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ALFRED

HITCHCOCK'S

MYSTERY MAGAZINE

ORIGINAL stories
presented by the MASTER of SUSPENSE

December 1965

Dear Reader:

Being oblivious to gibes, I donned the Pilgrim habiliment to express my admiration for those stout souls of yesteryear who braved the wilds, then set aside one day for prayer, initiating the tradition of Thanksgiving Day. Incidentally, the first of my grandchildren to identify the Pilgrim trappings will be awarded a prize.

There will be no prize in store, however, for second-guessing the suspenseful stories presented forthwith. The scope of our mystery masters is unlimited, as they delve with universality into the chilling areas of mayhem, arson, and murder.

Thus forewarned, forearmed, and good reading.

Alfred Hitchcock

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ALFRED HITCHCOCK'S mystery magazine

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G. F. FOSTER, Editor
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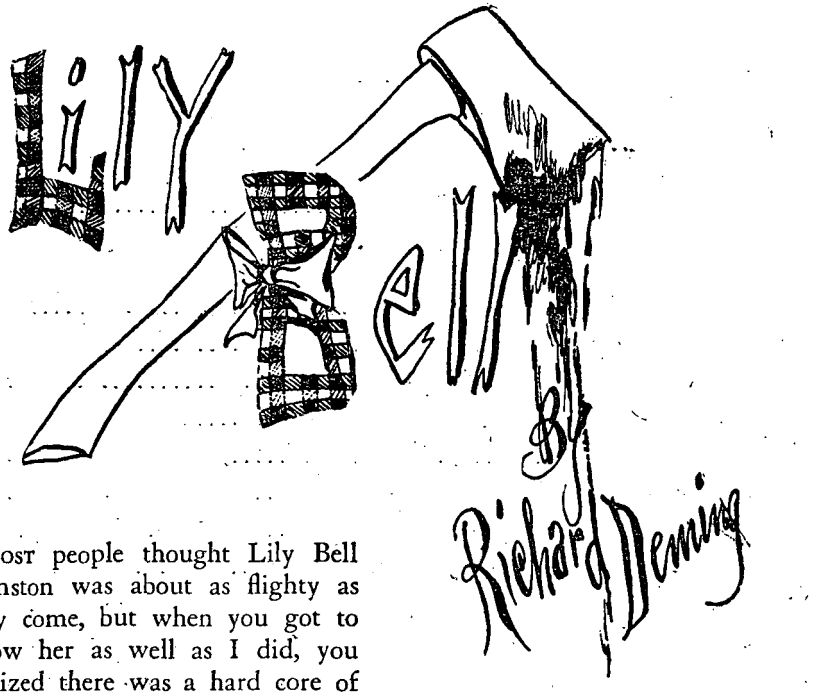
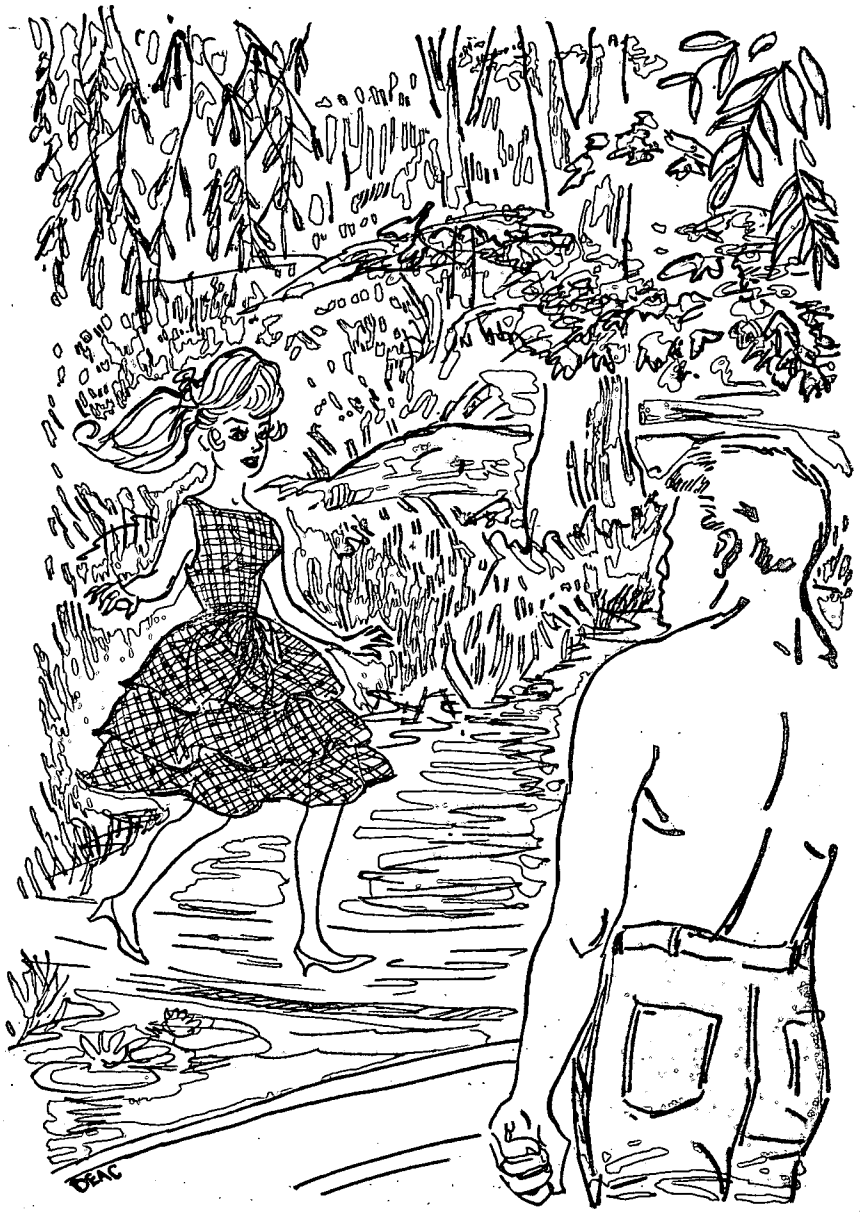
MARGUERITE BLAIR DEACON, Art Director

Should one lend an ear to petitions for sympathy, let him be alert lest the heart lead the hand.



Most people thought Lily Bell Winston was about as flighty as they come, but when you got to know her as well as I did, you realized there was a hard core of practicality under her flibbertigibbet exterior. True, she wasn't very constant in her relationships with fellows before she got married, but even as a teen-ager she knew what she wanted out of life. She would have liked both romance and security in marriage, but when she realized it was a choice of one or the other, she picked the latter.

In a way I couldn't blame her, for she'd never had a thing before marriage. Her widowed ma ran the only boardinghouse in Pig Ridge Center, which was hardly a big deal when you consider that the village's population was only three hundred. I guess she figured that



trading the poverty of her home life for marriage with either me or Skeeter Hawkins would be jumping from the frying pan into the fire.

Skeeter Hawkins and I courted Lily Bell all through high school. Though nobody, including Lily Bell, I think, could ever really tell which of us she preferred, it was generally accepted throughout Pig Ridge County that eventually she'd pick one or the other. It shocked the whole countryside when, the summer after we all graduated, she up and married somebody else.

She broke the news of her decision to me first, which was some consolation. It led me to believe I might have won out over Skeeter if a third choice hadn't entered the picture.

She came down to the houseboat where Pa and I lived to search me out. Though it was a hot day in mid-July, she looked as cool and fresh in a pink-and-white gingham dress as though it were sixty-five instead of a hundred and two in the shade. Her cornsilk hair was tied into a pony tail by a pink ribbon, making her look about fourteen instead of the nearly nineteen she was. My heart started to thump the moment I spotted her working her way with cat-footed sureness down the steep river bank.

I had just started to run a trot line from the stern of the houseboat to a buoy Pa had set out just this side of the channel. When I saw Lily Bell coming down the bank, I rowed the skiff back to the houseboat, tied it up and was on deck by the time she reached the board we used as a gangplank. I remember wishing I'd had more notice of her visit because I wasn't wearing a thing but a ragged old pair of denims, not even shoes, and the houseboat was in its usual state of messiness.

She skipped up the gangplank, looked around and asked abruptly, "Mr. Harrow here?"

"Pa's up in the village," I said.

She nodded. "I figured he'd be loafing in the tavern on a day like this. I wanted to see you alone."

I gave her a pleased grin.

Then the grin faded when she said, "I'm getting married, Pete."

"Skeeter?" I asked sourly.

She shook her head. "Before I tell you who, I want you to know why. I guess both you and Skeeter deserve that. I'm really quite fond of you both, you know."

"But fonder of somebody else, huh?" I said with a touch of bitterness.

She shook her head again. "I'd marry one of you in a minute, if either of you had any future. But what can either of you offer a wife?"

I felt myself flush. "We're barely out of high school and are just nineteen years old. You can hardly expect us to be millionaires yet."

"You'll never even be hundredaires. I know your ambitions, Pete. You'll spend summers on the river fishing, winters in the hills trapping, just like your pa. Would you expect me to come live on this houseboat and breed a flock of future river rats?"

My flush deepened. "Pa's always got along. He made enough from fishing and trapping to put me through high school, didn't he?"

Her lips formed a pitying smile. "What good's an education you never intend to use?"

"What kind of work you expect me to do? There aren't more than a dozen paying jobs in the village, and they're all filled. If you don't own land in this county, you got to fish and trap."

"There're jobs in the city."

That wasn't fair because she knew I'd never leave Pig Ridge County. Nobody with any sense would. There wasn't a more peaceful, beautiful place in the world. Maybe we were a little backward, but we knew how to enjoy life without rush. Despite her ambitions, Lily Bell wouldn't have thought of moving to the city herself. She had an older sister who had married and moved there, and every time Lily Bell visited her, she came back swearing she'd die before she ever traded Pig Ridge County life for that kind of rat race.

"Would you go with me?" I demanded.

"There's no point in discussing that," she said. "I didn't come here to argue with you. I just wanted to tell you my plans, so there'd be no hard feelings between us."

"You told Skeeter yet?"

"No, but I will. His prospects are about the same as yours. He'll spend twenty years helping his pa work that thirty acres of dirt farm, then when his paw dies, he and his brother will inherit fifteen acres apiece."

I wasn't about to argue Skeeter Hawkins' case. I asked, "Who's the lucky man?"

She took a deep breath before saying, "Bill Skim."

My eyes widened in shock. "That old crab!" I blurted. "Why, he must be forty years old."

"Thirty-eight," she said. "And the richest bachelor in the county. Five hundred acres of clear land, forty milk cows, fifty thousand dollars worth of paid-for farm machinery, a beautiful big house and ten thousand dollars in the bank."

"It sounds like he rendered you a financial statement along with

his proposal," I said caustically.

"He did. I guess he figured he had to offer some concrete inducement to balance his looks. He's hardly as handsome as either you or Skeeter."

"Thanks for nothing," I said. "He's hardly as handsome as the scarecrows he sets out in his fields."

"Don't be bitter, Pete. I want to part friends."

"We'll continue to speak," I growled.

"I mean real friends. I'd like to think that if I ever really needed anything, I could still call on you for help."

She looked at me so wistfully, I couldn't help smiling through my pain. "You know damn well I'd come running whenever you needed me, even ten years from now and if I was married to someone else, which I won't be."

"You'll find another girl," she assured me. "You and Skeeter both. Good-by, Pete."

She flitted toward me, stood on tiptoe to plant a quick kiss on my mouth, then was running back across the gangplank.

Skeeter Hawkins and I had never been friends, but our mutual misery drew us together on Lily Bell's wedding day. I guess we were about the only two members of our high school graduating class who didn't attend the wedding. We wandered separately into Juniper Joe's, the only tavern in Pig Ridge Center, and ended up getting drunk together.

It was a mistake because, while we started out sympathizing with each other, by closing time too much whisky had brought out our natural antagonism. Skeeter said something I didn't like—I was too drunk to remember what—and I invited him out back.

By then all the customers but us had gone home. When we staggered out the back door, Juniper Joe locked it behind us from inside, so there was no one to break it up.

Sober we might have killed each other, since we both stood six feet two and weighed in the neighborhood of two hundred pounds. But we were too drunk to hurt each other much. We stumbled around missing each other with roundhouse swings and falling down from our own momentum. We both ruined our clothes and skinned our knees, but I can't remember either of us landing a clean blow.

Finally Skeeter got sick and I had to hold his head. Afterward we shook hands, each of us assuring the other he'd put up a hell of a fight.

The incident didn't convert us into friends, despite our conclud-

ing handshake. When we sobered up, we didn't dislike each other any more than before, but we didn't like each other any better either. We just resumed the status quo of staying as much as possible out of each other's way.

I didn't see much of either Lily Bell or Skeeter during the next year. I had a couple of casual encounters with Skeeter, and once I saw Lily driving through the village in a new car, but she must not have seen me because she didn't even wave. I stayed pretty close to the river until it got cold, then spent the whole winter up at our Pig Ridge shack trapping fur. I got into the village only a few times during the whole year.

Pa kept me abreast of the news though because summer or winter he never missed a Saturday at Juniper Joe's. And the tavern was the village hub of gossip.

According to Pa, Lily Bell was living in pretty high style for Pig Ridge County. Bill Skim had bought her the new car I had seen her driving, plus a flock of pretty clothes, and she drove all over the county showing herself off. Skim, who had never attended a barn dance in his life, was now dragged to all of them by his new bride. Pa said he was reported to be as taciturn and dour as ever, but at least he now appeared in public. He seldom danced more than the first dance, Pa said, after which he retired to the bar and glowered at his wife enjoying herself the rest of the evening. There was some talk about the way Lily Bell carried on at dances with young unmarried sparks, particularly with Skeeter Hawkins.

Another year passed, with me still staying pretty much to myself. According to Pa, Lily Bell was still flitting all over the county and continuing to be the belle of the ball at barn dances. Then, during the summer, he brought home some news of Skeeter Hawkins.

"Young Skeeter Hawkins got himself a job," he announced.

I hiked my brows and waited.

"Jim Biggs resigned as deputy, and Sheriff Hill put Skeeter on."

I felt a touch of envy. In an essentially farming community such as ours, sheriff's deputy was one of the few salaried jobs of any consequence. And for a young man Skeeter's age, it had a lot of future. Sheriff Albert Hill was past sixty, and none of his other four deputies were much short of forty. In a little over fifteen years they would all be past retirement age and Skeeter would be senior deputy in terms of service. By thirty-five or -six he could very well be county sheriff.

If I had known of the vacancy, I would have applied for the job

myself, but I hadn't heard of it.

Along toward the end of August, on a Saturday afternoon, Lily Bell paid a visit to the houseboat. I glanced up from cleaning a channel cat at the sound of a car pulling off on the road shoulder next to the river bank. Lily Bell climbed from the shiny blue car and picked her way daintily down the bank. She was wearing a pink knit suit, nylon stockings and high-heeled shoes.

As usual during hot weather, I was wearing nothing but worn denims. I tossed the catfish into a bucket and wiped my hands on a rag as she came across the gangplank. I noticed that she had a black eye.

"Hello, Pete," she said without

smiling. "I was just driving by and decided to drop in. Mr. Harrow around?"

She knew Pa wouldn't be there on a Saturday, so I ignored the question. "What happened to your eye?"

She hesitated a bare second before saying, "I ran into something at the farm."

"Like a fist?" I inquired.

She sat down on the rail, put her face in her hands and began to cry. I had never seen her cry before, and I didn't know what to do. I stood shifting from foot to foot, patting her shoulder and saying, "Please don't cry, Lily Bell. Please don't cry."

After a while she dried her eyes on a tiny handkerchief, sniffed a couple of times and asked in a despairing voice, "What am I going to do, Pete?"

Even with the rage against her husband seething inside me, I couldn't resist an I-told-you-so remark. "It's not working out as wonderful as you thought, huh?"

She looked up at me reproachfully. "I thought you were going to stay my friend, Pete."

"Sorry," I said. "I am your friend. Is this the first time?"

She shook her head. "About the tenth. He's getting worse all the time. I can hardly leave the place any more without there being a scene when I get home. He accuses me of all sorts of things. He seems to have it fixed in his mind that I'm carrying on some kind of affair with Skeeter, for instance, just because I've danced with him a few times at dances."

When I didn't say anything, she said, "I swear I haven't given him any reason for suspicion. I've been a good wife. What am I going to do, Pete?"

"Leave him."

"And go back to living in that awful boardinghouse with Ma?"

What could I say to that? Offer her a bunk in the houseboat? That would be a comedown even from the boardinghouse.

"Well, you can't keep getting beat up," I said. "Why don't you have him arrested?"

She gazed at me from frightened eyes. "You don't know his temper," she whispered. "He'd kill me as soon as he got out of jail."

"He's not going to kill anybody," I told her. "Wait until I get a shirt and shoes on and I'll ride back home with you. I'll convince that so-and-so that if he ever lays a hand on you again, I'll stretch his neck until he looks like a goose."

Jumping up, she said in a terrified voice, "Please don't, Pete. Please don't interfere."

I hiked my eyebrows. "If you don't want me to interfere, why'd

you come here?" I asked brusquely.

"For sympathy, I guess. I can see it was a mistake. Please promise you'll forget my visit. Don't mention it to anyone or do anything about it."

"I'm not going to say or do anything you wouldn't want me to," I assured her. "I thought you were asking my help."

"No. I never should have come. Just forget I did." She hurried back across the gangplank before I could say anything more.

I kept my word and never even mentioned her visit to Pa. A couple of weeks later I did casually ask if he'd seen or heard anything of the Skims.

Pa said he'd seen them a few times and they looked fine to him. "Now that you mention it, I hear Lily Bell ain't seen gallivanting around alone so much as she used to," he said. "I also heard the last barn dance they went to, she spent most of the evening sitting on the sidelines next to Bill instead of leaving him at the bar while she danced. Maybe she's starting to settle down."

She had solved her problem by restricting her activities so that her husband had no reason for suspicion, I decided. I hated to think of her cooped up in that big house with no one but dour Bill Skim for companionship, but it had been her choice. I tried to push the matter from my mind.

I hadn't really succeeded when the first snow fell in early November. I had a lot of time to think about Lily Bell because I was up at our Pig Ridge shack all alone by then. Pa had retired from trapping now that I was old enough to handle it myself and didn't have to go to school in the wintertime. He still did his share of setting and clearing the trot lines in the summer because he liked fishing, but he said the cold of winter was beginning to get in his bones.

I had been alone at the shack for two weeks when Lily Bell paid me a visit. Our shack was right beneath the crest of Pig Ridge in the heart of the hills, and the closest you could get to it by road was three miles. After that you had to cross two low hills, then climb nearly to the top of Pig Ridge. At this time of year the only way you could make it was on snowshoes or skis.

I always used both in the hills, skis downhill and snowshoes up, but Lily Bell came up to the shack equipped only with snowshoes and had to tramp the whole way.

She was waiting for me inside the shack when I returned about four p.m. from my daily check of the traps. She was seated on the lower part of the double bunk,

wearing ski pants and a blouse. Her fur-lined parka hung from the back of a chair and her snowshoes stood in one corner. Her shiny, cornsilk colored hair was, as usual, tied into a pony tail by a pink ribbon.

She had the lantern going and a fire burned in the wood stove. I tossed the bag containing two beaver and a fox in a corner, leaned my rifle in the same corner, stripped off my parka and hung it up.

"Aren't you even going to say hello?" she asked.

"I'm trying to recover from my surprise," I said. "I saw your tracks leading to the door, but just figured it was some hunter. Hello."

She gave me a tremulous smile. "Don't you wonder why I'm here?"

I went over to warm my hands at the stove. "Uh-huh. Why are you here?"

"I'm leaving Bill. I can't stand it any more."

I examined her. She didn't show any bruises or contusions. "He still using you as a punching bag?"

She shook her head. "He hasn't hit me since the time I last saw you. I don't give him any reason. I stay home and we just sit and look at each other. It's driving me crazy. I have to get away from him."

"You're leaving him right now?" I asked. "You're not going back home at all?"

"Oh, yes, I'm going back tonight. For the last time. I'm catching the bus for the city tomorrow afternoon. I'm going to stay with my sister Abagail until I decide what to do about a divorce."

I said, "Aren't you going to get banged around if you go home tonight? Where will you say you've been?"

"He isn't home. He had to go to the city for a tractor part, and I don't expect him back until about midnight. I'll be safely in bed by then."

I scratched my chin. "Why'd you come clear up here to tell me all this?"

"Because I need a favor. Once, you told me you'd come running any time I needed you. Does that still hold?"

"Of course. Now, ten years from now, any time."

"When Bill learns I'm leaving him, I'm afraid he'll kill me. As a matter of fact, once when I threatened to, he told me he would if I ever tried it. At the very least, I know there's going to be an awful scene. I want you to come get me about noon tomorrow and drive me to the bus. It leaves at two."

I frowned at her. "Wouldn't it

have been simpler to take the bus today while he's gone?"

"You know there was no bus today. It runs only three times a week."

I had known that, but I had lost track of what day it was.

I said, "Why don't you drive up to your sister's tonight? It's only about eighty-five miles."

"Bill took the car. I came here in the pickup truck. I doubt the pickup would hold together for eighty-five miles. It's about ready to fall apart."

"All right," I said. "I'll be along to get you at noon. I'll go down to the houseboat and get the jalopy about eleven. What is tomorrow?"

"Saturday," she said in surprise.

"Then Pa won't be around and I won't have to make any explanation. You better start back now before it gets dark. I'll walk you back to your truck."

"No," she said quickly. "I know these hills as well as you do. I'll be all right."

I told her I preferred to accompany her, but she insisted it would be ridiculous to make the round trip when she was quite capable of getting back to the road by herself."

"I got here all right, didn't I?" she said. "It's mostly downhill on the way back, and I can easily make it by dark. You'd have to make the climb back here all by yourself in the dark."

There was something to that, and I had already spent a full day on snowshoes. Reluctantly I let her talk me into staying behind.

While my supper was cooking, and periodically while I was eating it, I watched from the shack window until she reached the top of the first hill beyond Pig Ridge. It was almost dusk by then, but she had only about three-quarters of a mile more to go and only one more low hill to climb. I knew she would reach the road before dark.

I washed the dishes, skinned the day's catch, and went to bed.

It wasn't nearly the problem getting home from Pig Ridge that it was getting there. I didn't need snowshoes, but I took them along, slung to my back, because I would need them on the return trip.

Pig Ridge was high enough so that if you were familiar enough with its slopes, you could get up enough momentum on skis to carry you clear to the top of the first hill beyond, over it and three-quarters of the way up the second hill. You had to walk your skis about twenty-five yards to the crest of the second, then it was downhill clear to the road.

It was five miles from there to the houseboat, but it was all on hard-packed snow. There wasn't

any traffic because this secondary road was used only by hunters. Not a single car passed in either direction.

As our houseboat was a couple of miles upriver from Pig Ridge Center, I didn't have to pass through the village. When I arrived home about eleven a.m., I had encountered no one at all.

Pa wasn't home, of course. As it was Saturday, he would be at Juniper Joe's. I stowed away my skis, snowshoes and rifle, shed my hunting clothes and took a bath. Then I dressed in a suit, topcoat and galoshes.

My 1929 Ford coupe was kept in an abandoned barn a few yards up the road from the houseboat. After setting so long, it took me about fifteen minutes to get it started. It was twenty to twelve when I headed for the Skim farm, which would get me there just about noon.

The route led back along the river road, the same way I had come, to Howe Junction, then east past the edge of the hills a couple of miles, then back south along a gravel road about a mile to the farm. It would have been a mile and a half shorter to drive through the village on the main road, but for some reason I preferred not to be seen heading for the farm. If I had thought about it, I would have realized I was going to be seen dropping Lily Bell at the bus station anyway, but I wasn't thinking that far ahead. It just seemed wise when going to pick up another man's wife to make my approach surreptitiously. I saw only two other cars en route, both driven by strangers.

A couple of dogs came barking from the barn when I drove up the lane and parked next to the big house's side entrance. When I climbed out, they sniffed at my galoshes, wagged their tails and returned to the barn to get out of the cold.

By my watch it was just noon when I knocked at the side door.

About a minute passed before Bill Skim opened the door. He was a lean, narrow-faced man with sunken eyes and a hooked beak over a gash of a mouth. He had thick, jet-black hair as straight as an Indian's, and wore a constantly sullen expression. He was dressed in a flannel shirt and clean overalls.

He gazed at me with no sign of welcome. "What you want, Harrow?"

"Lily Bell. She ready?"

"Lily Bell? What you mean, Lily Bell?"

"Your wife," I said patiently. "I'm driving her into the village."

A scowl grew on his face. "She ain't here. She's in the city visiting her sister."

He started to close the door, but I caught it against my shoulder and bulled my way inside. He fell back and glared at me.

I pushed the door shut behind me and leaned my back against it. "Where is she?" I asked.

"I told you in the city. What you think you're doing, forcing your way into my house?"

"When did she leave?"

"I druv her in yesterday morning."

I looked at him steadily until he flushed. "What's the matter with you?" he inquired.

"She wasn't in the city yesterday. I saw her at four o'clock."

"You must be crazy," he said. "I dropped her at Abagail's at eleven a.m. What business is it of yours, anyway?"

I said, "I think I'll take a look around."

"You'll get out of here or I'll call the sheriff," he threatened.

I walked over to within six inches of him and gazed down into his face. He was a head shorter than me and a good sixty pounds lighter. He backed away nervously.

"I'm going to look through the house," I informed him. "You're going to tail along and keep your mouth shut. Give me a hard time and I'll tie you in a fisherman's knot."

He gazed at me as though he suspected I was crazy. Licking his lips, he said, "I don't want no trouble with you, Harrow. Do your looking, then get out."

There was no sign of Lily Bell in any of the downstairs rooms. I had Skim precede me up the stairs to the second floor. There were four rooms and a bath up there. Two of the rooms were fitted out as bedrooms, one was used for storage, and the fourth was locked.

When I had checked the three unlocked rooms and the bath without finding Lily Bell, I held out my hand.

"Get up the key to this room."

"That's Lily Bell's sewing room," he said. "She must have the key. I didn't even know it was locked."

I was in no mood to argue. I hit the door with my shoulder and broke the lock.

"Hey!" Skim squawked.

Then he fell silent as he moved into the room behind me and saw what I was looking at. In the center of the carpet was a huge round spot of clotted blood. There was a splash of it on the sewing machine and several smaller splashes on one wall.

I felt a throbbing start in my head. I turned toward Skim, whose jaw was hanging slackly open. At the expression on my face he

backed into the hall, inching out.

"Cut yourself shaving?" I asked, moving toward him.

He held both hands protectively before him. "Now wait a minute, Harrow. You got no call—"

I shut him off by gathering a fistful of shirt and shaking him until his teeth rattled. When I released him, he stumbled across the corridor into the far wall.

"I guess there's no point in asking you about it," I growled at him. "We'll do some more looking."

I pushed him ahead of me toward the stairs. He went down them throwing cringing looks back over his shoulder at me, as though afraid I might belt him from behind at any moment.

This time I made a more thorough search of the downstairs. The first time I had only looked in places big enough to conceal a woman or her body. This time I peered into everything.

There was a combination summer kitchen and laundry room off the regular kitchen. It had set tubs in it, a washing machine, and an oldfashioned wood and coal range. When I lifted one of the cast-iron lids on top of the range, I saw charred cloth inside.

I pulled out a half burned dress. What was left of it was covered with dried blood.

Probing further, I drew out several articles of women's underclothes, similarly charred and bloodstained, a pair of women's shoes, and a pink hair ribbon which was literally soaked with blood.

Bill Skim stared at the pile of clothing glassily, seemingly incapable of speech.

I pushed him ahead of me toward the door of the woodshed giving off the summer kitchen. In a half-empty wood box there was a bloodstained axe with several strands of long, cornsilk-colored hair clinging to it.

By now my head was throbbing steadily. With effort I restrained myself from picking up the axe and burying it in Skim's skull.

"Better get a jacket and boots on," I said quietly. "We're going outside."

"Listen," he said. "I don't know what this is all about."

Barely moving my lips, I said, "If you so much as open your mouth again, I'll kill you. Get on your wraps."

He didn't give me any more argument. He was so scared, he practically flew to get dressed for outdoors.

I found what I was looking for behind the barn. Snow had been cleared from an area about six feet by three and there was a mound of fresh-turned dirt in the cleared

space, clinching all my suspicions.

After both of us had gazed at it for a time, I said dully, "What time did you get back from the city yesterday?"

"What?" he asked, gazing at me stupidly.

"What time did you get back from the city yesterday?" I rasped at him. "Get up an answer fast."

He backed a step away from me and whispered, "About five in the afternoon. Why?"

So he had been home when Lily Bell returned from her visit to me, I thought. I wondered if she had made the mistake of admitting where she had been and that she planned to leave him today.

It didn't really matter what had brought it about. All I could think of was that I would never see Lily Bell again. The throbbing in my head became unbearable. I don't even remember reaching for his throat. But when I finally released it, he wasn't struggling any more.

I left him lying next to the grave and plowed my way back to the car. When I started the engine, the dogs came barking from the barn again. They followed the car down the lane to the road, barking it on its way, then trotted back toward the barn with wagging tails.

I took the same route back to the houseboat that I had used to get to the farm. It wasn't by plan because my mind was a total blank. It was pure instinct that kept me from driving through the village, where I couldn't have avoided being seen by a dozen or more people.

I was back at the houseboat before it really registered on me that I had committed murder. Then it occurred to me that no one at all knew I had come down from the hills.

I parked the car in the abandoned barn, changed back into my hunting clothes and hung my good clothes up. Slinging my skis over my back, I picked up my rifle in one hand, my snowshoes in the other, and glanced around to see if I had left any evidence of my visit. I couldn't detect any.

Outside I strapped on my snowshoes because I wasn't going to use the road. Instead I followed the river edge, below the bank and out of sight of the road. Beyond Howe Junction I finally cut across the road and crossed a couple of open fields to the edge of the hills.

It was just turning dusk when I reached the shack. I hadn't seen a single person all the way back.

It snowed that night, so that even my tracks were covered.

I stayed up on Pig Ridge a full two weeks, then packed up my furs and brought them down the first week in December. It was a Friday afternoon when I arrived at the

houseboat, so Pa was home, alone.

It was some time before we got around to conversation. First Pa had to examine all the pelts and figure out what they would bring. Then I had to clean up and change clothes. But eventually we were settled over a couple of cups of coffee in the galley.

"Any gossip while I was up on Pig Ridge?" I asked.

"Yeah, Bill Skim got himself killed by some transient. Strangled, he was. Skeeter Hawkins was assigned the case, but he ain't caught the feller who done it yet."

"Oh?" I said, and waited for him to tell me of the discovery of Lily Bell's grave.

"Lily Bell was in the city visiting her sister Abagail," Pa went on. "Bill had been dead a couple of days when she got back and found him. Stock was in a bad way. Hadn't been fed for forty-eight hours and the cows hadn't been milked. You'd have thought their bawling would have attracted somebody's attention, but nobody heard 'em."

A dizziness passed over me. Just in time I avoided blurting out, "Lily Bell's still alive?"

I burned my throat draining my coffee cup and rose to my feet. As I started to pull on my galoshes, Pa asked, "Where you going?"

"Out," I said shortly.

All the way to the Skim farm my mind was racing. I had it pretty well figured out by the time I reached the farm, so I wasn't very surprised when Skeeter Hawkins answered the door. He looked quite handsome in his gray deputy sheriff's uniform.

"Come on in," he said cordially. "We've kind of been expecting you to show up eventually."

Lily Bell was seated in the front room with a teacup in her lap. There was another on the low table before the sofa.

"Hello, Pete," she said with a smile. "Skeeter just dropped in, and now you. Have a cup of tea?"

"No thanks," I said politely. "I just dropped by to make sure you're not dead."

"Why would you think that?" she asked, her smile turning to a frown.

"Don't play games with me," I said. "You played me for a chump, but you don't have to rub it in."

"What are you talking about?"

I said, "That Friday you showed at the shack, Bill had driven you into the city to your sister's. You must have furnished Skeeter a key to the house so that he could set the scene while both you and your husband were away. He did a beautiful job. The clues were hidden just enough to make it convincing, but not so thoroughly that I couldn't find them without much trou-

ble. The hairs clinging to the axe is the touch I like best. It was actually your hair, I suppose, but it sure as hell wasn't your blood. What was it? Chicken blood?"

Skeeter said, "Do you know what he's talking about, honey?"

"Shut up," I told him. "Skeeter drove into the city after he'd set the scene here, picked you up and brought you back to the edge of the hills. The reason you didn't want me to accompany you back to the road wasn't because it would inconvenience me. It was because you didn't want me to know you had lied about coming in the pick-up truck. Skeeter was waiting for you in his car. He drove you back to your sister's and nobody could prove you'd ever left the city. The next afternoon Skeeter came out here after I'd left and cleaned up all evidence of your 'murder.' You waited a couple of days to assure your alibi, then came back and discovered Bill dead. Did he ever really beat you?"

She smiled at me. "Not really. He wasn't a violent man. Just dull. I blacked my own eye."

Skeeter said, "Bill was strangled by some unknown transient, Pete. You're not suggesting it was anything else, are you?"

After staring at him for a time, I turned around and walked out of the house.

Skeeter and Lily Bell were married six months after Bill Skim's funeral. He resigned his deputy job to run the farm. Lily Bell now has everything she ever wanted, security and a man she can love.

The thing that grates on me most is that the two of them couldn't possibly have known in advance that I'd get down to the farm, then back into the hills without ever being seen by anyone. They must have expected me to get caught and be hanged. Skeeter was kind enough to cover for me when it turned out I was never suspected, but even that couldn't have been from the goodness of his heart. It simply would have complicated things for him and Lily Bell if I had told my story. And I can't tell anybody what really happened without putting my own neck in a noose.

'Tis said, "And gentle Dullness ever loves a joke," yet misjudge not the ten-o'clock scholar.

Ed Bowen sat at the dusty window of his apartment, and watched Gilly Siebert going down the street. The hulking pinhead, with his shambling walk like a day-old calf, had always annoyed Bowen in the past. He'd felt that normal people shouldn't have to watch the boy, a deaf-mute and retarded, besides. Some day, he often told himself smugly, the kid will run wild, committing murder, rape, and mayhem. After all, pinhead or not, he was sixteen or so, and bound to have swelling emotions typical of all adolescents.

To be sure, Gilly seemed almost unreasonably good-natured. He loved animals, and had gentle hands. If all the other children made fun of him, or used the boy, they had to respect his courage, because everybody knew Gilly would do anything on a dare; anything, that is, except to hurt people.

He was, of course, unable to read or write; and he made only gobbling sounds with his mouth, but he easily followed simple directions given through gestures and suitable drawings. With his capable hands, he could make superior kites and skate-boards, too, which gave him some standing even among the normal kids, more articulate and intelligent, perhaps, but not as handy.

At home, he had little for which to hope. Gilly's birth had almost destroyed his father, a clerk of bookish ambitions, who wanted more than anything else a son able to attend college and master such things as nuclear physics, thus bringing Myron Siebert the kudos he couldn't attain on his own. For sixteen years, the boy's father had

ostentatiously ignored Gilly, making no attempt either to love or communicate with him. It was as if the Sieberts had no children at all.

Leona, Gilly's mother, was different, both as a woman and as the one who had carried Gilly. She was a grim, angular creature, juiceless, with a mouth so small she seemed to need a shoehorn to eat a pea. But insofar as she was capable of it, she cared for the boy. Completely non-intellectual herself, she didn't grieve over Gilly's illiteracy; instead, she did her best to develop his tactile facility, encouraging him to use his hands as much as possible in creative work.

Ed Bowen thought about these things, well known to the whole neighborhood, as Gilly lurched by. His attitude towards the boy had suddenly changed. This was due neither to compassion nor any sudden growth of tolerance. Rather, he saw in the pinhead, by his very abnormalities, a perfect instrument of murder.

Up to now, Bowen had never killed anybody. But he was into his employers for over sixty thousand dollars, and faced a long term in prison when discovered, as he was bound to be soon unless, of course, Tim Collier should die. He was the Senior Accountant, and had been concentrating on the books in a way that meant certain trouble. With him silenced for good, it would be possible for Ed to escape the law. The company might be sure he was guilty, but on the surface, without Collier's evidence, either man could be the one. Bowen could brazen it out; there was no way to pin the missing money on him, since it had been spent in circumstances that left no traces. He was a gambler, an unlucky one, but always far from his natural haunts, and with simple disguises such as elevator shoes, a hairpiece, dark glasses, and pads in his cheeks. He'd be bounced, naturally, but that was nothing compared to prison.

Aside from removing Collier, Bowen could think of no other way to avoid conviction. And yet, to exchange a mere embezzlement rap for a chance at the Death Cell wasn't smart—unless a foolproof killing could be managed. That was where Gilly Siebert came in.

