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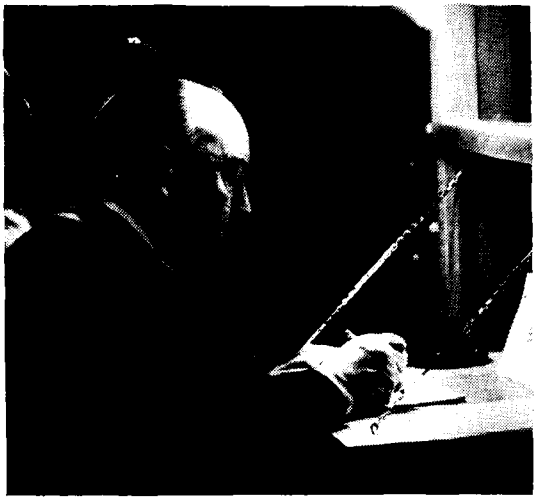

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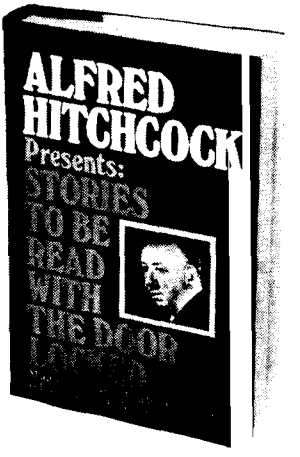

MAY 1976

Dear Reader:

Well, here it is spring again—time to start planning that summer vacation.

Why not visit relatives? That's what happens in our novelette, *Lost Child* by Pauline C. Smith. Of course, certain precautions are required. Better still, why not have relatives visit you? Before you let them in, however, read *A Visit from Aunt Barbara* by James McKimmey.

Or you could go abroad—say, to Ireland (although Edward D. Hoch's *The Diamond Frog* discouraged *me* from that trip). Perhaps a jaunt to the Big City? But after reading *Here Be Dragons* by R. L. Stevens maybe you would rather stay at home. Although home is hardly the haven it used to be, as we see in *A Private Little War* by William Brittain.

Hmm. I think this summer I'll just find some well lighted place and settle in with a mystery.

Good reading.

Alfred Hitchcock

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VOLUME 21, NO. 5 MAY 1976

ALFRED HITCHCOCK'S mystery magazine

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SHORT STORIES

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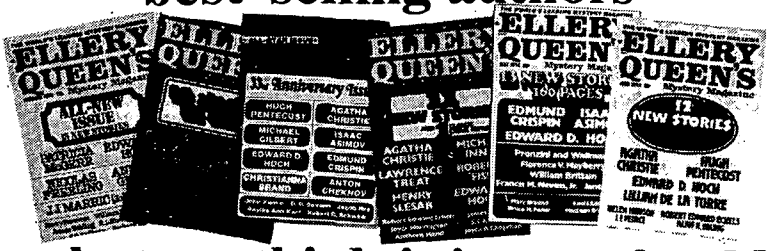

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As he fell, he was aware of a strange odor, musky and somewhat sweet. . .

A PRIVATE LITTLE WAR

by WILLIAM BRITTAIN

Jake Landis hobbled back into his classroom, hung his cane on the chalk tray, and settled himself onto the tubular steel chair at his desk. With both hands he pulled at his left leg, moving it into as comfortable a position as possible.

The stiff knee, a relic of an automobile accident five years previously, didn't pain him any more. It was just awkward sometimes. But then, a man crowding fifty, with all the dreams of becoming a sports

hero or another Fred Astaire behind him, didn't need supple joints to teach freshman history. And besides, the cane added a certain style to his lessons, especially during descriptions of French swordplay or when brandished as a mock threat over the head of some lazy student. Getting up and down stairs was a tedious process, but he was usually able to find a football player to run interference for him and be there to catch him if he was in danger of falling.

He pulled the first batch of test papers from the slow class toward him and began reading: "The Boston Tea Party was wher the coloneal daims planed ther part in the Revelushin." Oh, boy! It was going to be a long two hours until five o'clock.

There was a knock at the classroom door, and Jake looked up. The door opened, and Harvey Cassidy of the math department stuck his head in. "Got a minute, Jake?" he asked.

"Sure. Come on in, Harv. But if it's about math, I'm telling you right now, I always figured you guys worked by magic, not logic. Just apply the right spell, and the volume of a pyramid is yours for the asking."

"At least it's better than reviewing a couple of centuries of man's inhumanity to man," replied Cassidy with a grin. He leaned against one of the student desks, and suddenly the grin disappeared.

"Jake, you've got Alec Whitnine in one of your classes, haven't you?" he asked in a flat voice.

"Sure. Third period. He sits over there by the window. Why?"

"Tell me what you think of him, will you? Never mind the test scores. What's he like as a person?"

Jake considered the question for a moment. "To tell the truth, I don't really know that much about him," he said. "A pretty quiet kid most of the time. About the only time he speaks out is to ask some question designed to embarrass me in front of the class. He's something of a pain in the neck, but not really all that bad. And Mabel Fuchs considers him the darling of her science classes." He adjusted his leg to a more comfortable angle. "Why do you ask?"

Cassidy's gaze was piercing. "Because," said the math teacher, "earlier today, I think Alec Whitnine deliberately tried to kill me."

"What?" Jake's head shook in disbelief. "Alec's a little squirt of a freshman, Harv. You must weigh close to two hundred pounds. He couldn't take you on with anything less than a cannon. And besides,

what do you mean you 'think' he tried to kill you. Don't you know?"

Cassidy held up a hand. "Let me tell you what happened. It was seventh period. I'd covered the lesson faster than usual, so I gave the class the last ten minutes to begin their homework. And since the weather's been so hot lately, I had all the windows up as far as they'd go."

"But what's the weather got to do with. . ."

"My room's back in the new wing of the building, remember? The windows there come down to within a couple of feet of the floor. You know how the administration's always warning us to be careful around them. Anyway, the kids were working on their own like a bunch of Einsteins, so I leaned out the window to get a breath of air. My back was to the class, but I didn't figure there'd be any trouble. I heard one or two of 'em walking around the room, but that was all right—they're allowed to get paper or go to the pencil sharpener any time they like."

"Harv, will you get to the point of this cockamamie story?"

"I don't know what it was that made me turn around. But when I did, there was Alec, holding the window pole up over his shoulder like it was a spear. He let it fly just as I turned. The thing missed me by a couple of inches and went right out through the open window. Made an awful clatter when it hit the sidewalk below."

"Look, my students play with the window pole in here too. Either they're Little John fighting Robin Hood or Knights of the Round Table at a jousting tournament."

Cassidy slapped his fist angrily against the top of the wooden desk. "Dammit, this wasn't done in fun! I was kind of off balance leaning out that window, and it's two stories down to the sidewalk. If I hadn't turned at just that moment they'd have been scraping me up with a putty knife!"

"Take it easy, Harv," said Jake soothingly. "All right, Alec was out of line. But he didn't mean any harm. Probably the whole thing scared him a lot more than it did you."

Cassidy shook his head. "With ten years in this business, I figure I can read human reactions as well as the next guy. He wasn't scared. He acted more like he was. . .was. . ."

"Was what?"

"Disappointed," said Cassidy softly.

There was a silence in the room, and the clock clicked off another

minute. "Oh, come on," said Jake. "What reason would Alec have to do a thing like that?"

"He got a fifty on a class quiz the other day. First failing mark for him in math all year."

Jake almost laughed out loud. "Now are you going to be scared of any kid you have to fail?"

"I tell you, Alec is—well—different. He's had it in for me since he got the paper back."

"What makes you think so?"

"It's nothing you can put your finger on. Just something I can sense. The way he looks at me. You know how it is. The wise-guy way he phrases his questions. And I'm not the only one who thinks Alec Whitnine is creepy."

"Who else?"

"Manny Shelberg. He's coaching freshman baseball this year. Last week was tryouts, and Alec got cut from the squad. That day, after the practice was over, the kid came into the exercise room to ask Manny to reconsider. Manny was down on the floor looking for one of his contact lenses that had fallen out, and he told Alec to beat it. Five minutes later one of the barbells rolled off its rack when Manny was right beneath it. The way he tells it, if he hadn't done a fast somersault, the thing would have come down on his spine. Have you got any idea how much damage a two-hundred-pound weight falling three feet can do, Jake?"

Jake shrugged. "An accident."

"But there's no way the barbell could have jumped out of the grooves in the rack. Unless it was helped. And Manny remembers he never heard Alec leave the locker room. He could have slipped up on the other side of those racks and. . ."

"And maybe Manny hit the rack with his shoulders while he was crawling around. Maybe a hundred other things. Come on, Harv, you're being silly. You say Alec's got it in for you because of a failing paper. Mabel Fuchs had to flunk him on a few tests, and the two of 'em still get along like a couple of mice in a corn crib. If he's the monster you seem to think, why hasn't he tried anything with her?"

"I don't know, Jake. But from now on I'm going to be on my guard. And I suggest you do the same. That kid'll kill somebody yet. And he'll take the greatest of pleasure in doing it."

Four days later, Alec Whitnine failed his first quiz in Mr. Landis's history class.

At the dismissal bell, Alec chose to remain for what Jake liked to call the inquest. Alec stood before the teacher's desk, a small figure with a vestigial layer of baby fat that made his body resemble an overripe peach. Unlike most of the boys, who wore their hair at collar length and elaborately styled, Alec's was cropped in a short, military manner, one step away from a completely shaved head.

"Mr. Landis," said the boy, "I should have gotten more than a sixty-one on my essay."

Just like that, thought Jake. Shape up, Mr. Landis, and give me the mark I feel I deserve.

"Alec," he began, "you did a fine job on your analysis of the Stamp Act, but the question did say to discuss three causes of the American Revolution. You completely left out the other two."

"I thought, Mr. Landis, that an in-depth discussion of a single cause would be more to your liking." The boy's voice dripped syrupy sarcasm.

"Well, you thought wrong. The question was quite clear."

"Another four points would be sufficient," said the boy. "Simply a passing mark."

It wasn't a request; it was a command. Jake hadn't been talked to that way since boot camp. "You'd better leave, Alec," he said firmly.

Alec merely hunched his shoulders and stared at the floor.

"Look, young fella," the teacher went on. "In about thirty seconds a class of students will be coming through that door. And unless you're out of here by then, they're going to meet you flying low in the opposite direction off the toe of my shoe. Clear?" Jake grinned to make a joke of the threat.

The expression on Alec's face changed, and Jake felt as if he'd been drenched with a pail of ice water. The concentrated malevolence in the young eyes was something all his years of teaching hadn't prepared him for. The boy's twisted features were fanatic—almost inhuman. In the face of this naked hatred, sweat began trickling down Jake's neck, and suddenly Cassidy's story about Alec's attempt to kill him seemed all too possible.

Without a word, Alec pivoted and stalked out of the room.

Jake got through the rest of the day, both ashamed and afraid of the

thoughts going through his brain. Alec had to be like all the other students, probably angrier at himself for failing than at the teacher, and yet the awful menace of that single moment before the boy had left made Jake's skin crawl every time he thought about it.

The dismissal bell finally rang, and five minutes later Jake was at work on his homework corrections. He worked his way through the papers in record time and was halfway finished with the last one when he heard the sound out in the hall.

A door opening.

It couldn't be a custodian. Cal Stettner had finished cleaning this section of the building more than an hour ago.

"Hello!" Jake called.

No answer.

Jake hauled himself to his feet, gripped the cane, and hobbled out into the hall. It was empty. He peered around the corner.

The hydraulic device on the door to the boys' lavatory was slowly pulling it closed.

Jake walked into the lavatory, his shoes making shuffling noises on the white tile floor. Nothing. Whoever it was must have been leaving when the teacher had heard him. And it was clear that the unknown person didn't want to be discovered.

As Jake went out into the hall again, the silence was an almost solid thing, broken only by the gentle hissing of air as the lavatory door closed.

And then something else.

A soft, guarded sound of steps on the stairwell beyond Jake's room. He lurched to the top step.

"Who's there?" he called. "Come on, speak up. You know students aren't allowed to walk around the building after school." He looked downward, wishing he could see beyond the landing.

From the floor below came a single low whistle that lasted less than a second.

"Games, huh?" Jake snorted. "Okay, let's find out who in blazes you are."

Bracing himself with the cane, he set his left foot slowly and laboriously down onto the first step and gripped the railing tightly as he brought his right foot down beside it. That's one, he thought. Only twenty-three more to go. He'd never catch the kid, of course, but with

a little perseverance, maybe he could chase whoever it was out of the building.

Two steps.

Three.

And then, on the fourth step, as he leaned forward to shift his weight to the cane, its tip squirted off the flat surface as if the rubber tip had grown wheels. Overbalanced, Jake instinctively thrust out his injured leg, but it skidded and slid as if the stairs had turned to ice.

He was falling! He crashed down on one hip, and pain streaked along his side. He gripped at the steps, but all friction between his hands and the terrazzo surface seemed to have vanished. As he rolled over and over, trying to protect his face with his arms, he was aware of a strange odor, musky and somewhat sweet.

Then he tumbled heavily to the landing, banging the side of his head against the radiator.

For a moment he was dazed, and flashes of bright light danced before his eyes. Then, ignoring his pounding head and ringing ears, he gingerly moved first his arms and then his good leg. Finally, the stiff leg, which ached dully but seemed to be in reasonably good condition.

A series of jerky movements brought him to his feet, and he looked upward at the dozen steps down which he had fallen. Lucky, he thought to himself. A broken arm or leg was a distinct possibility from a fall like that, a snapped neck or spine not completely out of the question. What could have caused. . .

He rubbed the thumb and forefinger of his left hand together, feeling a slimy something against his fingertips. Then he brought the hand to his nose and sniffed.

Soap!

Both his palms were covered with the slippery liquid soap used in the school lavatories. One shoe also had traces of the stuff, as did the tip of his cane. Wiping it off with a handkerchief, Jake torturously made his way back up the stairs until he reached the fourth from the top.

The surface of the step had been liberally coated with the soap.

The noises outside his room had been deliberate. He'd been lured into the hall by someone who was bent on killing him.

Someone?

Alec Whitnine?

At home that evening, soaking his aches in a steaming tub, Jake pondered the problem of how to handle the situation with Alec. Tell someone? But who? He remembered how he'd scoffed at Harv Cassidy's story just last week. No, he couldn't mention it to anyone at school.

The police? They'd want proof, and he had no proof. Just a step with soap on it, which could be looked on as accidental, and the expression on a boy's face. But how, Mr. Landis, do you go about getting a facial expression into police records?

And yet a potential murder victim couldn't be expected to wait idly by to give his prospective killer a second chance.

The following day, Jake used his free period to look up Alec Whitnine's record in the guidance office. Not much there. Alec's mother had been dead for ten years, and Alec lived with his father on Derby Avenue. The old man had to be loaded to afford a house in that section. Alec's grade school had been Chindale Park, the newest and best in the whole district. Average marks through the first six years, with only a few D's and F's.

