED AD IN OUR NEXT TWO ISSUES AND RECEIVE A THIRD AD FREE!

Your ad will reach a combined audience of 200,000 readers in our outstanding publications—Ellery Queen and Alfred Hitchcock mystery magazines.

 Call today for a new rate card. 

DELL MAGAZINES CLASSIFIED DEPARTMENT
475 Park Avenue South, 11th Floor, New York, NY 10016
Call: (212) 686-7188 ● Fax: (212) 686-7414
Email: classifiedads@dellmagazines.com

4 MYSTERY MAGAZINES

just \$5.95!

When it comes to knock-'em-dead detection, nobody outdoes *Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine*.

To introduce you to the award-winning fiction of *Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine*, we'd like to send you a special value pack of four favorite issues for just \$5.95 plus shipping.

Special introductory offer.

To get your value pack, fill out the coupon below and mail it to us with your payment today.



PENNY MARKETING

Dept. SM-100, 6 Prowitt Street, Norwalk, CT 06855-1220

YES! Please send me my *Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine Value Pack*. I get 4 back issues for just \$5.95 plus \$2 shipping and handling (\$7.95 per pack, U.S. funds). My satisfaction is fully guaranteed! My payment of \$_____ is enclosed. (EQPK04)

Name: _____

(Please print)

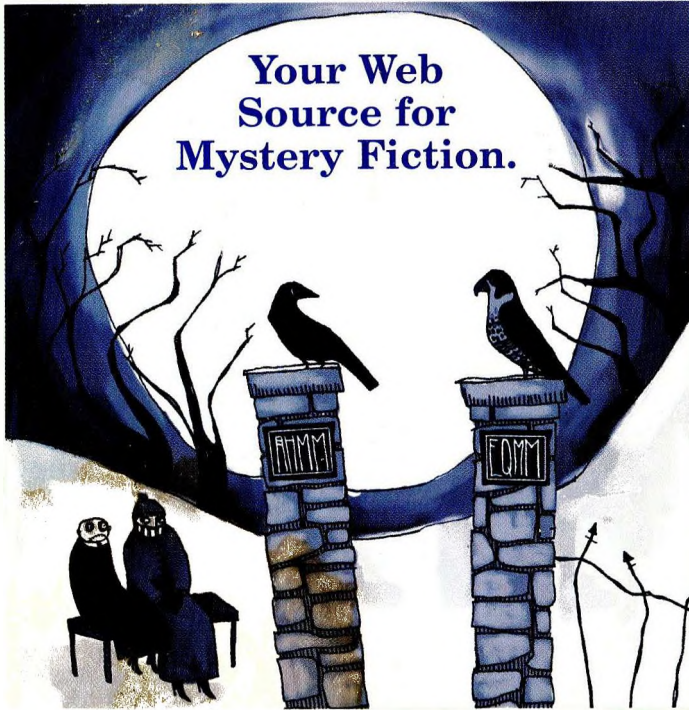
Address: _____

City: _____

State: _____ ZIP: _____

Please make checks payable to Penny Marketing. Allow 8 weeks for delivery. Magazines are back issues shipped together in one package. To keep prices low we cannot make custom orders. Add \$4 additional postage for delivery outside the U.S.A. Offer expires 6/30/04. 53C-NHQVL2

TheMysteryPlace.com



Your Web
Source for
Mystery Fiction.

Visit www.TheMysteryPlace.com, home of the
leading short-fiction mystery magazines.
Log on and you'll enjoy:

- Full stories on-line
- Trivia contests
- Readers' Forum
- Award lists
- Book reviews
- Mystery puzzles

All this and much more!

ALFRED HITCHCOCK'S
Mystery
MAGAZINE

ELLERY QUEEN
MYSTERY MAGAZINE

Visit us at www.themysteryplace.com