Bowen had never spoken to the boy. He had, it is true, commented occasionally in the liquor store and other places, like the *Tip Top Tavern,* that the kid should be put away before he hurt somebody; but that was all to the good. Not only would Ed be proven a veritable prophet, but nobody would expect him to be involved with the pinhead. Others had from time to time hired the boy for odd jobs,

or had him make their kids a kite, but Bowen had never had such contacts.

Now, however, he had to deal with Gilly, but in secret; and that called for considerable ingenuity. Nor was there much time; Collier was bound to spot some discrepancies in the books any day soon.

The basic scheme was clear and simple in Bowen's mind. He counted on Gilly's inability to refuse a dare, plus another characteristic that many people held to be admirable even in more valuable members of the community. This was the boy's dedication to any chore once undertaken. What Gilly Siebert promised to do, he did, no matter the cost to himself in bruises, broken bones, loss of income, or future embarrassment. When he accepted a dare to pull trick-or-treat on old lady McGonigle, who threw hot water and blistering maledictions at anybody that came to her door uninvited on Halloween, Gilly went through with it, even though everybody knew she had just acquired a large and surly bulldog. The pinhead got well nipped but accomplished his mission, if returning empty handed and drenched, dragging eighteen pounds of nasty canine by one's pants-seat, is an accomplishment.

Again, when none of the other kids dared hop the fast freight except where it slowed on the grade out of town, Gilly actually dropped to the top of a boxcar from Sullivan's Ridge, escaping serious injury by a miracle. But he had been dared, and his honor was at stake. It was to the credit of the kids that they now tended to discourage such challenges as unsporting, because "poor Gilly doesn't know the score—so lay off, you guys!"

With a character like that to work with, Ed Bowen felt he had it made. After pondering a number of angles, he hit on a perfect approach.

There are fake hand grenades for sale at every novelty store; they are used as paperweights, but also serve to scare people who don't have x-ray eyes and see only a deadly ovoid of corrugated metal exactly like the ones in Europe or Korea.

But a solid dummy wouldn't do; Gilly had to be sold on a trick, something funny but harmless. A search of various novelty shops well away from his own neighborhood, and in his pet disguise, finally turned up what Bowen needed, a facsimile grenade that held a pinch of black powder. It went off with a loud pop, showering bits of colored paper. Ed bought two, in case Gilly was hard to convince.

That much was easy, and no risk. Now he had to get the real thing.

There had been a time, five years earlier, when Bowen had joined the National Guard, hoping to use it for political purposes where he worked, since the boss was a colonel. He had found there was study and drill involved, but no preferment at the company, and had soon quit both organizations. But he remembered the Armory, and recalled glimpsing racks of guns, mortars, bazookas—and grenades—in the storeroom.

Dances were often held there, the Armory being ideal in terms of floor space, and cheap to rent. On such nights, a lot of people were in and around the building, so Ed could prowl without being questioned. He cased the Armory on a Saturday, when a dance was held, and although he had expected to make only a reconnaissance, was lucky enough to find a side door open. It led to a hall, which led in turn to a storeroom. Both were deserted. Using a thin-bladed knife he always carried, Bowen got into the storeroom. He quickly located the cases of grenades, and looked for an open one. It was best to leave no trace of thievery, even if it couldn't be connected with him. There was a box half-full; from it he took, his fingers shaking a little, one of the live and potent metal eggs. Hastily he slipped out, hearing a roar of laughter from the ballroom, locked the door, and slipped away into the night, damp with cold sweat, but exulting. The toughest part, he felt, was behind him now.

It remained only to work on Gilly, and as secretly as possible. Since the boy couldn't talk or write, he was a perfect ally, but Bowen meant to add other pressures as well.

Since the boy didn't go to school, he was in the habit of wandering about the neighborhood, often spending time in the park playground or the railroad yard. Bowen stayed home from work accordingly, phoning in to say he had a virus. From his window that morning, he watched hopefully until Gilly shambled by, heading for the freightyard. Quickly, Bowen slipped out, and taking back streets easily intercepted the deaf-mute near the dump, where privacy was most likely of a morning.

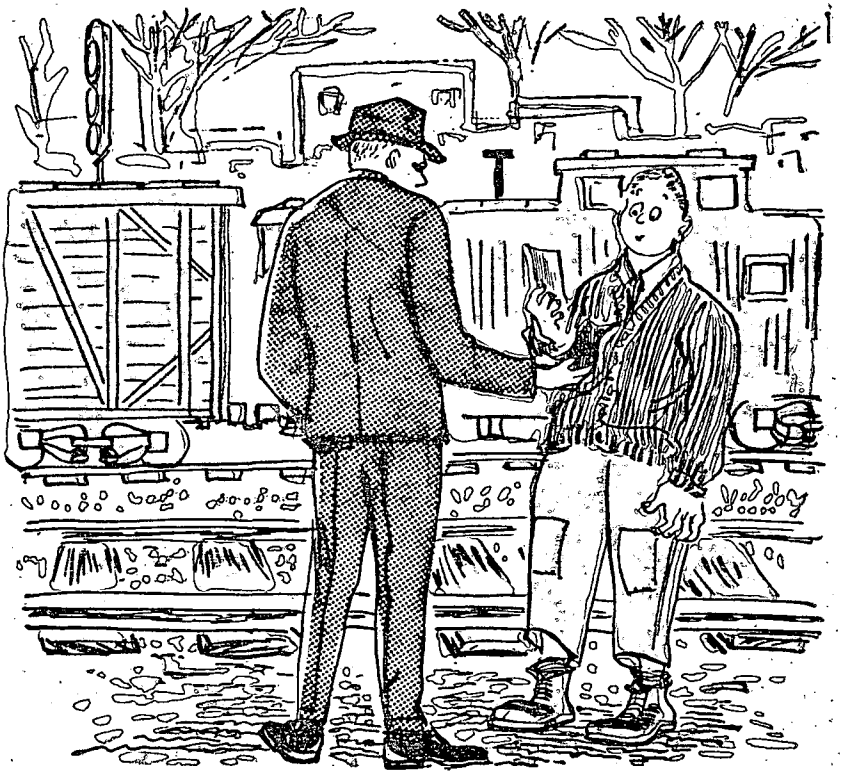
He smiled at Gilly, who grinned back; his smile, like the legendary one of Davy Crockett, was enough to paralyze a 'coon, but amiability shone through it.

Bowen began by giving the boy a dollar, which generous gift won his regard immediately. He loved chocolate, and no doubt intended

to buy some the first chance he got.

Then, Bowen took out one of the novelty grenades. He had removed most of the paper filling in order to add lead shot, since otherwise the thing lacked the heft of a real weapon. Making sure he had Gilly's attention, Ed pulled the pin, slowly released the lever, and handed the grenade to the boy. He took it gratefully, thinking it another gift. Ten seconds later it exploded, showering him with paper and lead shot, all quite harmlessly. Gilly gobbled in fright and dismay, but seeing that Bowen was laughing and offering him another bill, he made throaty sounds of glee.

After that, Bowen showed the boy a picture of Tim Collier, clipped from the company magazine. He explained very patiently, with gestures and sketches on a pad, just what he wanted. At five-thirty, he demonstrated with his watch, Tim Collier would leave the office and go down Harper



Avenue. Ed showed Gilly a picture of the building. Gilly nodded vigorously, to show he knew the place. The boy was to meet him as he left, hand him a grenade, and wait for the explosion. No, he mustn't run; it was a dare. Play the trick, but don't run until after the explosion. If he did that, and told nobody in advance—here Bowen waved not a mere dollar bill, but a tenspot. Gilly's muddy brown eyes widened at the tempting sight. Most dares brought him nothing but prestige, and trouble. This was a pleasant change; this was a nice man.

Bowen made sure. He repeated the whole indoctrination. To his surprise, Gilly was not slow-witted after all. His head was just too small for his hulking torso; the kid was far from stupid. So much the better; he would follow instructions, hoping for ten dollars. It was a relief to know Gilly had enough sense to do the job properly, but was still unable to blab about it.

As for the denouement, Bowen didn't much care. People would probably think that the boy found a grenade, a common occurrence judging from the papers, and was moved by some whim to "serve" it on Collier; perhaps Tim just was handy, and it would have been anybody. Or they might figure some kids egged Gilly into it, without themselves knowing the grenade was live. Whatever their notions, nobody could tie Ed Bowen to Collier's death. And nothing else mattered. Certainly the loss of this pinhead would not hurt society much.

Bowen nodded at the boy, shaking his head up and down to indicate a "yes", a strong affirmation expected. Gilly imitated the motion vigorously; his eyes shone with resolution. It was obvious that the stories were true: what this boy promised to do, he did; you could see the determined glint, all right. It couldn't have come from the wishy-washy father, Bowen thought. Maybe some ancestor had been strong-willed, and now his precious gene was futilely lodged in a deaf-mute monster.

Bowen left the boy. It was almost noon. He had stressed not only secrecy, but the importance of leaving the pin in position until the "trick" was to be played. No point in blowing up Gilly—not alone.

Ed went home as furtively as he had left, re-entering by the back door, and crept past the manager's apartment. After that, the hours dragged, the evening seemed a thousand years away.

At five-fifteen, Bowen opened the front window, although it was

chilly out. The office was only three blocks away; perhaps one could hear a grenade that far. These new ones, he understood, were a good deal more powerful than those in World War II, some of which were weaker than firecrackers and harmed nerves and ears more than tissue.

Sure enough, he heard the explosion clearly, as did much of the town. Since so many people were hurrying towards the scene, he felt free to join them.

When he arrived at the office, he felt his pulse leap. The ambulance was there already, and two bodies, covered with reddening sheets. His plan, in spite of nagging doubts, had worked perfectly. Tim Collier was out of the way, and nobody could pin a thing on Ed Bowen.

He learned the next day that both victims had died on the spot, riddled by metal fragments. There were dozens of wild speculations going around, but none of them involved a third party. The consensus seemed to be that Gilly had found a grenade and handed it to Collier to scare him. It was obviously an unfortunate accident; Tim Collier certainly hadn't an enemy in the world.

At the *Tip Top Tavern*, Bowen agreed. Collier was a prince, and very competent, too. A drink to poor Tim.

It was several weeks before the embezzlement was discovered. Then Bowen had an uncomfortable session with old P. J., the vice-president.

"It had to be you or Tim," P. J. said, "and I know Tim was straight as a string all his life. I've never been very sure of you, but didn't have any proof."

"There isn't any," Bowen said, keeping his voice level. "I'm not guilty."

"That's brave, accusing a dead man."

"I accuse nobody; I just defend myself."

The officer was breathing heavily, his face flushed. "If we go to court, you'll tar Tim Collier, I suppose."

"I'll defend myself," Bowen repeated, feeling a glow of confidence. His psychology had been sound. They wouldn't prosecute.

"You're through here," P. J. said. "Your punishment will come sooner or later, be sure of that. But I won't prosecute; it would hurt Collier's family, and do no good. Some crooked lawyer would get you off. Get out of here, before I'm sick!"

Bowen cleaned out his desk and left. He was tempted to demand proper notice, but decided to leave and then write for two weeks' salary. He'd get it, too; they didn't

want to tangle with him legally, that was plain.

When he got home, there was a woman in his apartment. He recognized her gaunt, stringy figure. It was Mrs. Siebert. He felt his stomach contract like a clenched fist.

"The manager let me in," she said. "I said I was your aunt."

"W-what do you want?" he stammered. "I don't know you."

"It wasn't easy to find you; I'm not smart. But finally I thought of the office where poor Mr. Collier worked. I didn't know no other place to try. I showed them the drawing. They told me who it was."

"What drawing?"

"My poor boy couldn't read or write—or talk, or even hear. But he was good with his hands, and I got him books from the library, with nice pictures. He was good with a pencil or crayons. See how he did your bushy eyebrows, the bump on your chin, the way your ears bend at the top. At the office they knew you right away, from this."

She held out the sheet; he took it numbly.

"He drew it that afternoon, before doing—doing what you made him do."

Bowen looked at the page of sketches, vaguely aware that Gilly, the deaf-mute, must have been a born caricaturist. Here was he, Bowen, and the undoubted face of Collier, all set out like a cartoon panel, and showing the whole frame-up. The grenade popping to spew paper, just as Gilly expected it to happen; the ten dollars promised, graphic and nasty for him in its implications. But she was a fool, no brighter than her son, to hand it to him like that. He tore it to bits, backing quickly out of her reach, but she made no move to stop him. Instead, she opened her great, shabby purse and took out a heavy revolver, an old-fashioned weapon of the horse-pistol type that was popular years ago. Bowen gulped at the sight of it.

"W-what you gonna do?" he quavered.

"Gilly was a good boy, a loving boy; he was all I had. My man's nothing—just nothing. Gilly couldn't talk, but we sat together, laughing, making pictures. He was all I had, and you killed him. Well, mister, I'm going to kill you now."

"No!" Bowen begged, reaching out with pleading hands. Then he saw the glint in her eye, the proof-mark of her iron determination, and knew the source of Gilly's glint.

That was Bowen's last thought. The huge pistol boomed three times in rapid succession.

The enjoyment of achievement is said to increase in proportion to the procrastination exercised in attaining it.

THE HYPOTHETICAL ARSONIST

BY ROG PHILLIPS

"WHAT makes you think this man set fire to your building when the fire department is so positive it was not arson at all?" Justin asked the man who leaned over his desk, being too impatient to sit down.

The name on the business card the man had given Justin was *Reginald Hall,* and his business as stated on that card was *Financial Investments.* He was almost a foot taller than Justin would be if he stood up. He had practically forced his way past Miss Higgins in the outer office with the forceful aggressiveness of a brigadier general.

"Nothing, sir," the man said. "Nothing at all—except a form of instinct. He submitted a bid for rebuilding too soon, and it was too accurate. It strikes me as odd."

"Why not take it to the police or the fire department?" Justin said. "Why come to me?"

"In my leisure I have been a hunter," Reginald Hall said, leaning with his hands flat on the desk while Justin blinked up at him owlishly through his thick-lensed glasses. "When one senses a dangerous animal in the bushes, one does not get a pack of braying hounds. Besides, one whisper from my direction and I could be sued. The

sign on your door says *Justice, Incorporated.* I have noticed the sign many times. Auditors Incorporated handle my business records and they are just down the hall, you know."

"Yes, I know," Justin said, neglecting to tell Reginald that he also owned Auditors—and Private Eye, and most of the businesses on this floor of the building. "There is also an outfit called Private Eye, Incorporated, on this floor. Why didn't you talk to them? As private investigators, your suspicions would not go beyond them, I'm sure."

"I'm aware of that, sir," Reggy said. "If there were a single shred a private detective could work from I would be tempted. But why beat around the bush? I admit the name on your offices intrigued me. Justice, Incorporated, Justin P. Lord—almost as though you were Divine Providence come down to Earth to smoke out the rascals the law can't touch. It appealed to me, sir."

"Sit down and tell me about this man you suspect is an arsonist," Justin said, taking out a carved cigarette holder and inserting a cigarette in it.

"Thank you," Reggy said, sitting down and accepting one of Justin's cigarettes. "His name is Walter Moore. He is in his fifties, is a thoroughly respected and competent building contractor with a D and B top rating, engages in new construction much more than reconstruction, and most certainly doesn't need the money. I can't imagine what possible motive he might have had for setting fire to my rather shabby old office building, unless it might be to provide work for one of his crews until a legitimate job comes along. Would that be possible?"

"You own the building at Market and Elm?" Justin asked. "The one that had a fire last week, in which three people died?"

"Yes," Reggy admitted. "One of them was an old and wonderful friend. I think if I could be absolutely positive in my own mind that Mr. Moore started that fire I would not bother with you, but would kill him with my own hands."

"I doubt that," Justin said. "Still, you have come to the right place. If he's guilty, I'll smoke him out."

"How much?" Reggy asked bluntly, taking out his checkbook.

"I'm tempted to do it free, Mr. Hall," Justin replied. "However, I have expenses. How much can you afford? Five thousand? Ten?"

Reggy scribbled a check, ripped it from the checkbook and let it fall on the desk under Justin's gaze. It was made out for ten thousand, which proved that Reggy did have

an instinct, the right one, at that.

The moment Reginald Hall left the office Justin punched the phone button for the extension in PRIVATE EYE, INC.

"A man just left my office," he said. "Huge, a dynamo, named Reginald Hall. Have him followed, report often. I want to be sure about him, even though I think he's all right. When you get that going, send in the research team. I want someone investigated back to his birth."

Next, Justin punched the button on the phone connecting him to AUDITORS, INC.

"Do you have the accounts of Reginald Hall?" he asked. "You do? How much is he worth? Almost a millionaire? So ten thousand wouldn't bother him at all."

"He asked us about Justice, Incorporated," the man at the other end said. "We told him what you have instructed us to say when we are asked, that it is a non-profit organization which uses rather unorthodox methods to bring justice, both to the guilty the law can't touch, and to innocent victims the law can't help. We prepared him by telling him if he had a problem you would accept, you would be very expensive because he could afford it, but for someone who is poor you would work just as eagerly for free."

"Are you handling anything concerning his burned office building?" Justin asked.

"The whole thing. He will come out quite well on it. The contractor, Moore Construction, submitted a bid just below the figure the insurance company quoted as the maximum they will pay. He will actually have a better building. However, one of those who died in the fire was a lawyer who was a long-time friend of Reggy's, though not his legal counsel. His name was Arthur Brand. He had apparently been working late, and was trapped by the flames."

"You like Reggy?" Justin queried.

"Oh, yes, he's one of the best, though a trifle dynamic and impatient. His wife, Helen, is a wonderful woman with a quiet sense of humor; does some translating into English from French non-fiction works. My wife and I have been to dinner at their house."

"Thank you, Marvin," Justin said. After he hung up he sat motionless, frowning in thought, until Miss Higgins ushered in the research team from Private Eye. Like all the employees of Private Eye, they bore no noticeable or unusual characteristics.

"The man I want researched," Justin said, his eyes blinking slowly behind his thick-lensed glasses, "is

Walter Moore, the building contractor. It's possible he may, secretly and for much of his life, have been a compulsive arsonist. He must not know he is being investigated, in case he is innocent. I want you to find out especially if his home burned down when he was a child. It would be an indication. Also look into his first beginnings as a building contractor. See if you can find any seeming coincidences of his getting the contracts to rebuild structures damaged by fire. He is probably married and has children, who may have grown up and left home. He may have brothers and sisters. Find out. I want a quick job. Don't check with police or insurance companies unless you first find direct evidence that he has been arrested somewhere, sometime. I doubt that he has ever even been suspected of arson. I doubt that anything could be proved against him. If I am wrong, and he stands a chance of being tried and convicted in court, we are out of the thing until and unless he is tried and declared not guilty. Then I come back in, in my own way. Now get busy. He is in the phone book, and you know your business."

When the research team had left, Justin, as an afterthought, punched the phone button to AUDITORS, INC., again.

"Do you have Walter Moore, Moore Construction, or Moore Contractors as a client?" he asked. Then, "I didn't think so. No, it's just as well you don't. I would rather he didn't notice the existence of this building."

Finally, Justin rang for Miss Higgins and handed her the check.

"Photostat this and hold up depositing it until I say to," Justin said. "It always pays to be suspicious of any client I don't go out and get myself, in this business. He is a client of Auditors, though. Start a file from theirs, Miss Higgins."

"Yes, Mr. Lord. What cross-classification should this account be under?"

"Arsonists," Justin said, "Hypothetical."

"Who?" Miss Higgins asked. "Reginald Hall?"

"It's a thought," Justin said. "I mustn't overlook that possibility, but no, he's our client. The name for the secret file is Walter Moore. It should be quite a busy file for the next two or three days."

Reginald Hall, at breakfast in his shingle-siding house that had been built around the turn of the century, was angry at himself. He was often angry with himself at breakfast. His wife Helen would have begun to worry about him if

he weren't, two mornings out of three. It was, she realized, part of his energy, his drive. Perhaps it was what had made her fall in love with him when he first courted her many years ago.

"I must have been out of my mind to give that man ten thousand dollars!" Reggy said, buttering his toast viciously. "What do I expect him to do? Murder Mr. Moore? Subconsciously I must expect that! My instincts again! I have a nose for things, and my nose sniffed a professional killer there; but I like this Justin P. Lord, damn it!"

"Then he isn't a professional killer, Reggy," Helen said with quiet assurance. "You could not like a murderer even if you didn't suspect he had ever killed someone."

"But this Justice Incorporated business!" Reggy said. "What else could it be? Administering justice to criminals the law can't touch! Indeed! *That's* what made me pay him ten thousand dollars."

"I would like to meet Mr. Lord," Helen said. "You seldom like a person so immediately and so violently."

Reginald gaped at his wife, then continued eating his breakfast.

"It's been three days," he said. "I'm going to his office this morning and jack him up or demand my money back. Besides, I forgot to ask him, should I let Mr. Moore rebuild my building? I wish I didn't have it in my head that Mr. Moore started the fire. I'm sure he didn't. I don't know what gave me the idea. Sometimes I think I would be better off with a psychiatrist."

"Now, Reggy!" Helen said in alarm. "I shudder to think what a bore you would be."

Reggy snorted. "I would, wouldn't I?"

In better humor he continued his breakfast, and later he caught Justin in his office. Part of his annoyance toward Justin P. Lord was that he had been unable to get anywhere with figuring the man out. Mr. Lord, aside from his owlishly magnified brown eyes, was a very mild appearing man who could be married to a shapeless wife with ten children, and who was in this business of *Justice* in order to escape from his responsibilities at home—or he could be a bachelor who lived in a hotel room and whose whole life centered around his business activities. It was impossible to tell. The man had a loose skin, like he might have once been quite fat and his skin hadn't shrunk when he lost the fat. His features reminded Reggy of the face of a bloodhound, a little, although Mr. Lord's habitual expression was not the deep sadness of the bloodhound's ex-

pression but instead bordered on the intellectual scowl.

"What have you been doing?" Reggy came straight to the point.

"Things are moving," Justin said with a shrug.

"Have you seen Mr. Moore?"

"I've seen several candid camera shots of him taken by one of my men without Moore's awareness."

"What do you think of him?" Reggy asked.

Justin shrugged without answering.

"Of course," Reggy said. "What I really came to see you about was, should I go ahead and let him rebuild? What should I do?"

"Hmm," Justin said. He inserted a cigarette in his holder and lit it before answering. "If you give him the go-ahead, and he is an arsonist, he will undoubtedly retreat into being all business and avoid further direct contact with you. Delays in making decisions are normal when there has been a fire and repairs must be made. On the off chance that I might decide on some move that would necessitate your inviting Moore somewhere, he would be more inclined to accept if he still thought the contract depended on it."

When the time was auspicious, Justin summoned Reggy and Mrs. Hall to his office.

"What do you want us to do?" Reggie asked.

"You must have a dinner party at your house and invite Walter Moore and his wife. If he hesitates about coming, drop a hint that you will make a definite decision on the building contract that evening."

"All right," Reggy agreed. "Who else do I invite?"

"I'll give you the list," Justin said. "I will be one of them. Is this Friday evening too short notice for you, Mrs. Hall?"

"Not for me," Helen said. "What do you plan on doing? Expose Mr. Moore?"

"And open us both to suit for slander?" Justin said. "I don't work that way!"

"How do you work?" Reggy asked with frank bluntness.

"Complexly, Mr. Hall," Justin said, "and yet, not too mysteriously. People are very much like molecular substances. They react or don't react in any situation according to their properties. A chemist creates a situation where substance will react the way he wishes it to; I create a situation where a person will react the way I wish him to. Get Mr. and Mrs. Moore to come to your house at seven, Friday evening. My people will be there at six, so that we can be ready."

"How many shall I expect?" Helen asked.

"Just be ready," Justin said. "A caterer will handle the refreshments and straighten things up afterwards so that you won't have to do a thing except be the most charming hostess." Justin smiled at her, then shifted his smile to Reggy. "A contriver? That I would have never suspected!"

It was a very nice party, Helen decided when dinner was served; nice, except for the florid Mr. Ardmore who talked too loudly, and Mrs. duVres who was rather ludicrous with her mink stole and her insistence on wearing it even while eating. Mr. duVres was a nice old gentleman though. And there were so many people, over twenty. Mr. Lord was posing as a traveling lecturer and humanitarian who had come with the duVres, and possessed the suavity to portray the part.

Mr. Moore and his nice wife, Erna, hadn't the slightest suspicion that it was all set up for them. Mr. Moore was rather impatient to get the go-ahead on the contract, and neither he nor his wife were really enjoying themselves, but they were resigned to the evening and to Reggy's promise that he would make his decision soon.

"Justin P. Lord?" Mr. Ardmore spoke up suddenly. "I've heard of you. Friend of mine heard you lecture back east once on—what was it?—the criminal who is never caught? Isn't that a contradiction? No one is a criminal until he's caught, ha ha!"

"If you say so, Mr. Ardmore," Justin answered with an expression of distaste.

"No, come now," Mr. Ardmore chided. *"If you say so,* is that any way to answer a man? Is there or is there not a criminal who has never been caught?"

"There probably is," Justin said. "If he is never caught or even suspected, and he dies and his criminal acts are never found out, no one will ever know he is a criminal. Nevertheless, he is one. Rare, perhaps—or more common than we think."

"Wasn't there a woman who poisoned fourteen successive husbands before she was exposed?" Mrs. duVres gushed. "Isn't it possible there are women who have equaled her accomplishment and never been smoked out?"

"It's possible," Justin said. "In fact, it's well known that many murderers are never caught, but also most murderers don't keep on murdering. They do it once, then stop. In my lecture I was talking about the habitual criminal who can't stop, but is never

caught. He is more interesting because in the field of crime he chooses he can never make a mistake, and he keeps increasing the odds against himself by being unable to quit. I chose an arsonist for my hypothetical criminal because arson has so many potentialities, and is a recognized form of mental illness."

"But then he would be a sick person, not a criminal," Mrs. duVres said.

"No, I don't think so," Justin responded. "He would be ill only in the sense that a one-armed man is. Remember, he has never been caught. He has learned to live with his compulsion and to compensate for it. No one notices it, or will ever have the slightest reason to suspect him. In fact, there are so many ways a compulsive arsonist will eventually be caught that we can predict quite accurately what he will be like by the time he is, say, fifty years old—assuming he exists."

"You mean," Mr. Ardmore snorted, "any who aren't like him will already have been caught before they are fifty?"

"Yes," Justin said. "But first of all, how did he get started? Like all arsonists. He set his first fire when he was perhaps eight years old. He was home alone, there was a pile of wrapping paper in a room that hadn't been cleaned up. On impulse, he got a match and started the fire. There was the excitement of the bright red fire trucks, the few weeks of living somewhere else, then the excitement of moving back into a rebuilt home, with no one thinking to ask him if he set the fire. Rewards, rewards, rewards. Also cautions. The insurance man saying to his father, 'Good thing you never had a fire before. Next time won't be quite so easy!' and his father saying, 'Don't worry, we'll never leave a pile of paper laying around again,' and both of them laughing, secure in the knowledge of their lack of guilt."

Justin paused to put a fresh cigarette in his holder and light it. Helen and Reggy saw Walter and Erna Moore dart a swift, uneasy glance at each other, then look back toward Justin.

"It had to be that way," Justin said. "Those first-timers who set fire to something other than their own home did not get a lesson in the future hazards an arsonist will inevitably face. This one did. Eventually he set his second fire, perhaps not until he was twelve or older, and his third fire and his fourth. There was the first fire in which someone died. It was a horrible shock but he got over it. His schoolmates at about this age were

getting over their first feeling of remorse at having shot a rabbit or a bird.

"But he never set fire to his own home again. He was determined never to get caught and he was developing all the thousand and one instincts that would prevent him from even being suspected during the rest of his life. The rest of his life? Yes, *he can't quit!*"

Justin said this with firm emphasis and looked directly into Walter Moore's eyes, then let his gaze pass on to others so that Walter Moore couldn't be sure it had been purposeful.

"By the time our arsonist was twenty," Justin went on, "he was developing a philosophy that would normalize his periodic compulsion to set fires. What sort of philosophy? One that would partition that part of his life from the rest, like a cancer? No, one that would *embrace* his compulsion. How? In two ways: by concentrating on the good that stems from the tragedy of fire, and by building his career on that good. He had a choice of careers that fit this formula. Bright red fire engines are nice but abnormal. The insurance man was, he sensed, an enemy. But the carpenters were friends, and they were *builders*. So, perhaps even during high school, our arsonist became a carpenter. Later, he became a building contractor. When jobs slacked off he picked out houses to set fire to, to damage a porch, or one room, just to give him a small job. By this time he was an expert and stood little chance of ever being caught, but two hazards still lay ahead of him. One of them was a wife, who would get to know him better than anyone should. He had to marry and have a family, of course, because he had to remain normal or eventually he would make a mistake.

"So at the age of fifty he is married, has raised a family, has grown children, who don't live at home, and *his wife knows his secret.* She discovered it, of course, somewhere along the way, could not turn him in, and gradually learned to accept it, though never as an active partner in arson. She began to believe in the good that came out of fire; the slum buildings that were destroyed, then replaced by new buildings; the stricter enforcement of safety ordinances that saved more lives than were lost in the fires her husband set; the money her husband made when he got a big contract to rebuild what he had destroyed. . . ."

Justin blinked slowly, looking directly at Mrs. Moore, but not seeming to do so intentionally.

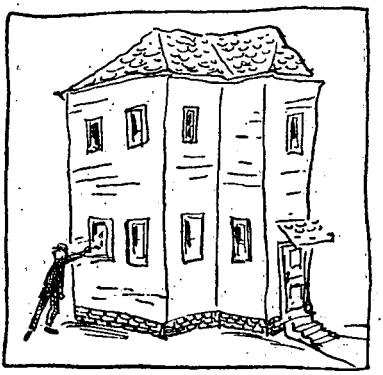
"There would almost have to be a church," Justin went on. "A min-

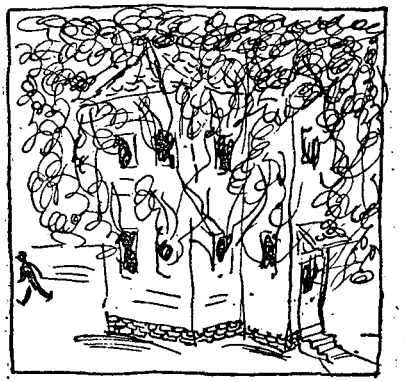
ister who wanted the old church torn down and a new one built, and a congregation that thought the old church was good enough. A fire would solve that. A new and more beautiful church would rise from the ashes, a spirit of brotherhood would grow in the congregation as funds were raised —and there would, of course, be the new preacher to replace the old one who died of a heart attack brought on by the fire. There is always so much *good* that comes from tragedy."

"Then what is the second hazard?" Mr. Ardmore asked. "It seems to me he will never be caught. His wife keeps out of it, and by now wouldn't want him to quit. What else could trip him up?

"His inability to quit," Justin said. "Oh, he has been and will always be extremely careful, and under ordinary circumstances he could continue setting fires until he dies of old age. In his contracting business he doesn't rely on arson to make more work. On the contrary, most of his work is new construction, most of the time he doesn't even bother to get the contract for rebuilding what he has burned down. He doesn't need the business.

"No, the final hazard he can never avoid, and which is always there," Justin said, "is that someone, sometime, will get an illogical —almost a psychic—*hunch*. Of course, no one will ever be able to prove anything that has already happened in the past. The house he was born in burned down when he was eight, but that proves nothing. A neighborhood church burned down when he was thirty-three, but he and his family weren't even members of that church. What can be proved?"





Helen and Reggy were watching with fascination the change coming over Mr. and Mrs. Moore. They had grown very pale, and didn't seem to be breathing at all as they stared in horrible fascination at Justin Lord.

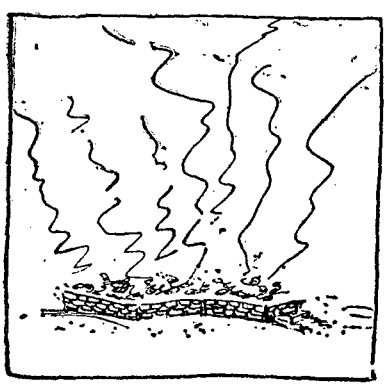
"No," Justin said, shrugging indifferently. "Nothing out of the past can trip up our arsonist. But if he is singled out and some expert organization keeps him under observation, twenty-four hours a day, week after week, month after month, sooner or later he will have to set *that last fire,* the one that convicts him, because he will be seen in the act, photographed in the act, caught in the act, arrested in the act, and by that time he won't care. He will be desperate beyond desperation, he will, at last, be truly *sick!* He has tried to keep from setting fires and he can't. He can't—any more than any of you could stop breathing by an effort of will and hold your resolve not to breathe until you were dead. He has to set *one more fire.*

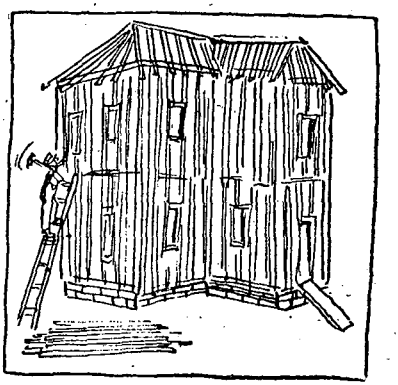
"He will know he is followed," Justin said, "but eventually he will convince himself he is not. He will know those who know about him, know they are right about him, but eventually he will convince himself they had no idea he exists, and were just talking about a hypothetical person."

This was Reggy's cue.

"Well, all of this is very interesting, Mr. Lord," he said. "You are an excellent public speaker. I'm delighted that the duVres could bring you to our party, but methinks you are a compulsive speaker."

"I admit it, I admit it!" Justin said. "I apologize and will shut up, provided I am properly rewarded with another of your fine drinks."





"I'll get you one right away," Reggy said, hurrying toward the kitchen.

Walter Moore gave his wife a warning look and hurried after Reggy, catching up to him in the kitchen.

"We'll have to be going," he said. "About that contract—"

"Do you have it with you?" Reggy asked. "I'll sign it right now, if you have."

"I don't—" Walter Moore said, then halted himself by an obvious effort of will. "Yes, I have it." He took it out of his inside pocket.

Reggy laid it on the corner of a table and signed it, glancing up with a smile.

"You're a contractor!" he said. "What beautiful sophistry that makes. All successful arsonists who reach their fifties are building contractors."

"My crew will start Monday," Walter said, smiling. He turned abruptly and left the kitchen.

Reggy opened the kitchen door far enough to watch. Walter Moore went to his wife, and then both went to Helen to say goodnight and leave.

Reggy finished making the drink, wondering how Justin Lord's little speech was going to affect Walter Moore and his wife Erna. That *hypothetical* business was strictly phony, of course. Mr. Lord had been quoting historical facts he had uncovered. And Mr. Moore, the contractor, would know that. He would know beyond any doubt, by now, that Mr. Lord was pretty sure he was an arsonist.

But would that make him go to the police and confess? Reggy doubted it. Also, he doubted very much that twenty-four hour surveillance of Moore would work. Why, he himself could think of half a dozen ways to set a fire while being constantly watched. Fires that wouldn't start until hours or days later! And he was far from an expert!

Reggy returned to the front of the house and delivered Lord's drink. There seemed to be some sort of argument going on, but he made no attempt to catch the thread of it until he had rejoined Helen.

"Not all of you can take part in it," Mr. Lord was saying. "You should have enough sense to see that."

"I think I should take part, Justin," Mrs. duVres was answering, almost angrily. "After all, it's been years and years!"

"What's going on?" Reggy whispered to Helen when he sat down beside her.

"You'll never guess!" Helen whispered back, positively titillated and quivering with excitement. "Listen . . ."

"I think I should have his house!" Mr. Ardmore said. "I'm a charter member!"

"All by yourself?" several voices protested.

"I see our host is confused," Justin said. "Mr. Hall, I should explain. In my discussion of the successful arsonist I neglected to say anything about the ones who, somewhere along the line, get caught. What happens to them? They are, of course, confined, in prisons and state mental institutions, but eventually they have paid for their deeds or appear to have recovered sufficiently to be returned to society. What then? They face much the same problem as the alcoholic who has been dried out in a prison or state hospital. The only way their compulsion can be controlled is by banding together into a society of their own kind, to help one another fight that impulse—or if not fight it, to direct it into a constructive channel."

"You mean," Reggy said in sudden amazed comprehension, "these people are—why the initials are the same, aren't they!—Arsonists Anonymous?"

"You're darned right!" the florid Mr. Ardmore said. "And I want the right to set fire to Mr. Moore's house!"

"You see, Mr. Hall," Justin said, shrugging sadly, "the group has become imbued with the desire to recruit Walter Moore. One of the inflexible rules of A.A. is that only the property of a practicing arsonist is fair game, and they are hungry, starved for action."

"Yes, indeed," Mrs. duVres said, smiling at Reggy with something bordering on pride. "I was recruited this way. It was so wonderful discovering there are people who really understand, who have been through it themselves, and who have banded together to help one another. Why, Mr. Hall, you have no idea how many hours we will spend preventing one another from setting fire to YOUR house, now that we have seen it. But have no fear, your house is perfectly safe, because we all know that if it did burn, we would have a session and find out who did it."