Seventh grade had been a different matter. The low marks became more numerous, with three F's in English alone. Jake smiled. It took more than a cute smile and a polite manner to impress old Sadie Treska. The absentee card for that year showed a total of twenty-five days Alec had been absent.

The teacher thumbed back through the earlier cards. Strange. In all his first six years put together, Alec had only been absent seventeen days. And it couldn't have been a major illness or an accident. The days were too widely spaced for that.

Eighth grade showed much the same pattern. Lower marks and increased absences. But the teacher, Bob Hausermann, had added some comments of his own:

10/17—"Alec's a loner. Quiet. Perhaps too quiet for his own good."

1/29—"Usually a peaceful boy. But sometimes becomes belligerent with classmates at little or no provocation."

2/27—"Moody and unapproachable since midyear marks."

The final comment, dated 4/15, had been heavily crossed out. Jake peered closely at the network of lines on the back of the report card. The first letter was, he thought, a T.

Finally he was able to make out more letters. "To--y Ale-tri-- -o. . ."

And then Jake had it.

"Today Alec tried to. . ." There was no more. And Bob Hausermann had done his best to see that no one would read the message.

Jake ducked into an unused guidance office. He picked up the telephone on the desk and dialed the extension for the Chindale Park School. He asked to speak to Mr. Hausermann and listened to a three-minutes lecture from the secretary about phoning a teacher during classes. Jake was finally able to convince her of the importance of the call, and she grudgingly got the eighth grade teacher on the line.

"Hi, Jake! Say, I haven't seen much of you this year. Why don't we. . ."

"Listen, Bob, I've got no time for the nicities. Give me a fast rundown on Alec Whitnine, a kid you had last year. I've been reviewing his record. I'm particularly interested in your last comment—the one you crossed out. Do you remember it?"

A long silence. Then: "Yeah, Jake. I remember it. But now that the records are open to the parents, I'm not sure I want to get my head handed to me by. . ."

"Bob, this is me—Jake. Nothing you tell me will go any further. That's a promise. Now give."

"The kid's got problems, Jake. The father's a big bull of a man. Expects his kid to produce just the way all those companies he owns are supposed to. I can't prove it, but I think that during the last year or so he attended here, Alec got slapped around when he brought home low marks. Any time he had a bad time with a test, he'd be out the next day or two. And when he came back, there were the bruises. I saw them."

"Well, that's a start on what I need. But about the report card and your comment. . ."

"Jake, I'll call you a liar if you tell another soul. But I'm sure Alec Whitnine tried to kill me. Don't laugh. It's true."

"I'm not laughing, Bob. How'd it happen?"

"We were getting an assembly program ready. Alec had a lead part. Y'know, that kid's really something. He can mimic anybody. I caught him in front of the class one day doing me, and I couldn't get mad because he was really good."

"What's that got to do with. . ."

"I'm getting to that. Three days before the show, I caught Alec

cheating on a grammar test. I took the part away from him. The next day he was absent. I guess you can figure out why."

"His father again?"

"Sure. Anyway, the day he came back I had a practice after school. Naturally Alec wasn't included. I was on the stage, talking to the cast. I finished what I was saying and moved to the front of the stage to hop down to the floor. Just when I moved, a curtain counterweight fell and caved in two boards right where I'd been standing. Later on, when I'd gotten myself and the kids calmed down, I looked at the rope on the weight. It'd been cut. And a janitor told me he thought he'd seen Alec sneaking around in the loft above the stage. Naturally he denied it. There wasn't any real action I could take, but I did start to put a note on his report card. Then I got to thinking of what the legal consequences might be, and I thought better of it."

Slowly Jake settled the telephone receiver onto its cradle, his mind spinning from what he'd just heard. Bob Hausermann. . .Manny Shelberg. . .Harv Cassidy. . .and now his own "accident" on the stairs. Alec Whitnine, it seemed, was prepared to kill whenever the prospect of failure arose.

No, that wasn't really true. His science teacher, Mabel Fuchs, hadn't had any trouble. And Sadie Treska, back in seventh grade, had noticed nothing unusual.

And then Jake understood the pattern.

Until Bob Hausermann in eighth grade, Alec had had only women teachers. And there'd been no trouble. Even now, the boy couldn't consider women among his victims.

But men! When men attacked Alec's image of himself and caused dire consequences at home, the attack had to be repulsed. In the surest and most permanent way possible.

Murder.

Jake wondered whether Alec looked upon all men as surrogate fathers who were there only to punish him unfairly. Or perhaps there was something in his twisted code of honor that made women immune from retaliation, regardless of the provocation. Whatever the case, it was clear that Alec was carrying on his own private little war against any male teacher who implied that he wasn't measuring up to some nebulous standard the boy had set for himself.

But it was done so cleverly that only those attacked even knew that the war existed. And they couldn't do anything about it.

The bell rang for the beginning of the next period.

That evening, Jake deliberately waited until seven o'clock to telephone the Whitnine house. He wanted to be sure to talk to Mr. Whitnine, and he decided that if Alec answered he'd hang up and try again.

"Sam Whitnine here." The voice sounded as if it was coming from inside a bass drum. "Who's calling?"

"My name's Landis," Jake began.

"Landis? Oh, yes. Alec's teacher. What can I do for you, Mr. Landis?"

In for a penny, in for a pound, thought Jake. Taking a deep breath, he poured out the whole story. Events, comments, suspicions. All he left out were the names of the other teachers involved. "So I think your boy's in trouble," he concluded, "and frankly, Mr. Whitnine, I don't know how to handle it."

He leaned back in his chair and waited for the blast. You don't tell a parent point-blank that his child has homicidal tendencies and expect to escape unscarred. What, he wondered, would he be threatened with first? Dismissal? A lawsuit?

"Mr. Landis," said the deep voice, "I must say you make a mighty convincing case. Matter of fact, I've been noticing some things about Alec I'm not too happy about either. I wonder if you'd do me the favor of dropping by sometime so we can discuss what's to be done?"

Jake stared at the phone in disbelief.

"Would tonight be okay?" he asked.

"Fine. Alec's out to a movie or something. In about an hour, say?"

The Whitnine house was a colonial with a fieldstone facade; and it looked big enough to park the Hindenberg zeppelin. Jake limped up the brick steps and rang the bell. A little metal box beside the door showed a red light, and Mr. Whitnine's voice came from it.

"That you, Landis?"

"It's me, Mr. Whitnine."

"The door's unlocked. Come on in. I'm in my study, just to the right beyond the living room."

Jake opened the door and stepped inside. The living room, about the size of a basketball court, was done in pseudo-Japanese, with low chairs

and tables, bamboolike wallpaper, an exotic chandelier right out of Fu Manchu, and even a samurai sword hung in its sheath on the far wall.

Jake looked about. There were two tiny lights on, but they didn't begin to dispel the shadows. Then, at the far end of the room he noticed a brighter glow.

He made his way across a rug deep enough to drown in and finally reached the open door to Mr. Whitnine's study. It was a Civil War buff's dream, filled with relics that ranged from cap-and-ball pistols to canteens and Confederate flags. And in the center, at a flat desk that Lincoln himself might well have used, sat Samuel Whitnine.

His lined face seemed sculpted from marble, and the set of his mouth indicated that here was a man who stood for no nonsense. His arms were outstretched on the desk, and his hands were pressed flat against its surface. In spite of the warmth of the evening he wore a wool robe of brilliant colors which seemed to accentuate the man's aggressiveness.

Jake stepped into the room. He coughed gently, preparing to speak.

But then the cane slipped from shaking fingers, and he struggled to retain mental control over himself. His mind refused to accept what his eyes told him had to be true:

The teacup on the corner of the desk, with no liquid in it but only a thick layer of white powder at its bottom.

The man's staring eyes and uncanny lack of movement.

The thin layer of dust on his sleeves and the backs of his hands.

And finally—horribly—the single strand of spider web that extended from one corner of his half-open mouth down to the edge of the desk.

Alec Whitnine's private little war had claimed its first and most logical victim.

"Welcome to my house, Mr. Landis." The booming voice behind him was the same one the teacher had heard on the telephone an hour earlier.

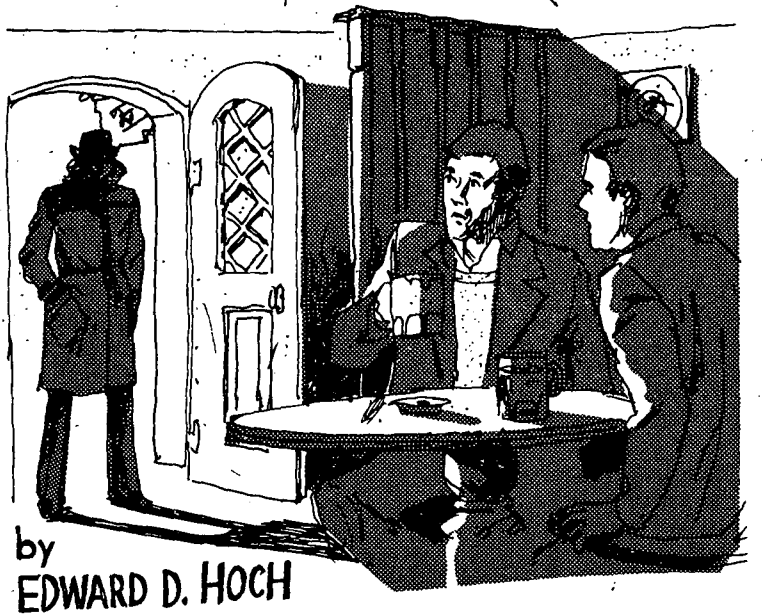
"That kid's really something," Bob Hausermann had told him. *"He can mimic anybody."*

There was a metallic slithering sound as the samurai sword was removed from its sheath.

And Jake Landis, helpless without the cane now lying on the floor, bowed his head and waited for Alec Whitnine to claim his second victory.

Sometimes a murderer can also be a detective. . .

THE DIAMOND FROG



by
EDWARD D. HOCH

My newspaper had booked me a seat on the evening jet to London as soon as the news broke about the latest rash of letter-bombings. We were an hour out of New York before I realized that my seatmate was an elderly Irish gentleman with white hair and a brogue.

"A newsman, you say? Flying over to cover the latest troubles? Fifty years ago I was part of it myself. I was with the I.R.A."

It sounded like a good sidebar feature, so I encouraged him to tell

me about it. "How do you feel about the killings now? Do you condone them?"

He stared at me with pale-blue eyes. "Terrorist killing of innocent persons can never be condoned. It was different back in my day."

"How different?" I asked. "Killing is killing."

The elderly man shook his head. "No, sometimes killing is murder. And sometimes a murderer can also be a detective."

"You're talking in paradoxes. But if you have a story to tell, I'd like to hear it."

He smiled slightly and began, and I wondered how many times he'd told his story before. "It was during the final months of the Troubles, at one of the bloodiest times . . ."

Hilljoy Square was a tenement section of Dublin, a shabby stinking hole of a place, especially when the muggy summer heat beat down on the metal roofs and cobblestone walls. Only the nights were cool, and few risked venturing outside during those late summer months of 1920. The rats were always there at night, scurrying out of their holes for the same coolness the humans sought. But now a new hazard had been added with the coming of bloodshed to Dublin.

It started with the ambush slaying of two Irish policemen at Tipperary by one Daniel Breen, a trackwalker for the railroad. As the attacks by Breen and his growing number of followers became more numerous, the English sent in the Auxiliaries and the Black-and-Tans in a futile effort to maintain order. Now, some said, perhaps two thousand gunmen of the Irish Republican Army roamed the streets of the city and the lanes of the countryside. The killings were more frequent, and a summer night rarely passed without the crackle of gunfire or the flare of a firebomb.

To men like Patrick Mulligan, the killing and the terrorism had become a way of life that summer. Like many of the others, he was still in his early twenties—a young man who might have been studying or marrying or working. But like the rest, he had come to hate the English. His early years had been filled with grandfatherly tales of how it was during the potato famine, of how the English had killed so many. And the Rebellion of 1916, with the bloody fighting in the streets, had done nothing to tame his dark thoughts. He'd mourned the execution of James Connolly and joined the Sinn Fein as soon as he was old

enough.

Patrick Mulligan lived in Hilljoy Square, in a little two-room apartment with his sister. She was older by five years, but still unmarried. Each morning she left breakfast for him and went off to the pub where she helped clean up and occasionally served beer.

"Sheila," he called out from bed one morning, "what's it doing out?"

"Raining," she answered. "What else does it ever do in August?"

"Going to the pub?"

"Of course. I left your breakfast. Try not to get into trouble today."

He stayed in bed until she'd gone, staring up at the cracks in the ceiling and thinking about the haggard landlady who would soon come by to bicker with him over the rent. That was enough to get him in motion, and he dressed, bundled into a shabby coat against the rain, and went out to face the world.

Patrick Mulligan's world was one of tenements and fruitstands and fly-specked candy stores. And hotel lobbies where the odor of stale beer and urine mingled. More recently, since the coming of the Troubles, his world had broadened to include Mills bombs and machine guns and big army pistols with a ring on the butt. He'd killed three men so far, but he rarely thought about them.

That morning he was thinking more about Basil Good, a solemn young man as reckless as himself. It was Basil who'd challenged the priest when he refused a Catholic burial to an I.R.A. gunman, Basil who'd fired the army barracks and blasted the railway bridge.

He found Basil at the second pub along Duke Street, next to the plumber's shop. "It's early for a beer," he said by way of greeting.

Basil Good twisted his lips into a sort of smile. It was as close as he ever came. "Never too early, my lad. What's on for today, eh?"

"Got a meeting tonight," Patrick said, lowering his voice so the bartender would not hear. There were still those who did not approve of the killing and burning, who would sell out their own people to the British only too quickly.

"Anything in the wind?"

"We need money, Basil."

Basil Good played with his beer. "Maybe I could get some for us. Maybe I could get enough to keep us in guns and good Irish whiskey besides."

Patrick Mulligan was interested. He knew the solemn young man

was not one for idle dreams. "The Black-and-Tan payroll!" he burst out, putting words to his own secret dream. "That would really show 'em!"

"No. We'd need men for that. And there'd be killing."

"Are you suddenly against killing a few Englishmen?"

Basil shifted his stance at the bar. "What I'm onto will give the I.R.A. money enough to kill every English soldier in the country, and make us heroes every school kid will remember. Have you ever heard of the diamond frog?"

"The what?"

"The diamond frog. It was a gift of Sir Francis Drake to Queen Elizabeth on the occasion of his knighthood. He was knighted by the Queen following a banquet aboard the *Golden Hind,* which was laid up at Deptford. The date was April 14, 1581."

"A diamond frog," Patrick repeated, turning the phrase over on his tongue. "But why?"

"Elizabeth already possessed a small golden flower with a frog on it, and when Drake was searching for a suitable gift for the great occasion, he decided on a large silver casket or chest and a frog made all of diamonds. They were diamonds gathered by his looting from the far corners of the sea, completely covering a replica of a frog. Can you imagine what such a thing would be worth today?"