"A pity, too," Mr. Ardmore said. "That nice shingle siding, and dry as tinder. But let's get back to the business at hand. Mr. Lord, I leave it to you, shouldn't I get to burn Walter Moore's house?"

"Don't be so eager," Justin said. "After all, he has enough property for all. His contracting company offices and sheds, the fifty houses under construction in his housing development, but it all must be done slowly so that the insurance companies will cancel his insurance. You must all use self-restraint."

He who is possessed of a glib tongue should be forewarned,
"No mask like open truth to cover lies."

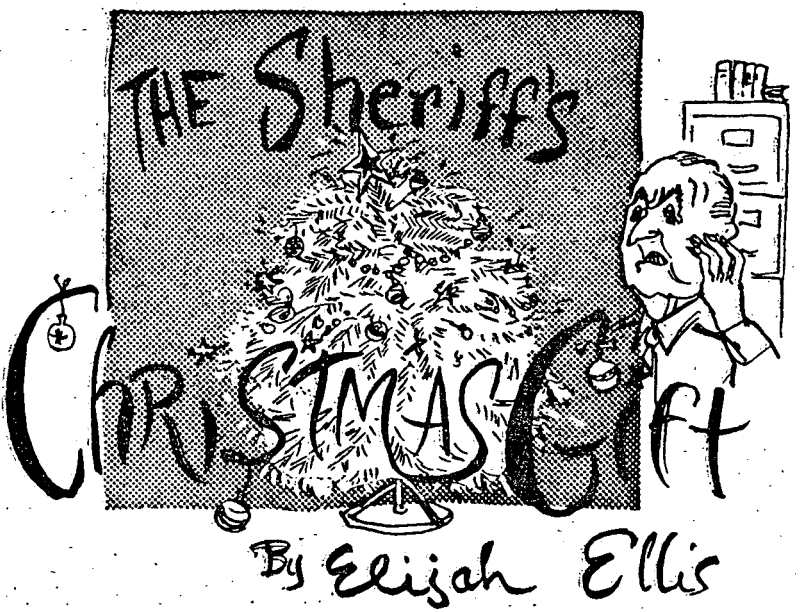
IT WAS shortly before eleven on a frigid winter night when the sheriff stopped in front of my home. I left the front porch and cut across the lawn, my boots crunching through the half-frozen turf. At the curb I opened the door of the county car and slid inside.

Sheriff Ed Carson gave me a sour glance. "Now, just don't say it, Lon," he growled.

"Don't say what?" I grinned.

"That it looks like we might have snow for Christmas, after all. If I hear that line once more, I'm goin' to scream, or worse." The sheriff slammed the car in gear and we took off down the street.

"Okay," I laughed. "No mention of the weather. What happened tonight? All you said on the phone was that somebody got



shot." I hoped he had it solved.

"It was a stick-up, at a fillin' station west of town. Happened about twenty minutes ago. There was two fellers there—and one of them tried to jump the robber. The robber shot him. That's about all I know."

We reached the highway on the outskirts of Monroe, and headed west. I noticed that there were lighted Christmas trees in front windows of almost every house we passed.

"I take it the gunman got away," I said.

Carson grunted. "So far. The town cops are out, stoppin' cars and so on. And my deputies went on out to where it happened, while I came by for you."

"Uh huh," I said. "How'd you hear about it?"

"This feller, the one that didn't get shot, called my office at the courthouse. Said a man had been killed, and the killer had just took off, in a car."

Now the radio on the dashboard sputtered to life. Carson unhooked the mike, said into it, "Yeah?"

"Nothin' much to report," a gravelly voice blared from the radio. "Man named Frank Bridges called the office here a few minutes ago. He's a cab driver. Anyhow, he says he was supposed to pick up someone at the fillin' station at ten-thirty, but when he got there, nobody was around. So he came back to town, and finally decided to call us about it."

Carson said, "Alright. I'll talk to him later."

The sheriff replaced the mike on its hook. "That's interestin'," he told me. "Ten-thirty is just the time the robbery's supposed to have happened."

About a mile out of town, Carson pulled off the highway into a service station and braked to a stop in front of the dimly lit station office. There were a couple of other cars parked down at the end of the service lanes.

The wind hit us like an icy fist when we got out. Carson gave a sharp gasp, then muttered, "I've got the granddaddy of all toothaches, and this weather ain't helpin' it a bit."

There was only one person inside the office, an elderly man who looked pale and shaken. He said, "Station's closed."

"I'm the sheriff," Carson said. "This is Lon Gates, the county attorney."

"Oh. Well, my name is Peters. I own this place. You'll find the other cops out there where George was shot."

"Where's that?" I asked.

"Why, that gravel road, right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there beside the station. Can't figure why the bandit made George and that friend of his walk out and up along that road, but he did."

"Then you weren't here yourself?"

"Lordy, no. I was to home. The cops called me, an' I drove over to see what'd happened. Durn bandit got off with a hundred dollars from the cash register," Peters told us. "Not that I care about that—it's George gettin' killed."

Carson and I went out the door. Peters was saying, "Nice kid like George. Wouldn't harm a fly, an' this happens to him."

I pulled the door shut, and Carson and I walked along to the corner of the small stucco building. I noticed there was a narrow road leading northward from the highway.

"Thought I saw lights up there, when we drove up," Carson sighed. "I wish I'd put on about another four coats."

I agreed. The full force of the wind hit us as we headed along the road toward lights winking in the darkness about a hundred yards away.

I ducked my chin down into my upturned coat collar. Our footsteps sounded brittle on the gravel road. On either side of us trees poked bare limbs up at the gray-black sky.

"This fella that was killed, his name was George Royce," the sheriff said. "He worked the night shift at the station, and was just closin' up when the robber barged in."

"How the heck did he get out here?" I asked.

"Find out in a minute," Carson said. "Damn that wind. Like a hacksaw scrapin' at my tooth, every time I open my mouth."

I had an answer for that, but decided not to say it. The sheriff might be gray-haired, stoop-shouldered, and skinny, but he still packed a wallop.

Squinting ahead now, I could see that the lights came from two small spotlights set up on the shoulder of the road. An ambulance was parked nearby, and beside it a car with a blinker light on its roof. A couple of men stood in the lee of the ambulance, watching another man who was crouched down in the ditch beside the road, in the full glare of the lights.

As Carson and I walked up, the crouched figure got ponderously to its feet. I recognized Dr. Johnson, the county's part-time coroner. He turned as we stepped down into the shallow ditch.

"Well, there he is," Dr. Johnson growled, gesturing to the body

that lay sprawled face down on the bare, iron-hard ground. "Shot once in the left arm, once in the back. He's about as dead as you can get."

The dead man was wearing only a light khaki jacket over his shirt. There was a smear of red on the back of the jacket.

Carson knelt, turned the body over. Rapidly he went through the dead man's pockets. He made a little heap of items—a pen and pencil, a pack of cigarettes and matches, a soiled handkerchief, some loose change and a penknife.

The sheriff glanced up sharply. "Has somebody else gone over this stuff?"

Dr. Johnson shook his head. "Not that I know of. Me and my boys got here right after Buck Mullins. Nobody's touched the body except me, since then."

"Yeah," Carson said. "It's just that he ain't got a billfold on him."

Now Buck Mullins, one of Carson's deputies, loomed above us on the lip of the road. Buck had on a wool cap and a heavy, shaggy brown coat that gave him the appearance of an oversized grizzly bear. He had a camera in his gloved hands.

"Howdy, folks," he rumbled. "No, Ed, we ain't fooled with the feller at all. Just seen he was dead, then waited for Doc."

"Alright. Get your pictures," Carson said.

While Mullins took several flashbulb pictures, the rest of us joined the men huddled behind the ambulance. There were two ambulance attendants who had come with the doctor, and Carson's other deputy, Millard Shaw. The sheriff asked Shaw, "Where's the guy that was with Royce when the robbery happened?"

"He's sitting over there in my car," Shaw said between chattering teeth. "Young guy named Jimmy Ward. Told us he'd come by the station to give Royce a ride home."

"Talk to him in a minute," Carson snapped. "What've you and Buck done here?"

"Heck, we just got here a few minutes ago," Shaw protested. "We looked around the area here some, and talked to the Ward boy, and—"

"Well, look some more," the sheriff snarled and wheeled away. He headed for the deputies' car.

Shaw asked me quietly, "What's eatin' him?"

"He's got a toothache," I said, and followed Carson.

One of the ambulance attendants gave a muffled laugh.

The dome light was on inside the deputies' car. A dark-haired, sullen-looking man was in the back seat, with a blanket wrapped around him. He glared as Carson and I got into the front seat, and said, "Shut that door. I'm freezin' to death."

"You're Jimmy Ward?" the sheriff asked. "What happened out here?"

"I've already told them other dumb cops," Ward said.

"Well, tell it again," I said.

"Who're you?"

"Lon Gates, the county attorney."

Ward snorted. "Big deal."

The sheriff was in no mood for courtesy. He growled, "I've heard of you, Ward. You're a bum. You've been in and out of the Monroe jail like you owned the place, for ever'thing from drunk and disorderly to muggin' old men. Don't give me any trouble."

Jimmy Ward fumbled at the blanket. He said, "No need you gettin' teed off, Sheriff. I'm just tired and cold, an' upset, is all."

"Alright. Now, let's start over. What happened?"

Ward pulled out a cigarette, lit it with shaky hands. He took a deep drag, then said, "George called me, asked me to come out an' give him a ride home when he got off work. His wife was usin' their car. So I drove out. We sat around the office at the station a few minutes, while he was totalin' up the money from the cash register, then we started to leave—"

"Anyone else around?" I asked.

"Naw. Anyway, George turned off the lights, except for the little night light, and him and me was startin' to put on our coats, when the front door whammed open, an' there was this guy wearin' a mask an' wavin' a gun around."

Ward took another long pull at his cigarette. He went on, "The guy didn't come inside. He told me and George to come out. Wouldn't even let us put on our coats. So we went out, an' he grabbed the money sack from George, then made us walk up this road here. I thought I'd freeze, for sure. We got just about right here, an' I seen there was a car parked, no lights on, headed towards the highway. This feller told us to stop. He backed away towards the car, still holdin' that gun on us. All of a sudden, George hollered 'Let's get him,' and made a dive for the feller. That's when the shootin' started."

Ward paused. He shook his head.

"What then?" I prompted.

"I hit the gravel and rolled off

out of the way. I didn't look up till I heard the car start and cut out down the road. Then I went over and found George layin' in the ditch. He was dead. So I ran back to the station an' called the sheriff's office. Listen, one of you got a drink on you?"

"Never mind that," Carson snapped. "What did this man look like, and what kind of car did he have?"

"I don't know—I never did get a good look at him. He was just a shadow. Had on an overcoat, and a hat pulled down to his mask. He was kind of tall—over six feet, anyhow. I don't have no idea about his car. It was pitch-dark up here, and the car was just a shadow."

Carson and I exchanged a glance. I said casually, "This man take your billfold?"

"Naw," Ward said. "Just the money sack from the station."

There was a pause. Then Carson asked, "How come you think George Royce would call you to come get him—and also call a taxi-cab?"

Ward blinked his bloodshot eyes. "I—I don't know nothin' about any cab."

"Uh huh," the sheriff said sardonically. He opened the car door and stepped out. I got out on my side and went around the car to join him. He was rubbing his jaw.

I glanced in at Jimmy Ward. He was lighting a fresh cigarette from the butt of his last one. His swarthy face was beaded with sweat.

"What do you think?" I asked Carson.

"Just about what you do, prob-'ly."

We walked back to the ambulance, saw that the body had been loaded inside. Dr. Johnson was talking to Buck Mullins. They turned to us, and Doc grumbled, "Okay to leave now?"

"I guess so," Carson said. "Buck, you find anything?"

"Not a thing. Durn killer wasn't even nice enough to drop a cuff-link or a card with his name and address on it."

"Yeah. Nothin' else you can tell us, Doc?"

"I can tell you it's cold."

"Bet we'll have snow by Christmas," Buck Mullins put in, slapping his huge hands together.

Carson groaned. "Buck, you and Shaw take that punk downtown to the courthouse. I want to talk to him some more."

Mullins said, "You think he—"

"Just get gone," Carson told him. "We'll meet you there."

Moments later, the two deputies and Ward drove away. Dr. Johnson waddled to the front of the

ambulance. He started to get into the cab. "You fellers want a ride?"

"Yes indeed," I said. "Drop us at the service station."

The sheriff and I climbed in through the rear door. I stumbled over one of the spotlights that was lying on the narrow floor. Swearing, I sat down and rubbed my ankle. I glanced at the sheet-wrapped figure strapped to the cot across the aisle.

"Go ahead and cuss, Mr. Gates," one of the attendants said from his seat next to me. "That feller won't mind."

"What about Royce's wife, or whoever?" I asked.

"Old Buck Mullins put in a call for the wife," the attendant said. "Your deputy at the courthouse was goin' to send somebody to get her. Goin' to be a real merry Christmas for her, ain't it?"

No one answered. The ambulance stopped at the intersection of the road and the highway. The sheriff and I clambered out. The ambulance made the turn and headed for the county hospital in Monroe.

Peters was still inside the service station. He watched irately as Carson and I tramped over to warm our hands at the gas stove. I noticed that there was a swelling on the sheriff's cheek. His craggy face was lined with stoical misery.

"Take a dentist about ten seconds to pull that tooth," I said.

Carson shuddered. He turned quickly to Peters, and asked, "Do you know Royce's wife? And does she have some relative or close friend in town? Somebody to be with her tonight."

"Don't worry about that gal," Peters said grimly. "The news about George ain't goin' to get her down. Not that one."

"That's a fine thing to say," I snapped.

The old man cackled. "Sally's a lot of gal. She's been pussyfootin' around with some other man, at nights while George was out here at work. Sally's a no good—"

"Who was this other man?" Carson interrupted.

"Durned if I know. But I do know George was worried sick about it. Told me when he come to work this afternoon, he aimed to have it out with the feller—tonight." Peters blinked at the frosted front windows. "Say, now. Maybe it weren't no robber that killed him after all."

I listened for a moment to the muted roar of the gas fire. "You don't have any idea who this guy was?"

"No, durn it. George just said that there was one, an' he aimed to get it straightened out tonight."

We talked a few minutes longer,

without getting any further information. Then Peters said, "By the way, that killer didn't get off with George's money did he?"

"You mean the money from the cash register?"

"No, I mean George's personal roll. He had about two hundred dollars in his billfold. Told me he was goin' to get up early in the mornin' and get Sally a Christmas present—a secondhand car. So's both of 'em would have transportation." Peters shook his head. "Ain't that something? Here she's treated him like dirt, an' he was gettin' her a car."

I said slowly, "George didn't have a billfold on him."

"He had one at two o'clock this afternoon, when he come to work," Peters said. He glared at me. "Where is it?"

A good question, but I didn't have an answer. Carson and I left soon after that. As we drove away, the headlights flicked over the two cars parked at the end of the service lanes. The newish coupe belonged to Peters. The other, an old sedan, must belong to Jimmy Ward.

"Wonder if Ward would take two hundred for that heap?" I mused. "If so, I wonder—"

"What about this here mysterious boyfriend of Royce's wife?" Carson broke in.

"Yeah. What about him? Looks like our simple armed robbery has got sort of complicated."

The sheriff snorted. "Sort of."

We reached the outskirts of Monroe. It was close to midnight by now, and most of the houses we passed were dark. There was very little traffic on the dark, windswept streets.

Carson got his office on the radio. It blared at us that Mullins and Shaw had arrived, with Ward —who was showing definite signs of unrest.

"Keep him there," the sheriff said into the mike.

"Will do. Listen, there ain't anything new, as far as findin' any suspicious characters roamin' around town. The town cops did nab a couple of drunks, but I doubt that either of them is our killer."

Carson snorted. "Just hold on to Ward. I'll be there."

"This dead man's wife—Mrs. Sally Royce? She's at the hospital. She'd been to the movies tonight, along with some aunt of hers. When she got home, a cop was waitin'. He took both of them direct to the hospital. Okay?"

"Okay," Carson said.

"The hospital's right on our way," I suggested.

The sheriff nodded, told his deputy at the courthouse that we'd

be along in several more minutes.

"I guess that lets out the wife," I said. "If she's got an alibi—"

"Oh, brother," Carson said.

"No, it was a possibility that she and her boyfriend might have pulled this," I said defensively. "She might have been in the car parked on the road."

The sheriff didn't bother to answer.

We reached the hospital, parked, and went inside. Dr. Johnson was in the lobby, talking to a young woman who was huddled in a chair. An older woman sat nearby.

The doctor saw us and nodded. He introduced us to the girl, Sally Royce. She was a baby-faced blonde with pouting red lips and wide blue eyes, red-rimmed now from crying. As she got slowly to her feet, wearing a tight black sweater and even tighter wool slacks, I didn't have any trouble believing what Peters had said about her appeal to men.

The other woman was her aunt.

Sally Royce asked in a husky voice, "I don't quite understand just what happened—"

The sheriff told her briefly, and when he'd finished, the girl's face was ashen. She licked her lips nervously. She whispered, "I was afraid it would be like that. Oh, what a rotten—Please, could I talk to you? Somewhere else?"

She glanced toward her aunt, who was watching us curiously.

At Dr. Johnson's suggestion, the sheriff, Sally Royce, and I went into a tiny office that opened off the lobby. Carson shut the door and turned to the girl. She sank into a wooden chair placed near a desk.

"What is it, Sally?" I prompted.

She looked at me. "I have to be sure—could it've been a robbery? Like Jimmy Ward said it was?"

"Yes, certainly," I said slowly. "Every year, in the weeks before the holidays, there's a rash of hold-ups and the like. This business tonight seems to be pretty

typical." I watched her closely.

"But you all—" Sally included the sheriff in her glance, "don't believe that Jimmy told you the truth."

Neither Carson nor I disagreed with her.

She hesitated, then nodded her head decisively. "Okay, I'm not going to cover up for him, not if he

killed George. The thing is, I—well, I've had a few dates with Jimmy in the last couple of months, while George has been working nights. Don't ask me why I'd go out with a no-good bum like Jimmy. I don't know, myself."

She scrubbed her palms over her face.

Carson said, "Did George know about this?"

"I told him today. We had a fight about it, of course. It ended with me promising never to see Jimmy again, which I wouldn't do anyhow—"

"You think that's why Ward was out there tonight?"

"Sure, what other reason would there be?"

I said, "George was going to buy a used car from someone. Did you know that?"

"No," she whispered. "I'll bet it was going to be a Christmas present for me. I feel like a—I don't know what."

"Take it easy," Carson said. "And thanks for telling us this. I know it's hard for you to do, Sally."

The sheriff raised shaggy eyebrows at me. I nodded, and we started for the door. The girl watched us with tear-filled eyes. "Poor George. Poor, poor George, why . . ."

Carson said softly, "Well, Jimmy Ward wasn't out there to give George a ride home. An' he wasn't there to sell his car. It must've been this business of him and Sally."

"Sure," I agreed. I raised my voice, "Sally, would your husband try to attack a man holding a gun on him?"

She shook her head violently. "Never. When you told me that awhile ago, that George was supposed to've done that, I knew for sure Jimmy Ward's story was a lie. George wouldn't—"

She broke off. Tears spilled down her face. She sobbed.

Carson and I went out to the lobby. The girl's aunt bustled by us, and on into the office. As we left the hospital, I could hear Sally Royce wailing, "It's my fault, my fault. I wish I could die with him."

"I doubt that," I muttered to the sheriff.

"Yeah, it'd be a heck of a waste, wouldn't it?" Carson said absently.

During the drive downtown to the courthouse, brief scurries of freezing rain pattered against the windshield of the car. The streets around the square in the center of town were deserted. We went around two sides of the square, then into the parking lot between

the jail and the massive heap of stone that was the Pokochobee County courthouse.

The sheriff stopped the car, and sat staring out at the wintery midnight. He rubbed his cheek.

I reached for the door handle on my side of the car. I laughed, "Anybody afraid of a dentist ought to suffer."

"What? Oh, it ain't my tooth botherin' me. It's . . . ."

His voice trailed away.

I sat back in my seat and looked at him puzzledly. "We've got Jimmy Ward practically in the death cell," I said. "From what you've said about him, and what Sally Royce said, he's just naturally got to be our killer. A no-good petty thief, caught playing around with a married woman. How's he going to react? Shoot first and think later, that's how."

"Sure, sure," Carson said irritably. "Then he hides the money from the station and George's billfold somewhere, plannin' to pick them up later. An' he carries George a hundred yards along a gravel road and leaves him in a ditch to make it look like a robbery. Fine, but why give it all away by tellin' us that the imaginary bandit did not take their billfolds?"

I opened my door and slid out. "You said yourself he was a stupid jerk. Probably he hadn't thought we'd ask him about that, so he just blurted out the first thing that came to mind, if he's got a mind."

We crossed the parking lot and went in through the back door of the courthouse. We tramped along the dank, echoing corridor and into the sheriff's office.

There was a tiny, lopsided Christmas tree on the wooden counter a few feet inside the door. The string of vari-colored lights on the tree gleamed forlornly in the haze of cigar and cigarette smoke that hung in the hot, stale air.

I followed Carson around the end of the counter. The three deputies were grouped around the radio transmitter across the big, dingy office. Jimmy Ward was in a chair at a desk several feet from the deputies. When he saw the sheriff and me, he jumped up, scowling angrily.

"Why're you keepin' me here?" he yelled. "I ain't—"

"Come with me," Carson said, and walked on across the office to the door of his private cubbyhole. Ward followed sullenly, and I brought up the rear. Inside the tiny private office, Carson gestured us to seats, then went out to talk to his deputies for a moment. He returned and sat down

at his desk, rubbing his fat jaw.

Jimmy Ward glared at him, then turned to me. "You're the county attorney, ain't you? Why don't you make these dumb cops get off my back?"

I took off my overcoat and laid it across a chair. I didn't answer Ward. He muttered something under his breath.

The sheriff suddenly rapped out, "You're a lousy liar. As lousy at that as you are at ever'thing else. Sendin' you to the electric chair would be a favor to the whole world."

I was sitting to one side and slightly behind Ward. I saw his muscles tense. For a second I thought he was going to make a break for it. Then he slumped back in his chair.

"Have you—have you been talkin' to that dame?" he asked.

"We've been talking to Sally Royce, yes," I snapped. "Very interesting conversation. Enough to fry you twice over."

Ward raked his fingers through his mop of greasy hair. "Okay, so I didn't go out there for the reason I said. But that don't have nothin' to do with George gettin' killed—"

"Come off it," I said disgustedly.

"No, now. Honest," Ward whined. "It happened like I told you all. Me and George had done settled our—business. Sure, we weren't exactly buddy-buddies again, but . . . . Anyhow, we was startin' to leave. I was goin' to give George a ride home. Then the door flew open, and—"

"And there was this tall man with a hat pulled down to his mask," Carson growled sarcastically. "This—shadow."

Ward gulped. "The lights was off, I told you. Only the little night light still on. Couldn't see nothin' much. Honest, that's how it was."

"Shadow man, driving a shadow car," I said. "A car parked a good hundred yards from the station on the blackest, coldest night of the year. Why?"

"I don't know, I tell you." Ward mopped his sweaty face on his shirt sleeve.

"What'd you do with the money from the station and George's billfold?" Carson said. "Hide them along the road?"

Ward made meaningless gestures with his hands. "I never seen any billfold. Why do you keep askin' me about that?"

Now I took it up. I said casually, "Two people have told us, two people that knew George, that he wouldn't try to jump anybody, much less a man with a gun aimed at him."

"Oh, lordy," Ward groaned.

"Okay, okay. It was me that tried to nail that guy. He kind of stumbled, an' I thought there was a chance—but there wasn't. He started shootin'. He missed me, an' hit George."

"Why'd you lie about it?"

"I—I didn't want people thinkin' it was my fault that George got killed," Ward muttered. "That's the truth."

I laughed loudly. Then Carson shook his head at me. "Pitiful, ain't it?" he said. He lifted his voice, "Buck?"

The big deputy loomed in the doorway. "He confess?"

"Might as well have," Carson said. "Get him out of here. I want to talk to Mr. Gates a minute, then we'll book this bum."

Mullins shoved the protesting Ward out, and closed the door. The sheriff immediately got up, paced around the cramped office, and then leaned against a corner of his desk.

"I believe him," he said.

"What are you saying? That toothache driven you nuts?"

He shrugged rawboned shoulders. "Maybe, but I believe that sorry punk is tellin' the truth."

"Ed, you've got to be kidding," I protested.

"I sent Millard Shaw on an errand, while ago. If he finds—"

There was a tap at the door. It opened, and Buck Mullins poked his head in. "Say, you remember that cab driver that was out at the fillin' station at ten-thirty? He just come in the office. You want to talk to him?"

"Send him in," Carson said.

A moment later, a gangly, balding man wearing a thick leather jacket came hesitantly through the door. He said, "Sheriff, howdy. I'm Frank Bridges—"

"Sure, I know you, Frank," the sheriff said. "Take a chair. This here is Mr. Gates. I understand you had a call to pick up George Royce?"

The cab driver sat down on the edge of a chair. "Yeah, that's right. But there wasn't nobody around when I got there. Well, I figured Royce had got a ride or somethin', and gone on home. Looked like the station was closed, you know; most all the lights out, an' ever'thing. So I come back to town. I got to thinkin' about it, an' decided to call your office here, just in case somethin' was wrong."

"Yes." Carson said. "Right thing to do, Frank. Now, did you see or hear anything at all out there?"

The lanky cab driver hesitated. "Nothin' I could swear to. Did have a halfway idea that there was a couple of guys walkin' along that gravel road beside the

station, just walkin' along, but—"

I broke in excitedly, "Two men?"

"Why, it was just a kind of glimpse in passin', Mr. Gates. Looked like two men. Might've been more. I didn't think nothin' about it."

Carson went around his desk and sat down. He yawned widely. "Appreciate you stoppin' by, Frank."

"Sure. I know it don't amount to anything, but I wanted you all to know," Bridges said. He got up. "Well, reckon I'll get home to bed. Been a long day, pushin' that hack of mine."

I watched Carson with growing curiosity. He looked as if he might fall asleep any second. I'd seen him that way before, and usually it meant he was very wide awake.

"Don't rush off," he said now. "Tell me, you still buy and sell used cars?"

Bridges said, "Ever once in awhile."

"Uh huh." The sheriff leaned forward casually, dropping his hands out of sight. "Say, you weren't makin' a deal with Royce, were you? To sell him a second-hand car?"

Bridges opened his mouth, shut it again. He licked his thin lips. "Why, him and me had talked about it. There wasn't anything definite, or nothin'. I'll be goin' now."

"No, I don't think so," Carson snapped. His right hand appeared on top of the desk. In his hand was his .45. "Sit down, Frank—and don't go reachin' in your pockets for anything."

Bridges slowly sank down in his chair.

"You should've let well enough alone," Carson told him. "Heck, you'd never have been suspected. Never in the world. But you couldn't leave it alone, could you?"

Frank Bridges was silent for a long moment. Finally he croaked, "You're crazy. I didn't—"

"Frank, you drive a cab. You don't make much money at it. You couldn't, in a town as small as Monroe. Now, you really expect us to believe you'd make a trip a mile out of town to pick up a fare, and then not make any attempt to locate that fare? Just drive back to town, without even gettin' out of your cab long enough to try the door of the fillin' station out there? Not hardly. You'd scour the whole neighborhood before you'd mark the trip off as a loss." Carson tapped the muzzle of his gun against the desk top. "Let's have it."

Again Bridges was silent. His

eyes darted around, then fixed on the blank wall behind Carson's desk. "Alright," he said. "I don't know. I guess that's really why I come down here, to confess. I didn't mean to hurt nobody, but—"

"But Jimmy Ward tried to jump you, and you panicked," Carson said quietly, "and started shooting."

Bridges gave a long sigh. "Yeah. That's about it."

I finally found my tongue. "Why? What was your motive?"

He turned toward me, his long face as bleak as the night outside. "I knew George had that money on him. He called me earlier, said he'd be to my place first thing in the mornin' to get the car. So I knew he had that money in cash, an' I figured there'd be a good bit more, in the station cash register. I was broke, an' here it is almost Christmas. I wanted enough to buy some decent presents an' all, for my family."

Bridges looked pleadingly from me to Carson, and back again. "You all can understand that—man wants his wife and kids to have a decent Christmas?"

The door behind us opened. It was Buck Mullins again. He said, "Sheriff, Mill Shaw just radioed in. He went out there to the station like you told him, and . . ."

Mullins' voice trailed away as he noticed the tense atmosphere in the cramped little office.

"Go on, Buck," the sheriff said.

"Huh? Oh, yeah. Shaw did find Royce's billfold. It was layin' in the ditch beside the road, just a few yards from the fillin' station. Had two-hundred bucks in it, an' a little over—what's goin' on here?"

Carson said, "Stay here an' find out." He glanced at me. "I thought there was a chance Royce might have sneaked his billfold out of his pocket, and dropped it along the road somewhere so the hold-up man wouldn't get it."

Bridges buried his face in his hands. In a muffled voice he said, "I never had a chance to even ask for it. That other feller jumped me too fast."

Deputy Mullins gave a startled exclamation.

"Yeah," Carson nodded. To Bridges, he said, "Why'd you park all that distance from the station?"

"I was in my cab," Bridges told us. "It has the name of the company painted on it, you know. I wanted to park it away from the lights on the highway." He lolled back in his chair, and said, "I feel sick. Think I'm goin' to faint."

"Put your head down between your knees," Carson said. He got

up, moved toward the door. "Buck, you stay here with Bridges."

I followed Carson into the big outer office. "How the heck did you . . ."

"I didn't," Carson muttered. "Not till he came out with that business about seein' two men on the road—an' it black as tar up there. That was gildin' the lily a little too much."

I groaned softly. "Talk about luck—"

Jimmy Ward was standing in the center of the office, glaring wildly around as he heard our footsteps. The deputy at the radio glanced at us questioningly.

Carson said, "It's all over."

"You ain't goin' to hang this on me," Ward suddenly yelled. We were between him and the corridor door, and he charged straight at us, swinging both fists.

He connected a hard right to Carson's jaw, the blow landing squarely on the swollen place caused by the sheriff's bad tooth. Carson staggered back, clutching at his face, and shaking one fist.

I kicked out at Ward, and he stumbled, then sprawled to the floor. The deputy was up now, with his gun in his fist.

"Freeze, Ward," he said. "I'll blow your head off."

Ward lay there, panting.

I turned to the sheriff. His mouth was bloody. Tears of pain streamed down his face. He poked shaky fingers in his mouth, then drew them out, holding a blood-smeared tooth.

"Damnation," he gasped. He wheeled and snarled at Jimmy Ward, "Get out of here—and keep right on goin'."

Ward scrabbled up and ran out the door.

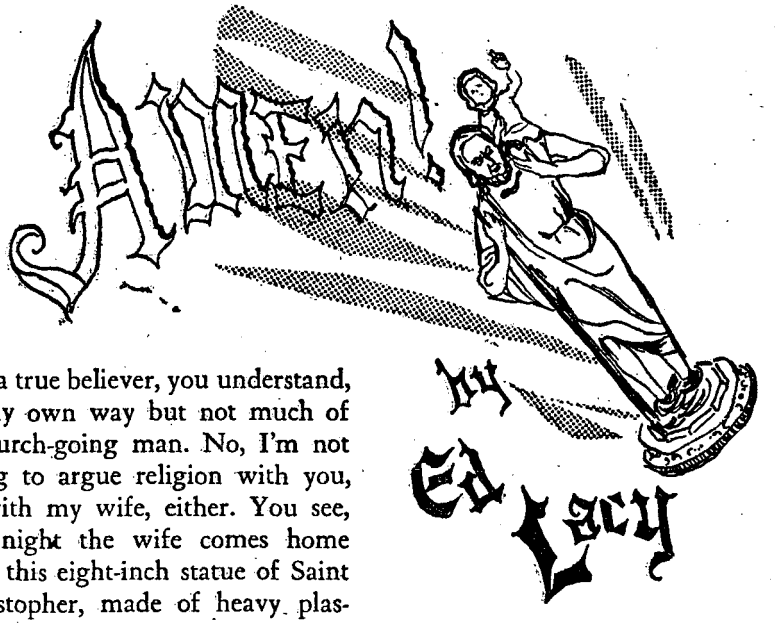
"You going to let him get away with that?" I asked.

Carson pressed a handkerchief to his mouth. He muttered, "He saved me a trip to the dentist."

I said, wonderingly, "Well, for that—"

The sheriff gestured weakly toward the little, lopsided tree on the counter. "Next week's Christmas, ain't it?"

'Tis said that, "Ordinary saints grow faint to posterity," but it seems that at least one saint has sidestepped the path to oblivion.



I'M a true believer, you understand, in my own way but not much of a church-going man. No, I'm not going to argue religion with you, or with my wife, either. You see, one night the wife comes home with this eight-inch statue of Saint Christopher, made of heavy plastic and with a magnetic base. "It's for your truck, Joe," she said. "He's the patron saint of drivers and travelers and I'd feel better if you keep this on your dashboard."

So there it is; I been driving since I was twelve, I'm a darn good driver, and I don't need any statues to help me at the wheel. Also, I know better than to argue with the wife about a thing like *this*. I merely thanked her, didn't even mention that my boss would certainly tell me to keep it off the dashboard, it's against insurance regulations.

Sure enough, the following morning, as I'm taking my truck out of the warehouse, the boss said, "Okay, Joe, you want a St. Christopher, wear one of them medals

around your fat neck. But take that off the truck. I don't want no accidents."

"He's supposed to prevent accidents," I said brightly and sarcastically.

"I'm talking about an accident to *you,* stupid. You run into a heavy bump, or somebody rams into you and WHAM! that little statue is going to fly off the dashboard with bullet speed, maybe knock your eyes out. And if the insurance company learns about it, goodbye any possible compensation for you. And you drive like a hot-rod kid anyway, so move it!"

Frankly I didn't give a hoot about the statue anyway, so I worked things out like this: entering and leaving the garage I kept the statue in the glove compartment, so the boss won't bug me. Once I was rolling, I stuck the St. Christopher back on the dashboard only because in driving around town I sometimes pass the wife out shopping, and if she saw I didn't have the statue she'd bug me worse than my boss. And she's the gal who can do it, too.

Things went like that for a couple of months and this morning, when the boss handed me my trip ticket, he said, "Be careful, Joe, you're carrying a bonded load, $82,000 worth of transistor radios. Try to remember you're at the wheel of a truck, not a jet plane."

I told him a few things—when I was a block away from the warehouse, sticking the statue on the dashboard. The traffic thinned as I reached the edge of town. I was headed for a company sort of in the country, which would make for a nice day's driving and no chance of being stuck with a second trip. Stopping for a traffic light a snappy sports roadster with two young guys in it drove up on my right. The taller guy called out, "How far to Newton, pal?"

"Newton?" I laughed. "You're driving in the wrong direction. Look, at the next intersection, make a left and follow that to the next . . ."

"Wait up, I can't hear you," the tall guy said, getting out of the car and coming up to the window of my truck cab.

He should have heard me; we were the only cars waiting for the light."I said, at the next intersection you make a . . ." My voice died as I found myself looking into a very ugly .38 pistol.

Sliding into the seat beside me the tall guy said, "Do as you're told, truck jockey, and you don't get hurt. Try anything, and you're a dead hero! Drive, I'll tell you where to go."

I fully knew my chances of ever being a day older were slim. A hi-

jacker drives the truck to some isolated spot where he has another truck waiting. After unloading and loading the stuff, the next step is always to slug the driver and/or drop his body off on some lonely road.

The light turned green and the gunman told me to drive on. At the next crossing, he had me make a right turn. In the mirror I saw his partner following us in the sports car. I was trying to think and getting only zeros, when ahead of us I saw another crossing, but with a traffic cop and lights. For a second my hopes went into orbit, until the goon jammed his gun into my side and snarled, "So there's a cop, so you play it cool! One wrong movement and you get the lead treatment! I ain't kidding."

I didn't doubt it, either; he was a hell of a snarler. I just nodded, sweat running down my big face. If I went through the light, ran the truck up on the sidewalk, did *anything* to make the policeman mad, I might wrestle the punk, try to hold him until the officer came up. But the barrel of his gun, which seemed to be boring a hole in my kidney, told me I wouldn't have a chance. And the other hood, in the sports car, would take out the cop, gun him down.

The light turned green as we approached and I drove on, wanting to scream for help, but my throat was dry as sand. Suddenly a kid came busting out of a weedy lot and raced across the street. Jamming the brakes on with reflex action, my truck lurched to a sudden stop, skidding sideways across the road. I didn't touch the kid but I saw St. Christopher carom off the windshield on the impact of the sudden stop, strike the gunman's eye, blinding him for a second. I dug my elbow into his side and grabbed his gun as he crumpled forward in the seat, mouth sucking air.

Jumping out of the truck, I saw the other punk trying to turn his snappy car around, since my truck was blocking the road. The cop was running towards us. I tried to yell it was a hold-up—but not a sound came forth. But the cop already had his gun out, probably because I was still holding the tall punk's gun in my own trembling hand.

Well, the two punks were sent up, the cop was promoted, and for saving them $82,000 the insurance company wrote me a ginger-peachy letter of commendation.

Of course I still don't go for that statue bit. But looking at the slightly crumpled St. Christopher statue on my dashboard, I don't know; I just may even go to church . . . one of these days.

'Tis said that a pupil is as good as his teacher. Occasionally, however, the pupil's perspective might differ from that of the master.

By Talmage Powell

IN the spectator section of the courtroom, the old man, Pierre Soulard, strained forward as the ten men and two women returned to the jury box. As powerful as a Florida razorback, old Pierre's eyes burned in their rawboned sockets as he moved his head and drilled his gaze into the back of the tall, slender youth at the defense counsel table. *They've found you guilty, David Wickway,* the old man thought. *They'll give you many years behind bars to remember how you killed two people.*

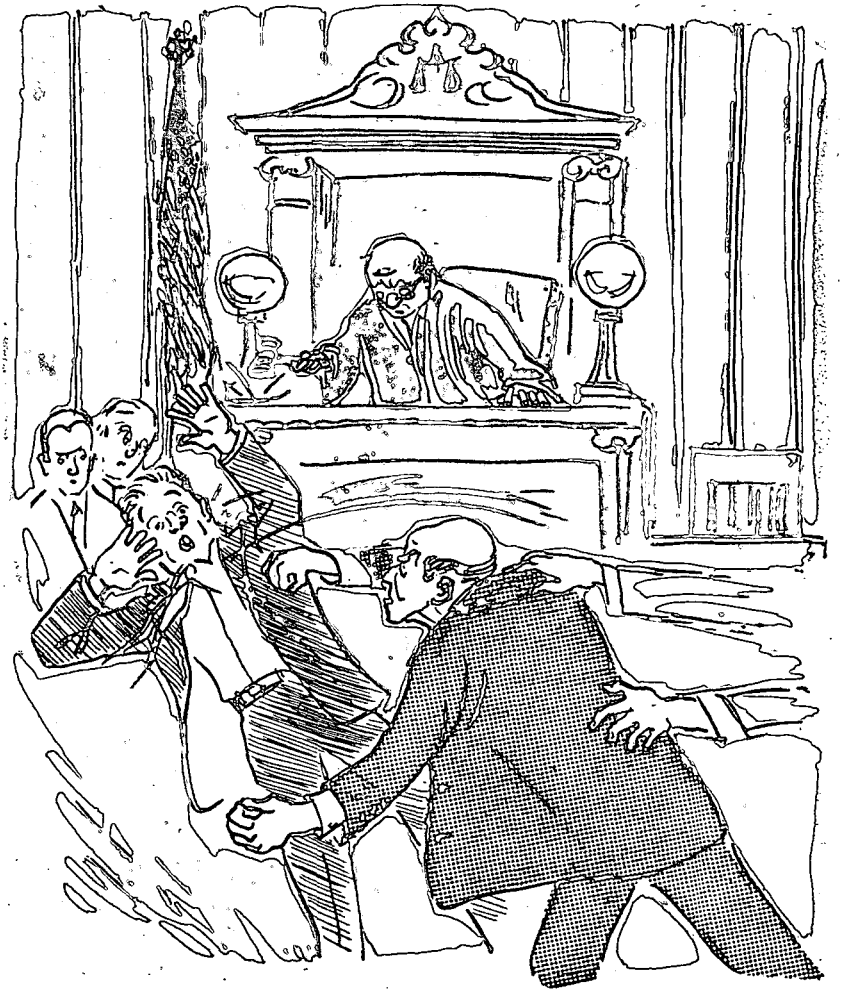
"Gentlemen and ladies of the jury, have you reached a verdict?"

As the words spilled over the courtroom, the old man returned his attention to the jury. He watched the foreman, a lean Florida Cracker, slowly get to his feet.

"We find the defendant," the foreman said, "not guilty."

There was a moment of stillness in the sun-scorched day; then Dave Wickway's friends applauded, leaped to their feet and whooped it up, crowding around Dave and slapping him on the back.

The old man sat stunned, incapable of movement. It was unthinkable, unbelievable. Yvonne and Tony—his daughter and her child—both dead, and their killer was going free. Unaware of the



motions of his own muscles, the old man was on his feet, pushing toward Dave Wickway, shoving people aside.

Dave didn't turn until one of his friends saw the old man's face and spoke sharply to Dave.

The old man drew back a fist as rough and hard as the bole of a palm tree. Dave jerked his arm up to protect himself. The effort was too little and too late. The old man's fist smashed through Dave's defense. The irresistible force met

a movable object, Dave Wickway's nose. The mutilation of skin and gristle took place with a crunching sound audible all over the courtroom. With his face suddenly bright with blood, Dave pitched across the counsel table.

The old man lunged, his huge, bony hands reaching for Dave's throat. A bystander grabbed Pierre's left arm. He shook free almost without effort. Two young friends of Dave's added their efforts to the fracas, grunting and gasping as they tried to pull Pierre away from Dave. The defense lawyer and yet another bystander were finally able to wrestle the old man back and hold him prisoner.

Pierre ceased his struggles when he saw he was surrounded. The judge, the bailiff, and a deputy, along with the prosecutor, were pushing toward him.

"Here!" the judge bellowed. "What's the meaning of this?" A bulky, bald man whose many years on the bench had given him a deserved reputation for honesty, integrity, and judicious compassion, the judge quickly understood the meaning of it all.

"Pierre—Pierre," he said with a shake of his head. "What are you trying to do to yourself?"

"Lock me up," Pierre said in his rumbling voice. "I don't care. You can't hold me forever, you can't protect the murderer for all time."

"He's not a murderer," the judge said gently. "You heard all the evidence. Your widowed daughter and her little child—I know what a loss you've suffered, Pierre. But it was an unavoidable accident. They stepped from between two parked cars on a rainy night, directly into the path of Wickway's car."

"Your justice is blind," Pierre said. "Mine isn't."

"No more of that talk!" the judge's tone sharpened. "We'll have no one-man vigilante lawlessness around here." The judge glanced at Dave. "You have a right to press charges against this man."

With a bloody handkerchief to his face, Dave had struggled to a standing position. He seemed slimmer, much paler than when the trial had started. He was a clean-cut, sun-scorched youth from a farming family that lived near Pierre.

"No," Dave said in a blood-muffled voice, "I don't feel I have any right. Let him go, please."

Angered exclamations came from Dave's friends. Ignoring them, he faced Pierre squarely. "You think you're the only one who's suffering? Well, you're wrong. For the rest of my life,

I'll carry the moment when they were suddenly there in the path of my car. I'll remember the helplessness of myself when I tried to stop. Nights when I want to sleep I'll hear the sound of the car striking them, feel the impact." He drew in a heavy breath. "I'd give anything, even my life, if I could turn back the clock and not have it happen. You've got to believe that, Pierre. I—I'd like to be your friend and try to make up in some way for this terrible thing."

Clever, Pierre thought. *Cunning as a cottonmouth. Making himself look so kind and generous to all of them. The murderer!*

"Let him go," Dave said. His voice left no room for refusal. "Let him go, I said!"

The restraining hands and arms pulled away from Pierre. He stood ringed in by men ready to pounce again. *Not now,* he thought, *the time is not now. But there is much time later.* He turned and stalked out of the courtroom, an oaken giant of an old man.

Pierre stopped his pickup truck beside his modest frame house and sat a moment. He did not want to go inside. He was acutely conscious of the silence that gripped the house and the flat, sere acres that stretched to the swamps in one direction and to palmetto thickets and pines in the other.

He had first come to this section of the world in the old lost days when the carnivals had wintered near Tampa. Carnies had had it made in those days, and he'd been a headliner with his trained animals. Then the world had changed. Television had come. People of a new generation had broader horizons, different interests, changing tastes. Carnivals had died like elephants in an ice age. Even the big circuses had fallen on hard times; those unable to streamline themselves had perished.

When the day of the final squeeze had come, Pierre had bowed out with an attempt to save face. He knew the harried owner of a show, losing its shirt in the wilds of Iowa, would have to axe an old friend whose animals now played in a leaky tent in the corner of the lot.

Pierre spared the owner the final action. "My daughter," Pierre explained, "and her little son live on a small place near Bradenton, Florida. She has lost her husband. She needs me."

"A man must go where he must, Pierre."

"True."

"I wish I had the moolah to take the animals off your hands."

"I have a buyer. Already I have

a buyer," Pierre said, "for all but Gretchen. I'll keep Gretchen. It would be like cutting off my right arm if I sold the chimp."

"Good luck, old friend."

"May you have no more bloopers," Pierre said.

And now, what was left? Only he and Gretchen. If she were not waiting inside the house, he would never open the front door.

He forced his muscles to lift him out of the car, carry him into the superheated stillness of the frame house. He crossed the livingroom with its sparse, floral-patterned furniture, and dropped the chain from the door of the little room he'd fixed for Gretchen.

A full grown and aged chimpanzee, Gretchen immediately jumped into Pierre's arms. She nuzzled his shoulder, squeezed his neck, and made childish noises of pleasure.

"It is all over, old girl," Pierre said, sudden tears in his eyes. "The murderer is free, and they are gone. I have thought about it all the way from the courthouse. He deserves to die, the murderer. Do you agree?"

The chimp lifted her face and chattered, responding to Pierre's tone.

"And you will help me, Gretchen," the old man said. "Together we can deal out death and remain safe and free, the way Dave Wickway believes foolishly that he is safe and free."

While Gretchen slept that night, Pierre constructed a simple training harness with strips of leather and cordage. He slept little, rising with the sun. After a hurried breakfast, he cleaned the heavy, double-barrelled shotgun that had belonged to Yvonne's husband.

While Gretchen nibbled at a breakfast of fruit, Pierre gathered up the training harness and carried it and the shotgun out of the house. He crossed the sandy yard, walking to the small, weathered toolshed which stood about fifty yards behind the house.

Inside the toolshed, Pierre pulled the solid, heavy work table from its place against the rear wall, leaving room for a person, or a chimp, to stand behind the table. Laying the shotgun on the table, he stooped until his eyes were level with the gun. The barrels were pointed directly at the shed door, at a level slightly higher than a man's waist. No man could possibly stand in the toolshed doorway and live beyond the moment of a discharge from the shotgun. Only one barrel, one exploding shell would send a man on a short trip from the doorway to eternity.

Making sure the gun was un-

loaded, Pierre laid two shells beside it for future use. Then with hammer, nails, and cord, he swung Gretchen's training harness behind the table.

The chimp was in the front yard when the old man returned. She did a quick performance for him, turning handsprings, jumping to the porch railing, crossing it in the manner of a wirewalker. She peeled her lips from her teeth and joined the applause as the old man clapped his hands.

"Good girl, Gretchen. Always so eager to please, to learn. And that is fine, Gretchen, for now you learn the most important trick of your life."

Pierre extended his hand. She came to him quickly, knowing a new game was afoot, a new trick by which she would delight both herself and the man in mastering.

Her excitement increased as Pierre guided her into the toolshed and slipped her into the harness. He snapped his fingers, holding her immobile as he backed away with his hand upraised, a gesture so familiar to her from all the past years of training.

The old man paused in the bright, sunlit oblong of the shed doorway. He knuckled sweat from his forehead, drew a breath, and said. "Now the hours begin, Gretchen, the long, painstaking hours of teaching and learning."

By the end of the first day, under Pierre's expert tutelage, Gretchen mastered the first hurdle. She realized the gun was part of the act and that she must put her finger to the trigger and pull it, making the gun snap.

The second day, she realized that her infinitely patient master wanted her to pull the trigger only at certain times, under certain conditions.

By the end of the third day, Gretchen was responding perfectly, out of harness now, moving to the gun and pulling the trigger only when Pierre opened the toolshed doorway from outside.

One more day, Pierre thought, *to condition her until it's an automatic reflex action.*

The final day of drilling ruled out any chance for error. The toolshed had a single meaning and purpose for the chimp, evoked a single association in her mind. It was the unique place where she was to wait alone and watch until the door opened and the man stood there. Then she was to reach to the gun and snap the trigger.

Time after time, she went through the routine flawlessly. Wholly satisfied, Pierre put her in the house, came out to his truck, and drove to the Wickway farm.

His dark good looks marred

by his swollen nose, Dave was standing in the yard when the pickup approached. "Get out of here," Dave said coldly.

Pierre looked out the open window of the truck. "I came to tell you I'm sorry, Dave."

"I don't want any words with you, Soulard."

"I guess I can't blame you."

"Then turn the truck around and get back where you came from."

Pierre shook his head, his eyes heavy and sad. Quietly and slowly, he reached to the ignition key and turned off the idling engine.

"I guess you have a right to throw me off the place, Dave. But I'm not going under my own steam until I say one thing. I need your forgiveness. I want it."

Pierre saw a little of the chill leave Wickway's dark eyes. "Davey boy, you believe in kindness. I know you do. I'm a suffering old man who's humbling himself. Don't that mean nothing to you?"

"Well, I—hadn't figured on you coming here this way, Soulard."

"I had to come, and you got to forgive me. Will you do that?"

Dave was relenting. The old man, sensing it, kept his real feelings from showing on his face.

"There isn't much more I can say," Pierre said. "In the courtroom all I could think of was my daughter and her baby—both dead."

"I can understand that," Dave said slowly.

"It was something that somebody had to pay for, Dave, and you happened to be the handiest. So I did a foolish thing, and I'm sorry for it."

"I guess we've both been plenty shook up," Dave said. "But you can't call back water from under the bridge, can you?"

"No, I guess you can't. You have to go with the tide, and that's what I'm figuring to do. I'm pulling up stakes, Dave, and I don't want to leave with a bad thing between us."

"We'll try to remember we were once pretty good neighbors," Dave said. "That's the way I'll remember."

"You're a good man, and to prove the sincerity of our feelings, I want a favor from you, and I want to pay you for it."

"Favor?"

"I'm going to convert the pickup here," Pierre said, "into a van for me and Gretchen. We'll hit the road again. There's still shows and spots where we can do a performance for a bean. I'll need a little help for a few hours, Dave, when I close in the bed of the truck for living space. I'd be proud to have you work at my

side for a little while before I shove off."

"Well, I—"

"And I want to pay you well, so everything will be right and square between us after I'm gone. When Gretchen and I make camp aboard the truck, I'll need to look around and remember that we finished things between us, you and me, as men and neighbors should."

Pierre knew he was getting through to the boy. He hadn't for a moment doubted that he could.

"I don't blame you for having to think about it, Dave," Pierre said. "Maybe you don't want to come to my place alone?"

"It isn't that—"

"I don't blame you. I might not want to either, in your place. I might still wonder a little about the other man, no matter what he'd said to assure me. So don't come alone, Dave. Bring Harley Johns, the man who works for you, with you. I can use him. We'll need him. I'll be glad to pay him. The two of you, Dave, you and Harley. Help me get the heavier pieces in place so's this pickup will be a real camper."

"We're pretty busy," Dave said.

Pierre brought a tired, lonely, compassionate smile to his lips. He looked at Dave a moment in forlorn silence. "Well," he said, with a heavy sigh, "I guess I can find somebody else. Maybe it was foolish of me, coming here. I just wanted you to know how sorry I am, Dave, how I feel. Guess I wanted my last hours around here to be something I could look back on with solace. Guess I was just an old man needing a memory, Dave." Pierre reached for the ignition key to start the truck.

"Wait a minute," Dave said. "I guess I need a memory like that myself. God knows I've got enough of the other kind, from that rainy night. We're not all that busy."

"Tomorrow morning, Dave?"

"Yes."

"Be sure and bring Harley Johns with you."

"I will."

"Thank you, Dave. Thank you from the bottom of my heart."

Pierre was up with the sun the next morning. He got through breakfast chores quickly. While Gretchen romped, Pierre went into the toolshed, loaded both barrels of the shotgun, and lined the gun with great care directly at the doorway. Then Pierre brought the gun to full cock and backed out of the toolshed.

The heat of the rising sun dried out dew and ground mist. Insects came to singing life. And as the morning progressed, Pierre sawed

plywood panels on sawhorses which he'd set beside the house, and watched the road. At nine-forty, he saw the red and white pickup from the Wickway farm. A quivering went through his brain. His mouth became instantly dry.

"Gretchen!"

The chimp looked up at him. She had been in and out, around his feet, wetting her finger, touching it to the fresh sawdust, tasting it, making faces, and chattering.

Pierre took her hand, and the two of them moved around the house, hurrying to the toolshed, the man walking straight and tall, the chimp rolling on her bowed legs and touching the ground now and then with the knuckles of her free hand.

Pierre eased the door open and gently pushed Gretchen inside the toolshed. Then he closed the door gently and leaned against it until his breathing became less shallow.

When Pierre returned to the sawhorses, the Wickway truck was pulling off the road. Inside were two men. Dave and Harley. Victim and the witness. The witness to the fact, later, that it had all been a terrible freak accident, with Pierre nowhere close by when David Wickway was killed.

Davey boy, the old man thought, *you're really just halfway knowledgeable about accidents. This morning we're going to complete your education.*

"Good morning, Pierre."

Pierre watched the two get out of the truck. "Same to you, Dave. How're you, Harley?"

"Fine," the young man said.

Dave and Harley stopped beside the sawhorses.

"See you've already started," Dave said.

Pierre nodded. "Plan to box the pickup in, roof her tight, and stick in a bunk and kerosene stove. Gretchen and I will make it fine."

"What do you want us to do, Pierre?"

"Well, Dave, Harley and I can lift these panels I've already cut if you want to keep on sawing."

Harley climbed onto the bed of the pickup as Pierre lifted the end of a piece of plywood obviously cut for a side panel. When Harley had hold of his end, Pierre went to the other end, picked it up and moved forward as Harley moved back into the truck.

"Dave," Pierre said.

"What is it?"

"Before you start with the saw, how about getting the brace and bit? It's hanging just inside the door of the toolshed. Shed's the little shack around back of the house."

"Okay," Dave said. He went out of sight around the house.

Pierre stopped, set his end of the plywood panel to rest on the tailgate of the pickup. He stood gasping.

Up against the cab of the truck, Harley said, "What's the matter, Mr. Soulard? Anything wrong?"

"Just the heat, I guess—the sun—a dizzy spell. It'll pass in a moment."

But the moment had dammed up time. The moment wouldn't pass. Pierre had the weird feeling that even the insects had stopped movement, were hanging motionless in the dead, still, superheated air. Then the moment fell like a drop of sweat. Pierre heard footsteps. He turned his head to look.

There was David Wickway—big as life, coming toward the sawhorses with a brace and bit in his hand.

"Right where you said," Dave smiled, holding up the tool. "Say, that was a pretty neat idea of yours, putting the chimp in the toolshed so she wouldn't be getting underfoot while we're building you a portable Waldorf room."

Pierre stumbled a step away from Dave. It was unbelievable. It was impossible. It simply couldn't be true. He'd forgot to cock the gun! He could clearly remember cocking the gun with great care, but his mind must be playing a trick on him. There was no other explanation. Was he losing his mind, going crazy?

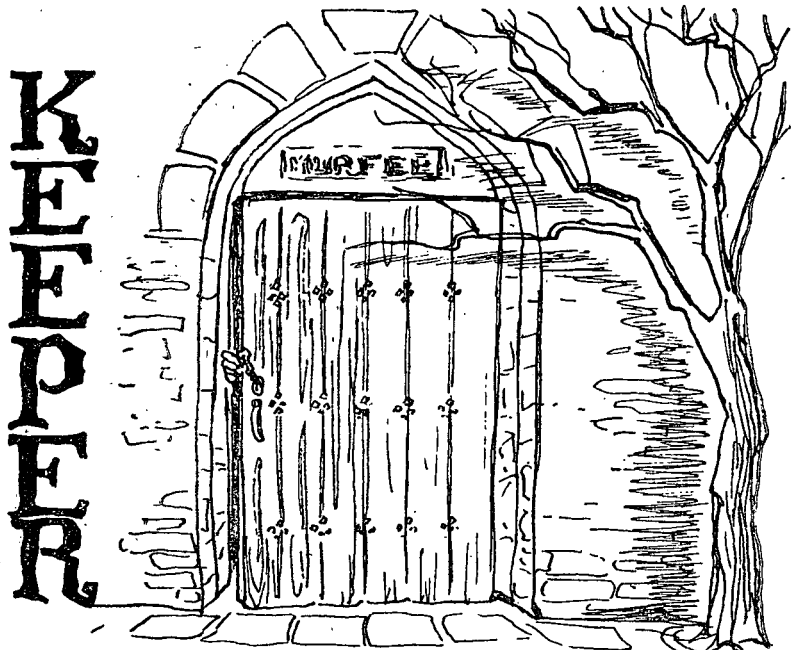
The old man made a fearful inhuman sound in his throat and bolted—straight to the toolshed. With incoherent dissonances dribbling from his lips, the gaunt old man opened the door.

He heard and saw the shotgun blast. He felt the force of it hurling him backwards, away from the shed, on a quick route to eternity.

The explanation for Dave Wickway's survival was really quite simple, at least in the mind of a monkey. Gretchen was no chump. She had responded precisely to her training. She had obeyed with a thoroughness that was not at all human. Her performance had been flawless, letter perfect.

Gretchen had waited until Pierre—and only Pierre—had appeared in the toolshed doorway. And that, naturally and as a matter of course, had been the proper moment for her to reach for the shotgun trigger.

It is a matter of record that an habitual corpse-gazer, should he indulge overlong, may very well experience hallucinations of reincarnation.



KEEPER OF THE CRYPT

FINCH moved like a specter across the cemetery, his footfalls cushioned in silence by the thick turf of the grounds. His thin body, stooped and grey, blended almost invisibly into the light morning fog that still hovered eerily around the tombstones. At the edge of a clearing where the crypt stood, Finch stopped and peered through the haze. A clean-cut young man, dressed in a tan chauffeur's uniform, was working on the crypt door. Finch stood quietly for a mo-

ment, admiring the young man's shiny leather boots, the knifelike creases of his coat sleeves, the easy, confident movements of his gloved hands as he slid the barrel of a small oil can from one hinge to another, lubricating metal that had not moved in nine years.

Lucky you are, Gerald Stander, Finch thought; a good clean job with uniform provided; a fine car to drive and polish; handsome face to get you that fleshy little wife of yours; even a furnished house on the grounds of the manor to keep her in. Aye, lucky you are, all right; luckier than me, down here in the fog with nobody but the dead for company. Living in that ugly caretaker's cottage, talking to myself of late.

But never mind, he thought. He looked beyond the crypt to the nearest tombstone at the edge of

by Clark Howard

the clearing. That was where his tunnel ended. It wouldn't be long now.

The young man, Gerald Stander, turned toward him and Finch immediately started walking onto the clearing, lest Gerald suspect he had been watching and wondering.

"Good morning, Finch," young Stander greeted him.

"I thought I'd find you here," Finch said without preliminary. He walked up to the crypt and looked at the heavy metal hinges with their dry rust thirstily drinking in the fresh oil. "So his lordship, Sir Tyron Murfee, the Earl of Sheel, is finally dead, eh?"

"Aye," said Stander, "he is that."

"Well, bloody few'll miss the arrogant old devil," Finch observed. "How did it happen?"

"The epilepsy got him. Late in the night it was. Strangled on his own tongue."

"Vile tongue it was, too," Finch muttered. He walked with Stander back to the steel-grey limousine that belonged to Murfee Manor. Some of the fog had blown away now and Finch could look up and see the great house high atop a hill. "When'll they be bringing him down?" he asked.

"This afternoon, I expect. There are no heirs left, not even distant, you know. The family solicitor's coming from London with the key to the crypt. He'll keep the services fairly simple, I expect."

"Close the crypt back up tonight, will they?" Finch asked casually.

"Got to," said the young chauffeur. "They that ain't embalmed have to be sealed in an airtight

crypt within twenty-four hours." Stander looked curiously at Finch. "You ought to know that, old man, being the gravetender. It's the law, ain't it?"

"Yes, yes, so it is," said Finch. "I'd forgot." He turned and looked back at the crypt, rubbing his jaw thoughtfully. "How many of the family's in there now, would you know?"

"There's five, I'm told. The eldest son, who killed himself; the Earl's brother, who was a bit odd and never married; Lady Murfee, who drank herself to death; and the daughter and a younger son who died together in a speeding auto crash."

"So the old man'll make it an even half dozen," Finch observed.

"Aye, and that'll close the crypt for good."

"Yes," Finch said softly, "yes, it will." He took a deep breath of the chill morning air. "Well, I'd best be getting back to my cottage. I've things to tend to."

Gerald Stander watched the stooped gravetender walk out of the clearing. Dull, stupid fool, the young chauffeur thought. Just because he lives down here all alone, he has to skulk around like a ghost. I'd give a lot to be in his place, I would. Get out of these stiff clothes, away from that harping wife of mine. Have a nice little house out here away from it all, place to bring that little barmaid from the pub. Ah well, it won't be long now. Soon as they get his lordship stretched out in that crypt, I'll rid myself of this place once and for all, I will.

The solicitor, a tall, stuffy man with an uneven mustache, had an obvious distaste for cemeteries in general and cemetery crypts in particular. With his briefcase in one hand and an ornate jewel box under one arm, he stood by the open steel door that afternoon and watched, dutifully if impatiently, as six hired pallbearers carried into the crypt the coffin containing Tyron Murfee, last Earl of Sheel.

With the solicitor stood the Earl's doctor, a Lloyd's of London representative, and the manager of the Evanshire branch of the Dover Bank, in which the Murfee estate was entrusted. Gathered behind that esteemed group, at a respectable distance, were the assorted servants, groundskeepers, stablehands, and other domestics and manor help, numbering sixteen, and including in their forefront Gerald Stander, appropriately dressed in his dark grey chauffeur's uniform.

Off to one side, alone, stood Finch.

When the coffin had been set

upon its bier and the hired pallbearers discharged, the solicitor summoned into the crypt all those remaining. The group filed inside and gathered round the bier in solemn obedience. All eyes, naturally curious, lingered for a moment on the five airtight caskets resting in a precise row on other biers along one wall. A common shudder tickled the collective spines of the watchers at being so close to so much death.

The solicitor took his place next to the coffin. He cleared his throat, loudly but rather reluctantly, for he was certain the air in the musty little structure was surely unfit.

"A preamble to the Earl of Sheel's last will and testament," the solicitor announced, "directs that the document be opened and read here, in the final resting place of his beloved deceased family."

"Beloved, indeed," one of the servants whispered knowingly. "He drove 'em all to this very crypt."

"Representatives of the Earl's bank and insurance carrier are present," the solicitor continued, "as is the doctor who last attended the Earl. Mr. Finch represents the cemetery on which the crypt stands and will certify to the sealing of the door when this ceremony concludes."

The solicitor hesitated for a moment, unconsciously wetting his lips; then, realizing what he was doing, hastily withdrew his tongue lest the tainted air reach it.

"There are two more parts to the preamble," he said distastefully. Opening the ornate jewel box, which he had placed on the bier edge, he showed its contents to all present. "As has been customary in the Earl's family for many years, the personal jewelry of departed members is laid to rest with the deceased. In the Earl's case, he being the last of the line, this will consist of all the remaining rings, signets, coat of arms, and other standards of the House of Sheel. They are all contained here in this box, as has been certified by the gentleman from Lloyd's. I ask you now to witness their deposit in the coffin."

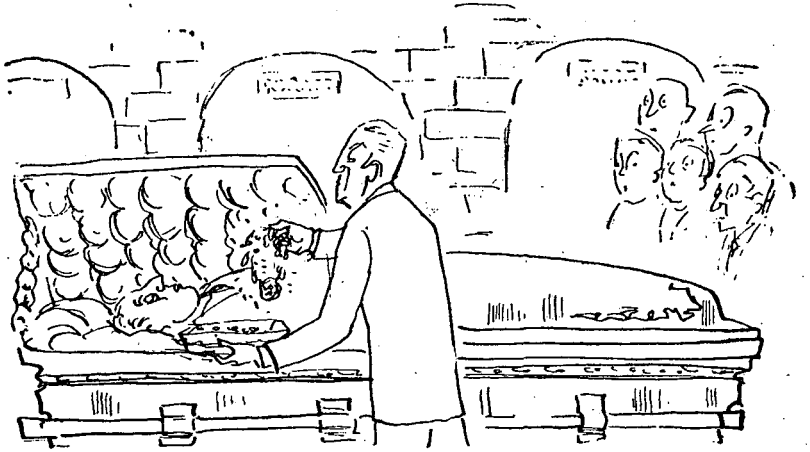
The solicitor extracted from his pocket a pair of suede gloves which he pulled onto his hands. He grasped the edge of the coffin lid and exerted pressure to raise it. The lid gave an inch, then stuck. The solicitor grunted, straining vainly at the jammed cover.

"Let me help you, sir," said Gerald Stander, stepping forward smartly. He forced the lid up the rest of the way.

"Thank you," the solicitor said, panting slightly. He straightened and looked down at Sir Tyron

Murfee. The Lloyd's and Dover Bank representatives strained their necks to see in death the man they had never seen in life; and when they did see, their eyes widened in surprise at the sheer bulk of the man, for the Earl of Sheel weighed nineteen stone—better than two hundred sixty-five pounds.

"Hefty bloke, what?" whispered the Lloyd's of London man. "Ever see such a belly?"



"That's the rich for you," the Dover Bank man said back, "always eating like hogs. The solicitor's got his work cut out for him, finding any room for them jewels."

The solicitor commenced distributing the various jeweled articles into the coffin; a ring here, a pendant there, the coat of arms, another ring, signet clasps, a few unmounted stones, more rings. When the jewel box was empty, he put it aside and directed his attention to Finch.

"The last part of the preamble requests that the Earl's coffin be left open, since he is the last of the line, and following his interment the crypt is to be sealed forever. As cemetery representative, Mr. Finch, do you have any objection to such a procedure?"

"None, sir," said Finch, "so long as the crypt itself is safely sealed."

"Very well," said the solicitor. "All conditions having been duly complied with, we may proceed with the distribution of the estate."

Opening his briefcase, the solicitor removed the will and broke its seal. It was a surprisingly uncomplicated document. The stablehands received fifty pounds each,

the groom a hundred. Groundskeepers were given fifty, the gardener one hundred, domestics fifty, the cook a hundred, and so on. Gerald Stander, who had been chauffeur to the Earl for some six years, received a compromise amount—seventy-five pounds. That was sweet of you, old boy, Gerald thought. Give me first class fare to Paris, it will, away from that nagging nag of a wife of mine.

The bulk of the estate, four hundred thousand pounds plus Murfee Manor, went to the Foundation for the Study and Cure of Epilepsy, the Earl having been plagued all of his adult life by that disease. The Lloyd's of London man was instructed to pay the Earl's insurance to the Dover Bank man, who in turn was to distribute the legacies accordingly.

"The will directs that a final medical examination be made on the Earl before the crypt is sealed," said the solicitor. "Doctor, if you please."

The doctor stepped up to the bier with a stethoscope and listened to the Earl's chest. Next, he placed a thumb and forefinger on the wrist. Lastly, he held for several seconds a small mirror before the slightly parted lips.

"I detect no heartbeat or pulse," he declared, "and no breath clouds the mirror. Again I pronounce Tyron Murfee, the Earl of Sheel, to be dead."

"I think that concludes the formalities," said the solicitor. "If you will all step back outside now and witness the sealing of the crypt—"

With the Lloyd's man and the Dover Bank man and Finch and the servants all gathered round, the solicitor, his briefcase in one hand and the now empty jewel box under his arm, used a shoulder to push the great crypt door closed. Juggling the briefcase, jewel box and his gloves, he fumbled with the bulky crypt key, almost dropping it, and then Gerald Stander stepped smartly forward again.

"I'll get it for you, sir," he said with a smile. He took the heavy key from the solicitor's hand, inserted it into the lock and twisted it completely around. There was a sharp click as the tumblers engaged. Stander removed the key and stood close to the door, putting all his weight on the lock handle to test it. The handle held firm. Stander straightened, squared his shoulders in satisfaction and turned back to the solicitor.

"Thank you," said the solicitor, taking the key Gerald held out and putting it into his briefcase. He turned to Finch. "You'll certify that the crypt is once more sealed,

Mr. Finch, as it was requested?"

Finch tested the lock. "Aye," he said, "sealed it is."

"Very well. These proceedings are hereby ended. Thank you all for your attendance."

The gathering began to disperse. Finch lingered with Gerald Stander for a moment near the crypt door, filling his pipe while he unobtrusively eavesdropped on the solicitor and the doctor.

"What was all that business of a final medical examination?" Finch heard the solicitor ask the doctor.

"Precaution, I imagine," said the doctor. "The old boy had epilepsy for years, you know. Somewhere he got wind of an Old Wives' Tale about the seizures sometimes leaving people in a catatonic state where they appear dead, but aren't. The saying goes that after twelve or fifteen hours the body comes out of it, fully alive again. Naturally, hearing a story like that makes some epileptics fearful of premature burial."

"Yes, well I shouldn't wonder," said the solicitor. He glanced back at the crypt door. "You, ah—you're absolutely certain in this case, are you?"

"Now, see here, counselor," the doctor said, slightly miffed, "how'd you like it if I questioned the legality of the will?"

"Yes, I see your point," said the solicitor. "My apologies. Well, I must be off if I'm to make the last train to London."

"Be happy to drive you, sir," Gerald Stander offered. "Got the Manor car right here."

"Good of you," said the solicitor.

Finch watched them go. When they were beyond sight, he hurried anxiously toward his cottage—toward his tunnel.

The passageway, leading from beneath the cemetery cottage to a point directly under the Murfee crypt, was exactly large enough in circumference to enable Finch to crawl on his hands and knees the entire distance. Finch had dug out the last eight feet of it that very afternoon, finishing minutes before the Earl's coffin was brought down from Murfee Manor. It was a compact, well constructed tunnel, shored up on both sides and above by sturdy slabs of rough wood, of the same type used to wall up open graves on rainy days. Even the weight of a hearse on the ground above would not disturb the tunnel.

An hour after the crypt had been closed, Finch sat at an old wooden table in his shabby little cottage, drinking a large glass of whiskey and contemplating the open hole in the floor before him, the entrance to his tunnel which had taken him a year to excavate.

He shuddered at the thought of all that had gone into that tunnel or, more gruesome yet, all that had come out of it. Working underground in the muck and mire was bad enough, but when the muck and mire contained the remains of—

Finch shuddered again and gulped down his whiskey. No matter, he thought. It's all over now, all but the collecting. He stood up and looked at his pocket watch. The solicitor would be boarding the train just about now. In another half hour the cemetery would be dark. Might as well get on with it.

The stooped, grey cemetery keeper slung a hand shovel and crowbar across his back, looped a battery lantern around his neck, and lowered himself into the hole. Reaching out behind him, he removed a wooden brace and carefully let drop into place a cut-out slab of the brick floor to conceal his passageway. Finch rarely had visitors, but tonight was not the night to take unnecessary risks. With the slab in place, the hole would be undetectable.

The tunnel, as usual, was damp and clammy; but on this, the beginning of his last trip through it, Finch did not mind the wetness that crept up through his trouser knees, nor the sharp rocks he occasionally jabbed his hand against, nor even the putrid odor he invariably encountered midway in his journey; for tonight—tonight was the time he had dreamed about all the lonely, barren moments of his life. Tonight was the time of rebirth.

He crawled, the shovel and crowbar rubbing heavily on his shoulderblades. He crawled, the shifting strap of the lantern burning his neck raw. He crawled, the dampness biting painfully into his arthritic bones; the thick smell of stale death abusing his nostrils; the closeness of the tunnel trying his lungs. He crawled and crawled and crawled.

And at last, chopping upward almost frantically with the shovel, cutting away the last three feet of soil in one corner of the floor, he broke into the crypt of Tyron Murfee, the last Earl of Sheel.

Panting, Finch dragged himself out of the hole and leaned against the wall. He flashed his light along the bricks until it showed him an oil beacon, still partly filled from the funeral that afternoon. He snapped a wooden match and touched the wick. Flickering light spread slowly across the crypt and Finch turned off his lantern. Quietly he surveyed the room of the dead in which he stood. A cold, rough shiver jerked his body in a

brief spasm, like an icy chain had been dragged up his spine. He swallowed dryly. Best not think about the dead, he told himself. Think about the living; think about yourself, man.

Finch leaned the crowbar against one of the closed coffins and went over to where the Earl lay in the open coffin. He began collecting the jewels scattered around earlier by the solicitor, delicately pinching them out one by one with thumb and forefinger, putting them into his coat pocket, silently counting the pieces as he went along.