"If it exists."

"It exists all right. And I've been told it would bring close to a million pounds!"

"A million. . . Who'd have that sort of money?"

"The diamond merchants in Amsterdam or New York. And they have about as much love for the English as we do."

Patrick scratched his suntanned forehead. "Are you hinting that you know where we can lay our hands on this frog?"

Basil Good sipped his beer with a look of triumph. "It's here, lad—right here in Dublin!"

"Go on! If such a thing ever existed, it's either lost or sitting in the Tower of London with the rest of the crown jewels." He motioned the bartender for more beer.

"It's not in the Tower," Basil assured him. "It's here in the city, in the possession of a man named Davoren."

"How did he come by it, then?"

"Well, he. . ." Basil was stopped in mid-sentence by the expression on the bartender's face. It was a sudden look of sheer terror that directed the customers' gaze to the door.

"Mask," Patrick Mulligan breathed.

The door of the pub was open and the man who stood framed in the morning sunlight was a too-familiar figure to them both. His name was Mask, or at least that was what they called him, after Lough Mask, a lovely little lake in the west of Ireland. But there was nothing lovely about him, and only the watery depths of his icy blue eyes were in any manner lakelike. He was handsome, and young for the job assigned to him. Standing there, his cold eyes sweeping the line of men at the bar, his right hand plunged deep into his raincoat pocket, he might have been an executioner sizing up his next victim.

In point of fact, Mask was an executioner, and in that instant every man in the pub knew there was a gun in that pocket that might be meant for him. In a world where neighbor spied on neighbor and brother occasionally fought brother, nothing was certain except a man like Mask. He was the avenger, the righter of wrongs, the conscience of the rebellion. The men who had died that summer under Mask's steady gun were not Englishmen—they were Irish like himself. They were the traitors, mostly, the informers who worked with the English against their own people. But more frequently now they were ordinary people who spoke out against the killing, who refused to pay the rifle tax or contribute to the cause in some manner. Even those priests who supported the I.R.A. found themselves speaking out against this growing wave of killings, but the leaders said they were necessary, and the man named Mask walked the street of Dublin with growing purpose.

But this day he'd come to the wrong pub. After a moment's hesitation he backed out of the door, his right hand still deep in his pocket. The bartender and his customers relaxed with audible sighs. Mask had passed them by, at least this time.

"Come on!" Basil said to Patrick. "Let's follow him and see who it's going to be!"

They ran out into the street like small boys chasing the fire wagons, in time to see Mask vanish into the doorway of the next pub on Duke Street. Almost immediately there was the muffled bark of two shots close together. A woman screamed from somewhere inside, and as they reached the doorway Mask brushed by them, his face frozen in an ex-

pression of indifference. He walked quickly down the street, through a weakening drizzle, and vanished from sight around a corner.

Inside, they found a group of familiar faces clustered around a body on the floor. The dead man was O'Casey, a laborer they both knew. He'd been seen talking to the Black-and-Tans on several occasions, and perhaps that had been enough to seal his fate.

"It was Mask," someone said.

But when the police came, they spoke only of an unknown gunman.

That afternoon Patrick Mulligan strolled across one of the bridges that spanned the Liffey, pausing midway to study the unusual turbulence in the river. Turbulence was so much a part of Dublin life. He stared for some time at the little eddies of current, grown strong by the recent rains, and then walked on. It was a sad day, even though the rain had stopped, and he hoped that Peg O'Neill could cheer him up.

Peg lived in a little apartment on Dorset Street, with a view of the river and a landlady who didn't ask questions. Often in the afternoon he'd taken to stopping by her place, spending a few relaxing hours amidst the studied confusion of her possessions. Though Peg was Irish, she'd been educated in England, at an exclusive girls' school outside London. Mulligan was never certain that her present sympathies rested entirely with the Irish.

"Mask killed another one this morning," he said, settling deep into the pillowed sofa that was the pride of her apartment. "O'Casey."

She paused in her task of brewing them some afternoon tea and her green eyes flashed. "Do you condone killings like that?"

Patrick sighed. "Peg, do I have to run through a hundred years of Irish history with you once again to prove our point? Do I have to tell you about the famine and the killings and the forced conscription during the war? You've been in England too long. You've forgotten your own people."

"I haven't forgotten that murder is still a sin and a crime."

"We have priests on our side."

"And priests against you. Which side do you think God is on?"

"Most of the priests are behind the I.R.A.," he told her.

"But there's talk that the bishops are opposed to the violence. They won't speak out, but they feel it is morally wrong. And what about the

newspapers, Patrick? Was it right to burn the *Daily Independent* to the ground because they protected the attempt to assassinate the Viceroy?"

"I didn't have anything to do with that," he protested.

"But those you side with did! Don't you see, there are other ways of fighting the English?"

"How, Peg? By sitting back and waiting another hundred years for our independence? We've waited too long already."

She took a sip of her tea and made a face. "God, it's the wrong day for this stuff! Do you want some Jameson?" He nodded and she poured two drinks from a bottle in the kitchen. He'd never known his sister to drink as freely. But then, Peg O'Neill was a different sort of girl.

"Anyway," he continued, "Basil Good's onto something that might mean a lot of money for the cause."

She was sitting opposite him, her thin fingers delicately holding the whiskey glass. "Basil Good! Why, only last month you were cursing him out for trying to sleep with your sister!"

"I know, but I think that trouble's over now. And he's still a friend of mine."

Peg shook her head sadly. "That's always been your trouble, hasn't it? Your friends."

He knew there was nothing more he could say to her, no direction the conversation could take without antagonizing them both. He finished his drink and slipped into his coat. "I have some things to do, Peg," he told her. "I'll see you tomorrow or the day after."

She stood slim and boyish in the doorway as he left, and they both wondered if this was the end of it.

That night after dinner Sheila was puttering around the kitchen, chatting about the day's events at the pub where she worked. It was a popular place not far away but Mulligan carefully avoided it because his sister worked there.

"There was a policeman in after lunch," she said. "He was looking for Mask."

"Everybody looks for Mask, but nobody ever finds him."

"One of the other girls at the pub knew him before—she went to school with him and all. She says he hated the English even then."

"It wasn't an Englishman he killed today," Mulligan said, and then was sorry for the words. He was beginning to sound like Peg.

"Why don't you get out of it, Pat?" she asked him. "Go back to work, forget about Mask and the I.R.A."

"Maybe someday I can, Sheila, but not yet. Your chum Basil has a scheme that might change the whole picture and get rid of the English a lot faster than we hoped."

"Basil? What—?"

"Never mind what. Just believe me—it means a lot of money for the cause."

A troubled frown creased her brow. "You were so set against Basil only last month."

"But he's still a fighter, and a friend. I just didn't think he was right for you. We all have our mission on God's earth, and his is to kill Englishmen." He got up from the table, taking his shabby cap with him. "I'll be late. Don't wait up for me."

She mumbled something and he was gone, down the familiar littered stairs with their lingering odors into the muggy street where there were still puddles along the cobbled walks and in the gutters. It was a swift walk to Basil Good's place, a tiny room with a perennially rumpled bed and a framed picture of Daniel O'Connell over the dresser. The room breathed with the memory of Irish heroes—and the hope of Irish literature.

Patrick enjoyed looking through Basil's books, marveling at the verve and drive of these Irish authors who were beginning to make their literary mark. But it bothered him, as it did Basil, that so many of them sought their fortunes outside the homeland. He'd asked Basil once why so many authors—men like Jonathan Swift, Oscar Wilde, Bernard Shaw, and the young James Joyce—had fled their native Dublin. "Because Dublin is a sterile city," Basil had replied heatedly. "There's no life to it, even for a writer. Maybe when we're free, when the English are gone once and for all, the city will live again."

It was something to fight for. They talked about it as Basil led Patrick to a nearby basement flat where the man named Davoren lived. "This Davoren is with us," he said. "He believes in the city, and in a free Ireland."

"Then why doesn't he just give us the diamond frog?"

"It cost him money, and great risk. He deserves something for it."

Davoren was an old man who smelled of a lifetime of cheap whiskey. Mulligan didn't know exactly what he'd expected, but somehow the

man was a bit of a letdown. Still, when he started to speak, some of the doubts were displaced. His voice, his words, where those of a true Irishman.

"Imagine!" he said, warming to them both. "Imagine, the very diamond frog once owned by Queen Elizabeth herself! And worth a million pounds!"

"How could we sell it?" Mulligan asked.

"Knock the stones out with a hammer. Or even ransom it back to the English. They'd pay dear for it, believe me."

"How much do you want?"

Davoren frowned and seemed to ponder. "It's worth a million pounds, easy."

"How much?"

"Ten thousand," the old man said.

"Ten thousand! Where in God's name would we get ten thousand pounds?" Patrick turned to Basil in despair.

"Maybe we could raise it," Basil reassured him. "Every loyal man in Dublin would contribute."

Patrick faced the old man. "Where is this diamond frog?"

"Here."

"Here? In this room?" Patrick looked around, half expecting to see it on the table behind him.

"In this room—for tonight, at least." Old Davoren moved to a closet, and produced from it a cardboard box about the size of a hatbox. He lifted the lid and tipped the carton for them both to see. In it, nestled among paddings of crumpled newspaper, rested a bright object the size of a man's fist. "Behold! The diamond frog!"

It was indeed the replica of a frog, approximately life-size, and completely encrusted with the diamonds that gave it its fabulous value. Only the stones that represented the creature's eyes were different—the red of rubies rather than the matchless blue-white of diamond.

"It's beautiful," Basil breathed.

"But is it real?" Mulligan asked.

Basil reached for the frog but the old man pulled the box away. "Look only," he said.

Basil did look, closely. When he raised his head he said, "It's real all right. I've seen a few diamonds in my time."

Davoren lidded the box and returned it to the closet. "Don't you

two get any ideas about coming back and robbing me," he told them. "I've got this here for any robbers." He showed them a large army revolver.

"How soon do you need the money?" Basil asked him.

"A week. I've got other people interested."

"We'll have it."

Patrick started to protest, but Basil silenced him. When they left the basement room and were once more on the street, Mulligan asked, "Where will we get ten thousand pounds by next week?"

"From the people. We can tell them it's a loan if you want. Once we sell the frog, we can pay them all back and still have enough money to equip a regiment."

"If the thing's so valuable, why doesn't old Davoren sell it himself?"

"Because he wants the money for himself, not for the I.R.A." Basil was walking faster, urging him along the dark streets. "If he went after the big money, too many people would learn about it."

Suddenly Patrick Mulligan was finding himself caught up by the thrill of the thing. He remembered the sparkle of the diamond frog, and in his mind each facet of light became the flash of a rifle aimed at an English soldier. By the time they reached the pub his mind was aglow with the possibilities of the adventure. Then, over warming drinks, he and Basil heard the dread news that much of the city of Cork had been burned the night before in retaliation for I.R.A. activities. The days ahead would be bloody. Patrick Mulligan needed nothing more to decide him.

In the days that followed, Patrick was everywhere to be seen. He visited the pubs and the shops along Essex Street, knocked personally at the doors of every tenement in Hilljoy Square, and browbeat the people of Dublin's sidestreets for money they could ill afford. But when Mulligan knocked, there were few who turned him away without at least a shilling. The threat of Mask was too strong in their minds, and none of them wanted to look up from the bar one day or open their doors to face the gun below the icy blue eyes.

So the money grew, and after five days Patrick carefully counted it out with Basil while Sheila made them tea. "Almost six thousand," Mulligan breathed. "I never thought we'd do it."

"Maybe he'll settle for six."

Patrick nodded. "I'll go out again in a few minutes and see how much more I can scrape up. Then tomorrow we'll go see him again."

"Right."

"You two," Sheila said. She was dressed in a simple blouse and skirt, yet it was clear that she still excited Basil. His eyes seldom left her as she moved about the room. Watching her firm legs, Mulligan knew how it must be with Basil. He felt the same many times with Peg O'Neill.

"We're going to do great things," he told Sheila. "For a free Ireland."

"Just don't get yourself killed," she said.

Patrick left them and returned once more to the narrow back streets of the district. Patrols by the Black-and-Tans were more regular now, and twice during his journey he was forced to the shelter of a convenient doorway as armed men passed. There was no certainty now of casually by-passing the patrols. As the English grew increasingly wary of ambush, men were shot for merely running in the street.

He made two stops, collecting small donations which had been promised him, then he crossed the bridge and headed for Peg's apartment. Perhaps even she would contribute some money to the cause.

"I've heard about your doings," she said by way of greeting as she closed the door behind him.

"Don't you approve?"

"I have friends in many high places," she said. "I know people in the I.R.A."

"Sure."

"Patrick, I'm worried for you. What is this madness about a diamond frog that belonged to Elizabeth?"

"That's just what it is. And it's worth a million pounds." Her tone bothered him. "The leaders have been told."

"They've been told, but they don't believe you, Patrick." Without asking him if he wanted a Jameson, she went to pour them each a glass.

"Let them talk to Davoren, then. He's the man with the frog." He settled onto the sofa.

"They've tried. They can't find him."

"What? What do you mean they can't find him?"

"Just what I said." She passed him a glass.

"All right. He's probably gone into hiding with the frog. Hiding from the English."

Peg stared down at him. "Some of the members of the governing council think you made it all up, Patrick. Some of them think you've been collecting that money for yourself."

He knew too well what her words meant, what she was trying to tell him. "Don't worry," he assured her. "I'm clean. And a lot safer than you with your English schooling."

"Never mind me. Be careful, Patrick. These days life is very cheap in Dublin. A man can be killed over a misunderstanding."

"Tell that to your English friends."

"I'm no friend of the English. I never have been. My future is with Ireland. But I don't want an Ireland bought with blood. I don't want it bought with your blood, Patrick."

He finished his drink and set the glass on the floor. "Don't worry. Tomorrow I'll find Davoren and complete this deal."

He left her and made his way back through streets suddenly turned warm. For the first time in days the August sun appeared high in the afternoon sky. Over everything there settled a sense of well being. A thin curl of smoke on the horizon might have been a burning farmhouse in the outskirts of the city but he chose to believe it was only a distant train moving west along the banks of the Liffey.

Tomorrow he would find Davoren.

He was awakened early the next morning by an unfamiliar sound from the bathroom. Padding to the doorway on bare feet, he found Sheila bent over the sink, retching and pale.

"What's the matter with you?" he asked, suddenly frightened.

"Nothing. Go back to bed."

"What do you mean, nothing? Were you drinking last night?"

"No."

"How long did Basil stay?"

"Not long. Go back to bed, for God's sake! It's only six o'clock."

He did as she asked, but he heard her in the bathroom for some time after that, and he was troubled.

Later, while eating breakfast, he asked, "Do you know where Basil is today? I need to find him."

"How would I know where he is?"

"I just thought he might have said. Do you feel better?"

"Yes." She rose from the table and began to stack dishes in the sink.