Suddenly his blood turned cold and he stiffened in terror—*as a sharp click told him that someone was unlocking the crypt.*

The lock handle was slowly being lifted. Finch finally recovered his senses sufficiently to step quickly away from the bier and fade back into the shadows. An instant later, Gerald Stander entered and pushed the heavy door closed behind him. The young chauffeur paused, startled by the burning light in the crypt. Then, apparently deciding that it had been left on from the afternoon's gathering, he merely shrugged and moved quickly to the open casket to do his obvious work, collecting the jewels Finch had not had time to gather.

Finch, watching him, became incensed. He moved back into the light, his ashen face white with outrage.

"Stop there, you dirty graverobber!" he called out, impervious for the moment to his own like status.

Stander, hearing the condemning, self-righteous voice, all but fainted. He stumbled back from the bier in near panic, barely retaining his balance.

"How'd you get that door open?" Finch demanded to know.

"I—it—the key—" Stander babbled.

Finch's brow wrinkled. "The key?"

Stander squinted his eyes, staring at the old man. "Yes, the key. I—I switched keys after I locked the door. I—I gave the solicitor another key."

"Do you mean to say," Finch's voice rose in shocked indignation, "that I worked for a year tunneling in here from my house, and you—you found a way in by just stealing *the key!*"

"You dug your way in here?" Stander said incredulously. The young chauffeur, quickly regaining his composure, glanced around and saw the hand shovel stuck in the ground next to Finch's tunnel exit. "You dug all the way from your *house?* Through all those—all those

graves? How could you do it?"

Suddenly the whole picture of Finch's indignation unfolded in Stander's mind, and the younger man threw back his head and roared with laughter.

"You fool," he said to Finch, "you poor, stupid old fool! I accomplished in two or three seconds what it took you a whole year to do. No wonder you tend graves; you've not enough sense to be allowed among the living!"

Finch's face contorted in rage. He closed his fists and hurled himself toward Stander, lashing out with a blow that fell flush on the younger man's mouth and sent him reeling back against the open coffin.

"You dirty old tramp," Stander snarled, reaching up to touch a warm trickle of blood bubbling from the corner of his mouth. "I'll kill you for that!"

Finch backed off in suddenly born fear as the chauffeur charged him. He stumbled back across the crypt as the full weight of Stander's body lunged into him. His back bent over one of the closed coffins as Stander's strong young hands closed around his throat and began to choke the consciousness from his brain. All the strength drained from the old gravetender's frail arms; they dropped limply alongside the coffin, and Finch was certain at that moment that he was going to die.

Then one hand touched the cold steel of the crowbar he had left there, and desperate new strength sparked to life.

Finch curled his fingers around the bar, raised it high, and slammed its edge against Stander's temple. The chauffeur grasped his head in pain, stumbling backward. Finch struck him another blow, this one on the crown of the head. Stander pitched forward, brushing past Finch, tumbling face down across the casket lid. His body slid over the smooth brass lid and fell limply behind the casket. He lay motionless.

Finch got his lantern and peered over the casket, holding the bar raised for a third blow. The light fell on an open mouth and a pair of fixed eyes staring up sightlessly from the shadow, the eyes of a dead man.

Finch stepped back, sighing heavily. Putting down the crowbar and lantern, he gently rubbed his sore neck, remembering the strength of Stander's fingers. Bloody fool nearly had me, he did. Finch looked around the gloomy crypt, swallowing down a dry throat. I'll just take what's in the Earl's coffin, he thought nervously, I'll not try to open the others.

He went shakily back to the bier

holding the coffin of Tyron Murfee. Quickly he resumed his pilfering, snatching a ring here, a pendant there, a gold signet, a silver watch.

A Sheel coat of arms, mounted in a jewelled medallion, lay nearly hidden next to the casket lining near the Earl's left shoulder. Finch spotted it and started to reach across for it. His hand stopped midway over the great chest of Tyron Murfee and he stared down at the face of the Earl.

His eyes are open, Finch thought, confusion and fear tickling through him. Had they been open before? He tried to remember. Yes, of course, they had. No, wait. Stander's eyes were open; Stander, lying dead behind the other coffin; but the Earl—hadn't his eyes been closed?

Cold sweat burst out on the back of Finch's neck. His hand, still poised over the coffin, began to tremble. What was it that doctor had said about the epilepsy making people *seem* dead?

Finch jerked his hand from over the coffin and backed away. I've got enough, he decided quickly, feeling the small bulge of jewels in his coat pocket. I'd best get out of this place while I've still my senses.

Hurriedly, he got the lantern and switched it on. With a handful of loose dirt, he extinguished the oil beacon. He gathered his crowbar and shovel and dropped them into the tunnel hole. Then, as he was about to step into the hole himself, he paused as a sudden thought came over him.

The door! Stander had unlocked the door! There was no need to use the tunnel at all, he could go out the door.

No, wait now, he thought, what if I'm seen by someone? Not likely, to be sure, but still there's them in town that's overly curious at times, and someone might've wandered down just to be looking. Better to use a bit of caution, even if it does mean crawling through that blasted tunnel again. That door, though, that's a rub; can't chance leaving it unlocked.

Finch hurried over and searched the body of Gerald Stander until he found the crypt key. He started for the door, the lantern beam bobbing up and down as he walked. Halfway across, the light fell upon Tyron Murfee's coffin and Finch noticed with a start that the Earl's eyes were closed. Now, they were open before, weren't they? He thought frantically. Or is it Stander's eyes I'm thinking of? Wait now, Stander's were open and the Earl's closed; yes, that's it. I'll go daft if I don't get out of here soon!

At the door, Finch turned off the lantern and put it down. He opened the heavy vault door an inch and peered out. A full moon cast an eerie silver glow over the cemetery. Finch listened for a moment, hearing nothing. Quietly he opened the door just far enough to reach out and slowly lower the locking handle until it was in its closed position. That done, he reached out with the key, slipped it into the lock and turned the holding tumblers into place. There now, he thought, if the door will just force shut from inside, the crypt'll be sealed tight again.

Finch leaned his weight against the door. It snapped solidly into place and held firmly.

And that, Finch thought, takes care of any evidence. With the key inside, the crypt of Sheel will never again be opened.

Picking up his lantern, Finch switched it on again and started back for his tunnel. He could not help thinking about Tyron Murfee's eyes. Were they open or closed? As he passed the coffin, he deliberately flashed the beam of light on it, then tried to steady it.

Finch froze in terror, his blood turning icy, his palms and the bottoms of his feet and the inside of his mouth drawing up in tight, cold panic. The coffin of Tyron Murfee, the last Earl of Sheel, was empty!

"No," Finch muttered in a quivering whisper, "no, no, no—"

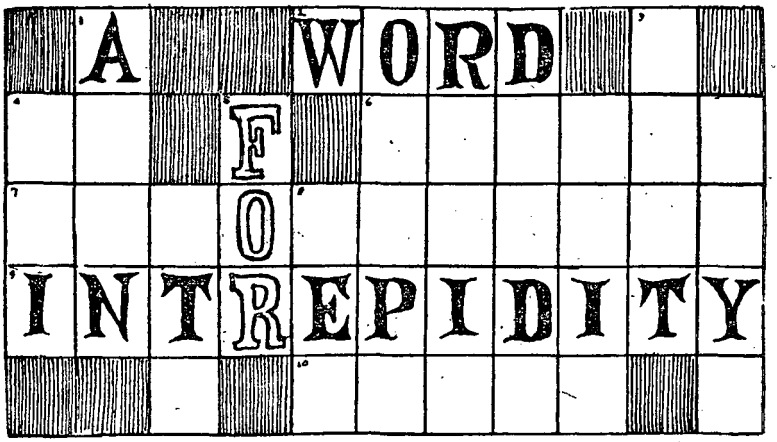
The lantern slipped from his hand; its beam of light flashed and whirled about the crypt as it bounced and tumbled from coffin edge to bier to the ground, finally landing upright between Finch and the tunnel. When it was still, the lantern cast its light straight again, shining brightly on the tunnel hole—now the only way out of the crypt.

And in the hole, twisting and writhing, his face contorted in epileptic madness, was Tyron Murfee, his huge bulk hopelessly stuck in the hole.

Finch, still holding the useless key in one hand, screamed.

Outside the crypt, silence reigned over the cemetery and all in its domain were of the dead.

Since the action which follows is based upon 'intrepidity', it does seem rather pertinent to hint here that one can rarely, "Patch grief with proverbs."



By CARROLL MAYERS

You might say the whole affair never would have happened if I hadn't bought that evening paper. Then, I wouldn't have tackled the crossword puzzle in a burst of unwarranted confidence, and Howie Peters, my partner, wouldn't have seen that photo. But I did and he did—and the caper started cooking.

When it came to killing an evening, we usually elected from a favorite trio: bowling, burlesque, or babes. As we finished a late supper that night, Howie indicated his

current choice. "The waitress tells me she's got a real sociable friend, Lenny."

Our waitress was a willowy redhead with all the proper equipment. If her friend were constructed along the same bounteous lines, sociability could be enthralling. At the moment, though, our joint exchequer was in the throes of pernicious financial anemia.

"Down, boy," I told him. "You know the dames are out until we come up with a respectable score."

He grinned at me. "We've still got almost a hundred."

"And I still like to eat regularly," I countered. "As long as you won't hit your uncle for a stake, forget the night life for a while. That hundred will go fast enough."

Howie frowned. I didn't care that he did, his Uncle Fred being a figurative bone of contention we'd gnawed on ever since our several ventures on the Coast had soured. We'd had some fairly lucrative enterprises going for us: magazine subscription solicitation without benefit of publisher; aluminum siding salesmen with a non-existent factory; a fund-raising campaign for a deserving but unspecified charity.

Unfortunately, some of our prospects had seen fit to approach their better business bureaus; we'd been obliged to decamp somewhat hastily, work our way east with no opportunity to replenish the bankroll materially.

That was where Howie's uncle came in. Since we'd teamed up, Howie had mentioned his relative once or twice. A widower and retired accountant, the old man apparently had saved his money, lived a simple life in Steel City. I could conceive no reason why we shouldn't look him up, hit him for a stake, being kinfolk and all. Howie, though, vehemently nixed the idea. It appeared he and his uncle never had gotten along.

But I didn't give up. As we kept ahead of the law across country, I continued badgering Howie, and one night after considerable alcoholic intake he agreed to stop over in his uncle's town. We made Steel City, all right, but sobering up in the morning, Howie reverted to his original obdurate stand.

He still maintained it, now. "Forget it, Lenny," he said shortly. "I told you before, the old man's down on me. Always has been. I wouldn't take a plugged nickel from him, and I'll be only too happy when we skip this town."

"You're just pigheaded. We're right here. If he's well-fixed—"

"I said, forget it. We'll make out some other way. And I never said he had a lot of dough."

I sighed. "Okay," I said. "You're

the doctor, but until we hit that other way, start passing up the bright lights routine."

His grin came back as he nodded. "You're right," he conceded. "Well, a couple of quiet evenings won't kill us."

So that was how I came to buy the paper; something to read before we hit the sack. Back in the room we'd taken center-city, I split the edition, giving Howie the main news section. My half wasn't too interesting. Most of the sports coverage was local, the comics something I seldom read. Finally, I settled for the crossword puzzle. Ordinarily, I'm no whiz in that department, but this one went pretty well. I negotiated an East Indian sacred temple, a carnivorous South American rodent, was just beginning to congratulate myself on some unsuspected gray matter, when I came a cropper.

"Give me a word for 'intrepidity'," I asked Howie.

"Eh?"

"'Intrepidity'. What's another word?"

He'd apparently come across a news item which intrigued him; he sighed at the interruption. "I don't know. Heroism? Fortitude? Valor? How many letters?"

"Eight. Blank, blank, D, blank, blank, blank, blank, Y."

He thought a moment. "How about audacity? A-u-d-a-c-i-t-y."

I checked, filled in the squares. "Good," I said. "Now, how about this next—"

Howie cut me off with an impatient gesture. "You and those blasted puzzles!" He extended the page he'd been reading. "Look at that. We've been stewing over keeping ahead of the cops, somehow picking up maybe a grand or two, and Big John Michaels is tossing away a small fortune on some dizzy dame."

The item was a three-column photo depicting a smiling, heavy-set man adjusting a necklace about the throat of a lush-lipped chick in an off-the-shoulders gown. I polished my glasses. Some dubiously inspired genius had tagged the pic, BAUBLES FOR A BEAUTY, and the accompanying text read: *"Evincing no concern over his upcoming federal court appearance for tax evasion, local entrepreneur John Michaels bestows tokens of esteem on his latest discovery, Miss Cherry Larkin, Queen of the Municipal Charities Ball tomorrow evening."*

Howie had known I'd recognize Big John Michaels' name. Thanks to an enterprising press, probably everybody in that part of the country knew him. Michaels ostensibly was only what the pic caption implied, a nightspot operator with a

flair for promotion. Reliable rumor, though, linked him with multiple underworld activities involving gambling, dope, girls. Both state and federal authorities had been investigating him without success, until Washington agents tapped him for tax evasion. But judging by Michaels' mien in the photo, even that rap wasn't costing him any sleep.

"So he's got it made," I told Howie, handing back the paper. "All of us can't hit the big time."

"Maybe not," he said, "but I'd sure like a piece of it." He scowled at the photo. "That necklace must be real. Probably eight, ten thousand. And did you spot those matching earrings?"

I tried to ease his arteries. "I was more interested in the gown that chick almost isn't wearing," I said.

He wasn't placated; he glared at the photo as though it were some personal affront. I went back to the crossword. Maybe ten minutes passed, then Howie abruptly put down the paper. "That's it!" he exclaimed.

"Huh?"

"Audacity! That's just what we should use. We'll be small-time grifters all our lives if we don't!"

I wasn't too certain of his tack. "We've worked a few barefaced cons," I suggested.

"Penny ante stuff," Howie told me. "That's why we're holed up here, marking time." He bent forward earnestly, thin features intent with some sudden conviction. "What we should try is something really gutsy." He picked up the paper again. "Like scoring with that ice Michaels is throwing around."

I was still out in left field, although a glimmer of comprehension was burgeoning. The only trouble was, the glimmer wasn't particularly appealing. I eyed Howie directly. "You're saying we try for that stuff?"

"Exactly."

"Just like that! Grab it and blow?"

"Exactly." He was smiling at me now, worked up, confident. "The doll's certain to wear that necklace and earrings to the charity ball tomorrow night. Twelve, fifteen G's. We'll never have a better chance for a real hit."

My brain was spinning. "For Pete's sake!" I protested. "We can't hope to get clear from a ballroom jammed with hundreds of people."

He shook his head. "Not at the ball," he corrected. "Afterward. The filly is obviously Michaels' latest interest. He's bound to squire her to the affair, take her home." He smiled again. "She's just as sure to ask him in to—ah—show her appreciation. There'll be only the two

of them, and we'll be waiting, see?"

"But we're not heisters. We've never tried a muscle job."

"So we're changing; branching out; using more audacity."

See? All at once he was hipped on the word. "But it's crazy, Howie," I told him. "Even if it develops like you say—and we do grab the stuff, get away—Michaels will never take the loss lying down. It's an odds-on certainty he has the organization he's rumored to have, and every hotshot hood on his payroll will be gunning for us."

He sobered a bit. "I don't think so," he countered. "First, while it'll be a big score for us, it'll be relatively a drop in the bucket to Big John. Second, with his government trouble, he's not too likely to risk ordering too much heat right now." Howie stopped, chuckled softly. "I think we can pull it off," he finished.

There probably were a hundred arguments against the caper, and I tried all I could muster. Where did the Larkin babe live? How would we get in? Where would we get the artillery to persuade Michaels to hand over the baubles? What would we do once we had them?

Howie fielded every query neatly. The address of as luscious a doll as Cherry Larkin should be as well known around town as her measurements, and once ascertained, a skeleton key or celluloid strip would take care of our entry. A revolver could be ransomed from any pawn shop, the ammunition from any sports store. And I'd be highballing a 'borrowed' car (Howie didn't drive) clear of town before any pursuit could be organized.

In the end, I gave in. "All right," I sighed, "we'll try it, but I still think it's crazy."

Howie was confidence plus. "Relax, Lenny," he told me. "You'll get gray hair."

"I just hope I live long enough," I answered him and went to bed. I didn't expect to sleep much, and I didn't.

The next day, though, some of Howie's confidence began to reach me. He went out around eleven, returned just before one with a bag of sandwiches, a bottle of Scotch and a big smile. The smile was because he also had a .32 revolver tucked under his belt, and Cherry Larkin's apartment address tucked in his head. I started believing we could bring it off, at that. Even fencing the jewelry later, we should realize a tidy profit.

We killed the rest of the day and evening playing Gin, finishing the Scotch, and mentally spending the proceeds of our take. At ten we went out to the restaurant, had a good meal, then returned to the

room to knock off two more hours. At midnight, after playing a final angle by dialing Cherry's number and getting no answer, we set out on Operation Audacity.

Step one went auspiciously; two blocks from the room we spotted a fast-looking car in the parking lot of a corner bar. The keys dangled from the ignition. Another minute, the lot had a vacant spot.

Our objective was a swanky apartment building on the west side of town. There was a liveried doorman, but Howie had checked out the premises and we slipped in an all-night rear service door, climbed the fire stairs. The softly lighted hallway was deserted when Howie took a celluloid calendar memo from his wallet, deftly manipulated Cherry's door.

Inside, we settled down to wait. We left the lights off, and so our victims wouldn't smell tobacco and possibly get an instant's forewarning when they entered, we didn't smoke. It was tedious business. I fidgeted, cleaned my cheaters in the dark. Once I got up, began prowling the apartment at random, looking for some loose cash or other prize I might pick up as a bonus.

Howie stopped me. "Forget it," he ordered. "We're not petty thieves."

It was nice to realize we had ethics. I sat down again. The minutes dragged on. I began to wonder if Howie had doped developments correctly, if Michaels would return with Cherry to do the 'appreciation' bit. With her endowments, I knew I personally wouldn't have been dissuaded by wild horses, but if Big John were made of sterner stuff and didn't show, if the girl returned alone, it would be that much easier.

My speculation broke off as a key rasped in the lock. Moving swiftly, Howie flattened himself against the wall to be behind the door when it opened. I pressed close beside him. The door swung inward, a light switch snicked, and Michaels and the girl entered the apartment.

The abrupt glare was blinding, but Howie's vision adjusted fast. Stepping out quietly, he jabbed the .32 into Michaels' back. "Easy does it, both of you," he said smoothly. "No tricks and nobody gets hurt."

Cherry gasped, involuntarily jerked about, then froze, her mouth a trembling red O as she gaped at the revolver. Big John stiffened but other than a ridging of muscle along his jawline he showed no emotion, merely stared straight ahead.

I'd been quick to note Cherry still wore the necklace and ear-

rings. Howie had too; he stepped around Michaels, nodded at me. "Collection time," he said.

The girl offered no resistance as I denuded her of her finery; she still was badly frightened. Michaels, though, stabbed me with bleak, expressionless eyes. "You're making a bad mistake, mister," he told me tightly.

The grin Howie flashed was cocky. "We'll chance that," he said. "Now, listen to the birdies." Moving close, he laid the revolver butt neatly behind Michaels' left ear. The big man collapsed.

Cherry Larkin whimpered, flinched from Howie. Howie's grin came back. "Sorry, honey," he told her. "We'd love to stay and comfort you, but we can't spare the time." Propelling the girl across the room, he locked her in a closet. Then he caught my arm, shoved me toward the door. "Let's go. Fast!"

We went, legged it down the fire stairs. Then the script freewheeled. As we raced from the building, my feet zigged when they should have zagged and I tripped, sprawled headlong, struck my head. The noggin knock wasn't serious, but both lenses of my glasses were shattered.

Howie hauled me to my feet. "You all right?"

"Fine," I squinted at him, "but you've just lost a chauffeur, buddy."

He swore softly, recognizing our bind. Without the cheaters, I couldn't see well enough to drive, and he'd never learned. "Lousy break!" he fumed.

That it was, but tempus was fugiting. "Now what?" I demanded.

"I don't know. Let me think."

"While you're thinking, Big John's coming back from bye-bye."

"I know, I know!" he muttered. "We've got to make tracks, but public transportation's too risky. A bus driver or hackie might remember us. The same goes for rail or air personnel—"

Abruptly, I cut him off. I had an answer to our possibly being traced. I knew Howie would fight me, but under the circumstances he'd have to buy it.

"Your uncle," I told him. "He's our best bet."

He shot me a hard look. "No," he said. "I told you before, no."

"Come off it, Howie," I said. "We can't stand here. We've got to get off the street, holed up where we can't be run down. We can't risk going back to the room; too many people have seen us there, might tab our descriptions. Your uncle's place is our only out."

For a long moment he hesitated, breathing hard, fighting my reasoning. Finally, he yielded. "All

right," he agreed shortly. "I can't figure anything else."

There was one angle in our favor. Howie's uncle's home, a small, unpretentious bungalow, was in the same part of town, only some eight blocks distant. We made it without incident.

Despite the late hour, a light burned in the front room. Howie thumbed the bell, manufactured a casual smile when the door cracked open on a safety chain. "It's me, Uncle Fred. Howie."

I squinted over Howie's shoulder. Uncle Fred was a thin jasper with sparse gray hair, the rounded shoulders of a man who'd spent a lifetime poring over figures. He frowned upon recognition, made no move to release the chain.

"Come on, Unk." Howie's smile thinned a bit as he pressed against the door. "Open up."

Reluctantly, the old man slipped the chain. "What are you doing here this time of night?"

Howie held to his casual air as we stepped into the neat living-room, one corner of which, I noted, was set up with a desk and straight-back chair, gooseneck lamp and filing cabinet. "Lenny, my Uncle Fred," Howie said. "Unk, meet Lenny Marcus. We just happened to be passing through town—"

The old man stopped Howie with a short gesture. "What is this, Howie?" he wanted to know. "Don't dissemble with me. You're in some sort of trouble, aren't you?"

"Unk, I told you—"

"We both know you'd never voluntarily come here at this hour without a reason. What is it?"

Howie gave me a brief glance, abandoned his airy casualness. "All right," he said flatly, "we're in a bind. We're staying here for a while."

Uncle Fred appeared a spunky character; Howie's hardened attitude didn't faze him. "You can't," he said. "There isn't room."

Howie shrugged. "We'll make room."

"But my work," the old man protested, indicating the ledger-laden desk. "I take on odd jobs at home, now. People keep dropping in."

"Let them drop. We'll keep out of sight."

Uncle Fred's rounded shoulders squared. "No," he said.

Howie grinned at his relative without humor, carelessly opened his jacket to expose the .32 under his belt. "Yes, Unk," he corrected.

Sight of the revolver wilted the old man. He moistened his lips, retreated to the desk chair and sat down stiffly. Howie relished his little triumph. "You were working late tonight, Unk?"

"Y-yes," Uncle Fred stuttered. "So finish up. Then we'll all hit the sack."

It was checkmate, all right, and Uncle Fred seemed to recognize it. He swung around, resumed work on the books. Howie sprawled on a sofa. "Let's see the loot, Lenny."

I fished the necklace and earrings from my pocket. They made a lovely sight, winking and blinking in the light, and I had to admit Howie's nerve had paid off. We spent some forty minutes dreaming up ways to enjoy the take while Uncle Fred worked in silence. Then the doorbell rang.

Howie stiffened, gave his uncle a hard look. The old man spread his hands. "I told you, clients come."

"At this time of night?" Howie queried, then didn't wait for an answer as he motioned to me. "Into the bedroom."

We retreated to the adjoining room, shut the door. You might say that was our major tactical error of the night. Because the bedroom had no other exit—except a window we had no time to crash—and in less than five minutes we could have used a dozen exits. Prior to that elapsed time we could hear only a murmur of voices from the livingroom. Then the bedroom door was yanked open abruptly, and a duo of stolid characters with hard faces and harder muscles barged in. Behind them I made out the grimly smiling features of Big John Michaels.

"Just collect the ice, boys," Big John instructed his hoods pleasantly. "I'll collect the new books."

Comprehension exploded in my brain as I recalled that newspaper photo text. Michaels had shown no concern over his scheduled court appearance for tax evasion because he'd been confident he would beat the rap. Good old ex-accountant Uncle Fred had begat that confidence; Michaels was one of his 'clients' and he'd been completing a second set of books to foil the government agents, which ledgers Big John had come to collect.

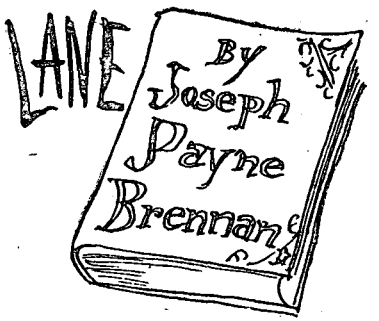
I reasoned no further. Slashing brass knuckles rather dulled my mental processes after that. Howie had no chance to go for his gun, fared no better.

At that, probably in deference to the old man, Michaels let us get out of it alive. In two weeks, I needed only one crutch. I didn't smile much, though; three missing front teeth make a big gap.

And I broke up with Howie. He was clever and shrewd, all right, but I figured for me he just had too much—what was that word, again? Oh, yeah. Audacity.

Premises based on speculation may be adopted for preliminary exploration, but without logic as an ally the ingenious probes may come to naught.

The Mystery of Myrrh Lane



IN the fall of 1958 I became seriously concerned about my investigator friend, Lucius Leffing. Although he possessed a slender income derived from inherited securities, it was scarcely enough to meet his routine living expenses. Luckily, his small house at seven Autumn Street was mortgage free, or he might have found himself in serious financial difficulties.

I was convinced that he was not eating properly. When a person of very modest means has a taste for thirty-year-old cask-mellowed cognac, and a passion for expensive Victorian antiques, including the rarest art glass available, something is bound to suffer. In Leffing's case, I felt it was his stomach. His thin angular face grew thinner, his manner more restless.

What exasperated me was my personal knowledge that he possessed the ability to improve his circumstances materially. He had one of the keenest brains I have ever encountered, but lacked the aggression to exploit it. If a case interested him, he would accept it, even though he knew in advance his fee could be no more than nominal. On the other hand, no prof-

fered sum could move him if a case lacked features which were not to some degree intriguing to him. His actual preference was for problems in which there was some element of the supernatural, but these cases did not occur very frequently.

One cold afternoon in late October when the yellow maple leaves were beginning to fall, I stopped in at seven Autumn Street. Leffing greeted me cordially, brought a glass of sarsaparilla, and then returned to his favorite Morris chair. I gained the impression he had sat there most of the day.

"You must rouse yourself," I told him. "Why not take a walk in this brisk air before dinner?"

He shrugged. "Walks depress me these days. Just yesterday I noticed that one of my favorite old brick houses, which must have been built prior to the War Between the States, has been pounded into rubble. New Haven will soon be nothing but a huge, ugly conglomeration of dehumanized steel and concrete rectangles. Brennan, I pine for the days of the Old State House, Quality Row, elm-shaded brick sidewalks, and the Tontine for a leisurely dinner."

"I share your sentiments," I told him, "but one must face up to the present. You need some problem to occupy your mind. I haven't played chess in years, but maybe—"

Then the doorbell rang. Leffing arose languidly. There was a brief conversation in the entrance hall, and my friend ushered in a nondescript individual who stood staring at the contents of the living-room.

"Ah, Mr. Leffing," he exclaimed, "you have some fine pieces here! Some very fine pieces, sir!"

Leffing bowed. "I pride myself that they are at least authentic."

I was introduced to the stranger, a Mr. Mersh, an undersized man with somewhat protuberant eyes, who settled gingerly on the edge of an upholstered easy chair manufactured well over a hundred years ago. His eyes continued to rove around the room.

Leffing resumed his Morris chair. "Now then, Mr. Mersh, tell us the details of this vandalism."

Mersh spread his hands. "It is an outrage, I tell you! An outrage! On two occasions they have broken into my shop and smashed valuable antiques, twice in two weeks! The police take notes and walk away. The insurance company looks suspicious. What can I do? I'm a man of very limited means, Mr. Leffing!"

Leffing nodded. "Please start at the beginning, Mr. Mersh. We must have a coherent account, you know, if we are to make any head-

way with solving this business."

Mersh took a deep breath and settled back in his chair. "I run a small antique shop on State Street. Been there seven years. It's a living —no more. But the rent is small and I get by. Never any trouble. Once I had to call the cops when a drunk stumbled in, but most of the time it's quiet. A few sales a day, and in between I do some refinishing, minor repairs, polishing. You know, small jobs. You wouldn't say I was a very important person, now would you? Not a man to make enemies?"

"Small shopkeepers were once the backbone of the nation," Leffing replied. "As for enemies—who knows, Mr. Mersh? I once heard of a man who made an enemy merely by changing the part in his hair! Pray, continue."

"Two weeks ago yesterday," our visitor went on, "somebody broke into my shop and smashed three antique desks, a bureau-bookcase, and a chest of drawers. Tore them apart, I tell you!"

"In what way were these articles damaged?" Leffing asked.

Mersh's eyes grew more protuberant. "Pulled out all the drawers and broke them apart! Split the panels!"

Leffing nodded. "Continue, Mr. Mersh."

Mersh sighed with exasperation. "I called in the police and they asked a lot of questions, said I should put in a burglar alarm. I reported the damage to my insurance agent and started to patch up the best pieces. I spent almost a week on one of the desks."

He leaned forward in his chair, his eyes bright with anger. "And then, Mr. Leffing, two nights ago someone broke in again! This time they damaged a Sheraton side table, a Victorian commode, a walnut table, and a good Queen Anne lowboy—drawers pulled out and broken apart, panels cracked open. Sheer vandalism, Mr. Leffing! The police took notes again, and my insurance agent acts like I did the damage myself! Mr. Leffing, I'm desperate! Half of my best stock has been wrecked. It will take me a year to repair all the damage. If they break in once more, I'm a ruined man!"

Leffing sat frowning, then said, "I will take the case, Mr. Mersh. It presents some features of interest. Besides, anyone who willfully damages irreplaceable antique furniture deserves to be run down."

Mersh cleared his throat. "Mr. Leffing, about your fee. I will do the best—"

"We will discuss it later," Leffing interrupted. "Do not concern yourself about it. Two questions: Was anything taken from the shop

on either occasion? And have you any *known* enemies?"

Mersh shook his head. "No; nothing was stolen either time, Mr. Leffing. As for enemies, I know of none. I never cheated anyone in my life. I pay my bills. I satisfy my customers."

Leffing stood up. "Very good. We will pay you a visit tomorrow morning. Put some extra strong bulbs in your shop lights tonight and leave them on." He escorted Mersh to the door and came back rubbing his hands together. "Well, Brennan, a strange little problem! It should afford us some diversion!"

I was not enthusiastic. "I'm afraid diversion may be your only reward, Leffing, and I'm not sure the problem is strange at all. Sounds like childish spite work to me."

Leffing sprawled in his Morris chair. "At this point, the matter of a fee is of secondary interest. There are times when I am so overwhelmed with ennui and the pedestrian aspects of this present age that I would gladly undertake cases of even minor interest for my expenses, plus a dollar a day. As for spite work, well, we shall see. I am inclined to believe otherwise."

"How on earth," I asked, "did Mersh manage to seek you out?"

A whimsical smile touched Leffing's face. "I do not advertise, Brennan. We must therefore conclude that one of your little accounts of some case of mine has got into Mr. Mersh's hands. You have no one to blame but yourself!"

Mr. Mersh's antique shop was located on lower State Street in a section which has not fared too well with the passage of time. Cut-rate stores, shabby restaurants, and poorly stocked newsstands comprise most of the block. Overhead are dingy lofts, largely unoccupied.

Mersh welcomed us eagerly. He had assembled the damaged furniture along one wall of his shop. He waved his hand toward it. "There you are, gentlemen. You can see I was not exaggerating!"

The damage was truly appalling. Antique desks, tables and the other pieces had been almost torn apart. Drawers had been pulled out and smashed, whole panels had been split or staved in.

Leffing inspected the pieces individually, frowning with genuine distress. I knew it pained him to see antique furniture dealt with in such a fashion.

He straightened up finally and shook his head. "A vicious business, Brennan."

"Did you find any clues, Mr. Leffing?" Mersh asked.

Leffing shrugged. "No definite

clues, Mr. Mersh. Let me ask a question or two. How did you acquire this furniture—piece by piece, or in a lot purchase?"

"One desk and the Sheraton side table I bought as separate pieces," Mersh replied. "The other items came together from an auction sale."

"Who was the original owner of the lot purchase?"

"A Mr. Frederick Bramwood. He died a few months ago and his furnishings were auctioned off. Had a house up in Simsbury."

"Can you give me Bramwell's address and the name of the auction house?"

Mersh nodded. "I remember the address, 50 Blue Hills Court. The auction was in charge of Collis & Canderson from Hartford."

Leffing noted down the information. "Can you also," he inquired, "give me the names and addresses of the persons from whom you bought the desk and the Sheraton side table?"

Mersh fumbled in a pigeonhole desk and finally came up with this additional information, which Leffing added to his notebook.

"One further question, Mr. Mersh. Was anything besides furniture included in the auction lot which you purchased?"

Mersh thought a moment. "I almost forgot. There were a few old pictures, Mr. Leffing, of no account. The auctioneer included them with the furniture. I thought I might salvage a frame or two."

"You have these pictures?"

Mersh nodded toward one corner of the shop. "Piled up there. I'd thought of throwing them out. The frames are pretty poor, after all."

I followed Leffing to the corner. The pictures were a drab lot—faded water colors, stylized landscapes and enlarged photographic reproductions of several nineteenth-century American literary figures, including Longfellow, Whittier, Poe and Hawthorne. The reproductions were dim, the frames chipped and discolored.

Leffing glanced at them with obvious disappointment. "Nothing else, Mr. Mersh?"

"No, sir. That was the lot of it. Nothing else at all."

"Well, you will be hearing from me. Meanwhile, keep your shop lights on overnight."

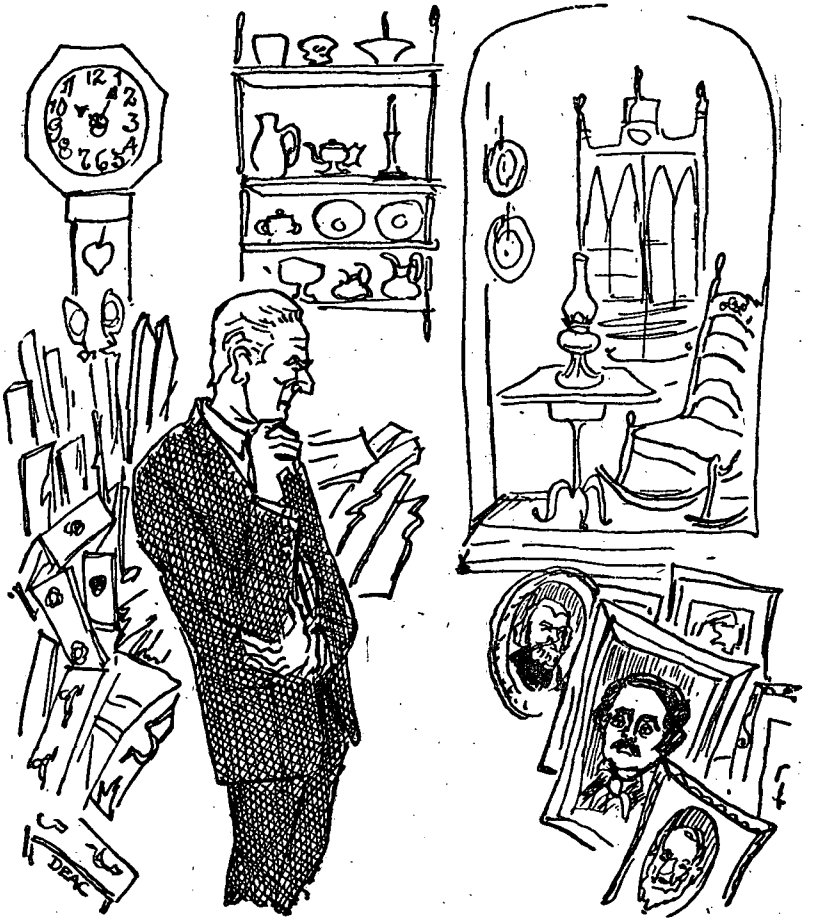
As I drove Leffing back to seven Autumn Street, he had little to say. Before I left, he promised to keep me informed of developments.

Several evenings later, as we sipped sarsaparilla in his gas-lit livingroom, he brought me up to date.

"I have learned that Bramwood's only relative and heir, a nephew,

Mr. Andrew Lorimer, arranged the auction of his uncle's furnishings. I have also been in touch with the auction house, Collis & Canderson. They kindly consented to send me a list of all the persons who made purchases at the Bramwood sale. The list arrived this morning, and I have been going over the names with some care."

"I admire your industry," I said, "but I really fail to see that all this has any direct bearing on the person who broke into Mersh's shop



and purposely smashed furniture."