Patrick left soon after, feeling in his pocket the few coins that were his own. Their pitiful touch made him conscious as he rarely was of the grubby tenements that surrounded him. He could almost understand how someone might think him capable of a gigantic fraud. Six thousand pounds was a fortune to him, more money than he'd ever had in his life.

He had it with him now, the great mound of bills, hidden in the lining of his coat. He and Basil would take it to Davoren and bargain for the frog. Then, when they came to ask him about the money, he would give them that jeweled creature and become a hero in the fight against the English.

But Basil was not in his room and Patrick went alone to find Davoren.

In the familiar passageway to the basement, he hopped over a scattered pile of rubbish and knocked on the door.

The door opened at his touch, and he saw that the apartment was empty, even of the barren furnishings it had held on his last visit. He went to the closet and yanked open the door. It was empty too.

Back upstairs, he tried to find the landlord, asking one of the women tenants what had happened to old Davoren. "Who?" She said. "Nobody's lived in that basement room for years. Too many rats."

Running now, he was filled with a sense of dread. What had happened? Where was Davoren? Where was Basil?

Then slowing down because of the patrols, and the money in his coat, he headed for the pubs and started checking them one by one, the familiar ones where Basil could usually be found first. But Basil was nowhere. And the bartenders who had been friendly turned their backs to him.

"We don't want you here," they told him. "Clear out."

"No more money, Mulligan."

"I don't want money. I'm looking for Basil."

"Get out. We don't want your blood on our floor."

And he ran, feeling the money heavy in his coat. He returned to the tenement, but there was no one in the apartment. Soon he was back on the sun-filled streets, his apprehension growing.

He remembered Peg O'Neill's warning.

She knew something. She could help him.

"Peg! It's me—let me in!"

She opened the door and stood aside. "You're a fool to come here," she told him. "They watch this house."

"Peg, you were right. I can't find Davoren. He's gone and so is the frog."

She sighed and leaned against the wall. "They don't believe you, Patrick. They think you've stolen the money."

"Do you believe me?"

"I do, but I can't stop them. They've put Mask onto you."

"Mask?" The chilling eyes and the expression that never changed. The hand in the pocket and the roar of the revolver.

"Get out of here, Patrick, while there's still time. Get to the leaders and give them the money you've collected. It's your only chance."

"Basil will back my story. He knows where Davoren is."

"Don't wait for Basil, run!"

Run.

But first he must go to the pub where Sheila worked. He traveled the back streets again, clinging to the shadows, praying for the sheltering cover of a good rainstorm.

But the sky was still sunny when he reached Sheila's pub. "Where is she?" he asked the owner, a fat balding man whose face showed fear. The man gestured toward the little kitchen, and Patrick hurried to it, understanding everything in an instant.

"Sheila?"

She turned toward him. "What do you want?"

"When you were sick this morning. You're pregnant, aren't you?"

"Yes."

"Basil! Damn his. . ."

Behind him, someone cried a warning. Mulligan spun around and saw the shadowed figure standing at the entrance of the pub. It was Mask, his raincoat limned against the sun.

"Here!" Patrick shouted, reaching for the money. "I've got it right here!"

Mask's gun blazed out three times. Patrick Mulligan felt the first two bullets hit, and then he was falling backward, into a void from which there was no returning. . .

"And so he died," the white-haired man next to me said. "He died like many others that year in Dublin."

I fastened my safety belt as the jet began its descent. "You had me fooled," I acknowledged. "I was sure you'd turn out to be Patrick Mulligan yourself. You'd be about the right age."

"No," the man replied. "I'm not Mulligan."

"Then you must be Basil Good."

This brought a slight smile. "No, you're wrong again. I suppose there's no harm in telling you, since it helps complete the story. I'm the man they called Mask."

"Mask!" My blood went a little cold at his words. "You killed all those people? You killed Patrick Mulligan?"

"Yes."

"But how did you know so much about them, about what happened?"

He looked down at the wrinkled hands folded in his lap. "After it was over, after the Anglo-Irish treaty, I started checking on the people I'd killed. There were thirty-five of them altogether, and I'd kept their names. It's a terrible thing to know you've removed thirty-five human souls from this earth, no matter what the cause. The case of Patrick Mulligan always struck me as an odd one, and I spent extra time digging into it. I talked to all the people who knew him, and I finally pieced the story together.

"Did you discover what happened to the diamond frog?"

"I believe it ended up at the bottom of the Liffey."

"*What?*"

"Oh, it was never real, not at all. Just a cheap trinket with pieces of glass glued to it. Fooling a man like Mulligan wasn't too difficult, I suppose."

"What about Davoren?"

"He was a seedy bum earning the price of a bottle with a little acting. He was easy to trace. After all, the whole thing was illogical from the beginning. If Davoren had wanted the money for himself, he could have gotten much more than ten thousand from the British government."

"But who got Davoren to do it? And why?"

The man whose name had been Mask leaned back in his seat, resting his head against the padding. "Only one man—the man who had as-

sured Mulligan that the diamonds were real and persuaded him to collect the money—then vanished when his word could have saved him."

"Basil Good."

The white-haired man nodded. "Basil Good, who'd gotten Sheila Mulligan pregnant and feared her brother's wrath. He knew Patrick Mulligan would probably kill him when he found out, so he decided to kill Mulligan first. He concocted a fantastic plot by which it would appear that Mulligan was attempting a swindle, robbing the poor people of Dublin. He knew in those days that the Irish leaders wouldn't wait to check too closely. Mulligan would be a man betraying the cause, a man to be shot down as a warning to others."

"And you did the shooting."

"I did the shooting. I was the weapon Basil Good used to murder his friend."

"But why didn't he just kill him in an alley? Why the complicated plot?"

"Two reasons, I suppose. He'd have been the prime suspect once Sheila's pregnancy became known, and also it would no doubt have lost him her love. She knew nothing of the plot, and accepted her brother's death like everyone else."

"What put you onto the truth?"

"The girl, Peg O'Neill. She believed in Mulligan. Sometimes I think she was the only sensible one of us all."

"What happened to Basil Good?" I asked.

"He was a brave man, for a murderer. He went after the Black-and-Tan payroll, and they shot him dead in the street. I went to his funeral."

"I see what you meant at the beginning," I said after a bit. "You were both the murderer and the detective. Or at least you were the instrument of the real murderer."

"Yes."

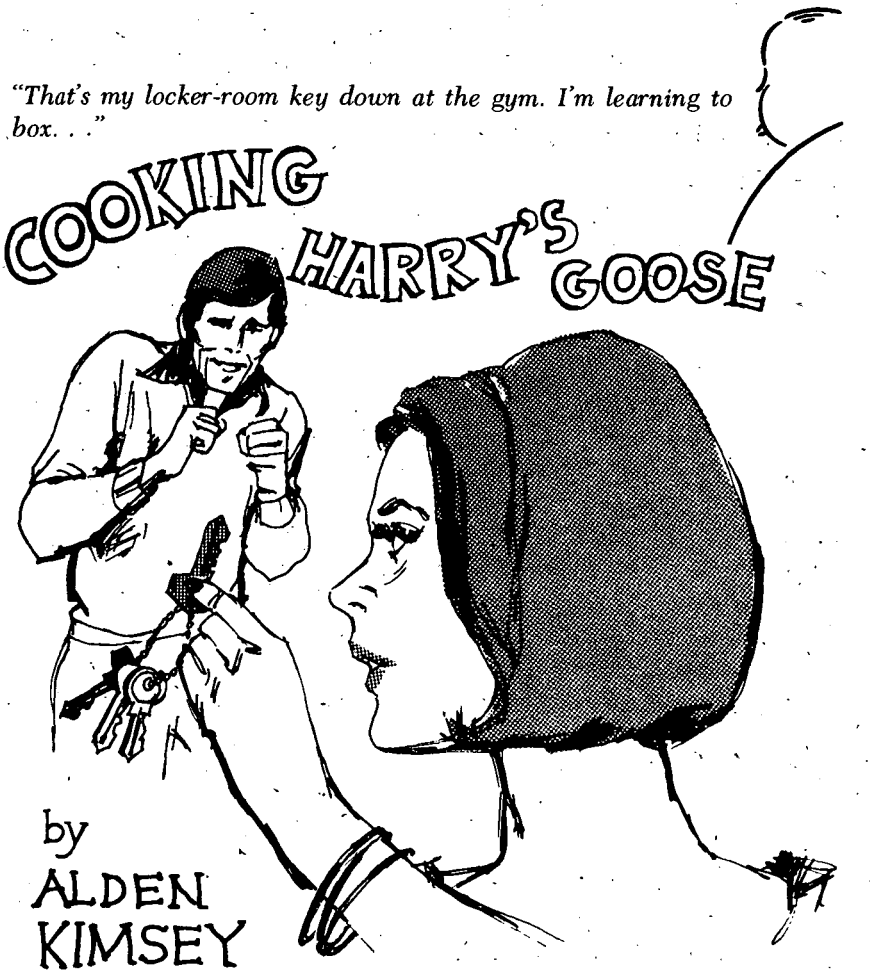
"And now you're going back? Do you still believe all your killing was right?"

He stared off into the sky, seeing the English countryside as the plane dipped closer to the land. "Of course it was right," he said. "But most of the people I killed were right too. I suppose that is the real tragedy."

We waited in silence for the plane to land.

"That's my locker-room key down at the gym. I'm learning to box. . ."

COOKING HARRY'S GOOSE



by ALDEN KIMSEY

"I'll see you," he'd said, ready to close the door. "In the funny papers."

What a way to end the heavy thing we had going. That's no way to wind up a ballgame. Quoting him, who else?

"Ta ta and goodbye" just doesn't seem to get the job done, as Harry would say.

So, scorner has created a big fat scornee. Me! That's who. A female

tiger. Old faithful, gushing wrath, bile and anger. The good old wine of a lover's candlelit dinner turned to vinegar. Blah! A relationship warped, stunted and yanked up by its tender roots.

"Well, I'll be seeing *you*, Harry Tolliver."

Walking that ridiculous walk of his, he went down the sidewalk, lugging a green canvas two-suiter. Dragging his old Navy barracks bag. I was supposed to keep the rest of his "junk" as he called it.

"No moss on a rolling stone, huh Babs?"

"Some stone you turned out to be, Harry."

Living as a wife to Harry had been, well, not cloud nine but we didn't have to hide behind the *Morning Post* either. Harry could see me of a morning in curlers, even those pink and blue plastic jobs, and still not blow his cool. Like it was comfortable. And Harry's being gone most of the time kept it sort of exciting.

Harry's a sailor. Yeah, you guessed it. I'm his sleepy-time gal in home port. Or I was until Maeve Davis started pinch-hitting in the ninth, as Harry would say. Apparently that inning got under way while I was gone to visit my sister Ethel who was having her first baby in Dubuque, Iowa. That is, she was living in Dubuque at the time her first baby arrived. Actually, she's never had a baby before. Melvin, her husband, is happy about that because they just got married last July and then the baby arrived. Here I'm making it sound like an Amtrak Special or something. Ever notice how hard it is to say exactly what you mean?

Anyhow, if Ethel only knew how much trouble all this has caused me—accidentally, you understand—she'd be the one cuddling a cute .38. Of course, I'm only kidding about Ethel. She's real scared of guns. Me, I've got no problem with guns. I used to have a boyfriend who let me shoot beer cans in a row. Pow, pow, pow! One bullet per can. Whoever missed a can lost the game and had to go set them on the fence for the next round. Well, I'm no Ma Barker, but the tales about Machine Gun Kelly zapping beer bottles off a fence with his tommy gun always fascinated me.

Sure, I'm a woman. And women are supposed to go for sleeping pills, poison and the cleverer means. But the homicide squad down at Chestnut and Oak would be interested to know that I've ruled out rat poison. For Harry, not me. Harry will die laughing when I come walking in. Sure, he'll be expecting a flag to pop out the end of the barrel.

That's Harry. Always out for the laugh.

So I'm going to pull Big M on Harry. The Big Q is how do I cover it so Harry doesn't end up laughing last? Well, let's back up a step here. You'll see I've counted more than one pasture full of wooly white sheep while mulling this over. For now, I'm calling it my recipe for cooking Harry's goose.

Do you ever count keys on your man's keyring? Or dig out old match folders from your gal's purse? One shouldn't be hasty about match folders. Who knows, some dude might have handed her a Sunny-Side Motel folder at the cash register. But with keys, I always say new keys mean new interests.

You can count keys the same time you're checking to see how much cookie-jar fodder you can skim off the top of last night's poker winnings. I'm not nosey, see, but I was counting Harry's keys and—here's this shiny new key sparkling like a brass monkey's eyeball and the edges were still rough.

"That's my locker-room key down at the gym," he said. "I'm learning to box. Wanna see me punch a bag?" He squared off at me. Punching the air, grinning. Bouncing on his toes the way Floyd Patterson used to do. Then he grabbed me and for a while there I forgot what it was I was supposed to be angry about. Lib people, I'm a washout.

But I kept thinking. New key. . .new life! No, Harry never was the sweaty T-shirt and gym type. Love, not senseless competition, was his way. Well, before the 5:05 came through, waking people like Harry up, I sneaked to the kitchen and mashed his new key in some soft soap, like that stuff Harry was probably feeding me. I got the cutest impression.

The young man at Eddie's lock shop shook his head at me. Like maybe this was his first time around getting mixed up in underhanded skulduggery.

I thought he was flat refusing to make me a duplicate, then I noticed Eddie over in the direction the young man kept ducking his head in.

Well, laugh it up and nobody'll get suspicious about why I want the key. I explained (giggle) that my boyfriend was stepping out on me and I wanted to get inside the new playpen and find out what she had that I didn't have.

Eddie's man grinned at that. He made sure Eddie had gone to the rear to grind a new key, then he talked from the corner of his mouth.

He was even using the Bogart twitch and gravelly voice.

"Lady, you sure you want to pay for a cast of this? Maybe I can go by eye and turn out a Chinese copy or something."

"You mean I'm going to have to fall back on the old plastic credit card in the door-jamb trick? Or how about a glass cutter and lots of guts?"

"Forget it, lady," Eddie's man said. "Find yourself a new boyfriend." He worked his eyebrows like Groucho Marx.

Naturally, I didn't have to bother guessing who he'd already selected as Harry's replacement.

You know, I'm not really all that bad-looking, even at thirty, past the peak. Especially when I'm riled up, and in my Irish tweed mini, my fighting green tam and block-heel alligators. But I wasn't about to snap Eddie's man on the end of my leash. Not yet. Maybe I'd just keep him in the wings. He could come in handy. Like for walking my dog—if I ever get around to getting a dog.

The next stop was Happy's Shooters Hangout. They sell guns. Guys, three of them, were hanging out there and talking Civil War musketry with Happy. He's fat, looks like a bartender, and runs the joint.

When I came in they all looked over, then were very careful to study interesting things off in other places. They were surreptitiously telling me I ought to be somewhere hooking rugs or holding down the anchor slot at a quilting bee.

When I mentioned that I knew Harry Tolliver, Happy hustled around front. He congratulated me on wanting to join Harry in his new interests. I called it target-shooting, only I didn't mention which target.

Over a cup of coffee and much talk about calibers, barrel lengths, ear plugs, trigger creep (which reminded me of Harry) and dry firing, Happy got me to dry-run some dummy ammunition through the showcase .38 special. Then we got down to selection of the weapon, only I was still calling it a birthday present for Harry.

My first choice obviously troubled Happy. It was a sleek .44 maggie and promised a big wallop. Happy talked me out of that. "Too big a bang for a Sunday target shooter," he said. "Besides, it won't be long until ole Harry has you punching neat little holes in the bull's eye. Right, boys?"

They all nodded, a little snidely I thought. Perhaps it was just my

imagination.

Well, I filled out the forms, all of them, and wrote the check. And I was already fixing a resting place in my tooled leather shoulder bag for that cute .38 when Happy grinned, wagged a finger and shook his head.

"You'll have to wait three days, ma'am. Nothing personal. Right, boys?"

I shrugged.

"Prevents nasty mistakes now and again. Same as waiting for a marriage license. Boys, ain't that right?"

The three Civil War buffs grinned, sheepishly, like maybe they'd waited the full three days and then still made the mistake anyway.

Anyhow, the days flew by and twice Harry called to ask about his swallowtail goldfishes, Thelma and Mac. All two of them share a cozy tank in my living room. I sprinkle food at them just before leaving for work at the bank each day. They remind Harry of the time he won the county goldfish-swallowing contest out behind Decker's pool parlour. He says when he's off on shipboard he can just think of me and the goldfish and that keeps him from going out on the town. Well, I don't know about that, Harry. Could be Maeve Davis keeps a pair of lovebirds in that new apartment. Soon, very soon perhaps, I'll know. Plans are shaping up well at the bank.

Even *you* could rob a bank if you had the perfect opportunity and guts. And I've got plenty of both. Harry was always calling me a. . .well, never mind that. And if you add ownership of a bank to having guts, why there's no telling how easy it can be. Some people inherit apartment houses. From my grandfather I inherited a bank. Small, true, but who's all that greedy?

Our town won't add up to 10,000 souls even when the national guard is passing through on summer maneuvers and the Salvation Army is on Main Street. So it's a small bank in a small town. All I know is I like going there to work among the money each day. For a gal, it feels good to be heading for a bank, knowing you'll soon be up to your elbows in money, not similarly employed with dirty dishes and damp diapers.

But what about my plans for Harry? You can't just write somebody off, bang, bang, and walk away whistling Dixie. All kinds of ideas ran through my mind. Get Maeve Davis's fingerprints on the gun ahead of

time and then for Harry's going away party I'd wear those new yellow Easter gloves. Let them blame her. Another idea was to shoot Harry and then burglarize the place. Robbers could take the blame. But none of these were simple enough. Too much fuss and bother and too many loose threads.

Finally I just decided to lay a few bullets on Harry and make a run for it. Fly through those friendly skies. I'd have a ticket in my pocket, my bag packed, and enough money in my large suitcase to last years in some nice little South American villa.

That last part, about the money, had been planned too. See, I've always carried a tooled leather shoulder bag. So I'd lately begun to carry a slightly larger bag. I'd fill it at appropriate times and places within the bank. The big alligator suitcase would hold enough stacks of thousand-dollar bills for a lifetime.

Sure, I'd be a criminal. But becoming an embezzler, or whatever, never bothered me all that much. Working amid all those stacks of greenbacks leads to contempt. Well, when you come right down to it, it's just paper, isn't it?

On the very last day in town I'd just go whambo crambo, into the alligator's yawning mouth. And Babs Northcutt would emerge as the new butterfly. Maybe I'd even meet a bald rich old tycoon and we'd live happily ever after on some palm-studded beach. Who knows for sure what's just around the corner?

That last day finally did come. A Friday. Planned that way, of course. Who's going to be checking around a bank on a sunny Saturday or a hungover Sunday? So it was time for my fun-money and run act. I worked late that evening. Very late and very hard. But the proceeds were well worth the overtime.

Outside Harry's new place, or rather one block past, I had the cabbie wait for me. Up the back stairs, just at late-afternoon beer-and-TV time too. I rubbed the key behind my left ear for good luck, listened, and could hear laughter coming from the kitchen window.

Finally I'm inside. Wouldn't you know she'd be the first one to come through the archway? And wouldn't you know she'd be a blonde? Maybe that's what she had that I didn't have. Anyhow, on her it looked like she'd uncorked the wrong bottle.

Harry was there beside her now, grinning sheepishly at me. All this time I was grabbing at my shoulder bag; an excess of travelling money,

tens and twenties, were packed in tight as canned fish. But really, I saw red. Harry just happened to be there in the way of it.

"Hey there, Babs!" Harry was actually looking as if he enjoyed seeing me break into the kitchen of his new place. "How's Mac? How's Thelma?"

"Unload your hay somewhere else, creep!" I threw the bag and the money at him, too excited to figure out what I was doing, but I held onto the .38.

A cool metallic blue snake, the .38 sought him out. I began pulling the trigger. Harry couldn't hold it in. He broke up. "Ha, ha, ha, hah!" He even rolled on the floor and tossed stacks of money around while I was shooting. Only something was wrong. *Snap, snap, snap,* instead of *boom, boom, boom.*

"Babs, Babs. . .you'll kill me yet." Harry was holding his stomach, tears streamed down his face.

"Ho, ho, ho," I said, fumbling for a new set of cartridges in my shoulder bag, which I'd retrieved while Harry was rolling around on the floor. "It ain't Christmas, friend, and I ain't Santa Claus but I'm going to give you a present."

Well, it was all very exciting to say the least. Maevé Davis screamed, a high, screechy and unpleasant scream if I do say so myself. She froze stiff as a yellow wax dummy near the front door. Harry was still on all fours. His eyes were stuck open like he was going nuts. He was stuttering. "Babs. . .gun. . .all that money." Then he tried the same words in reverse, his tongue all twisted up over them. He groveled among stacks of money. I figured he might bark there for a while. He was so comical among all those greenbacks, like a fat seal in a green ocean. Behind me the pale dummy came to life.

"Harry," she screeched, "let's get out of here!"

Harry had now graduated from the seal stage to being a baby, sitting happily on the floor and cooing and dribbling his happiness down his chin, cuddling those greenbacks. So what had I created? One blonde dummy and an insane child money-cuddler!

About then I came back to what was was developing. My plans were washing down that white porcelain drain. I made a grab for some fresh .38 cartridges, which brought Harry out of his comical trance, fast.

"Ah hah! So you're scared, Harry," I said

He scrambled on all fours to grab my hand.

"No way are you going to fire off that cannon in here." He slapped my wrist so I dropped the new .38 fodder. "Babs, this is rich. Happy and me loaded you up with a box of dummy cartridges. Ain't that the best one yet?"

I threw bag *and* gun at him this time.

"Idiots," Maeve Davis snapped.

I heard something that sounded like a door slamming. It could just as easily have been a cork popping, celebrating Harry's and my reunion. You know what, I liked it with us sitting there on top of all that money.

"Blondes ain't got no sense of humor," Harry said. He grinned happily like a small boy with a new tinker toy. "Look at this," he said, waving enough long-green to plug a sink. "I got it all!"

He held me on one arm and waved a pile of money in the other hand, letting it cascade down like a hit from a huge money machine.

Well, to come right down to it, it was all a huge success. Who says crime doesn't pay? Greenbacks, a cozy beach house beside the sea and Harry beside me are enough for me.

But even in our newly acquired paradise there was certain to be one pesky fly. Yes, have your little joke, Harry. Just now Harry is rolling over on his beach mat, so I can rub more suntan lotion on his back.

"Babs, I hate to run, but you know I've got that afternoon interview. Remember? Our new bilingual secretarial school ain't going to have much class until we get a ritzy receptionist. Right?"

"I hear she's a redhead. That's kind of funny too, isn't it, Harry?" I winked at him. "A redhead among all these brunettes will sure attract attention, especially from men."

He looked hurt, like I'd beaten him to a punch line again.

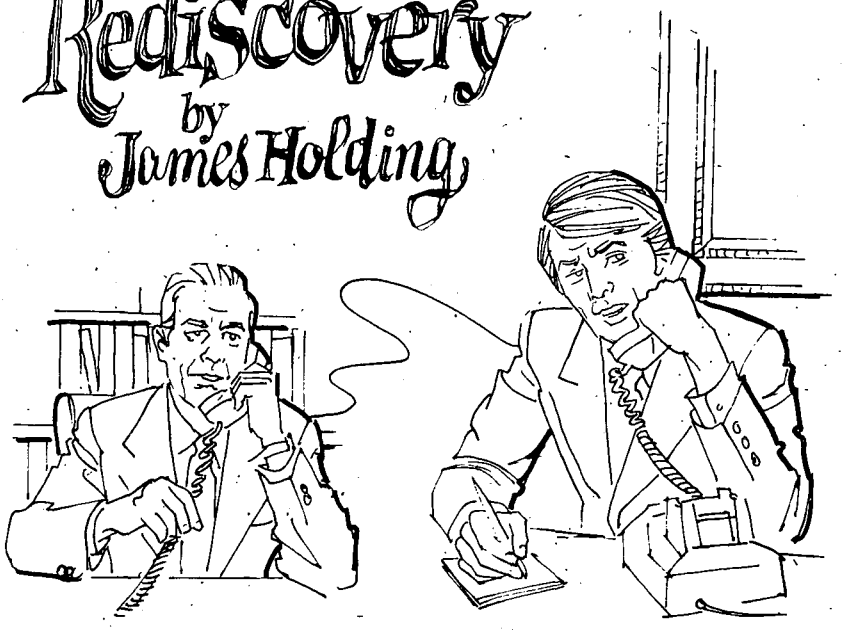
But have your little joke, Harry. The phone is just starting to ring. That will be Felix. He's some kind of state-side insurance cop who's down here to try and get me to return the money and face the music. But you know what? He likes it here too. And Felix knows all about how to deal with crime problems and criminals.

Wouldn't Harry die laughing if he knew about my new recipe. Hilarious, honey. If you only knew my new recipe you'd die laughing almost all the way to that so-called interview while driving the car that Felix fixed last night.

One might deduce that it is more practical to know others than to know oneself . . .

Rediscovery

by James Holding



After he had dismissed his Friday afternoon seminar in Renaissance Studies and returned to his own office in the Fine Arts Building, Professor Ferucignano put in a long-distance call to the Honeycutt Gallery of Art in Washington.

"Person to person," he told the operator. "I wish, please, to speak with Mr. Orville Carter, the director of the gallery."

"Who shall I say is calling?"

"Benozzo Ferucignano," the professor said, giving his name the proper pronunciation which eluded so many Americans. "Mr. Carter will know who I am."

Waiting for his call to go through, the professor reflected with a touch of complacency that not only Mr. Carter, but everybody who claimed to be anybody in the world of art, knew who Benozzo Ferucignano was: holder of the Rosario Chair for Art at America's most prestigious university, consultant to many of the great galleries and museums of Europe and America, and undoubtedly the world's leading expert in Italian Renaissance sculpture, a pre-eminence accorded him readily by most of the scholars familiar with the field. Unfortunately, Mr. Carter was not among them but perhaps, the professor thought wryly, he might make a believer out of even Orville Carter very soon.

Carter's voice, when he came on the phone, was cordial. "Hello!" he said. "This is a pleasant surprise, Benny. It's been a long time. What can we do for you?"

The professor said, "This time, Orville, I believe I can do something for *you*."

"Really?" Carter sounded skeptical.

"I was in Paris last week," the professor said, "and I stumbled across something that should be of considerable interest to you."

"What was it?" asked Carter. "I'm a little bit ancient now for *La Nouvelle Eve*, Benny." He laughed.

"I didn't stumble across this item in a nightclub," the professor reproved him, "but in a far more sedate milieu. The Louvre, as a matter of fact."

"The Louvre! Well, well. You going to tell me what it was, Benny?"

"Of course. But not on the telephone. Are you free tomorrow morning? I can take an early plane down."

"I'll be here. Saturday's a big day with us." Carter paused. "Is there a consulting fee involved in this thing, Benny? Because, if so. . . ."

"This is not a matter of money, please believe me. I don't want a penny out of it. I'm merely trying to discharge what I conceive to be my duty as a responsible member of the international art community."

"Your duty to whom?"

"To a fine Renaissance artist," said the professor promptly, "and, incidentally, to the Honeycutt Gallery and the Louvre as well."

Carter said at once, "I apologize, Benny. I'm fully aware that a man

of your reputation doesn't need to—ah—solicit business." He laughed self-consciously. "Won't you let us pay your expenses, at least? Shall I book you a hotel room?"

"No, thanks. I won't stay overnight. Will eleven o'clock in the morning suit you?"

"That'll be fine. See you then." Orville Carter hung up, a very puzzled man.

A hot summer sun was striking rose-tinted highlights from the sandstone walls of the Honeycutt Gallery of Art when Professor Ferucignano's taxi set him down before it next day. Orville Carter was waiting for him in his richly furnished corner office on the second floor. "Welcome to the Honeycutt," he said politely. "We see you here too infrequently, Benny."

"My university job limits my outside activities these days," replied Ferucignano with dignity. "I do not regret it. Teaching the young idea how to shoot, you know. . ."

Carter said, "I couldn't sleep last night, Benny, for wondering what you discovered in the Louvre that could possibly interest us to the degree you implied. You're killing me with curiosity!"

"You won't like what I have to say. But here goes. It concerns your Donatello bronze."

Carter's eyes grew wary. "Our Hercules," he said. "One of our greatest treasures. What about it?"

"I don't think your bronze Hercules *is* Hercules, Orville."

"No?" Carter said, trying to keep rising anger out of his voice.

"No," Ferucignano said. "And furthermore. I do not think the statuette is by Donatello."

Carter was startled. He half rose from his chair, then sank back. "You're talking nonsense, Benny! Although I can't remember the details after all these years—and I wasn't director then—I *do* remember that the Hercules was offered us as a previously unknown work by Donatello, put on the market by an English collector who needed money to pay his taxes, something like that. We weren't foolish enough to take the dealer's word for it, Benny. We called in the best man in the field to authenticate it for us before we bought it."

"I know. Demery from the Chicago Institute, wasn't it? And Gallagher from the Boston? and Helios from Stanford?"

"If *anyone* could affirm a Donatello without a complete and accurate provenance to help them, they could. Why, when we acquired our Donatello Hercules—"

"Please. Not the Hercules, Orville. And not, I repeat, by Donatello—at least in my humble opinion."

"Humble opinion! That's good!" Carter gave a bark of laughter.

The professor went doggedly on. "All the same, if you had called *me* in for my humble opinion before you acquired the piece, I could have told you then."

"You were an obscure instructor in Italian history at an obscure college thirty years ago, and well you know it! Why should we have called *you* in?"