"I fear some leg work is in order, Brennan. The auctioneer's list has not yielded any promising information. Perhaps a visit to Mr. Andrew Lorimer might be worthwhile at this point."

"I've a tankful of gas," I told him. "Where does Lorimer live?"

"In Windsor, up near Hartford."

"Not far at all. Whenever you want to go."

"I shall telephone Mr. Lorimer this evening and try to arrange a meeting for tomorrow. I will let you know if a visit is feasible."

I nodded. "Call me tonight. I'll make arrangements to take tomorrow off, if necessary."

Leffing telephoned that evening, informing me that Mr. Lorimer had agreed to see him at noon the next day.

We arrived in Windsor about eleven forty-five. Mr. Lorimer lived in a white frame colonial in an area which had probably once been select but was now becoming clotted with housing developments and parking lots.

Lorimer, a slim, neatly-groomed man I judged to be in the mid-thirties, was polite, but aloof and somewhat impatient. I gathered he had returned from his office to meet Leffing and that he had not yet lunched. He spoke with a very slight Southern accent.

"There's not much I can tell you. Frankly, my uncle was a bit eccentric, and we had little in common. I was somewhat surprised that he left me his property, but I was the only living relative he had. I thought it best to put the house up for sale and dispose of the contents as quickly as possible, especially since I may be transferred from this part of the country. Why anyone should break in and smash my uncle's antique furniture is utterly beyond me. It makes no sense. I think it must have been juvenile delinquents, or perhaps the shop owner himself after insurance."

"Might I inquire what business Mr. Bramwood was engaged in?"

Lorimer glanced at his watch. "My uncle dealt in antiques and old books for many years, but he retired from the business a decade ago. He kept some of the antiques to furnish his house, and sold off the remaining stock. I understand he was quite knowledgeable in the field, and was considered highly successful."

Leffing thanked Lorimer, and we were headed for the door when our somewhat impatient host, surprisingly, called after us.

"Mr. Leffing, there was one puzzling thing. I just remembered it."

Leffing turned. "And what was that, Mr. Lorimer?"

"Well, the night my uncle was

stricken, a neighbor telephoned me. I hurried to the hospital and remained until the end. Shortly before he died, my uncle rallied partially from a comatose state and tried—rather desperately I thought—to say something. His speech was blurred and scarcely audible. At one point, gasping between every syllable, I thought he said something like, 'Back poor Tom Myrrh Lane'. But I could not swear those were the words. They mean absolutely nothing to me."

Leffing appeared enthralled by this bit of information. "Myrrh Lane, indeed! Tell me, Mr. Lorimer, had your uncle ever traveled abroad? Had he ever visited London?"

Lorimer nodded. "Some twenty years ago he made a trip to England. It was a combined business and pleasure jaunt. Yes, I'm sure he must have visited London."

Leffing thanked him again and we left. As we drove off, my friend appeared lost in thought. It was obvious to me that he was intrigued by Bramwood's cryptic deathbed mutterings.

"If the trail leads to London," I told him, "you will have to count me out."

He smiled. "It seems unlikely. Bramwood's last words may have been the product of pure delirium. And yet 'Myrrh Lane' smacks to me of old London! And who was 'Poor Tom'?"

"I am at a complete loss," I admitted. "I cannot even begin to make heads or tails of the business."

Leffing pulled a paper from his pocket and glanced at his watch. "Brennan, since we are nearby, would it be possible to drive into Hartford and stop at Garnivan's Book Store? Garnivan's you know, bought Bramwood's remaining books at the recent auction. The address is 187 Riverview Road."

"Yes," I replied acidly, "I knew all about Garnivan's buying Bramwood's books—particularly since this is the first time you've mentioned it!"

Leffing placed his hand on my arm. "I am sorry, my dear fellow. I should have filled you in more adequately."

There wasn't any Garnivan at Garnivan's. The manager was a portly, prosperous looking individual named Meyerstock. He recalled the Bramwood books, spreading his hands in a gesture of indifference.

"I think Mr. Bramwood sold the best of his books before he died. The lot we acquired was quite routine. After expenses, we might just double our money. Scarcely worth the trip out to Simsbury, when you figure in our time."

"You noticed nothing remarkable about any of the books, nothing unusual?" Leffing asked.

Meyerstock shook his head. "Nothing unusual. Shelf fillers. We even put some of the books in the half-dollar bins on the sidewalk in front."

"Some of them have already been sold then?"

Meyerstock nodded. "Quite a few. We have a brisk trade here." He seemed about to turn away, but paused and rubbed a pudgy finger across his chin. "There was one peculiar thing happened. A young man bought several of the books from a bin, right after we put them out. The very next day he came back, asked a lot of questions, and insisted on seeing the other books in the Bramwood lot. Went through them page by page. Must have spent two hours, then left without buying any more at all."

Leffing's angular face assumed the questing look which I knew so well. "May I ask what were the young man's questions?"

"Where we had got the books; who conducted the auction; did anyone else buy books; what else was sold; who bought it, and so on. Of course we try to be polite to customers, but I must say I got tired of answering his questions."

"If we are not also trying your patience, Mr. Meyerstock, may we have a description of the young man? And did he give you his name?"

"Paid cash and didn't want any receipt, so I don't know his name. He was thin and dark, about twenty-eight, bright brownish eyes, not much chin, passably dressed in a grey suit. Nothing special I can remember about him otherwise, I'm afraid. He was just another walk-in, one of dozens every day."

We pulled away from Garnivan's-Meyerstock, and I commented irritably, "It seems obvious to me, Leffing, that the weak-chinned young man found a twenty-dollar bill in one of the books and came back panting for more. It's a false lead. And I'm afraid Poor Tom skulking in Myrrh Lane is another red herring."

"You may be right," Leffing replied, a bit wearily. "I must admit the jigsaw pieces do not appear to fit this time."

He scarcely said another word until I was south of New London. Then he suddenly sat bolt upright. "I may have it, Brennan!" he exclaimed. "Waste no time! Drive straight to Mersh's shop on State Street!"

I knew better than to ply him with questions. My foot pressed the accelerator and stayed down until city traffic got in the way. I pulled up in front of Mersh's shop

at precisely four-thirty. Leffing disappeared inside while I was still fumbling with the parking meter.

As I walked in, I heard his voice raised in consternation. "They must be recovered, Mr. Mersh! We must take after him at once!"

A moment later both Leffing and Mersh came dashing toward the door.

"Back to the car, Brennan!" Leffing ordered. "We have a pursuit!"

Mersh locked the door; we piled into the car and I pulled away, mourning my lost nickel.

"North on State Street!" Mersh instructed. "Look for an old panel truck with a red cab."

Every light on State Street flicked red as I approached. But there was no panel truck with a red cab.

"Turn here," Mersh instructed as we neared Ferry Street. "Bear left over the bridge."

I gunned the old car down Quinnipiac Avenue, but there was still no sign of a red-cab panel truck.

Mersh wiped perspiration from his face. "I thought he'd stop for a beer, but I guess he didn't. Must be at the dump already."

"We're going to the dump?" I asked.

"Yes, Brennan," Leffing replied. "Pray that we are not too late."

I pulled off Quinnipiac onto the rutted cinder track which led to the city dump. A big brown rat raced across in front of the car.

As we bumped around a mound of calcified rubbish, the back of a panel truck came into view. Someone was lifting items from the floor of the truck and hurling them toward a smoking pile of trash. Flames licked around the edges of the pile.

Leffing was out of the car and racing toward the truck before I got the brake on. "Stop!" he called.

Mersh scuttled after him. "Hold it, Jali!" he yelled.

Jali turned. A comical expression made up of amazement and fear crossed his face. I think he was convinced that two lunatics were after him. For a moment I thought he'd bolt.

As Leffing and Mersh rushed up, Jali was holding a framed picture of Henry Wadsworth Longfellow which he was about to pitch into the trash pile.

"The Poe!" Leffing exclaimed "Where is the Poe?"

Jali's wrinkled face registered absolute incomprehension. He gave a broken-tooth grin and said not a word.

"The other pictures, Jali! Where are they?" Mersh shouted.

But Leffing had already dashed toward the fire-fringed heap of rubbish. As we watched, he reached in among the flames and

snatched out a framed picture. He dropped it almost immediately but not before he had it free of the flames. The glass shattered as it struck the ground.

"It will cool off in a minute or two," he said, wrapping a handkerchief around his hand.

Neither Mersh nor I had the courtesy to ask him if he were badly burned. We were both too excited.

Jali joined our circle and the three of us stood staring down as Leffing took out a pocketknife and knelt. In a few moments he had pried off the wooden back of the frame. Underneath, carefully fitted in, was a brown envelope.

I thought Leffing's hands shook a little as he broke the wax seal on the envelope.

Then he slid out a small yellow pamphlet, measuring about six by four inches. My heart took time out as I read the paper cover: Tamerlane and other Poems, By a Bostonian. Boston: Calvin F. S. Thomas. Printer, 1827.

It was, of course, Edgar Allan Poe's first published book, a volume whose title has become a synonym for rarity.

As I bent closer, my amazement mounted. Underneath the byline, By a Bostonian, was a neat signature in copperplate longhand: Edgar A. Poe.

"Without the signature," Leffing said quietly, "It might fetch $25,000. With the signature, it is probably worth double that amount."

Nobody was more impressed than Jali. He was still shaking his head in disbelief when we left, although the twenty-dollar bill Mersh had pressed into his hand might have had something to do with it.

That evening after dinner, when we were comfortably ensconced in Leffing's Victorian livingroom, he lifted his glass of choice cognac. "Well, Brennan, to the successful conclusion of a case!"

"But Leffing," I protested, "we have not caught the culprit who wrecked Mersh's antique furniture!"

"No, nor shall we make further attempts to catch him. When he reads the newspaper accounts of Mersh's find, I think he will be sufficiently punished, and doubly when he learns the sum which I am confident it will return."

"I still don't know how you figured it out," I admitted. "I wish you would enlighten me."

My friend set down his glass. "In the first place, it was obvious to me that aimless vandalism was not the key motive behind the damaging of the antiques. In every instance *all drawers* were pulled out and broken apart. I concluded

at once that the intruder had been searching for something. The other damage, the smashing of panels, was done perfunctorily simply to give the appearance of senseless vandalism.

"For a time I believed the searcher was after hidden jewels, or perhaps rare stamps or coins. I did not entertain the possibility that he was hunting for a book until Meyerstock mentioned the weak-chinned young man—undoubtedly the culprit in this case. Even then I was not certain."

"But how did you actually tie in the hidden object with Poe's framed photograph?"

Leffing smiled. "Bramwood's dying words, as reported by his nephew, intrigued me. I kept repeating them in my mind, varying the pauses and accents, trying to make them yield up their riddle. 'Back poor Tom Myrrh Lane'. What *could* it mean? As we drove south from Hartford, I recalled a very minor but, in this case, tremendously important point—Lorimer's slight Southern accent. I pronounced to myself each word in the phrase. Now, obviously, there is only one word which a Southerner *might* pronounce differently and that is the word 'poor'. A Southerner might very well say 'po', dropping the 'r'. I varied the combinations and pauses, and suddenly realized 'Back po' Tom Myrrh Lane,' could be rearranged into 'Back Poe, Tom Myrrh Lane'. The brain works magically, Brennan. As soon as I had the word 'Poe', I recalled the Poe photograph and simultaneously recalled the title of Poe's famous, anonymously-printed first book, *Tamerlane*. The solution came like a thunderbolt: 'Back Poe, Tamerlane'! We must keep in mind that Bramwood was dying; his enunciation was necessarily garbled. It is not difficult to understand that Lorimer mistook 'Tam' for 'Tom'. The wonder of it is that he was able to hear any of the phrase correctly. The rest was easy. 'Back Poe, Tamerlane' could mean only one thing: Back of Poe's picture, there's a *Tamerlane*. That is what the dying man might have said had he the time, strength and energy to speak clearly."

"It all seems obvious when you explain it," I said, "but I doubt that I ever would have unraveled the business. There's still one thing I don't understand clearly however. How did the young man learn of the *Tamerlane*? Had Bramwood left a letter about it in one of his books?"

Leffing sipped his cognac. "We may never know for certain. But we can be sure that there was some reference to it in one of the

books—perhaps a letter. Possibly a scrap of diary. Perhaps a note scrawled on a flyleaf or in a margin. Years ago Bramwood must have picked up the *Tamerlane* in a bundle of pamphlets from someone who had no idea of its value. He hid the treasure, perhaps as a hedge for his old age, but he could not refrain from writing down something about his great find. The point is not important. The young man found the clue, and after combing through the rest of the Bramwood books, concluded that the rare item was hidden in a drawer, possibly a secret one, in a desk or other article of Bramwood's furniture."

"The hurried search for a secret drawer might well explain the extent of the damage done to those antiques," I commented.

Leffing nodded. "That is so. Had the weak-chinned young man approached the problem with more deliberation and less frenzy, however, he might have walked out of the shop with the Poe picture under his arm, and nobody ever the wiser!"

"Your fee," I said presently, "should be substantial."

"Well," commented Leffing with that casual attitude toward money which so often exasperated me, "we shall see what time will bring."

The signed *Tamerlane* eventually sold for $58,000 at auction. Lorimer brought suit, claiming the pamphlet was legally part of his inherited property, but since the *Tamerlane* was not mentioned in his uncle's will, which listed everything else, he lost the case.

Even after auction commissions and lawyer's costs, Mersh was left with a respectable sum.

One evening Leffing called me over to read a note which he had just received from the antique dealer. Along with it was a check for $10,000.

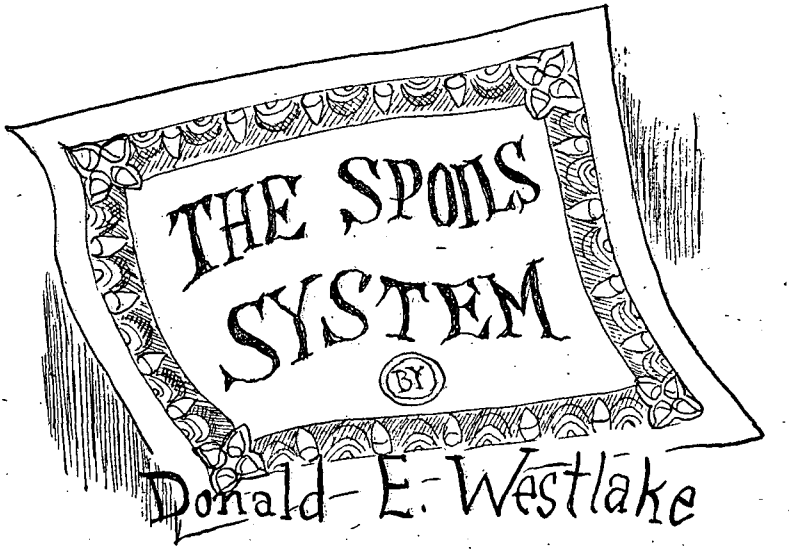
"Well, Brennan," he said with a whimsical grin on his angular face, "that little emolument ought to keep some decent brandy in the cellar for a season or two! What do you say?"

I didn't say anything. Reverentially, I replaced the check in the envelope and lifted my glass.

The "supine credulity" of man is said to be his most charming characteristic; certainly the proponent of the "fast sell" must find it so.

It was in the catacombish clubcar of the Phoebe Snow, that crack passenger express that roars across the Southern Tier of the Empire State with the speed of an income tax refund, that I most recently met Judd Dooley, a man with a strong sense of family. He is named for his infamous grandfather, the Judd Dooley celebrated in song and wanted poster, the man who, with the aid of patent medicine, gold watch and lost silver mine stock, opened the great midwest to the rapid patter, the fast shuffle and the quick getaway back around the turn of the century, a man sadly neglected by the television industry, which owes him a great deal.

The contemporary Judd Dooley is continuing the family tradition in a ceaseless barrage of non-violent outrages from Kennebunkport to



Mexicali, and is usually good for a reminiscence or two on his latest depredations against a public which has grown no less puerile since Grandpa's time.

Of course, there have been subtle differences in both the customer and the approach since Grandpa Dooley last foisted a genuine gold brick on a fatuous farmer in the bunco belt of the great midwest. Judd tells me that today's farmer is a much different cookie from the bucolic boob who supported his grandfather, and a much tougher cookie to crumble. But, says Judd, with a light of reverence in his eye, Grandpa would have felt right at home in today's suburbia, where the modern housewife controls the income and the modern con-man controls the outgo.

"I have just come from Cleveland," Judd told me, as we sat over Scotch on the rocks while the Phoebe Snow struggled out of Binghamton, "a town with suburbs that would have made Grandpa cry with delight. I was plying the Free Home Demonstration gizmo through a split-level development when—"

"Free Home Demonstration gizmo? I don't think I know it."

"You don't? It's a little gem—the quickest fast-fin dodge since the invention of Something For

Nothing. All it requires is a pocketful of forms, an identification card, an ingratiating smile and ten minutes of rapid chatter. The brand name involved is Electro-Tex Limited, and if the name sounds familiar you're half hooked already. The merchandise is a combination washer-dryer-television-radio-popup toaster-oven that retails for a stratospheric sum I won't even mention. But the company is about to commence an intensive advertising campaign, built around

the inane concept of the satisfied customer. *Therefore,* I have been sent around by the company to selected housewives to offer them a Free Home Demonstration, for a trial six week period, during which time they may have the Electro-Tex Push-Button Dew-It-Awl Wonder Whiz in their home, *absolutely free,* on the condition that we may use their name and a statement of satisfaction from them in our advertising."

"I imagine Mrs. America is normally interested by this time," I said.

"Interested? She couldn't be more excited if I were giving her a season pass to the Garry Moore show and a two-week vacation for two in Saskatchewan. She is frothing at the mouth."

"You've got her hooked, all right. But where does the swindle come in?"

"With all the wonders I am offering," said Judd, "could anyone in the world quibble over a measly five dollar damage deposit?"

"In advance, of course."

"If I had to wait until after the merchandise showed up, I'd be riding on top of the train, not inside here in the warm. But, as I was saying, I was working this gizmo with great success and dodging the pedigreed hounds who infest suburbia like one of the plagues of Egypt, when I happened to spy a personable young man working the same side of the street, and coming my way. His briefcase was black, bulging and polished to perfection. His eyes twinkled with bland sincerity behind a pair of black-rimmed spectacles, and his suit was so stark in its lines it's a wonder he didn't cut himself putting it on. Here, obviously, was another man in the same line of work.

"Not wanting either of us to create problems for the other, and since there were so many suburbs to choose from in the locality, I called to him, hoping we could work out an equitable distribution of the terrain.

"His name was Dan Miller, and he was perfectly agreeable to a division of spoils. Our occupations being what they are, we were both equipped with maps of the city, so we hunkered down on the sidewalk, surrounded by dogs, children and young men delivering ten-cents-off coupons, and divided the city between us in the age-old manner of the conquering invader. We learned that we were staying at the same hotel, a second-class but clean 'hustlery' called the Warwick, and made a date to meet in the cocktail lounge to compare notes on our sectors, for future use."

I got to my feet. "Another Scotch?"

"As a matter of fact," he said, "yes."

When I returned with the Scotch, swaying a bit (only an inveterate seafarer could feel really at home on the Phoebe Snow) I asked, "Was this Dan Miller working the Free Home Demonstration gizmo, too?"

"Thank you," he said, reaching for the glass, a man with whom first things are always first. "No, he was collecting donations for the Citizen's Committee to Keep Our Neighborhood Beautiful, with some magazine contest for the most beautiful neighborhood in the country as a tie-in. The donation games are all right, in a way, but I only work one when I'm really desperate. He'd have to do more talking per housewife for maybe a dollar donation than I had to do for a five dollar damage deposit. Dan Miller looked to me like a boy who was building a stake. I've already got a couple of permanent dodges that give me a steady trickle of income, mail order things and other gimmicks along the same line, so I haven't had to fall back on any of the smaller routines for a couple of years now.

"At any rate, I didn't see Dan Miller for about a week, not until I was finished with my half of the territory. I don't drink while I'm working, not even an after-dinner cocktail. It's one of the rules Grandpa instilled in me, and I've never known Grandpa to be wrong yet. So I didn't go to the cocktail lounge until a week later, when I had run out of territory and receipts."

"Receipts?"

Judd nodded. "Another of Grandpa's dictums," he said. "Never leave a sucker empty-handed. Always give him something for his money, some little memento he can press between the leaves of the family Spock, even if it's just a little scrap of paper with Theodore Roosevelt's signature scrawled on it.

"Well, as I was saying, when I'd completed my tour of Cleveland, I counted my gains and discovered I had damaged the Cleveland deposits to the tune of four thousand dollars. It was time for a celebration. I donned my money belt, a legacy from Grandpa, and went down to the cocktail lounge for a quiet toot.

"Dan Miller was there, happy as an early-morning disc jockey, and it turned out that he had just finished beautifying his half of the city to the tune of twenty-five hundred iron men. We had a congratulatory toast, and then Dan turned serious. He said, 'Judd, what do you

do with your admirable profits?'

"'Spend it or bank it,' I told him. 'But mainly spend it.'

"He shook his head. 'Bad business,' he told me. 'Think about your old age. You should invest it. A solid investment today will bring joy to your declining years.'

"For just a minute, I didn't know what to say. Did Dan Miller think my declining years had set in already? Was he really going to try to sell *me* goldmine stock? It didn't seem possible, so I said, 'Dan, just what do you have in mind?'

"'Uranium mine stock,' he whispered. He leaned close to me, looking earnestly at me through his plain-glass spectacles. 'I've been putting all of my cash into uranium stock for over a year now,' he confided. 'I've got over nine thousand dollars worth of stock. And it's a reputable New York firm, one that's been in business since the eighteen-fifties. Uranium stock just can't go anywhere but up. The way I'm salting it away, I'll be able to buy Long Island for my country estate when I retire.'

"'Well,' I said cautiously, 'I've never put much faith in stock, since I've sold a share or two myself from time to time.'

"'This is legit,' he insisted. 'On the up and up. Come on up to my room, and I'll show you their brochure.'

"More out of a professional interest in the competition than for any other reason, I joined Dan Miller successively in the lobby, an elevator and his room, where he bolted the door, drew the blinds, and slammed the transom before taking a whole sheaf of papers out of a battered suitcase.

"I looked it all over. The stock certificates were fancy things, all curlicues and whirligigs and gewgaws and whereases, and the brochure had been written by a man who could name his own price on Madison Avenue. The Navajo Squaw Uranium Development And Mining Company really did things right.

"Dan hovered around me while I leafed through the evidence. 'What do you think of it, Judd?' he asked me.

"'Well,' I said, 'I'll have to admit it does look pretty good.'

"'Can you think of a better or safer place for your money?' he wanted to know.

"I had to admit I couldn't.

"'Well, then,' he said, 'I was about to send them a telegram, telegraph my profits and tell them to send me a batch more shares. Why don't we double up on the same telegram, send your money too, and tell them to add you to the list of stockholders?'

"'Well,' I said, 'I suppose that is

the thing to do. It certainly does look like a better deal than three and a quarter percent interest at a bank.'

"So we went down to the Western Union office in the lobby, and I reached into my shirt and pulled three thousand dollars worth of damage deposits out of my money belt. We spent about half an hour getting the message down to fifteen words, then went back to the cocktail lounge to celebrate our good fortune, good sense and good security."

Judd sipped musingly at his Scotch, and the silence was broken only by the clatter of the Phoebe Snow bucketing down a Sullivan County mountainside. Finally, I said, "Did you get the stock certificates?"

"Came just before I left Cleveland," he said. He reached into his pocket and withdrew a bundle of stock certificates. He handed them over, and I studied them. To my unpracticed eye, they looked perfectly legitimate. But so did the Confederate money handed out in Wheaties boxes a few years back. I'm anything but a judge.

Finally, I gave the certificates back, saying, "Do you suppose they're all right?"

"No," he said. "They're as phony as Dotto."

"But—you pumped three thousand dollars into them!"

"There wasn't much else I could do," said Judd. He smiled rather sadly. "I couldn't very well tell Dan Miller that the Navajo Squaw Uranium Development And Mining Company was one of *my* little projects, now could I?"

Dear Fans:

Here are the particulars about the Alfred Hitchcock Fan Club:

Membership dues are one dollar which covers mailing costs and handling. (Please send coins or money orders, no stamps.) For this you will receive an autographed photo of Mr. Hitchcock, his biography, and a bulletin of current news, which will be issued four times a year. You can't imagine how rewarding it is to hear from so many loyal readers, and active, and incoming Fan Club members. I want to thank all of you for your enthusiastic interest.

Most sincerely,
Pat Hitchcock
Sherman Oaks, California

P.O. Box 5425

Presumably a hypochondriac may interpret, to his satisfaction, a prognosis couched in scientific terminology, but how often is one intelligible to the layman?

"You're a cinch to be nailed on the kidnapping charge," my lawyer said to me. "The jury won't even have to leave the box. Right?"

"Right," I admitted.

"And that means your neck, Beau. You understand that. Because kidnapping is a capital crime here. Right?"

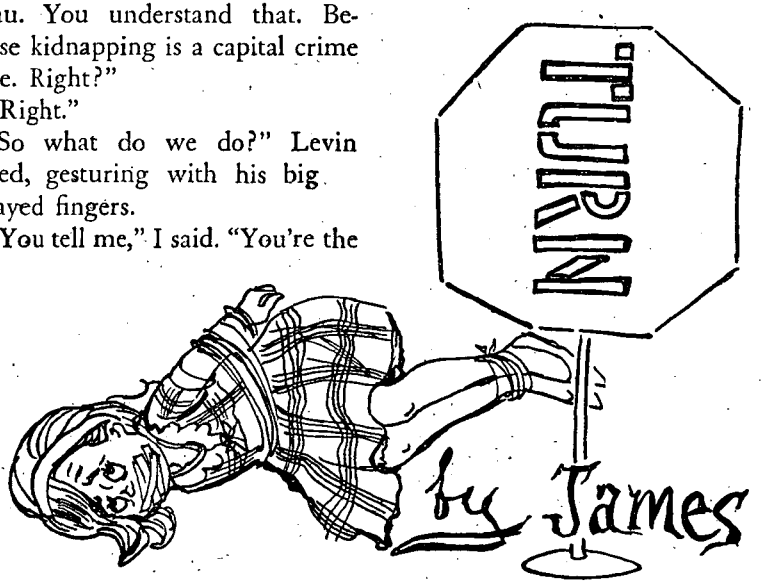
"Right."

"So what do we do?" Levin asked, gesturing with his big splayed fingers.

"You tell me," I said. "You're the high-priced lawyer. You got the education. And I got no confidence in myself since last night, anyhow."

Levin shook his head. "No wonder. But it suggests your only possible defense. Insanity. Temporary insanity. You're some kind of a nut, Beau. A kook. You kidnapped Janie Pharr while of unsound mind. Get it?"

"I get it," I said, "but I don't like



it. I'm no nut, buddy. If there's anything I'm not, it's crazy. I've always been sane, sensible and relaxed about everything I do. Anybody that knows me will tell you that. I'm as sane as you are."

"Haha," Levine said. "I'm laughing. Sane, the boy says. Did it all happen just the way the papers said it did?"

"Yeah."

"So let me lay it down for you to look at, once, then tell me if you're sane. You're staying at the same hotel in Riverside as the Pharrs—the rich oil man, his wife, and their little girl, Jane, aged ten. Right?"

I nodded. "You know it, pal."

"Okay. You work out this kidnapping caper. You snatch little Janie Pharr last night when she's on the porch alone, in front of the hotel. You get her into a car you've stolen, tape her mouth shut with adhesive, tie her hands and feet, and put her on the floor in the back of the car. Right?"

"You make it sound easy," I said, "but that's about it."

"Then what do you do? You take off for Campbell's Crossing. You're clean away. You know Janie won't be missed for a couple of hours. By that time, you'll have made Campbell's Crossing, ditched

the stolen car, transferred the kid to the cabin cruiser you've rented under an assumed name, and be long gone from the inlet with the whole ocean to lose yourself in until you can collect the ransom. Right?"

"Half a million," I said, remembering. "I was going to ask for half a million."

"But you never got as far as Campbell's Crossing." Levin's thin mouth turned up in a sardonic grin. "You had the kid. You were far enough ahead of an alarm to make your getaway sweet and clean. The half-a-million was as good as in your hand."

"Don't rub it in," I said.

He paid no attention. "So what does our sensible, sane kidnapper do at this crucial point in the commission of his crime?" Levin paced up and down five feet each way, as though addressing a jury. He turned to me. "What *did* you do, Beau?"

I said miserably, "I went to sleep."

He shrugged his shoulders as though his suit scratched, and gave me a triumphant look. "See? A sane, sensible act, if I ever heard of one," he said sarcastically. "You pulled up your stolen car at the side of the road, carefully parking it off the traffic lanes, and went sound asleep!"

"I didn't want the kid to get hurt," I said.

Levin's voice rasped. "Of course not. Naturally. So you pulled off the road. But was that a sane, sensible moment to decide to take a nap?"

"I don't know what came over me," I said. "It was the strangest feeling, as though I was going to black out, or faint, you know? Not like getting sleepy exactly."

"Whatever it was, you went to sleep, Connors. Because that's how those kind tourists found you when they stopped to see if you were sick, or needed help or anything; sound asleep behind the wheel of the car, slumped over a little. And they found a ten-year-old girl gagged and bound in the back of your car. You can't blame them for calling the police, can you?"

"No," I said, "but I can't figure what happened to me, either. I hadn't been drinking. I wasn't doped. I wasn't sleepy. I was excited, sure. Who wouldn't be, in the middle of a kidnapping? I kept looking over my shoulder into the back seat of the car to see that the kid was okay—not suffocating or anything from the tape on her kisser, you know? But I felt great. Then, all of a sudden, I didn't. When I came to, the police had me."

"And the police doctor who went

over you after they brought you in last night agreed that you weren't drunk or doped or having a stroke or a coronary. So face it, pal. You were nuts. You had to be, to take a nap in the middle of a kidnapping. Right?"

"Maybe I was," I admitted finally. "But I certainly didn't feel like it."

"They never do," Levin said. "We'll use it as our defense, anyway. It's our only hope. And Beau," he looked at me with genuine sympathy, "if you *are*—uh—slightly unbuttoned, don't worry about it, son. It's probably only temporary. And it will save you from the chair." He looked at his watch. "I'll send in a couple of psychiatrists to look you over good. Goodbye now."

The headshrinkers Levin sent in to examine me were nice enough guys but, believe me, they were operating away out beyond my depth. They asked me screwy questions, talked a lot of doubletalk in technical terms, and put me through some routines that made me think they needed the treatment, not me. But I ended up by being convinced that I was probably nuts, after all, when I stopped to take that nap in the midst of a snatch. "Intolerable tension," they muttered to each other. "Perfectly natural that withdrawal symptoms should appear." And like that. I had to admit that going to sleep in the middle of a crime they can fry you for, is quite a withdrawal symptom, at that, all things considered. So from then on, I worried more about being a nut than I did about being a kidnapper caught with the goods, until my trial came up.

The testimony given by Janie Pharr and her parents, by the motorists who had stopped to help me on the road, and by the police officers involved, all left no shadow of a doubt in the jurors' minds that I was a dirty kidnapper caught in the act. And there was nothing my lawyer, Levin, could do about that, except to keep pounding away in his cross-examination at the odd fact that I had been taking a nap beside the road when apprehended; and to intimate, none too subtly, that this was something no kidnapper in his right mind would conceivably do with a death sentence the almost certain result.

Pretty soon, the jurors were obviously beginning to agree with Levin that I was as nutty as a fruitcake. The sneaky frightened looks they gave me out of the corners of their eyes told me that, so everything was going along pretty good for our side. Levin had our two headshrinkers lined up to testify to my derangement when our time

came, and he had primed me to act as confused and uncertain in the witness chair as I could.

"It's in the bag, Beau," Levin murmured to me out of the corner of his mouth.

Then the prosecution called Dr. Julius Sanderson to the stand. I recognized him as the doctor who had looked me over when I was first arrested. He settled himself quietly in the witness chair and from that moment on, my trial went as crazy as I was supposed to be.

After the D.A. had qualified him, he said to Sanderson, "Have you heard the nickname that has been applied to the accused several times in this court, Doctor?"

"Yes, sir."

"What is it?"

"Beau."

"And what would you say this meant, Doctor? That the accused is a natty dresser, perhaps?"

"Yes, I would, judging from the prisoner's spruce appearance when he was brought to me for examination the night of his arrest."

"I see."

My lawyer said in a puzzled voice, "I object, your Honor. This is surely irrelevant."

"Then it can't hurt your client," said the Judge. He was getting interested in Dr. Sanderson's screwy testimony. "Proceed, Counselor."

"Dr. Sanderson," said the D.A., "will you tell the court what kind of shirt the prisoner was wearing the night he was arrested?"

"A clean white shirt with a detachable collar. The collar was heavily starched."

"Thank you. Now, will you tell us, please, whether the prisoner, when you examined him after he was brought in that night, was suffering from the effects of sleeping pills, liquor, narcotics, a stroke, an incipient coronary, anything that might have accounted for his stopping along the road to take a nap while committing a major crime?"

"He was not, as far as I could tell. His health seemed excellent in all respects."

"But you heard from the arresting officers that he had been captured while napping?"

"I did. Everybody was babbling about it. That's why I was asked to examine him, of course."

"And what did you think?"

Sanderson grinned. "I thought the guy was nuts," he said.

Levin nudged me. "Wow!" he said softly. "Their own witness admits it!"

The D.A. didn't even pause. "Do you still think so?"

"No, sir. I have since changed my mind."

"I see. And what made you

change your mind about this?"

"The kidnapped child's own testimony on the stand yesterday."

"What specific testimony was that?"

"About those turns to the right."

Levin hopped up. "Objection!" he yelled.

The Judge tapped his gavel. "You keep out of this," he said to Levin, really interested now. "Let the doctor testify. You intend to

connect up this strange testimony, of course?" he asked the D.A., just to keep things looking legal.

"Certainly, your Honor. Now, Doctor, what exactly do you mean by that phrase, 'turns to the right'? Tell us in your own words, please."

"Well, Jane Pharr told us how the accused, as he drove from Riverside toward Campbell's Crossing, kept turning his head at frequent intervals and looking over his right shoulder at her as she lay bound and gagged in the back of the car," the doctor explained.

"Yes," said the D. A., "that's in the record."

"And suddenly," Dr. Sanderson went on, "I found myself remembering an obscure case history I had read when I was in medical school—a diagnosis that was made, I believe, by a famous physician at the Mayo Clinic."

"I object!" Levin said, obviously just on general principles since he hadn't the foggiest notion of what was going on, any more than I did. Or the Judge, either, for that matter. The Judge was hanging over his bench, openly eager to hear more. "Overruled," he said sharply. "Go on, Counselor."

"I now ask you, Dr. Sanderson," said the D. A., "what these turns to the right, as you term them, had to do with the commission of this crime?"

"Plenty," Sanderson said inelegantly. "They're the reason why the accused stopped to take a nap while in the middle of his kidnapping."

This caused a sensation. Everybody buzzed at once until the Judge pounded his gavel. "Silence!" he shouted. "I can't hear the testimony with all that racket! Proceed, Counselor. And you," he said to Sanderson, "remember that levity has no place in this court. A man is being tried for his life here today."

Everybody looked at me, then, as though they'd forgotten who the fuss was all about.

Sanderson bowed to the bench. "I'm sorry," he said. "I'm afraid I'm telling this very badly."

"You're doing all right so far," the Judge said with a twinkle, "if you're really serious."

"I'm serious. Never more so," said the doctor, neatly bypassing the D. A. and speaking directly to the Judge. "As a doctor of medicine, I was naturally interested in why the accused would stop and take a nap at such a time. I realized it could have been as the result of mental derangement, which I understand is the contention of the defense. As I say, I thought at first the kidnapper was unbalanced myself. But couldn't the accused's nap, I asked myself, be the result of anything else? Couldn't some purely physical or anatomical explanation account for it equally well? Because the young man seemed quite well-balanced to me the night of his arrest—before he had seen his attorney."

"I object!" Levin yelled. "He's talking about me!"

"You may need the publicity before this is over," the Judge told him. "Overruled. Go on, Counselor. Ask the witness to clarify."

"Clarify, Doctor," said the D. A.

"Well," the doctor said, "I can't clarify without getting a little technical. Just a little."

"So get technical," the D. A. said with a grin.

"Jane Pharr's testimony, and the fact that the accused was wearing a stiff collar the night of the kidnapping," said the doctor modestly, "put me on the track, along with that old case history I've mentioned. I should have seen it sooner than I did, of course, and I would have, if I'd given the accused a really thorough physical examination when he was brought in."

Here the Judge became too impatient to restrain himself. "Skip the apologies and give us the facts!" he barked at the witness. "The Court's patience is wearing thin."