The professor murmured, "I had already established myself with my monograph on Verrocchio. I was not entirely unknown even then, Orville."

"You were to us," Carter said sharply, "and I want to know what this odd visit of yours is all about. Are you trying to discredit our Donatello out of spite because we failed to consult you about its purchase thirty years ago? I can't believe that, Benny, even of an overweening egocentric like you!" He was trembling with rage.

The professor said austerely, "There is no need for name-calling, Orville. As I told you on the telephone, my only reason for troubling you—" Abruptly he rose and turned toward the door. "But let's go down to your Hercules, Orville, shall we? I need to look at it once more before I can be absolutely sure." He grinned at Carter. "I wouldn't want to upset you unnecessarily, of course."

"Of course," Carter snapped. "Come on, then."

They descended in a silent elevator to the ground floor of the gallery and walked two hundred yards over polished hardwood floors to the Sculpture Hall in the east wing. The Donatello Hercules, a bronze statuette about fourteen inches high, stood on a plinth against the south wall of the room inside a sealed glass case.

The two men halted before it. For a moment, neither spoke. Each was deeply absorbed in contemplation of the masterpiece; each felt a lifting surge of reverence for the long-dead artist who had cast this breathing beauty into bronze.

"Donatello or not," murmured the professor at length, "it is a rare and wonderful piece, Orville." He turned impulsively to Carter. "I

would rather not have had to visit you today. I would infinitely have preferred to allow this lovely thing to remain a Hercules by Donatello, just as you label it. For who, save for egocentric experts like me—" he gave Carter an apologetic smile "—would ever know the difference? But, alas, one's artistic conscience cannot be denied. So you see in me a reluctant messenger. A very reluctant messenger. Do you believe that, Orville?"

Carter's expression was puzzled. "I believe I do at that," he grudgingly admitted. "At least that you have no personal axe to grind."

"Good," said the professor with satisfaction. He took a small magnifying glass from his pocket, bent over and peered through it at the statuette.

"Don't try to open the glass case," Carter said, watching him, "or you'll set off an alarm."

"No need," the professor said. "I can see quite well with this." He straightened and stepped back a pace. "I am right, Orville," he said. "What I suspected in Paris is confirmed beyond doubt."

Carter lost patience at last. "What the hell *did* you suspect in Paris?" he asked with some asperity. "You come all the way to Washington to tell me about it and you have yet to speak a single word of sense, as far as I can judge!"

"Patience," said the professor. "Allow me to savor for awhile yet my small personal feat of detection."

"Detection?"

"Let me ask you, Orville, were your three experts agreed that this bearded, muscular, bent-shouldered giant we see before us represented Hercules?"

"No," Carter said impatiently. "As I recall it, Gallagher of the Boston thought the figure probably was meant to be Atlas, supporting the heavens on his shoulders."

"Demery and Helios plumped for Hercules?"

"Yes. Demery for Hercules preparing to strangle the Nemean lion. Helios for Hercules bending to retrieve one of the golden apples of the Hesperides. Or vice versa. I can't remember exactly."

"I see," said the professor. "Well, what I discovered in Paris proves that none of these three theories is correct. The figure is *not* that of Hercules nor of Atlas."

"Then who is it?"

"It's St. Christopher, Orville. The patron saint of travelers. And he is represented here neither preparing to strangle the Nemean lion nor yet to uphold the heavens on his shoulders. His arms, rather, are reaching up to steady upon his left shoulder a more precious burden."

Carter stared at him, then turned to stare at the statuette. He licked his lips. "You mean the Christ Child?"

"Exactly. St. Christopher carrying the Christ Child across the river."

"Nonsense!" Carter said with some heat. "In that case, where is the Christ Child?"

"In the Louvre, Orville," said the professor smugly. "In the Louvre."

"Impossible!" the curator of the Honeycutt began, then allowed his words to trail off into silence.

The professor showed his teeth. "You remember it now, don't you? That lovely smiling Christ Child seated, as is possible only for the divine, upon empty air, and bearing the globe of the world in his left hand? He was not, originally, sitting on empty air, Orville. He was seated upon the left shoulder of your St. Christopher here."

Carter had a rather wild look in his eyes, almost a look of appeal. He said, "But—the Louvre's Christ Child is by Bellano, isn't it?"

"It is. By Bartolomeo Bellano. A gifted follower of Donatello, it is true, but not to be confused with the master himself. As I could have told you if the Honeycutt had called me in. . .but never mind that now. You must face the fact boldly that your Donatello Hercules is, in reality, a Bellano St. Christopher minus the Christ Child which, unfortunately, is owned by the Louvre."

Carter made a complete circuit of the plinth, studying the statuette intently. He made a final effort. "Perhaps this is St. Christopher as you insist. And perhaps the Louvre's Christ Child does belong on his shoulder. All the same; the work could *still* be a genuine Donatello. Just because the Louvre has labeled its Christ Child a Bellano doesn't mean it *is* a Bellano, Benny."

The professor shook his head. "No good. I'm sorry. The Louvre's Christ Child is signed, Orville; on the bottom of the globe of the world, held in the Christ Child's left hand, two tiny initials—BB—which, you will concede, identified the sculptor Bartolomeo Bellano five hundred years ago, just as they do the charming actress of our own day, Brigitte Bardot."

Carter refused to smile at this sally. "What made you link the Louvre's Christ Child with our Hercules?" he demanded.

"I made the discovery sheerly by accident," Professor Ferucignano said modestly, "guided in great measure by these new bifocal glasses—" he tapped his spectacles "—and by the newly installed brighter lights in the display rooms of the Louvre." He paused, enjoying Carter's obvious bewilderment, then went on. "I had not really seen the Louvre's Christ Child for years, Orville. Looked at it, yes, admired it, yes, on every occasion when I visited the Louvre. But with eyes grown slightly myopic with age, and in the dim unfocused lighting of the Louvre gallery. Only last week, seeing the Christ Child clearly for the first time in a long while, I detected the clues which led me to your Hercules."

"What clues?" Carter snapped.

"Two almost infinitesimal imperfections in the folds of the Christ Child's garment, imperfections which I have always assumed were caused when the bronze did not completely follow the mold during the statuette's casting."

"If not casting imperfections, what were they?"

"They were skilfully applied patches of bronze, artfully discolored and antiqued to match the rest of the figurine. But to the discerning eye *modern* patches for all that."

Carter said sarcastically, "Restoration or partial repair of masterworks is not entirely unknown."

"Wait," said the professor. "The location of these patches was what suddenly assumed new significance to me: one on the front of the Christ Child's garment below the knees, the other on the Christ Child's—ah—posterior. Do you see my point, Orville?"

Carter said nothing, only stared sourly at the professor, who continued, "Well, it instantly occurred to me, of course, that it was quite possible the patches were intended to cover scars left when some villain had brutally separated the Christ Child from another figure to which it had originally been joined."

"Our Hercules is not necessarily that figure!" Carter protested.

"Ah, but it is! Take my glass, Orville, if you please, and examine the surface of your Hercules' left shoulder and the inside of his left hand."

Carter accepted the magnifying glass and did as the professor asked, already certain of what he would find. "All right," he said ungraciously after a moment's inspection, "there are faint marks there that could be

tiny patches." He gave the professor back his lens. "But you are not, I hope, trying to tell me that your artistic erudition is so nearly total that you immediately dredged up from your memory these almost undetectable marks on our Hercules to match up with the marks on the Christ Child in the Louvre? Out of thousands of sculptures?"

"No," said Professor Ferucignano, "my artistic erudition, as you call it, led me to the much simpler conclusion that since the Christ Child was an undoubted Bellano, he had probably been separated, if separated he was, from another piece of Bellano's sculpture—of which the Honeycutt Gallery owns an outstanding example, Orville, in this statuette which you persist in calling a Donatello Hercules."

A docent, closely followed by a group of students, entered the Sculpture Hall and approached them. "We now come," the lecturer was saying, "to the famous statuette of Hercules, executed in bronze by Donatello, one of the greatest masters of sculpture the Italian Renaissance produced."

"Come back to the office," Carter said to the professor. "We're in the way here."

Ferucignano assented readily. They returned to Carter's office. Carter sat down behind his desk after waving the professor to a chair. He sighed audibly. "Did you say anything to the Louvre about this, Benny?" he asked.

"Nothing. I wanted to examine your Hercules to be sure I was right. And I thought it only fair to acquaint you with the news before the Louvre, since yours would be the greater disappointment."

"That was decent of you, Benny. I appreciate it."

"I did, however, in my capacity of Renaissance scholar, evince curiosity as to the provenance of the Louvre's Christ Child, and a curator readily supplied me with the story of how they acquired it."

"How did they?" asked Carter, lighting a cigarette with nervous fingers.

"Public auction in 1935," said the professor, "in the sales rooms of a respected French firm, Garbeau Frères."

"How much did the Louvre pay for it?"

"One hundred and sixty thousand francs. . .somewhere around forty thousand dollars in those days."

Carter groaned. "We paid ten times that for our—" he hesitated "—St. Christopher."

Ferucignano nodded. "Of course. You thought you were getting a Donatello."

"Did the Louvre's records show who *owned* their Bellano Christ Child before they acquired it?"

"An antique dealer in Ferrara named Giuseppi Bruno, who brought the figurine to Gabreau Frères himself, having smuggled it out of Italy."

"Bruno," Carter said. "Then Bruno must have been your 'villain' who separated the Louvre's Christ Child from our St. Christopher? What a barbarous, uncivilized thing to do!"

"Barbarous, yes," said the professor, "and profitable as well, if Bruno *was* responsible for making two sculptures out of one, and selling them separately at high prices. *If*, I say. Because the separation could have taken place any time within the last century, you know, judging from the condition of the bronze patches we've just seen."

"Where did Bruno get the Christ Child in the first place? Antique dealers in Ferrara don't carry priceless Bellanos and Donatellos in *stock*, you know that!"

"The story the Louvre gave me is this, Orville. Bruno, along with other antique dealers, was asked to bid on the contents of an old D'Este House of Grace and Favor when the last owner died without issue. He went to inspect the goods being offered and found them to consist mainly of worthless junk, as is usually the case with such houses in Italy after a long series of impecunious owners have sold off, one by one, the *good* pieces the family possessed. Worthless junk—except for the bronze Christ Child. Bruno speculated that generations of the family's girl children must have used it as a doll baby, since he found it in the cellars of the house with broken toys and a child's crib. He recognized it at once as something quite good, although he didn't realize how good until he found the artist's initials. He bought the whole collection of junk just to get the Christ Child. Bruno was very frank about all this when he asked Garbeau Frères to auction the piece off for him in Paris. He told them, too, that his business in Ferrara was on its last legs, and he needed money desperately to save it. As it turned out, he got the money from the Louvre, which has not for one moment regretted its bargain."

"Didn't they check Bruno's story about having a shop in Ferrara?"

"Of course. He had one, all right."

"Well, it's a likely enough story, I guess," Carter said. "Such lucky discoveries have happened before and they'll happen again. I can't help wondering though, if Bruno found the entire St. Christopher statuette in that house, and deliberately divided it into two figures."

"It seems probable," Ferucignano said, "although I am puzzled as to how the St. Christopher part of it turned up here in America as a Donatello. You said a few moments ago that you thought the Honeycutt had bought it from an English collector who needed money to pay his taxes. Did you buy direct from him, or was your statuette acquired at auction too?"

"I can't remember, Benny." Carter lifted his telephone receiver and asked his secretary to bring him the gallery's file on the Donatello Hercules. When he said "Hercules" he glanced the professor's way and smiled wryly.

A few minutes later, he looked up from his perusal of the documents in the Hercules file and said to the professor, "Here it is. We bought our Hercules in 1947 from Hamilton Langley, a New York art dealer."

Ferucignano nodded. "He's a personal friend of mine."

"Well, Langley was acting for a collector in England who had retained him because it was thought, quite rightly, that so soon after the war the Hercules would bring a better price in America than in England or on the Continent."

"Eleven years between the sales," the professor said. "The Christ Child in 1935, the St. Christopher in 1946. That could shoot down our theory that Bruno found the whole statuette in Ferrara. Why such a long interval between the first sale and the next? Do your records say anything about where the English owner of the St. Christopher obtained it?"

Carter read from a document in the file. "The owner claimed to have liberated the St. Christopher statuette just after World War II, when, as an officer in the British Army, he happened across it in the rubble of a bombed-out museum storage shed in Berlin."

"Liberated," said the professor, "means stolen, I presume?"

"Of course."

"From a museum storage shed? That's odd. I never heard of any Bellano piece, or any Donatello piece, either, being displayed in a Berlin museum, did you?"

"No. But the St. Christopher was obviously a genuine Renaissance

work by a great master. Anyway, in the light of what you found out at the Louvre, I think we can discount that whole story as a fairy tale."

"Really?" said the professor, raising his eyebrows. "I'm not quite—"

Carter cut him off peremptorily by holding out the document he had been consulting. "Take a look here, Benny," he said, "at the name of the English collector who 'liberated' our St. Christopher in Berlin. Second line on the page. Right there."

Professor Ferucignano leaned forward, read the name and began to laugh. "Joseph Brown!" he chortled. "Joseph Brown. That should convince you, Orville!"

Carter capitulated gracefully. "I am convinced, Benny," he said, "and although belatedly, I congratulate you none the less heartily on your detective work. Even I can't miss that hefty coincidence: a Bellano St. Christopher sold to the Honeycutt Gallery of Art by a man named Joseph Brown!"

The Christopher Case, as it came to be known, aroused only passing interest outside art circles but caused a considerable stir within them. Professor Benozzo Ferucignano, predictably, came off as the hero of the affair, having demonstrated by his brilliant detective work that he was indeed worthy of his fame.

In October, he drove to New York for his semiannual visit with his oldest American friend, Hamilton Langley, now retired. The former art dealer, in spite of his eighty years and his failing health, retained a keen interest in the doings of his former colleagues and customers.

"How does it feel, Benny," he asked his guest as they sampled before-dinner martinis, "to be the Sherlock Holmes of the art world?"

The professor laughed. "Quite satisfying, I must admit. I received the final accolade yesterday, an engraved invitation to the private, black-tie reception at the Louvre next week, when the reunited St. Christopher and Christ Child goes on display for the first time."

"I also am invited," said Langley, chuckling, "as is only fitting for the man who sold the Donatello Hercules to the Honeycutt."

"Are you planning to go? Perhaps we can go together."

"I'm too old to fly so far now. I hope I'll see the reassembled statuette when it comes to the Honeycutt in April. The Louvre is to have it for six months each year, the Honeycutt for the other six, isn't that the agreement?"

"That's it. And a surprisingly practical solution under the circumstances."

Langley nodded. Then, looking over the edge of his martini glass at the professor, he asked curiously, "What made you do it, Benny? After all these years?"

The professor pondered. "I don't really know." he said at length, "aside from the fact that I wanted to show Orville Carter that my credentials as an authority on Renaissance sculpture are bona fide. The Honeycutt is one of the few really important museums left which has never retained me as a consultant."

"But that wasn't the only reason, I take it?"

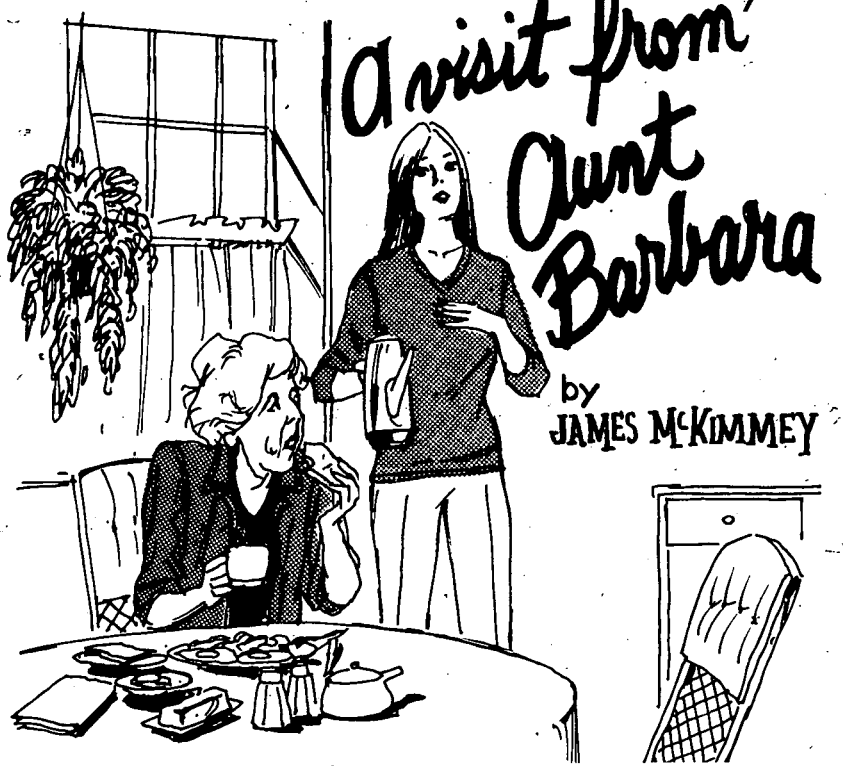
"I suppose not. Perhaps it was partly to satisfy my artistic conscience too, as I told Carter. The thought of such a lovely piece being deliberately broken up for commercial gain seemed more and more like sacrilege to me as I thought about it. Can you understand that?"

"Of course I can understand it." Langley rang a silver bell to summon his houseman. "Another martini for Professor Ferucignano," he told him, stumbling slightly over the professor's name. When the man went out, he continued, "I can understand it only too well, Benny, because I've felt the same way upon occasion." He paused to grin at the professor. "What I *can't* understand, however," he went on, "is why a man with the simple Italian name of Giuseppi Bruno when he lived in Ferrara, and the simple English name of Joseph Brown when he lived in London, should have selected an impossible tongue twister of a name like Benozzo Ferucignano when he moved to America!"

Caring for a little gray-haired aunt is just the thing to pass the time while hubby is off on a business trip. . .

A visit from Aunt Barbara

by JAMES McKIMMEY



Ellen Gossett, her trim figure in slacks and shirt, sat beside a Danish teak coffee table in the sleek apartment nineteen stories up, sipping sharply flavored aromatic tea as she gazed out over a sunny San Francisco Bay. She was luxuriating in being by herself. She'd driven Harold, her large, ungainly husband, to the airport the day before. He'd flown off to Europe to select new and expensive items for the flourishing business they had developed together. But now, after years

of work, Ellen was content to allow employees to handle affairs in the plant and Harold to make that two week whirlwind tour of the Continent alone while she savored being in her treasured, beautifully furnished, no-husband apartment.

Then the pleasurable solitude was broken by the sound of chimes. She put down her cup, frowning, feeling annoyed. Anyone wanting to see her should have called up from the outer lobby so that she could press a button that would let him into the elevator area. But someone had gotten in some other way, and she wasn't expecting him. No deliveries. No friends, either; she had no friends, really, unless they were important to the business. Even the custodian always phoned first if he had reason to come up. But the chimes sounded again.

She got up, opened the door, and saw an old, small, erect woman looking up at her with a smile that seemed at once apologetic, sad and pleading. Although it was summer, she wore a tattered green cloth coat; there was a frilly, but aged, bonnet over her white hair. She was carrying a cardboard suitcase and a large needlepoint knitting bag. "Ellen?" she said in a voice that had been roughened by time.

"My name is Ellen, yes."

"I'm Aunt Barbara." Again the odd smile, over too-white false teeth.

Aunt Barbara, Ellen thought, with a sinking feeling. She'd never met the woman before. But she was someone out of Harold's childhood, a woman with whom he'd spent a great deal of time after his mother had died. He'd often talked about her, although they'd been out of touch for years, as far as Ellen knew. Aunt Barbara, childless herself, had lived on a Nebraska farm near his own parents' farm; and Harold had credited her with strengthening those formative years by caring about him, helping with his problems, teaching him. Now she was here, with a suitcase, disrupting the freedom of being alone that Ellen had so counted on.

"Harold's aunt?" she said. "From Nebraska?"

"The very same," the old lady said, then laughed. It was a sound somewhere between gobbling and clucking, Ellen decided. "Harold wrote about you right after you got married, so I knew your name. But we haven't exchanged letters in a long, long time. So I just found your address in the phone book. And now I'm really anxious to see that young man!"

Ellen drew a breath, then said with great reluctance, "Won't you

come in, Aunt Barbara?"

"You can bet on it!" The woman rushed in with surprising speed. Then, once inside, she stood looking at the large, tasteful living room as though in awe. "I love it," the old lady said. "I dearly love it!" She turned, peering at Ellen with bright, twinkling blue eyes. "Could I see the rest? And then you can tell me which bedroom to put my bag in."

"Well—" Ellen searched for a defense, a logical story to give the woman about the impossibility of her remaining; but she could think of nothing. It *was* Aunt Barbara, after all, someone who'd been kind to Harold at a time when kindness had been needed. True, she did not feel all that much amiability toward Harold. Their marriage had become cool these past few years. But Harold had to be led because he was, simply enough, a follower. And their business was much too important to allow them to part because it was certain that Harold, without her direction, even from this apartment, would put that ship on the rocks in quick time.

She looked at Aunt Barbara, who was staring back eagerly, waiting for the tour. "Yes, of course. Let me take the bag." The suitcase was transferred from hand to hand, and Ellen said, "It's very light."

"It's all I've got," Aunt Barbara said cheerfully. "In this whole wide world."

"All you've got?" Ellen asked.

Aunt Barbara nodded. "I sold everything, through the years. Couldn't work a farm after Ben died. So—the animals first. Then the land, piece by piece. I finally sold the house, too. They let me rent a room upstairs, and I bought meals there, so I could be where I'd been so long. But then I knew I wouldn't have enough left for room and board much longer. So I bought a bus ticket for San Francisco and rode out and here I am. Will Harold be home soon from work to see his old aunt?"

Ellen shook her head. "He's in Europe. He left yesterday. He'll be gone two weeks, and I won't even hear from him or know where he is, until he finishes up in Rome—he promised to call then."

"Oh, dear," the old lady said with a sigh. Then her smile reappeared. "So I'll just have to wait to see him, won't I? Well—let's take a look at this pretty place. And then I can settle in wherever you tell me."

Ellen felt anger in her face as she said, "How did you find your way

here from the bus station, Aunt Barbara? And how did you get to the elevators? People have to call up, and—"

"When I got off in the station downtown," the old lady said proudly, "somebody told me which bus to take to get near here. I did that. And before I got off the bus, the driver told me where to walk. I did that too. And I came into the building, found your name and apartment number, and then someone came out of the door that gets to the elevators—I jumped in fast while the door was still open. Just like that."

"Just like that," Ellen said, aware she was revealing her displeasure, but not caring. "Let's start this tour, shall we?"

They went through the efficient kitchen where Ellen created her gourmet cookery. "My!" said Aunt Barbara. Then the study with its wealth of books that Ellen loved. Aunt Barbara began ohhhing and ahhhing. Then the master bedroom with its large twin beds and mirrors and bath and heavy gold-flecked drapes that opened to reveal sliding glass doors and a balcony where there was another splendid view of the Bay. "My Lordy!" Aunt Barbara whispered.

And finally, hating it, Ellen guided the old woman into the rarely used guest room with its ample bed and comfortable furniture; there was another bath here and even a well stocked bar. "Oh, my, oh, my, oh, my!" Aunt Barbara managed. She dropped her knitting bag on the bed and sat down on the edge to begin bouncing up and down, eyes sparkling.

Ellen, holding her temper, placed the suitcase on a rack, seeing that the old lady was now gazing at the bar as she continued to move up and down.

"I have another question, Aunt Barbara," Ellen said.

The woman stopped bouncing and turned her bright look back to Ellen. "Yes?"

"How long do you think you might stay?"

"Oh, my goodness," the old lady said. She shook her head. "I don't have anywhere else to go." Then she smiled once more, apologetically, sadly, pleadingly.

It would be two weeks, Ellen decided that night in her bed. Just two weeks—the interval upon which she'd planned to enjoy so much—and then Harold, when he returned, could send her packing. And suddenly the thought of getting through those weeks drove sleep

away. She got up, whispering swear words she rarely used. She put on a light robe, thinking of heating milk in the kitchen to help calm her—she hated giving in to pills.

She moved silently down the hall from the bedroom; as she passed the room now occupied by Aunt Barbara, she heard the clink of glass on glass behind the closed door.

The following morning, dressed for shopping, Ellen returned to the kitchen to prepare her ritualistic breakfast of a small glass of orange juice, one soft-boiled egg, a slice of toast, and her favored aromatic tea. She began boiling the egg, thinking that Harold, even though absent, was still capable of undoing her pleasure in life—this time by being responsible for the presence of that old woman in the guest room.

Mouth set thinly, with the egg nearly done and the tea brewing, she pushed down a slice of bread in the toaster, hoping devoutly that Aunt Barbara was a late sleeper. At which moment the old lady popped into the kitchen, saying with nerve-grinding fervor, "Now that was a good sleep, I'll tell you! I just *love* my room. And I'll tell you something else—I'm hungrier than a billy goat!"

Ellen removed the egg from boiling water and placed it in an egg cup. "What do you think you'd like, Aunt Barbara?" Her tone was carefully controlled.

"Now don't you fuss with things, do you hear?"

"Just tell me. I keep a very well-stocked refrigerator and freezer."

"Well. . . ." Her eyes reflected anticipation. "I ate skimpy coming out here. I'll admit that was a good meal you put on the table last night. But I could still use something that'll really stick to the ribs to get the day going."

"And what might that be?"

"I've always liked eggs. Four would be fine. Fried, easy over. Bacon, if you got it, and plenty—don't like it too crisp. Gobs of toast and butter and jam. And that'd go nice with a good mound of hash browns." She sat down at the small kitchen table and watched as Ellen, giving up on her own breakfast, began a grim and silent preparation.

The old woman talked, if she didn't help. And she talked of hot summers and blizzard winters in Nebraska. She talked of drouths and irrigation. She talked of cattle and hogs and chickens and horses. And

Ellen, working, closed her ears; a native of the city, she had not the faintest interest in any of it. All she wanted, now, was to leave the house, to escape on her shopping trip.

When at last she piled the breakfast onto a large plate, Aunt Barbara said, "I don't see any coffee perking, do I? We always kept a pot on, out on the farm. Couldn't hardly live without it."

"I have tea ready," Ellen responded tensely. "Would you possibly like a cup?" She put the loaded plate before the old woman and added silver and a napkin.

"Well now, I haven't had tea in ever so long. That might be good for a change."

Ellen poured the tea, put it on the table, and the old lady, puckering her lips, sipped at it. "Woooosh!" she said. "No, indeedy. Too much bite in it for me. Better put on a pot of coffee!"

Feeling her hands begin to tremble, Ellen got out an electric percolator, set it up, placed it on the table, plugged it in, then said, "It'll be ready shortly. I'm going shopping now. And you just make yourself comfortable." Her tone was sharp with sarcasm.

The old lady merely stuffed food into her mouth, eyes alight, and said, "Now you can count on that, Ellen. You really can."

In the living room, Ellen picked up her purse from a hassock where, out of habit, she'd placed it on her way from bedroom to kitchen. Then she took an elevator down to the garage where she got in her small sports car and drove to the nearest market.

She used a list prepared the day before and carefully picked up each item—in double quantity now. She got into line with her cart, was checked, and then opened the wallet of her purse to find it empty.

She stared at the wallet, certain that she'd transferred money from the lock box she kept in the lowest drawer of the bureau of their bedroom. She did not like carrying large sums, and she was nearly positive that she'd taken two twenty-dollar bills. Money had always been important to her, which was why, in the beginning stages of her and Harold's business, she'd been the one to keep the books.

"I guess I'll have to give you a check," she said to the man behind the counter. "I seem to have forgotten my money."

"Check's fine with us. Put it on the tab, if you like. You're solid with us, Mrs. Gossett."

"No," she said, never wanting to charge things, "I'll just write the

check."

As she did that, she imagined the morning's journey of that old woman: from the guest room to the living room, to the hassock, to the purse resting on it, where blue-veined hands had darted inside, drawing out those bills. . .

When she returned to the apartment, Aunt Barbara, having left her used dishes on the kitchen table, was in the living room sitting erectly on Ellen's teak chair, wearing her smile. She began to chatter furiously, as her nimble hands knitted. But Ellen stocked her groceries, ignoring her. Then she went to the master bedroom where, behind a closed door, she examined the lock box which she opened with a small key on her ring.

Inside were old and valuable coins, her jewelry— an expensive collection—and currency. She counted the money quickly and accurately. Left was $460.00, and she knew there had been five hundred. She had not dreamed of taking forty dollars for her wallet; the old culprit had stolen that sum.

She locked the box angrily and carried it to a wide closet. She lifted it up onto a shelf and tucked it back into a far corner. Then she slid the doors shut and left the bedroom, wishing there was a lock on that door.

"What do you think might get on the table for dinner?" the old woman said with rasping penetration as Ellen returned to the living room.

"I haven't thought about lunch yet," Ellen said sullenly.

"We call that dinner where I come from," Aunt Barbara replied, nodding definitely. "Noontime, when you eat your fill. Then, when it comes evening, that's supper. We could think about that, too, couldn't we?"

Ellen walked off stiffly to put the old lady's dirty dishes in the dishwasher.

The following days stretched into a long agony. The old woman ate and sat and knitted and talked and slept. And she continued to wear, to Ellen's dismay, the same dismal dress she'd arrived in. Then one morning, after consuming a giant breakfast, she saw Ellen carrying her purse and a clothes basket toward the door. "Going to do up the laun-

dry, are you?"