Sanderson came out with it then. "The only reasonable hypothesis to account for the accused acting as he did, your Honor, is that he has a sensitive—I might even say a hypersensitive—right carotid sinus. The carotid arteries, as you are no doubt aware, carry the blood supply and its energizing oxygen to the brain. If the flow of blood through one of these arteries is shut off, or even interrupted sufficiently often, a black-out results—a fainting spell, if you prefer. It need not happen instantaneously, however. It sometimes occurs gradually enough so that a man could conceivably feel it coming over him,

and have time to pull a car to the side of the road and shut off the motor before he lost consciousness entirely. And that's just what happened to the accused, I believe."

The D.A. said, "You are saying that such an interruption of the blood supply in the right carotid artery of the accused caused him to black out and appear to be taking a nap?"

"I am."

"Can you explain why?"

"I think I already have. Each time the accused turned his head sharply to his right over his shoulder to check on the condition of the child in the back of his car the stiffly starched point of his collar pressed into his neck, exerting pressure on his right carotid sinus. It wouldn't take much of this turning to the right to cause him to black out. In fact, your Honor, I'm morally certain that the accused is not deranged as the defense contends. He just happens to have an unusually sensitive right carotid sinus."

Levin, my lawyer, jumped to his feet. "This is ridiculous!" he yelled, completely oblivious of courtroom protocol. "Do you mean to sit there and tell me, Doctor, that a stiff collar and a few turns of the head made my poor demented client lose consciousness? What is this carotid sinus, anyway? I've never even heard of it!" Levin reached out and grabbed me by the neck in the hollow between my right shoulder and chin. "Is this where it is? Here?" He turned to the jury and said with magnificent contempt, "I'll show you how much truth there is in this quack's testimony! Look!" He squeezed down hard with his thumb on the right side of my neck.

A little while later, when I was conscious again and had collected my wits, I looked at Levin and said, "Who's crazy now, Counselor?"

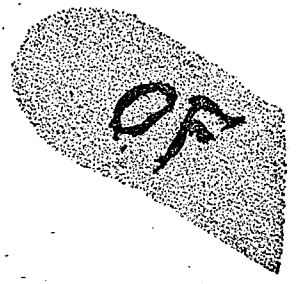
"Your defense attorney," he said savagely. "Who else?"

So I'm to be executed tomorrow. But I can't tell you how relieved I am to find out before I die that I'm not some kind of a nut, after all, but just a sane kidnapper with a sensitive sinus.

To anyone who would challenge the credibility of the following, let me remind him that the search for The Abominable Snowman continues.

OUTSIDERS love to laugh and jeer at us here in Modern City. They snigger, "How ironically quaint! Modern City is at least fifty years behind the times."

We don't deny we're behind the times; we like it that way. And we don't begrudge them their fun. We feel, all 207 of us, that perhaps laughter is good for their peptic ulcers and acid stomachs, stress induced ailments which seldom trouble us here.



Folks live simply in our modest valley. Mostly we're a community of small farmers—pigs, chickens, milk cows—served by a post office, a general store, a service station, a hotel, and two bars, which is a smaller ratio of bars than many places have.

The name of our town is an anachronism hung on us by the overzealous settlers of our valley. We agree it's an inappropriate name and someday, when we get around to it, we intend to change it.

I saved mention of our granite quarry until last because it looms

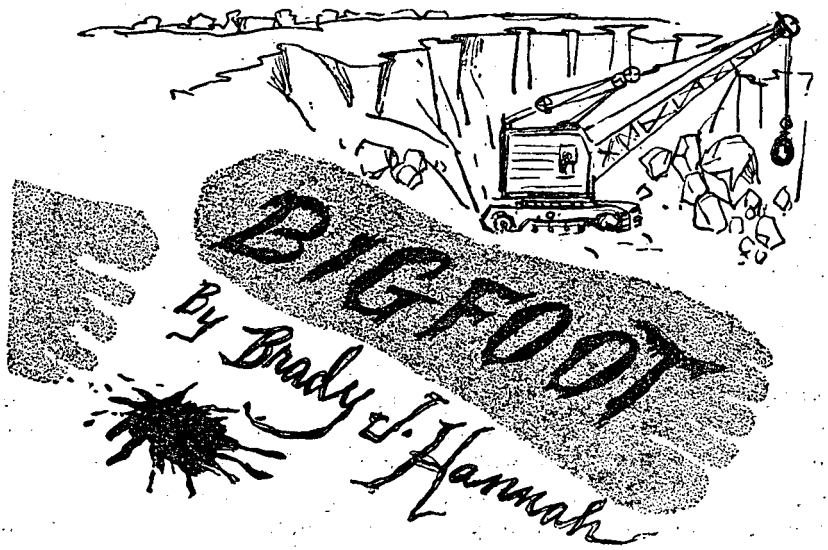
large in the events I shall try to relate, and because its presence in our valley may provide a clue to the character of our people.

The quarry was first opened by Snyder L. Tibbets, a young engineer from upstate, who came to the valley a few years back with visions of turning it into a granite quarrying center. He leased a ten acre site in the north valley from old 'Bullwhip' Cline who operated a hog-farm on the banks of Sweetwater Creek.

Now Bullwhip didn't get his title from skinning mules, but, you might say, from skinning people. He snapped words like the crack of a whip cowing many—nay, most—into acceding to his terms. It took a brave man, or a foolish one, to stand up to the burly Bullwhip. It would therefore have been mighty interesting to have listened to his negotiations with Tibbets for lease of his land.

The exact terms of the lease were never publicly known but it was widely speculated, probably rightly so, that it contained a proviso binding the quarry to employ Billy Boy Cline, Bullwhip's cowering son.

Now Billy Boy was not a small man himself, nor was he exactly a weakling. It was generally conceded that Billy, at twenty-five, had lived too long in the blustering shadow of his dad. But Billy Boy did well at the quarry and



was soon operating the crane that lifted granite blocks from the pit onto waiting trucks.

In a very short time it became evident that a metamorphosis was taking place. Billy Boy, in the newfound prestige of his job, lost his hangdog mannerism and started walking straight like a man. He even swaggered a little.

Soon everyone, each for his own reasons, dropped the Billy Boy from his name, and it became just plain Bill Cline. The possibility that he might one day become another 'Bullwhip' may or may not have had something to do with this new respect.

Snyder L. Tibbets ran the operation at a fair profit for just about a year. Then finding he couldn't buy, rent, or lease a site for a second quarry, he sold out and left the valley in a huff, mumbling about the ignorance of hidebound hillbillies who failed to aid the progress of a great project.

The buyer was Becket Ames, a native of Midville, the county seat, twenty miles to the south. He understood more of the philosophy of a quiet people content to live a simple life, and reluctant to see their lovely valley gouged, pitted, or mounded with ugly heaps of waste. Ames, wanting only a modest income and time to fish the excellent trout streams in our surrounding hills, was content to keep the operation small.

Perhaps I've conveyed the notion that we of the valley can't abide excitement. If so it's a misconception. Every fragment of excitement that proves to be harmless, we enjoy to the hilt. But our one big excitement was not a fun excitement. It brought in outsiders, it brought fear, and it brought death.

It began when the tracks were found at the quarry and certain events occurred which forced us to conclude that Bigfoot was in our midst.

Bigfoot, as you know without my explaining, is that hairy manbeast who delights in leaving huge tracks, performing fantastic feats of strength, and in general, scaring people. He's smart too, smarter than the whole human race, and seldom seen, except by a privileged few. He's never allowed himself to be caught or photographed, weighed or measured, poked or prodded in any manner by the multitude of scientists who, at each new appearance, join in the hot pursuit.

Actually our Bigfoot, by a sort of silent acquiescence, and by virtue of first discovery, belongs most to none other than past crane operator—God rest him—Billy Boy Cline.

It was early morning, the day after the season's first rain, when Billy's pickup, its horn screaming panic, roared into town. Chickens scrambled frantically and roosters choked off half-crowed crows. Billy spotted me, just leaving my front yard gate. The truck slued dangerously and bored straight at me without slackening speed. When the wheels hit the gravel at the edge of the pavement the front end shimmied like a dervish gone mad, and a shower of gravel pelted my face. I still didn't jump for the pure, simple reason, with the front of the juggernaut so hoggish, there was no direction left in which to jump.

I did close my eyes. And later wished I hadn't! I surely would have witnessed the manner in which miracles occur. The pickup stopped and I still stood. The motor quieted and the hot radiator whooshed its relief.

"Constable Tucker!" Billy cried out. "Man! Did I get a scare!"

"Yea, yea," I sneered weakly. "I can't imagine how you must have felt." Then attempting an impressive official manner, I leaned into his window and gave him my best cold-eyed glare. "All right, start talking, and you had better make it good."

Billy glared back. For an uncomfortable moment I felt I might be looking into the eyes of old Bullwhip Cline. Then Billy's expression changed.

"Something big's been out to the quarry last night, Constable," Billy said excitedly. "There's tracks out there. Big tracks. You'd better come and look."

"How big tracks?" I asked skeptically.

"At least twenty inches long and seven inches wide."

Still skeptical, I slid into the seat beside him. We drove over and picked up Becket Ames, a husky, though greying individual, then drove the four miles to the quarry. The pit was on a stoney hillside, half a mile above Cline's hog farm. We could smell the stench.

Billy stopped the pickup in a clearing surrounded by tall live-oaks whose trunks were profusely smothered with underbrush. Nearby stood the crane, with its boom angling skyward over the pit, and the cable hanging like a pendulum.

As we got out, I noted the expression on Ames' reddish face was as skeptical as mine must have been. "Now show us these monster footprints, Billy," he said drily.

Billy pointed to the place where the trucks backed in to be loaded. What previously had been dust was now a layer of mud of just the right consistency to preserve any tracks. Those of the trucks had

been canceled by last night's rain.

Ames and I both stood staring stupidly. The tracks were there and, if anything, Billy had underestimated their size. There were two of them, a left and right, spaced apart more than twice the stride length of a normal sized man.

Ames and I turned and looked into each other's faces, each seeking confirmation of the other. We both decided it was true. Ames turned and began scanning the underbrush, while I searched the ground for further signs.

No other marks were to be seen save those of Billy's tires, made when he had come early to service the crane, which was how he had come to discover the tracks. The buzz of approaching motors reminded me the tracks should be preserved.

I directed Billy to get some stakes and ropes and we quickly erected a barrier around the tracks. "I'm deputizing you, Billy, to keep everyone outside the ropes."

Two quarry trucks, tailed by a line of townspeople's cars and farmers' pickups, pulled into the clearing. Aroused by Billy's dramatic entrance, the townspeople came to see for themselves what was up. Soon the clearing was filled to capacity with parked cars and a milling crowd, each person trying to get close enough to see the tracks.

For a time I watched the reactions on the faces of the crowd, familiar faces every one, now changed by the excitement. Bill Diggins and Charley Race were standing by the ropes, talking excitedly. I wondered amusedly if they were already making some kind of plan to catch the creature.

Then I noted old Jim Ostertag edging through the crowd. He made it to the ropes next to Bill and Charley and stood gaping at the tracks. Suddenly he turned toward them and opened his mouth to say something. Seeing who it was, he clamped his toothless jaws firmly shut and sidled several paces away where he stood glaring suspiciously, obviously thinking they had something to do with the tracks.

I grinned and went to find Becket Ames, who was talking to Warren Bracket near the crane. I said, "I'm going back into town to call Sheriff Blake in Midville. I'd be obliged if you'd keep an eye on things here. I don't want the tracks disturbed."

"Sure thing, Constable," Ames agreed. He looked up the timbered slope. "You think maybe he's up there somewhere? Maybe watching us?"

"I'm an officer—of sorts," I re-

minded him. "It's my job to be skeptical."

"You mean this might be a hoax?"

"Maybe. Right now I need someone to drive me into town."

"I'll drive you, Constable," Warren volunteered.

Warren was a farmer, sandy-haired and husky, and Bullwhip Cline's nearest neighbor. His house was three miles down the road. We got into his pickup and started into town.

"This may be a hoax," he said grimly. "But I'm going to keep my rifle handy."

"Doesn't hurt to be prepared," I said.

Warren was silent for a while. Then he asked, "Ella Hains still playing with her ceramics?"

Ella Hains is our grade school teacher. In her spare time she likes to play around with the arts. Sometimes it's painting, sometimes music. Her latest was ceramics. She did quite well too, I thought. I still have a couple of her pieces in my house.

"Why, I can't rightly say, Warren," I said. "Why do you ask?"

"Someone's been digging in the claybank by the creek in my pasture, where Ella used to get her clay."

"That so?"

I had Warren drop me at the general store. Mrs. Haley was there alone. She told me Mr. Haley was out at the quarry with the rest, and she saw no use keeping the store open in an empty town. I sympathized, then went to the phone. Sheriff Dave Blake listened once, then asked me to repeat it slowly.

"You don't sound like you're drunk, Constable, and I've always thought of you as a fairly level-headed man, so perhaps you're not crazy. I'll send someone up."

I picked up my own car and drove back to the pit. The crowd was still milling about. Some of the men had rifles, shotguns, and even pitchforks, and were poking around the underbrush on the high slope.

About one o'clock the men from the Sheriff's office arrived. Showing varying degrees of skepticism, they made plaster casts of the tracks, took measurements, and talked to some of the crowd.

By three o'clock a brisk wind teased the treetops, a misty film dimmed the sun, signs that a storm might be brewing. The people began leaving, a car or two at a time. When the Sheriff's men had satisfied themselves and left, I started over to tell Billy Boy he needn't guard the tracks anymore. As I approached him, something about his bearing made me pause.

He stood poised in the wind, gazing into the sky with a rapt, almost reverent, expression on his face. Some vague dread touched me, and I was almost afraid to disturb him. I cleared my throat and he turned. As his dark, almost black eyes looked into mine, I was somehow reminded of a wolf running with the night wind. I relieved him of his duty, then drove back into town.

It rained that night and all next day. It stopped about midnight of the second night and turned cold. The following morning I was halfway to my front gate when Billy's pickup came boring down the street in my direction. This time I had time to duck around the corner of my house before he pulled up in a shower of gravel.

"Constable!" he shouted as I stepped from my refuge. "It's been there again. This time there's a dead hog; one of dad's, I think."

This time, after picking up Ames, I drove up in my own car. There were tracks in almost the same spot. Billy, who had preceded us, beckoned from the rim of the pit. As we looked into the pit Ames and I gaped in awe.

The hog, if hog it was, lay near the wall on the north side. It didn't resemble any animal but looked more like a hide bag filled with ground meat and splintered bones, with some of the splinters piercing the bag.

Ames gasped, "It's real. The beast's real. The hog would never be smashed like that merely falling into the pit. It's just not that much of a fall."

I pointed out a large boulder lying a few feet from the carcass.

"Constable, you think the hog might have broken out of its pen, wandered up here and fallen into the pit where by coincidence a rain-loosened boulder happened to fall in on top of it? It sounds too fantastic."

My eyes searched the clearing above the pit. No evidence of a boulder having rolled into the pit could be seen. Then I spotted something. A few feet beyond the crane was a depression where obviously the rock had been torn from the earth. There was no possibility that it might have rolled into the pit from there.

"How much do you think that boulder weighs?" I asked.

Ames studied the rock. "Better than six hundred pounds."

I pointed to the scar in the earth.

Ames said, "You don't think the beast threw the hog into the pit, then wrenched loose the boulder and tossed it in on top of the hog. That would take monstrous strength."

"No," I said. "The stone was neither dropped nor tossed onto the pig."

"How do you know?" Ames asked incredulously.

I pointed out an area of red stains near the top of the wall above the carcass. Below it and slightly to the right was a mark that could have been made by an

impacting boulder. It seemed obvious that both hog and boulder had been hurled with terrific force against the wall of the quarry.

By this time the cars of the valley people began arriving to witness the new excitement. I asked Ames if he would look after things while Billy and I went down to the hog ranch to look around. I told him to rope off the tracks and the area around the earth scar to preserve them. He agreed after I gave him a powerful rifle and ammunition from the back of my car.

Billy and I walked down the slope, taking a zigzag path to look for signs of hog or beast. About halfway down we found hog tracks and a couple of places that had been rooted since the rain stopped. There seemed to be no doubt the hog had gotten loose and wandered up to the quarry.

"How do you like your job at the quarry, Bill?" I asked as we walked along.

"I like it fine."

"It's been a long time since you've been to school, hasn't it, Bill?"

"I graduated from the eighth grade when I was thirteen. I'm twenty-five now. I didn't go to high school."

"Makes it about twelve years. Did you have Ella Hains as a teacher?"

"In my last year," he admitted. "Before that, it was Clara Pickens."

"Miss Hains is a great one for the arts. I have some of her work at my house. Did she ever interest you in anything like painting, music? Or maybe ceramics?"

Billy seemed to hesitate a second or two. "I did water colors and clay, like the rest; no music."

By now we had reached the Cline house. Old Bullwhip stood

on the porch watching our approach. I now witnessed a strange metamorphosis. Billy's self-assurance dissipated like mist. Soon he was his old hangdog self. I felt a strange compassion.

Bullwhip was hatless, his greying hair wild as a shaggy broomtail. His brute shoulders were covered by a blue denim shirt and his massive thighs were covered with the same material.

He was about as close to a man-beast as I ever hope to see. I speculated as to whether he could lift six hundred pounds. I glanced down at his feet. They were big, but not big enough.

"Morning, Mr. Cline," I said genially as I could, hoping he was in a good mood.

"Morning," he rumbled. "Now tell me what's going on around here."

"Dad," Billy broke in, a trace of whine in his voice, "one of the hogs got loose last night. It's dead. Up in the quarry."

"What?" Bullwhip snapped, making Billy wince. "Becket Ames will pay me for that hog, I'll see to that!"

Paying no more heed to us, he strode off angrily toward the hog pens. Billy showed me about the place. There was an old woodshed that Billy had fixed up for his own quarters. There were two feed warehouses, a smokehouse, and several rows of hog sheds.

We could hear hammering as we neared the hog sheds. Bullwhip was nailing back the boards where the hog had broken out. He didn't even look up as we passed. Seeing no signs other than those of the pig, we climbed the slope back to the quarry.

The day was almost a repetition of last time, except the excitement was greater because of the dead pig and the boulder. The Sheriff's men were up, and also some nosey, smart aleck reporters.

For the next two weeks things were quiet, except for the many outsiders coming in to inquire about Bigfoot. The days were sunny, the nights chilly. Talk was of Bigfoot. All the papers carried tongue-in-cheek stories about Modern City's Abominable Snowman. Personally, I thought and hoped we had seen the last evidence of Bigfoot.

It was a sunny Tuesday morning when Becket Ames hailed me as I stepped from the general store. He had just pulled up.

"Constable Tucker, I hate to trouble you with my problems, but could you possibly go out and talk some sense into Mr. Cline?"

"Has Cline been bothering you?" I asked needlessly, already knowing that he had.

"He's been up to the quarry twice, demanding payment for his hog. Says he'll give me one more week."

"One more week and then what?"

"He didn't say, but I got a distinct message it wouldn't be pleasant," Ames said ruefully.

"I'll be busy for a while," I said, "but I'll get up there sometime this afternoon."

"Good enough, Constable. Thanks."

It was almost five when I left for the hog farm. As I drove, I noticed the weather was changing. Little puffs of wind were kicking up in the trees, and a thunderhead was building over the north ridge. It looked like we were in for a little thunderstorm.

Bullwhip was coming from the feed warehouses when I pulled up. I could see right away he wasn't in a good mood. I dreaded what was coming.

"Well, what do you want this time?" he snapped his voice like the pop of a whip.

"Mr. Cline," I tried to keep my voice low and steady, "Mr. Ames tells me you've been up to see him about your hog found in his pit. Says you've been demanding he pay you for it."

"He's right. I am demanding payment."

"It seems to me, Mr. Cline, that this matter—"

Bullwhip wasn't listening. He was staring fixedly at the sky over the north ridge. I turned and looked. The thunderhead had grown to awesome proportions. I heard a motor and turned as Billy's truck pulled in and stopped.

Only then did Bullwhip tear his eyes from the clouds and look around. I was astounded by the look in his eyes. They were wild. Slowly it dawned on me. Bullwhip was afraid! He feared the one thing he couldn't shout down, a storm.

Billy's car door slammed. It was followed almost immediately by a loud thunderclap. Bullwhip flinched. His neck muscles bulged. His cheeks started to twitch. Suddenly, with a wild cry, he turned and charged for the house. I turned and looked at Billy—and was shocked to the core.

Billy, his face an evil mask of rapturous glee, was watching his terrified parent stumble up the steps. I'd seen enough. I got into my car and drove back to town. The storm lasted a couple of hours, then blew over.

Next morning about nine, I was again accosted on the street by Becket Ames. I had been to see Ella Hains. We had had a pleasant chat about ceramics. She said she

was still interested but hadn't done any in quite some months. I leaned on Ames' car window.

"It's happened again, Constable," Ames said, "only this time it's a man. Billy says it's his dad, although the body's so badly crushed no one else can tell."

I cursed myself for a fool. I should have known, if it was going to happen, it would be last night. The rain was what I had missed. It had been after a rain both other times.

"Where's Billy now?"

"He said he was going home. He seemed to be pretty shook up."

"All right, Becket, I'll get my car and be right up."

I called Sheriff Blake before driving to the quarry. I didn't even look into the pit. I didn't want to see it. I had been sickened enough by events, and I still had one more unpleasant duty to perform. I left my car and walked down to the hog farm.

As I neared, I heard a rhythmic clack-clack-clack from behind the converted woodshed. I pulled my pistol from my belt and stepped quietly around the corner. Billy was pounding with a three-pound single jack on a couple of clay objects which resembled huge feet.

"Why are you breaking them up, Billy?" I asked softly. "Did you think I didn't already know?"

For a second Billy was startled. He recovered quickly. "I kind of expected you," he said resignedly, "though not so soon. I didn't think I had you fooled, though I had to act on the chance that I had."

"Do you want to go back with me now?" I asked.

"No," he said determinedly. "You'll have to shoot me. I'm leaving, and if you get too close I'll hit you with this hammer. Your only recourse is to shoot."

With that, he turned and dashed for the brush-lined creek bank fifty yards away. Once across the creek and into the rough hills beyond, it would take an intensive manhunt to flush him. My mind raced. Should I shoot him down? He was a murderer, yet it was almost a certainty he would not murder again.

I raised my gun and fired—at his legs. It was a miss. I had hesitated too long. He dived into the brush and rolled over the creek bank. *That's that for now,* I thought. *No use my trying to catch him now.*

Then he called to me from behind a tree. I was deeply touched by the infinite pleading in his voice. Not having an answer, I hurried away, up the slope to the quarry.

Sheriff Blake had not arrived. Not wanting to hang around the

quarry any more than was necessary, I decided to drive into town. Blake, I knew, would stop at my house before coming out. He arrived about one, and we had several cups of coffee while I told him what I knew.

"It was really quite simple," I began. "Billy, hating his bullying father, learned to love—almost worship—the one thing that could make Bullwhip cower, like Billy was always made to cower. That was a storm.

"Storms did strange things to Billy; made him capable of doing strange things. Perhaps Billy dreamed up the idea for a hoax from reading of Bigfoot, but it is more likely that to Billy, Bigfoot was a personification of a storm, something more powerful than his hated father.

"He fashioned and baked the feet of clay over metal frameworks with hooks, so they could be weighted and manipulated with his beloved crane, which also explains why the tracks were found only at the quarry. He would haul the casts to the site in his pickup, make some tracks, hide the casts somewhere, then drive into town to report his discovery.

"Anyone who has seen a wrecking ball at work on a brick wall can guess how the boulder, the pig, and his father, were hurled against the stone. He simply rigged up a special sling for the cable that could be released at the proper time by a rope running to the cab.

"I think on the night of the boulder and hog, he had thrown the boulder to try out the sling, then seeing the pig wandering around, he had taken the opportunity to try his scheme on a living creature.

"He must have hit his father with a heavy hammer while Bullwhip was still cowering from the storm. Bullwhip may or may not have been alive when he was hurled against the stone. That's the way I see it."

Sheriff Blake finished his coffee and started to rise. "Well, shall we get the manhunt organized?"

"That won't be necessary," I said. "I'll have Billy Boy for you, first thing in the morning."

Sheriff Blake's dark eyes regarded me sharply. "You're pretty sure of yourself, aren't you?"

"I was never more sure," I said. "Just bear with me until morning."

"Alright, Tucker," Blake said. "It's your show until morning. If by then you don't have Billy, I'll have to get him my own way. I'm going up now to look around."

"Oh, Blake," I said, "it won't be necessary to leave anyone out there tonight."

"I sure hope you know what you're doing," Blake snorted, then left.

Next morning, Blake and a couple of his men picked me up at seven. "Now where do we find Billy Cline?" Blake asked.

"In the quarry," I said.

"What!" Blake exploded.

"We'll find Billy Boy in the quarry," I repeated.

We drove up in silence.

The crane stood lonely in the morning sun. The cable hung slack into the quarry. When we left the car and approached the edge, I sensed an air of skepticism in the Sheriff and his men. I was sure I was right. And I was.

Billy Boy's broken body lay near the spot where his father had lain the previous day. I waited for the incredulity to subside in the others. Sheriff Blake was first to recover.

"Alright, Tucker," he said quietly menacingly. "Start talking, and it had better be good."

"Billy had talent," I said. "He rigged this one too."

"Without help?" Blake asked suggestively.

I pointed up into a large oak growing near the south edge of the pit. From the highest limb a short length of rope was hanging.

"It was simple. Billy moved the crane boom to overhang the tree. He climbed to the limb and tied the cable hook with the rope. He climbed down and reset the boom over the pit. He reclimbed the tree, released the cable, and swung himself into the wall with terrific momentum."

"I'll be darned!" Blake exclaimed. "But how did you know yesterday he was going to do it?"

"The last words he said to me were, 'Please, Constable, don't tell them it was me. Let them think it got me too.'"

Well, that was the death of Modern City's Bigfoot. I couldn't, of course, comply with Billy's last request. There are many smarter than I who would have figured it out. So the real Bigfoot will live on, his reputation still unsmudged by human murder.

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In formulating a plan, 'tis a wise man, indeed, who allows for the probability of modification necessitated by human frailties.

YEAH, like I told you, it was a good plan. It took somethin' that wasn't in the picture to put me in here, talkin' to you through this round hole in the glass on Visitor's Day. There wasn't nuthin' wrong with my plan.

Listen, old buddy, don't gimme that sneaky little smile, or you know what'll happen to your kisser when I get out, even if I have to do the full twenty. I'm still SAM (Smart And Merciless) Costel, and don't forget it!

No cracks about twenty not bein' all either, what with that bum mayhem rap they added on "to keep Costel from bein' turned loose on society again." How do you like

A GOOD PLAN

by Aubrey S. Newman

that, like I'm an animal or somethin'?

I see you got the point and, because you ain't much on jawin' anyway, I'll tell how it *really* was. Them newspaper rats got things all fouled up, tryin' for laughs and runnin' down people's characters. You see those guys, you tell 'em I got a memory like a loan shark, and they better wise up or they'll find out when I get out that I pay debts like that with big interest!

Specially that runty typewriter pounder with the thick glasses that said in the paper, "Smart And Merciless Costel turned out to be Stupid And Muddleheaded." Little four-eyed screwballs like him got to be learned a lesson, and I had plenty practice teachin'. He's really goin' to know what SAM means when I get ahold of him!

Anyways, like I was sayin', I'll tell you how it *really* was.

O' course it begins with my big reputashun and all, bein' known all over as SAM, the guy that makes things go by figurin' all the angles and not lettin' no Sunday School compassionet ideas git in the way. That's why, when this Oriental Potentater wants a big job done, that his inter . . . er intermedium —you know, his go-between come to see me.

This Oriental Potentater is one of them lousy rich old goats that collects ice like some people collects postage stamps. "His private gem collection is fabulus," the writin' nuts said—but he don't let nobody see it, so how do they know? Anyways, when some extra special ice this Potentater wants ain't for sale, that don't bother him none. He just figgers to get it irregardless.

That's when he thinks of SAM Costel.

Well, Old Buddy, this was that chanct you're always hearin' about —the big deal, if you got the guts to pull it off. Instead of the puny prices them blood suckin' fences hands out, it's a nice glitterin' half million bucks for them special rocks.

This go-between has got a neat scheme figgered out for when I give him the big ice for the dough, so neither one of us don't double-cross the other one. But ain't no use talkin' about that, seein' things never got that far.

At least them libelus newspaper rats did git one thing right, about I was to git them special sparklers from the Wonderbilt Museum—and they wasn't any others like 'em in the world: The Star of China, which was that giant size diamon' with the funny shape. Also the King Kong Ruby, the one if you looks at ten minutes you'll go nuts to own it. And that Celestial Star

Sapphire they said come down from antiquitty.

Them newspaper guys said they was "beyond price." I wouldn't know about that, but half a million bucks in my paws—no questions, no taxes, no divvyin' with nobody—that was price enough for me.

In my plan to "cop the carbons" (that's what that newspaper squirrel called it) this was a loner job. Then there's nobody else can foul things up for you, see? Smart, with me keepin' all that dough, and no danger of anybody rattin' later.

It took a lot of figgerin' to git all the angles untangled, but I puzzled out a sure enough SAM plan, because it was smart, and there was one place you got to be merciless to do it. Lots of guys wouldn't of had the guts, but that's where bein' SAM Costel come in.

To get ready, I take my .45 caliber convincer and some shells, and go out in the woods to practice. First I took the bullets out, and put in some little round pieces of cardboard to hold the powder in. So now I got .45 caliber blanks, without no bullets.

Then I set up some white paper on a board, and fired the blanks at the paper where I can see the powder marks good. This is somethin' I got to know about.

O' course I went rubberneckin' in the Wonderbilt Museum a coupla times, and cased the layout. That's how I found the name of the Curater of the museum, which was Clarence Fiddlefinger. No kiddin'!

It was easy to find where a guy with a name like that lived, and there was nuthin' to it to snatch him from his home out in that fancy Dogwood Hills sububs one night. It just took a little patience and waitin' around, but I'm real patient when there is a half million bucks in the kitty.

That .45 revolver is a real cannon. Also, bein' a revolver, it has a six-shot cylinder that makes it easy to load four live shells and two blanks. Then by puttin' a little dab of white paint on the two chambers loaded with blanks, I'm all set to fire bullets or blanks, whichever I want.

In makin' the snatch I've got the business shells ready, but one look at my oversize roscoe and that Curater did just what you'd think a feller named Clarence Fiddlefinger would do—he folded, and come along real peaceful.

We then stopped at a quiet spot off the road in some woods, so I can explain to him that he was goin' to take me in that Wonderbilt Museum by his private door. Also that we wasn't goin' to see any watchman or have any burg-

lar alarms go off— or, if they did, Clarence was goin' to get several sudden round windows let into his belly.

He seen the light, and said not to worry, he would do it. Even though he don't guess I'm SAM Costel, he is like a lot of other people, when I poke my gat at them and say, "You will or . . ." Why they just naturally seems to realize I'm smart and merciless, so they believe me.

O' course he did kind of stammer a coupla times when I told him about the sparklers we was goin' to take outa the museum. Until I explained how if he did not give me no cooperashun it wasn't only he'd get them sudden belly windows, but his wife and daughter was goin' to have certain unpleasant things happen to them. After that, no more peeps outa him. He really seemed to get the idea.

If I'd of told him I was SAM Costel, what with my reputashun there wouldn't have been even them few little stammers. But I been careful to keep my picture outa the newspapers, up until then anyway, so he has got no idea what SAM Costel looks like. Also I'm careful to dye my blond hair black, and make my white skin brownish with some of this stage stuff. So he's gonna be way off tryin' to describe me.

This is all a part of my SAM plan, like I'm tellin' you about. See? Planned out real careful and smart like, lettin' this Fiddlefinger guy see I'm plenty merciless bein' necessary to make him want to get them sparklers into my hands in a hurry.

Well, things worked just like clockwork. So we end up with that Star of China diamon', the King Kong Ruby, and the Celestial Star Sapphire in the little leather bag I've got hangin' inside my shirt by a string around my neck.

Then in no time at all we are back at that quiet spot in the woods again, and right away this Fiddlefinger gits all excited. Thinks I'm gonna kill him, and plops down on his knees there in the moonlight, beggin' me to spare his life.

By this time I got that revolver cylinder turned so as to shoot a blank if I pull the trigger. So I says, "Clarence, I want you to look right in the muzzle of this gat and swear you'll keep your trap shut," —and he does.

That's when I pull the trigger.

Well, you never seen nuthin' like it. He goes over backward, clawin' at his face and moanin' around. Finally he gits to his knees, sayin', "I'm blind! You have blinded me!" And he begins to blubber.

I don't say it out loud, but I'm thinkin', "Sure, Fiddlefinger, that's

the idea. This way I don't run no risk of a murder rap, and you can't identify me or pick my picture out of the police files either."

You see that dyed hair and darkened skin might not keep him from recognizin' my mug shot in the cop files, but now he is as good as dead as far as pickin' out my picture goes. Pretty neat, huh?

To make double sure, I turn my pocket flash on his face. It's all speckled where I can see between the hands over his eyes. Also, there is this reddish liquid runnin' out from under his fingers, like he is cryin' pink tears.

He keeps on snifflin' about bein' blind, but that's just his tough luck that he runs into a guy with a smart and merciless plan. Anyways, both of us are better off because of my plan; he ain't dead, and I ain't murdered the guy.

So I leave him there, and reads in the paper the next day how two of them lovers' lane parkers found him, and what a mess he was in and all.

It's a three-day wait to make my meet with this Potentater's go-between, so I'm keepin' the rocks around my neck in the leather bag —and do they ever wind up around my neck in court!

Because on the second day cops come out of thin air, grabbed me, and found the sparklers. They was happy to get the rocks, but sure seemed unhappy with me. There wasn't nuthin' gained by them cuffin' me around like they did.

Well, anyways, like I said in the beginnin', it was a good SAM plan, real smart and plenty merciless too. But no plan can save you from what happened to me.

You probably read about it in the papers, but them rats twisted it all around, specially that little four-eyed squirt callin' me "Stupid And Muddleheaded Costel".

All it was, like it come out in court, was this "unexpected thing" that Clarence Fiddlefinger had poor eyes to begin with.

He's got powder burns in the little pocks on his face, and the outer edges of his eyes, the sclera area they called it, is all speckled. But there ain't nuthin' wrong with the seein' part of his eyes, because that "thing" that give him poor eyesight is what made him put this new fangled armor plate on his eyes.

You get it, old buddy?

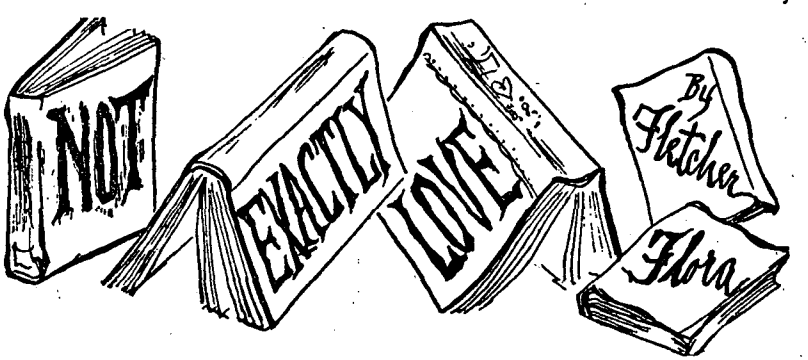
All that SAM plannin', and I've got ahold of a half million dollars, practically in my hands. Except this Clarence Fiddlefinger has to ruin everything by pickin' out my mug shot in police headquarters, and identifyin' me in court—because he had been wearin them new contact lenses!

The following serves to emphasize my contention that, while education per se may be commendable, its chief virtue lies in enabling one to separate the wheat from the chaff.

STARING out the high casement window, open to the late afternoon, Marcus could see for miles across the wide river valley beyond the clustered multi-colored roofs of suburban homes. He could see in the valley, besides a shining silver fragment of the river itself, a remote and casual pattern of farms and fields in the reds and browns and tenacious greens of autumn. It was a pretty sight, inviting and comforting to the eye, and he would have liked, had it been possible, to stand and view it at his leisure for the good of his soul. But it was not possible. At his feet, on the floor of the small room in which he stood, a room with only three walls, was anther sight which neither invited nor comforted. It was the body of a girl, and the girl was dead, and she had priority, however reluctantly granted, over rivers and fields and farms in the tag end of a year that was not yet dead, but only dying.

A Novelette

With a soft sigh, barely audible to Sergeant Bobo Fuller in the shadows behind him, he lowered his eyes and sank slowly to one knee. The girl was lying face down, her head turned on the dark green composition floor to expose the left profile of a face in which death had left the blind eyes



open and the lips turned back in a snarl of anger or pain or ultimate effort. Her feet pointed toward the open side of the room in which Fuller stood, her body tangential to a metal desk fastened to one wall of the room and supported on the opposite side by a pair of slender steel legs. Her arms were flung out ahead of her, the fingers of the small hands curved like claws, as if, in the instant of dying, she had desperately sought a hold on the smooth surface to prevent herself from being carried away by whatever dark angels had come for her.

Well, the angels had won, and she had lost, and so, thought Marcus, had he. He had been left with what was left of her, which wasn't much to leave in a world so fair with colored farms, and it was, after all, his own fault for being what he was. With his fingers, he probed among the short fair hairs of her head, finding the pulpy spot behind the crown, feeling with fastidious distaste the slight and sticky seepage on the fingertips. He stood up, sighing softly again. At the metal desk, really nothing more than a simple working surface, a single straight chair, also metal, was pushed neatly into place, its seat entirely beneath the surface, its back touching the edge. There were no books, no papers, nothing at all on the desk.

"She was struck from behind with something smooth and heavy," Marcus said. "What was it?"

In the shadows, Sergeant Bobo Fuller stirred and stepped forward. He did not like Marcus, who was blandly aware of the dislike, and he took a perverse satisfaction in speaking only when spoken to, and in contributing only what was specifically requested or routinely expected. As for Marcus, he did not share Fuller's animus, which he usually found amusing. In fact, he found Fuller rather stimulating, a constant challenge to perform at his best. Otherwise, he would have done what Fuller apparently wanted him to do. He would have asked for another partner to share his work, allowing Fuller to serve elsewhere with someone more compatible.

"We haven't found it," Fuller said. "It must have been hidden or carried away. We'll keep on looking, of course."

"Six tiers. Tens of thousands of books on more than a thousand shelves. It might have been hidden behind any of them. You've got a job, Fuller."

"If it's here, we'll find it."

"It probably isn't. Good luck, anyhow."

Marcus stepped back, his eyes moving about the tiny room with

an effect of casualness, almost of indifference, stopping on the tour briefly, just once, when they reached the open casement window and the far-off colored pattern beyond.

"Abby Randal," he said. "Is that what you said her name was?"

"That's right. Abby for Abigail."

"I'd guess she's been dead about an hour. You agree?"

"That's close enough."

"I wonder where her books and papers are?"

"Books and papers? What makes you think she had any?"

"Well, these little rooms or carrels at the rear of each tier of the stacks are to study in. Ordinarily, you need books and paper to study. Books, at least. I wonder where they are."

"It strikes me that you could use these rooms for other things besides studying, if you wanted to. What I have in mind doesn't require any books."

"You have a naughty mind, Fuller, and so have I. Lover's quarrel, you think?"

"I wouldn't say so. Since you ask, one lover doesn't crack another lover over the head. Not in my opinion. What I mean is, it's not exactly an act of love."

"Quondam lovers, then. A not-so-tender parting. Jealousy sometimes becomes malevolent, Fuller."

There he went again. Showing off, as usual. What the hell did 'quondam' mean? Well, Fuller wasn't about to ask, and he could, anyhow, being no fool, guess pretty accurately from the context. Former lovers? Was that what Marcus meant? If it was, why didn't he say so?

"Could be," Fuller said.

"Well, I'd better clear out of here now so the crew can get in. Not, probably, that they'll learn anything we don't already know, which isn't much. They ought to be here any minute. You've done a good job, Fuller. Everything under control."

It was praise deserved, and Fuller should have appreciated it, but he didn't. In fact, he resented it. He had come out alone in response to a call, and he had done what was necessary before Marcus arrived later, and it was, in his opinion, a deliberate and subtle kind of insult to imply that he might have done less.

"Thanks," he said. "I'll wait here for the crew."

"Right."

Marcus moved past him into a narrow cross-aisle running parallel to the row of small study rooms. From his position, he could look straight up one of the several perpendicular aisles between shelves

of books that rose to the low ceiling of the tier on which he was. He was, in fact, on tier C of the library of the university located on the west edge of the city in which he, Detective-Lieutenant Joseph Marcus, earned his bread and credits toward his pension. The tier had been declared off-limits temporarily. Except for the lights burning in the aisle up which Marcus looked, no lights burned at all.

"Let me see if I've got it straight," Marcus said. "The head librarian's name is Henry Busch. The girl who found the body is Lena Hayes. The young man who was at the charging desk this afternoon is Lonnie Beckett. Straight?"

"Straight. I told them to wait in the librarian's office. It's on the next floor, two tiers up. You'll find them there."

"I'll go and see. Carry on, Fuller."

Carrying on, so far as Fuller could see, was for the present nothing more than waiting where he was in the capacity of a watchdog, and this is what he did, moving for the purpose to the casement window, where he looked out across the valley with a somewhat jaundiced eye that impaired his appreciation. Marcus, meanwhile, walked down the lighted aisle and up two short flights of steel stairs, turning to his right through an exit that brought him out into a large room with a high ceiling. He could see, looking straight ahead across an open area, into another room which was furnished with long tables, six chairs to a table, and a multitude of reference books on shelves around the walls. Immediately to his right was an enclosure bounded on two sides by a high counter, the charging desk, and on the other sides by two walls. Directly ahead of him, spanning the distance between the charging desk and another wall, was a low wooden fence with a gate in it. The gate locked automatically when closed, and the lock, electrically operated, could be released only if the person on duty at the charging desk could be induced to press a certain button. This, of course, was to prevent the invasion of the stacks by any person who could not produce a stack permit. Marcus had no permit, but he was privileged. He waited at the gate until a buzzing sound told him that the button was being pressed, and he escaped with an exorbitant feeling of freedom into the greener pasture on the other side of the fence.

In the librarian's office, he found the three that Fuller had promised. Henry Busch was a tall slender man with streaks of gray in

smooth dark hair. The streaks had an artificial look, as if he had carefully contrived them for effect, but his thin ascetic face and somber eyes, the latter looking out through thick lenses in heavy horn frames, did not lend credence to the suspicion. He was not a man, Marcus decided, to indulge his vanity with such nonsense. Lonnie Beckett, strangely, looked very much like a younger and slightly revised edition of Busch. Approximately the same height, same weight, same shape of head and face. His dark hair lacked the streaks, however; his eyes the glasses. Lena Hayes was a looker. Marcus, who had somehow not expected such a pleasant surprise in a library, was pleasantly surprised. Her brown hair, thick and short and smoothly brushed, had the soft sheen of polished walnut in a lamplit room. She filled her sweater admirably, and her short skirt, after the fashion, was tailored to suggest a lean thigh and display a pretty leg. The bachelor's heart in Marcus's breast, which appreciated sights other than colored fields, began to swell. Whatever lovely Lena was studying in college, he thought, she could always make a living as an educated ecdysiast. And let Fuller look *that* one up in his Webster's.

"Mr. Busch?" Marcus said. "I'm Lieutenant Marcus. Or is it Doctor?"

"Small matter, small matter. As you choose." Busch came forward and offered his hand. "Come in, Lieutenant. We've been waiting for you."

"I know you have many things to do," Marcus said, accepting the hand. "I'll try not to detain you long."

"It's perfectly all right. We're at your disposal. This is Miss Lena Hayes, and this young man is Mr. Lonnie Beckett."

Marcus nodded at the pair in the order presented, resisting the temptation to linger on the former to the neglect of the latter.

"I understand," he said, "that you were all to some degree connected with the unfortunate occurrence in the stacks this afternoon."

"Not precisely," Busch said. "I am here only because I am the librarian and therefore responsible for what happens within my jurisdiction. It's a dreadful thing. Absolutely incredible."

"Whatever happens is credible," Marcus said reasonably. "However, perhaps we can settle the matter quickly without too much disturbance."

"Let us hope so, but I'm afraid there is not much help that any of us can offer. That will be for you

to decide, of course. I assume you wish to ask us some questions. We are prepared to cooperate fully, I assure you."

"Good. I can't ask for more." Marcus occupied a chair that had been placed for him, while Busch resumed his seat behind his desk. "To begin with, did any of you know the victim personally?"

"Speaking for myself only," Busch said, "I knew her casually. She was a graduate student, preparing a dissertation, and she was naturally often in the stacks doing reference work. She never asked for my personal assistance in any instance. I've spoken with her, exchanged some small talk, and that's all."

"Did you see her when she came to the library today?"

"I did not."

Marcus shifted his attention to Lonnie Beckett. "I understand that you were at the charging desk today when she entered the stacks. You must have admitted her."

"That's right. I did."

"Did she speak to you?"

"Yes. I didn't notice her when she came up, and she asked me to release the lock on the gate."

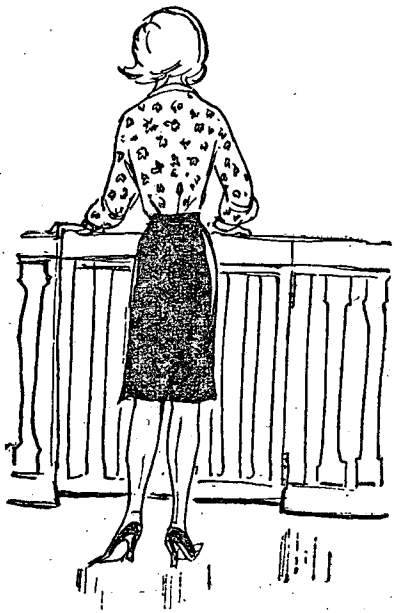
"Was she carrying anything? Any books or papers, I mean."

"I don't think so. No, I'm sure she wasn't. She always carried her materials in a briefcase, and she didn't have it with her. Now that I think of it, she wasn't even carrying a purse."

"Wasn't that a little odd? After all, students come to a library to study. They usually need certain materials, don't they?"

"Not necessarily. Maybe she just needed to do some reading from the shelves."

"I see. Then again, she may have come to meet someone. At any rate, deliberately or by chance, she *did* meet someone, and she was killed by whoever it was she met."



"Obviously."

The remark was innocent enough, a simple concession of a plain truth, but Marcus thought he detected in it a faint inflection of sarcasm. Not that his comment had deserved any better response; the plain truth rarely requires a commentary, especially when it is supported by a corpse. Still, he was not sure that he liked Lonnie Beckett. He felt that men in their middle twenties should show a certain amount of tenderness toward the senilities of men in their early forties. Even young men, he added sourly in his mind, who were too slick and assured by half. Aware of incipient prejudice, he would take care to lean the other way.

"As you say," he said, "obviously. I wonder if you would be good enough to answer my first question, which Mr. Busch has already answered for himself. Were you personally acquainted with Abby Randal?"

"I was." Lonnie Beckett leaned forward and rubbed his palms on his knees, as if they were sweating, and Marcus had the satisfaction of realizing that he was not, after all, quite so assured as he tried to appear. "I think it would be better if I were to explain our relationship now. I wouldn't want it to be exaggerated or misunderstood later, if it happened to come up."

"That's wise," said Marcus. "We always prefer to avoid misunderstandings if possible."

"Well, the truth is that I went out with Abby several times this last summer. We were both here for the summer session, that is, and we got acquainted and had a few dates."

"How many is a few?"

"Oh, I don't know. I didn't keep a record. Say a dozen."

"That's a nice, round number. What did you do on these dates?"

"Nothing much. We went to some shows downtown, a couple of dances. Mostly, we just strolled around the campus and talked about various things. She had a good brain and a sharp tongue. I thought she was fun to be with for a while, but eventually I lost interest."

"I imagine you can get to know a person pretty well just strolling around talking. What kind of person would you say she was?"

"Smart. I've said that. And tough. I mean tough in a complimentary sort of way. She was realistic, and she knew what she wanted, and I suspect that she didn't have many scruples about going after it. She came from a poor background, I think. She told me her parents were dead. I gathered she'd had to cut a lot of corners

and shoot a lot of angles to get through college and into graduate school. She swore a lot, but you didn't seem to mind it, and hardly noticed it. I think it was part of her defenses, part of the toughness she'd had to develop in getting where she was. Maybe I'm making her sound pretty crude, but she wasn't really. She was knowledgeable, and she had unexpected sensibilities and good taste in many areas. I guess you could call her genuine. She may have played rough when she needed to, but there was nothing phony about her."

"I think I get the picture. A smart, tough girl, basically honest but capable of making the most of her chances."

"That's about it."

"But not all of it. She was pretty, too. Even dead. I noticed that down in the stacks. Generally speaking, pretty girls get more chances than most."

"She was attractive enough, I suppose. Not my type, however."

Marcus had the sudden conviction that this remark was not intended for him alone. He had been vaguely disturbed all along, in fact, by a feeling that he was only ostensibly the primary audience in this matter. Lonnie Beckett was looking at him steadily as he talked, but he was talking to Lena Hayes. He was, in fact, repeating a confession. Marcus was sure of it, and he noticed for the first time, sneaking a quick glance, that Lena's ring finger was decorated with a small diamond. Her hands, lying in her lap, twitched and were still. Lifting his eyes briefly to her face, he saw that it was carefully composed in an expression of disdain, as if the summer's petty infidelities were of little or no importance. As indeed, Marcus thought, they weren't. Unless, he amended, they lead somehow to murder.

"Everyone to his own taste," he said. "Miss Hayes, how well did you know Abby Randal?"

"Hardly at all."

She did not say that this was well enough, but she managed to give the effect of saying it. The effect was achieved, at least in Marcus' ears, without the slightest inflection of scorn, and he willingly gave her points for composure, if not for compassion.

"You did, however, discover her body. It must have been quite a shock."

"It was not exactly a pleasant experience."

"What did you do when you discovered it?"

"I went immediately to the charging desk and told Lonnie. Lonnie went for Mr. Busch."

"You didn't scream?"

"I am not much given to screaming."

"I wondered if you attracted attention to your discovery. That's why I asked."

"No, not at all. I'm sure, even now, that only a few of us know what has happened. There was no one else on that level at the time, and Mr. Busch immediately made it off-limits to all students and personnel. Oh, a lot of people know that something is wrong, of course, but not exactly what."

"You seem to be a sensible young lady, Miss Hayes. I'm sure that the police appreciate it. Tell me, what was your purpose in going to that particular level at that time?"

"I wasn't going to that particular level. I was in the process of going to *all* levels. The lights in each aisle are controlled by a switch at the end. Students are supposed to switch them on when they need them and off when they leave. Only they often don't. Switch them off, I mean. I was going through the stacks doing it for them. I generally make two or three tours a day. We're on an economy kick."

"It seems to be catching. I take it, then, that you just happened to come across the body of Abby Randal in the course of your tour."

"Yes. I saw the body, and I acted just as I've told you."

"And you acted very well, I must say." Marcus turned again to Lonnie Beckett. "How long before the body was discovered had you been at the charging desk?"

"I came on duty at noon. That would make it about two hours."

"So it would. Can you tell me whom you admitted to the stacks in that time?"

"Oh, no." Lonnie Beckett shook his head, apparently appalled by the question. "I'm afraid that would be impossible."

"Impossible? Why? Do you mean there's a rule against telling?"

"No, nothing like that. It's just that I couldn't possibly be sure. Admitting a student is such a routine thing. If you recognize him, you press the button. If you don't recognize him, you glance at his permit and then press the button. I'm always busy, and I hardly notice the person I admit, let alone remember him. I mean, I could give you a long list of those who regularly enter the stacks, one day or another, but not of those who definitely entered this afternoon."

"You remembered Abby Randal, didn't you? You even remembered that she wasn't carrying a briefcase or purse."

"That's only because of what

happened to her. If nothing had happened, I couldn't be sure right now if she'd been in this afternoon or not. Maybe, if I try, I can be reasonably certain about a few people, but I wouldn't have the least notion of the times they came and left."

"Do you remember the time when Abby Randal arrived?"

"No. If I guessed, I might be thirty minutes off."

"You're not much help."

"I'm sorry."

"Well, if you happen to be certain about something all of a sudden, make a note of it." Marcus abruptly returned full cycle to his starting point, which was Henry Busch. "Are there any other entrances to the stacks?"

"Yes. Certainly. At least one on each floor of the building, besides an outside door leading to the drive in the rear."

"Could anyone have entered the stacks this afternoon through one of those entrances?"

"It's possible, I suppose, but improbable. It's the policy to keep them locked at all times. The only ones who use them regularly are library personnel who have keys."

"Then any of the personnel could have entered through one of them?"

"Yes." This question brought a fleeting expression of fastidious distaste to the librarian's thin face, as if he found the implication both untenable and presumptuous. "Anyone, as I said, who had a key."

"Can these doors be opened from inside without a key?"

"They can. Each is equipped with a bar. When the bar is depressed, the lock is released."

"In that case, at least, they are all possible exits. The murderer could have left the stacks through any one of them."

"That's true."

"Well, that's just fine. There's nothing like having plenty of complications." Marcus stood up abruptly and slapped his thigh, apparently out of patience with the whole difficult and sordid affair. "I guess I'd better get out of here and let you go back to work. Before I go, however, I'd like to know where Abby Randal lived. Do you have a student directory or something like that?"

"The new one hasn't been issued yet." Henry Busch turned to Lonnie Beckett. "It seems that you were keeping company with Miss Randal this past summer, Lonnie. Perhaps you can tell the lieutenant her address."

"She was living in a room at 812 Morgan Street at the time," Lonnie said. "She may live there still. I wouldn't know about that."

He was talking to Lena Hayes again. All current knowledge disclaimed. The summer interlude over and done with, incredible and regretted in the bright chill air of autumn. Please, darling, can't we forgive and forget? Marcus couldn't say. He could only make a note of the address and say good-by.

He went down through the stacks again and saw Fuller on the way. The medical examiner had been and gone, and Abby Randal, in a basket, was about to go. A couple of technicians were completing a routine that would probably gain them nothing. Leaving Fuller to wind things up, he descended through the stacks to a lower level, where he used the outside door and went out past the police ambulance in the concrete drive.

He walked around the library, climbing a flight of steep steps up the slope on which the building stood, and so back to his car in the street. In his car he drove slowly off the campus and found Morgan Street, on which, in short order, he found 812. The house was a two-story frame structure that had been painted white at some remote time. There was a high front porch that Marcus crossed to reach the front door. The landlady, who responded after a while to his ringing, was an elderly woman with the sad, depleted air of one who was expiring slowly and interminably with a diminishing whisper of life through a slow leak. She was, Marcus guessed, one of the many widows near the campus who supplemented social security by renting rooms to students.

After identifying himself, Marcus asked for permission to examine Abby Randal's room, and the landlady, after expressing proper shock at what might be an improper request, demanded firmly to know the reason for it. Marcus had no objection to telling her what would soon be general knowledge, and he did so, thereby intensifying her shock to such a degree that he feared for a moment that social security was about to lose an obligation. She recovered sufficiently, however, to accompany him upstairs. She stood in the doorway, leaning for support against the jamb, while Marcus examined the room and went through its late occupant's effects.

He might have saved himself the trouble. There was a meager wardrobe hanging in the closet, a pair of heels and a pair of flats on the floor beneath. There was a bookcase packed with good books, mostly quality paperbacks, and on the walls, incompatible with a faded background of printed paper,

there were two tolerable copies of two excellent paintings. There had been nothing wrong with Abby Randal's taste, but she had clearly lacked the funds to pamper it. There were no letters, not a single one. Apparently she had not only been an orphan, as Lonnie Beckett had said, but also lacking in friends. Or the friends didn't write. Or, if they wrote, Abby had not kept their letters. There was nothing, in brief, to indicate who she really was, or who might have had reason to kill her. In the top drawer of a dresser Marcus came across twenty-three dollars, and he wondered where she got her money. Well, she probably worked for it, and that was something he might need to pursue. In the meanwhile, he was able to assign her a certain character. A pretty girl. A smart, tough girl. A poor girl with a taste for quality.

"Who were her friends?" he asked. "Did she have many?"

"Not many." The landlady was still breathing rather heavily from the excitement or the climb up the stairs or both. "She was pleasant enough with the three other girls who live here, but not what you'd call friendly. Last summer she went out with a young man, but I think that's finished. She told me his name was Beckett, Lonnie Beckett. That's all I know about, except for Mr. Carrol," she added.

"Carrol? Who's he?"

"Richard Carrol, one of the teachers at the university. He's young, just an assistant, I think. Last summer he tutored Miss Randal in French. She was working on a dissertation, and she needed a reading knowledge to do some of her research."

"I see. Perhaps Mr. Carrol can give me a little more information about Abby Randal. Do you know where I can find him?"

"Not offhand. He should be listed in the city directory if he has a telephone."

"Well, there's nothing more to be done here. Let's go look at the directory."

They descended the stairs, and the landlady switched on a light in the lower hall so Marcus could see the fine print in the directory. Locating the C's, he followed his finger to Carrol, Richard.

"Wymore Hall," he read aloud. "That's on campus, isn't it?"

"You might say so. It's just off it. It's reserved for bachelors on the faculty, but they take graduate students if there's any room for them after the faculty has been accommodated."

"You've been helpful." Marcus closed the directory and headed for the door. "Thanks very much."

"Glad to do what I could. That

poor little Miss Randall! Poor little thing!"

Yes, thought Marcus, driving back toward the campus, poor little thing. He supposed that was an apt description of all that had been left of Abby Randal in the library stacks. It was beginning to get dark, and he drove with his lights on. Crossing the campus, he came to Wymore Hall on the other side. It was a long brick building of two stories. Within, beyond a foyer, was a small lounge where shaded lamps burned cozily. In the foyer, a young man was doing desk duty. Marcus reported.

"I'd like to see Mr. Carrol. Detective-Lieutenant Joseph Marcus calling."

The title worked its immediate magic, as he had anticipated. He was told to make himself comfortable in the lounge, and Mr. Carrol, who had lately returned, would be fetched at once. Marcus did as he was told, and approximately five minutes later Mr. Carrol appeared. He was a young man with pale blond hair, cropped close to a well-shaped skull, and candid blue eyes. His handgrip was firm.

"Lieutenant Marcus?" he said, not troubling to disguise a degree of natural apprehension. "I'm Richard Carrol. What can I do for you?"

"I'm making inquiries about a Miss Abby Randal," Marcus said. "There seems to be precious little known about her, and I thought you might be able to fill in with a few details."

"I'm afraid not. I know precious little about her myself."

"You tutored her in French this summer, didn't you?"

"That's correct. But French lessons are not particularly revealing. May I ask why you're interested in Abby?"

"She's been murdered."

"Holy smoke!" Richard Carrol's mouth gaped for a moment, and his blue eyes seemed to go briefly blind with sudden shock. "Where? When? How?"

"You have good news sense, Mr. Carrol." Marcus permitted himself a faint, humorless smile. "In the stacks at the library. This afternoon. By a blow on the head."

"What a shocking thing! I wish I could be of some help to you."

"Perhaps you can. We'll see. How often did you see Abby Randal this summer?"

"I saw her two evenings a week for approximately three months."

"That's quite a while. You surely must have learned something about her in that time."

"Not much. She was bright and learned readily, but I don't suppose that's particularly significant."

"Not particularly. Where did

you meet for her lessons?" I asked.

"Oh, various places. The sessions were quite informal. Sometimes we used a study room in the library. Sometimes we found a bench on the campus. A few times we combined business and beer at one or another of the campus joints."

"I see. And she never confided in you? Not even over the beers?"

"Never. We kept things quite impersonal."

"Too bad. I was in hopes that the student-teacher relationship had developed a bit of sentiment. Sometimes it does, I understand."

"Not ours. Sorry to disappoint you."

"Well, I'm no stranger to disappointment. I meet it often."

A horn sounded outside, and Richard Carrol, hearing it, cocked his head. To Marcus, it sounded like just another horn on another automobile, but to Carrol it apparently had a distinctive character.

"There's my fiancee," he said. "She was to pick me up at this time. We're going out to early dinner. Perhaps you know of her. Her father's quite a prominent figure in the state. Member of the Board of Regents, for one thing.

Leonard Manning, *the* Manning."

Marcus was properly impressed. Member of the Board of Regents was among the least of it. Among the most were umpteen million dollars and a ring in the governor's nose. A common cop couldn't help being impressed. Marcus guessed, sourly, that Richard Carrol had not been entirely unaware of this when he dropped the name. Not, of course, that you could blame him for wanting to make the most of a good thing. A Manning chick would be quite a catch for an assistant professor, involving the effect of an astronomical jump of brackets on 15 April. Lucky boy. Lucky, lucky boy. If things went well, *he* would never need to work thirty years for a pension.

"I've heard of him," Marcus said. "If you're ready to leave, I'll walk out with you."

"I'm truly sorry to have to run. Sorry, too, that I wasn't more helpful. I'll put my mind to it, however, and see if I can recall anything Abby said, anything at all, that you might find useful."

"Thanks. I'd appreciate it if you would."

They walked out together to the curb, where Marcus veered off toward his own car. The dome light was on in the expensive job waiting for Richard Carrol, and Marcus could see the Manning girl behind the wheel digging for something in her purse. The sight gave him a perverse sense of satisfaction. She might have her little fist in her old man's bottomless pocket up to the elbow, he thought, but she could never get within a thousand miles of Atlantic City when looks was buying the ticket. It was somehow comforting to know that you can have so much without quite having it all.

So comforted, Marcus drove downtown to headquarters. He made some notes, wrote a report, and went out to eat. Having eaten and being off duty, he stopped in a congenial bar and drank three beers and watched Burke's Law on TV. He liked to watch it because Amos Burke made it look so easy. Marcus didn't resent this. His envy had a quality of congeniality that was in accord with the bar and the beers. After Amos solved his case, Marcus took his own case home, still unsolved, and went to bed with it.

The next morning at headquarters, he was trapped at his desk for a couple of hours, after which he spent another half-hour briefing the Chief. Returning to his desk to snatch his hat and make his escape, he was caught in the act by the medical examiner, a skinny little man with the dyspeptic expres-

sion of one who suffered a chronic affliction of either cynicism or gas. He seemed so physically frail as to be threatened by every draught, but he was, in fact, as tough as a strand of baling wire. At the moment, in any event, he was securely anchored in Marcus' spare chair.

"I usually just write it in a report," he said, "but this time I thought I'd hog all the fun of telling you personally."

"Enjoy yourself," Marcus said. "Of telling me what?"

"Cursory examination of your latest little victim reveals that she suffered from a well-known physical condition that is sometimes a problem, but seldom fatal. She had round heels."

"Oh?" Marcus sank into his chair and leaned back. "Are you positive?"

"Certainly I'm positive. The condition is easily diagnosed when it's supported by a severe case of pregnancy."

"I got the point, Doc. How long pregnant?"

"About three months."

"Odd. Very odd." Marcus closed his eyes, apparently preparing to catch forty winks. "I've been building a picture in my mind, and somehow I had her figured as too tough and too smart to get caught that way."

"You'd better start over."

"Maybe so. Maybe not. Maybe there's an angle I missed."

"Such as?"

"Such as maybe she was tough enough and smart enough to arrange things deliberately."

"You're guessing. That's the trouble with you fancy cops. Someone gives you a scientific fact and you use it as the gimmick in a fairy tale. Anyhow, if you're right, the arrangement didn't turn out to be very smart. Fatal is how it turned out."

"Now you're the one who's guessing. How do you know it was the motive for her murder?"

"Come off, Marcus. It'll do until a better one turns up."

"Well, that's no guess. That's the truth if I ever heard it." Marcus suddenly got up and grabbed his hat. "I've got to run, Doc. Thanks for your brilliant diagnosis. I didn't think you had it in you."

He escaped into the hall, leaving the old medic to swallow his sour retort, and twenty minutes later he was climbing the steps to the entrance of the university library. Inside, he continued to climb, coming out on the floor in front of the charging desk. Lonnie Beckett was on duty behind the desk. He greeted Marcus courteously but with less than enthusiasm.

"Good morning, Lieutenant," he

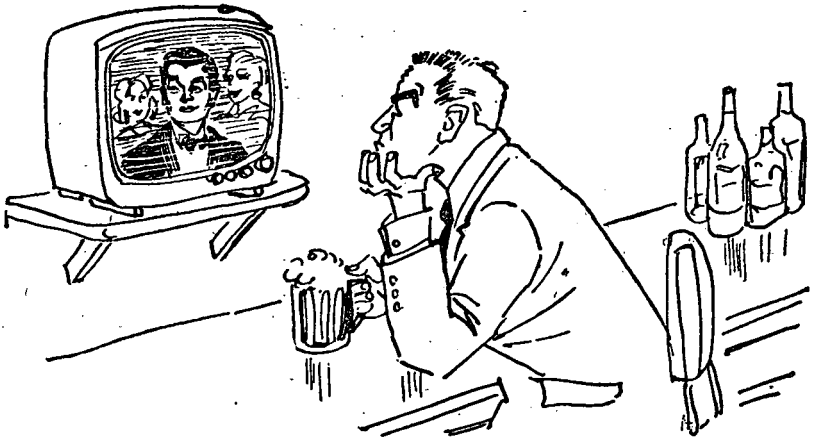
said dryly. "Looking for someone?"

"I was hoping to find Miss Hayes here. There's something I want to clear up with her."

"Lena's in class." Lonnie consulted the watch on his right wrist. "She'll be out in about six minutes."

"Where does the class meet?"

"Grover Hall. That's the stone building just around the curve in the street out front. But maybe I



can tell you what you want to know."

"I don't think you can. There's something else, though. You told me yesterday afternoon that Abby Randal was tough and smart, but that wasn't all of it. Why didn't you tell me that she was also capable of excessive generosity?"

"I don't know what you mean. Generous with what? I told you she was hard up. She didn't have much with which to be generous."

"All girls have something. As my friend Fuller would say, it's not exactly love. Sometimes it passes for love."

Lonnie Beckett's thin face was drained and pinched. His lower lip began to quiver, and he sucked it in between his teeth and held it for several seconds. Marcus watched him with a kind of clinical curiosity, as if his interest were purely academic.

"I don't believe it," Lonnie said finally. "Abby wasn't like that at all."

"No? Well, maybe not. Maybe she discovered some other way of getting pregnant. Not, you understand, that I don't respect you for trying to protect a girl's reputation. Incidentally, I noticed yester-

day that Miss Hayes was wearing a diamond on her ring finger. I had a notion that you put it there."

"All right. So I did."

"Congratulations. Let's hope she leaves it where you put it."

Turning away, Marcus descended the stairs, left the building, and walked along the curving walk to Grover Hall. There was a stone bench beside the walk, and he sat down on it in the pale, cold sunlight. He lit a cigarette and waited, drawing the collar of his coat around his neck. He should have worn an overcoat. The campus was almost deserted at the moment, the students captives in half a thousand classes, but soon afterward it was swarming with them during a brief intermission in their captivity. Marcus watched them closely, searching for Lena Hayes, but he was disconsolately aware that it would be a minor miracle if he could pick her out of this mob dispersing rapidly in all directions. Luck was with him, however, and there she was, coming briskly along the walk on what was clearly a tight schedule. He waited until she came abreast, and then he stood up, touching his hat.

"Hello, Miss Hayes," he said.

"Oh, Lieutenant Marcus." She stopped, facing him, but impatient to be on her way again. "I'm sorry I haven't any time right now. I have another class."

"That's all right. I'll just walk along with you if you don't mind."

"Can't it wait, whatever you want to see me about? I'll be free in another hour."

"I'll try not to make you late for your class. Could I carry your books?"

"No, thank you."

She started off down the walk again, and Marcus fell in beside her. He wished wistfully that she would let him carry the books. It had been a long, long time since he had performed such a service for a girl so lovely.

"You told me yesterday," he said, "that you were switching off lights in the stacks when you discovered Abby Randal's body. Where are the switches located? At which end of the shelves, I mean."

"There are switches at both ends."

"Which were you using?"

"The ones nearer the stairs, naturally. Why should I walk all the way to the other end and then back to the stairs again when I was ready to go to the next level?"

"But that is exactly what you did, Miss Hayes; at least in one instance. Otherwise, you couldn't possibly have seen Abby Randal's body on the floor of that little room

at the far end. Isn't that correct?"

"Of course not. I went back there for a perfectly good reason. When I reached the aisle that ends just opposite the door of the room, the lights were off, as they should have been, but I happened to notice a book on the floor near my end of the aisle. I switched on the lights so that I could see to put the book back on the shelf where it belonged, and then I saw that several books were on the floor all the way along the aisle. It looked as if someone had pulled them off the shelves maliciously just to make extra work. Anyhow, I went down the aisle and replaced the books, and that's how I happened to get back where I could see the body."

"Tell me, Miss Hayes. Which shelf were the books from?"

"The bottom one, just off the floor."

"All of them?"

"Yes."

"Didn't you think that was odd?"

"Not at all. I merely thought it was devilish. The books are more difficult to replace on the low shelves. You have to sit on your heels to do it. If you're not careful, you pop your hose and start a run."

"You must have been rather annoyed."

"To put it bluntly, I was mad as hell. Then I discovered the body, of course, and it was all knocked right out of my head."

"I can appreciate that. Is this your building?"

"Yes. I'll have to rush, or I'll be late. Is that all you wanted to ask me?"

"That's all."

"I can't see that it makes any difference."

"It makes a great deal of difference. Thanks, Miss Hayes."

He watched her hurry up the walk to the building, filled with the ghosts of seasons past, and then he turned with a sigh and went back to his car. He sat for a while under the wheel. He was strangely reluctant to do what was left to be done, and he decided he would go back to headquarters and try to get Fuller to do it for him. Fuller probably wouldn't mind, inasmuch as it would give him a chance to play the lead for a while, and in the meantime he, Marcus, could prepare himself for the most depressing part of his job, which was charging people for things they never should have done. So deciding, he returned to headquarters and left word with the desk sergeant to send Fuller to him when Fuller turned up. It was almost an hour later when Fuller came in.

"If you're wondering whether

we've found the weapon or not," Fuller said, "we haven't."

"Well, I wouldn't worry about it. It was probably a length of lead pipe or something that could be carried in a briefcase or under a coat. I wonder if you'll do me a favor?"

"I'll do anything," said Fuller carefully, "that's part of my job."

"You always do your job, Fuller."

"Thanks. What's the favor?"

"Run out to the university and bring in Abby Randal's murderer. No hurry, however. Whenever it's convenient."

Fuller's face turned slowly to stone. Deliberately, with an effect of great caution, he sat down in the spare chair and cupped his knees in the palms of his big hands. He spoke with dreadful restraint, staring at the wall above and beyond Marcus.

"Just like that. Go out and bring in Abby Randal's murderer, Fuller. At your convenience, Fuller." He lowered his eyes to his hands and turned the hands over on his knees, flexing the fingers. "Maybe you wouldn't mind telling me how you know all of a sudden who the murderer is?"

"That's easy, Fuller. I know because Abby Randal told me."

"Oh, that explains it, then. It was a simple matter of talking with a ghost. I've never had the privilege of talking with a ghost, myself. How come you always get to do the interesting things?"

"No ghost, Fuller. She told me before she died."

"Somehow I was under the impression that you never saw her before she died."

"So I didn't, Fuller, but she left the message."

"I'm just a dumb sergeant, I guess. I don't read very well. I probably wouldn't have got the message if she'd written it in blood, of which there wasn't any, or in the dust on the floor, of which there also wasn't any."

"She wrote it in books, Fuller. We assumed in the beginning that she was killed in that little room where she was found, but she wasn't. She only went there to die. I had suspicions even in the beginning, because the chair was pushed neatly under the desk, as you'll remember. She obviously hadn't been there long enough to use the room, at any rate, but that didn't preclude the possibility of her being struck down as she entered. That's what the position of the body suggested. I learned this morning, however, that she was attacked at the far end of the aisle. The murderer should have struck her again and again to make sure that she was dead, but he was

afraid to linger, of course, and hurried away. That was a mistake, because Abby Randal didn't die. Not immediately. She was tough. She was smart. Even dying, in pain and fear, she thought of a way to leave us the name of her murderer. She dragged herself down that aisle, all the way, pulling books off the bottom shelf to mark her path and let us know that there was a *reason* for what she was doing. When she got to that little room, she was where she wanted to go. She crawled in and died. Why? Why, Fuller?"

"I suppose," said Fuller with heavy sarcasm not unmixed with despair, "that she wanted to die in privacy."

"No. She crawled there because that was the one way she could name her murderer. Do you know what those little study rooms are called, Fuller? *They're called carrels.* There's a guy on the faculty out there whose name is Richard Carrol. He tutored Abby Randal in French last summer, and he had a lot to lose, name of Manning, from becoming a premature papa in collaboration with the wrong mama. He said his sessions with Abby were informal, and they must have been. And I'll give you odds, Fuller, that their last one was held yesterday afternoon in the library stacks."

"Is this all the evidence you've got? It may be true, but you'll have a hell of a time proving it."

"That's right. It's not enough for the district attorney to take to court. We'll find something else, though. It's not too hard to find circumstantial evidence when you know where to look for it. Anyhow, we won't really need it. I talked with Carrol last night, and I know the type. He'll break like an egg under pressure. But how in the devil can we get a confession if you won't bring him in?"

Fuller stood up. He shook his head as if to clear it of fog.

"If you can make it stick, it's great work," he said. "I've got to admit that."

"I'm not proud of it," Marcus said. "Abby Randal did all the work. I just came along later to grab the credit."

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