"That's correct," Ellen said in the short, snappish fashion that she used when conversing with Aunt Barbara.

"Then it might be time for the weekly bath for me. You want to wait a minute, I'll slip out of this dress and you can wash it."

"There're coin-operated machines in the basement. You can do that yourself, can't you?"

"Oh, well," the old lady said.

"Just give me the dress," Ellen said quickly. "Please."

Aunt Barbara went to her room, the dress was handed out and Ellen carried it with her own clothes to the basement.

She loaded the washer while thinking about the things that had disappeared during the last days. A half dozen imported and expensive figurines. A gold plate. A small etching that she and Harold had found at an art show in southern France, something done by a brilliant young French artist. She'd kept her purse with her constantly, but the other things had gone.

The day before, she'd confronted the old woman by listing the missing items. But Aunt Barbara had simply shaken her head and said, "Don't know about that. They must have just got up and walked off by their own selves."

And there was nothing Ellen could do about it, she thought. The old woman never left the apartment. She was either inside her room or just outside it, watching Ellen when Ellen wasn't shopping or in her own bedroom. The previous noon Ellen had attempted going into the guest room to look for what was missing; she'd thought Aunt Barbara was totally absorbed in eating lunch. But the old woman had bounded to her feet, run across the living room to the hallway and said, as Ellen was opening the door, "Now if you want something out of there, sweetie, you let Aunt Barbara get it!" The smile again. "Beggars can't be choosy, but I do like my room left to itself, if you don't mind. . ."

Washer loaded and started, Ellen sat down to review the time since the intruder had arrived. And she was thinking that Aunt Barbara seemed nothing like the person Harold had described knowing as a youngster. Harold had said that his aunt was a kind, outgoing woman; Aunt Barbara surely was outgoing, but beneath her nice-old-lady facade, she appeared to be tough, possibly mean and most assuredly selfish. He'd said that his aunt was always gently understanding. But if

the old woman had demonstrated any gentle understanding toward her hostess, there had not been a demonstrable trace of it as yet. And her physical appearance—Harold had described her as being absolutely beautiful. That grinning witch? Ellen asked herself.

Still, she thought, memories of childhood could become idealized through the years. And Harold could have chosen to remember a childhood that hadn't, in reality, existed, including the warped memory of that old lady ensconced in the apartment above. And even that woman's own memory seemed to have failed about the interval of her life when she and Harold had been together so much. She had never, since she'd arrived, told any specific stories about their relationship; no anecdotes about earlier times so often common to older people, just the frequent phrase that Harold had been such a good boy. . .

And then it came to Ellen, for the first time: *What if that old woman were not Aunt Barbara?*

Transferring clothing from washer to dryer, Ellen returned to her chair and the contemplation of her new thought. It was a possibility. The old woman may indeed have ridden a bus from Nebraska, as she'd said. But that in no way meant that she was actually who she said she was; she could have been anyone who'd known the real Aunt Barbara, and found out enough about her relationship with Harold years ago, to create the facade. She simply could have learned somehow that Harold was involved in a successful business, decided this was the course to take, and taken it.

And there was even another possibility, Ellen decided: perhaps the old woman was a professional, from right here in the city. Harold might have told his story about the early years with his aunt to anyone—at work, in a bar, anywhere—so that the crone upstairs could have gotten just enough information to impersonate Aunt Barbara.

Ellen gripped well-manicured nails into her palms, knowing that she had to face the possibility of a falsely identified intruder realistically.

Back in the apartment, she found the woman again planted erectly in the teak chair, smiling, dressed in what was obviously her single change of dresses—a garment that very probably had been purchased in the Thirties. Ellen tossed the clean dress to her and said, "You'll have to iron it yourself."

"Well, it don't need ironing, really. Do appreciate it, and I thank you a heap, sweetie."

I thank you a heap, sweetie, Ellen thought darkly as she put down her basket. The old woman was making every effort to emulate the stereotype of what she claimed to be. But wasn't it overplayed?

Ellen sat down near the woman, and was suddenly aware that, following her bath, the witch had put on perfume—Ellen's very best, gotten from her bathroom. No doubt the bottle would be missing when she checked. "Aunt Barbara," she said tensely, "we have to have a talk."

"I love to talk. Can go at it all day, all night. You want to hear more about the farm back home? Or—"

"I want to know if you're really Aunt Barbara." There was no other way, she'd decided—just straight on, as boldly as that.

"You want to try that on me again, sweetie?"

Ellen did.

The old woman began laughing, shaking her head, slapping the sides of her chair. "Now that's the dangdest thing I ever did hear!"

"I have to know," Ellen said, persisting.

"Why would you ever think I wasn't?" the old woman said.

"Because you're someone I've never seen before. And Harold isn't here to identify you. I have only your word. So—you could be anyone at all. And if you're going to continue to share this apartment with me until Harold gets back, I've got to have proof."

"Ellen, you're turning into the darndest person."

"Never mind that. You must have identification, probably in that knitting bag of yours. Would you mind getting it and showing it to me, please?"

"Well, now—" The old woman's head wagged. "Can't think of a single thing I've got."

"How about a driver's license?"

"Never been behind a steering wheel in all my days."

Ellen was silent for a moment, then: "You have Social Security identification, don't you?"

"Reckon not. I never worked for anybody."

"And you don't receive Social Security payments?"

"Ben never made a penny in his life to pay on it. Just got enough back from the land so we could hang on."

"But aren't you eligible anyway, at your age?"

"If I am, don't know a danged thing about it. Never collected a

penny."

"I could call that farm you left. They could tell me if you went away to come here."

The old lady's head went from side to side. "No phone out there."

"All right then. I've heard everybody knows everybody else in small communities. I'll call the telephone office there, and—"

"Wouldn't do no good. Wasn't hardly ever in town, these last years. And them I did know are all dropped dead by now. The folks who bought my place, the ones I been living with, don't like other people at all. Stay to their selves just about every minute. So I don't think calling like that'd help, Ellen."

Ellen took a long breath, making up her mind. "Then since you have no way of identifying yourself, I'll have to ask you to leave. Right now."

The old woman bent forward, closer to Ellen. "Leave?"

"That's what I said."

The aged eyes turned hard, the withered mouth curled. "You try to boot me out of here, I'll fight you!" Ellen felt the beginnings of true fear deep inside her as she looked at the old woman, who now extended claw-like hands toward Ellen's face, saying croakingly, "I'll get these nails in your eyes. Poke 'em out! I'll scratch and bite! You don't monkey with me, you understand?"

Ellen got up with a jump and hurried away from the old woman, who began laughing again. Ellen headed for the master bedroom, hearing the woman call behind her: "We never got around to talking about what might be on the table for dinner!"

She sat in her bedroom, with the sliding glass doors leading to the balcony open—the days continued to be warm. And she considered packing a bag and going to a hotel until Harold returned. But that would mean leaving the entire apartment, with all of her remaining possessions, to the dreadful woman sitting in the living room. No, she thought, she could not do that.

She thought of calling the police telling them of her fears and suspicions and asking them to investigate. But she could not do that either, she knew. They would come here to check on the old woman, and if she really were Aunt Barbara, Harold would be furious. Their marriage was tenuous enough without risking that.

No, all she could do, she thought as she got up to reexamine the lock box in the closet and finding it intact, was remain here, with that woman, until Harold got home.

She called the nearby market; they agreed to deliver her groceries. Then she phoned her pharmacy and asked for a renewal of her tranquilizer and sleeping-pill prescriptions, medications she seldom used ordinarily. She asked for a double filling of the prescriptions because she was, she said, about to embark on a long trip abroad. She put the phone down, feeling her nerves singing; she had been able to get no more than fitful minutes of sleep, these past nights. Tonight she would sleep, the only escape from the witch open to her.

To fight her frustration, she then telephoned the plant and questioned the manager about the current efficiency of the operation. Before she hung up, she'd properly reduced his confidence.

When the pharmacy delivery had been made, she took the prescriptions to her bathroom and stood looking at her reflection in a large mirror. Her eyes had an odd look, she thought; and she knew what was causing it—fear and the firm knowledge that the woman was dangerous.

And she, Ellen, was forced to live with her in the same apartment, with no one to turn to. Harold would not be phoning from Rome for another four days. If only, she thought for the first time in her life, she had a friend to call and confide in. But there was no one. Not even anyone at the plant—she'd realized that, talking to the plant manager. No, she was a prisoner to the situation. She shook out tranquilizers and took them and awaited their calming effect. . .

She got through the day, recognizing the presence of the woman, but trying to ignore her just the same. Before she went to bed that night, she took sleeping pills. She did sleep. But she awoke the next morning feeling weary, and a trifle vague. The old lady was waiting at the kitchen table for breakfast. And Ellen went through the now familiar routine of preparing it for her.

The woman talked and talked, with her penetrating voice grinding into Ellen's awareness. And Ellen suddenly left the kitchen to swallow more tranquilizers. When she returned, she delivered the huge breakfast to the woman who called herself Aunt Barbara, then took her tea to the temporary sanctity of the living room.

The days moved by with ponderous slowness. Although Ellen kept

watch, her precious things kept disappearing; the aged pack rat chose her moments for stealing with care and accomplished it with speed. Too, Ellen was beginning to feel more and more drugged. She continued to take morning tranquilizers to escape the woman's chatter at breakfast. She consumed no more than her doctor had indicated she should. But still, on the morning of the day before Harold would be calling from Rome, sitting in the living room sipping her tea, something that no longer was pleasant—it was bitter, and she blamed it on her mental attitude—she felt especially groggy and distant from reality. The old woman was busy in the kitchen gobbling her breakfast. And Ellen decided that another shower, this time cold, might help clear her senses.

She took that, then came out of her bath thinking that the shower really had not helped her doped feeling. She redressed and stepped out into the hallway. Again, as she so often did, she heard that clink of glass upon glass as she passed the old lady's room. She went on angrily to the kitchen to clean up.

That accomplished, she returned to the living room, expecting to find the woman sitting on her favorite chair. But she was not there.

Ellen went on to the hallway and saw that the door of the master bedroom was slightly ajar. Frowning, she hurried forward to push the door open all the way.

And she saw, with a pounding fury despite the grogginess she was feeling, that the old lady, back to her, was bent over the bed, transferring the contents of the lock box into her knitting bag—the box had obviously been pried open with the screwdriver beside it.

"What are you doing?" Ellen shouted.

The usually erect woman whirled in a crouch and stared at Ellen with blazing eyes. Her mouth was a sunken pucker, and Ellen distantly realized that she'd removed her teeth, which gave her a wild and threatening look. "Get out of here!" the old woman shouted back.

"You can't—!"

"I can!" the old lady screamed. One gnarled hand leaped into the knitting bag and came out clutching a knife. She brandished it, coming at Ellen, who dove sideways, barely able to stay on her feet. She shook her head, saying:

"Please!"

But the old woman kept moving toward her as Ellen backed away.

The knife waved and jabbed. "I want what you've got!" the woman said through her toothless mouth. "I want *everything* you've got!"

And Ellen, hands going up to protect herself, backed, and backed, and backed.

Not until her calves touched the railing of the balcony did she realize she'd gone all the way through the open glass doors. She felt a breeze blowing on her neck as she stared at the relentlessly advancing monster.

The knife held in one hand moved constantly. The other hand came toward Ellen, closer and closer. Ellen's mouth opened in an O, but no screams came forth. She could no longer move, frozen by the drugged feeling and total fear.

Then that other hand, palm flat, was against her chest, pushing. And Ellen went over backward, moving into space, a stunned bird in flight.

Harold Gossett stretched his heavy-set frame out in a large leather chair and propped his feet on a hassock. He grinned across at the old woman who was perched erectly in the carved teak chair. Both had drinks beside them.

"Well, Aunt Barbara," he said, "you're truly something. I mean that."

"Now, Harold," the old woman said, showing a pleased smile.

"Nice to have you here. And I mean that too."

"I'm pleased to be here, Harold."

"And it's like I told you when I wrote just before I went to Europe—if anything ever happened to Ellen, you'd have a home here with me the rest of your life."

"It was so nice of you to write after we hadn't been in touch for so long. And to send money, too, if I ever wanted to take a trip to San Francisco. Came right away, didn't I?"

Harold chuckled and sipped his drink. "Darned shame about Ellen. But those things just seem to happen when you're around, don't they, Aunt Barbara?"

"Fate, I guess. Can't do a blamed thing about it."

Harold nodded. "Like that neighbor of yours, back in Nebraska. Gored to death by your bull."

"Danged fool," the old lady said, testing her own drink. "Herded his

cow right into the corral, and that testy old bull came charging out of the barn and made short work of him."

"I guess he didn't know the barn door was open. Maybe you didn't tell him."

"Spilled milk now. He should have checked first. Anyhow, he was always trouble to me and Ben. Fretting this, fighting about that, every day of the week. Wasn't any loss, I'll tell you."

"Well—and the hired hand. How in the world did he ever get in front of a moving tractor that way so it ran him down and killed him?"

"Nobody ever got it figured out for sure. Dummy must have jumped off while it was moving and then ran ahead to pick up something and tripped and that was all she wrote for him. Well, another trouble-maker too. Like that story he was going to tell Ben when Ben got home from taking a shipment of hogs to Omaha. That him and me got into a little fiddle-diddle while Ben was gone."

"Well, the tractor got him the day before Uncle Ben got back."

"I was true to Ben to the day he died!"

"And that was unfortunate too—Uncle Ben, I mean. Falling from the hay loft to the barn floor and breaking his neck that way."

"Poor devil."

"Now Ellen."

"Like you say—a shame. But she was asking for it. You know what the autopsy said."

"Yes," Harold said, smiling. "A lot of medication inside her. She lost her balance, I guess. Too dizzy."

"She had a ton of those pills," Aunt Barbara said. "I know because I peeked into her medicine chest. And, you know, I think she was even taking them with her tea. Think she ground 'em up and put 'em right in the pot—I'd bet my life on it. Just couldn't get enough."

Harold was chuckling again. "Well, I certainly can't say she won't be missed around here. But like I wrote you, she was pushy. On top of me about this and that and you name it just about every minute I was around her. I told you I could do without that. I mean she'd nag about this, nag about that. Just kept it up, all the time. Nag, nag, nag."

Aunt Barbara's mouth curled into a smile, then that suddenly disappeared as she rapped her glass on the table beside her. "An empty here, Harold. Let's fill her up, shall we?"

"Right!" Harold said, getting up swiftly. He remade both drinks,

gave the old woman hers and returned to his large and comfortable chair to stretch out again, feet on hassock. "Well, Aunt Barbara, Ellen's a memory now. And it's just you and me from now on."

Aunt Barbara lifted her drink, and now her eyes were hard and narrow as she stared at Harold over the rim. She put the glass down and said, "You know, you always were a good boy, when we spent so much time together years ago. Always a good boy. But you got sloppy about things, didn't you? Had to keep after you about more things than I want to remember. Sloppy, Harold, never doing things quite right."

"A long time ago, Aunt Barbara," Harold said pleasantly.

"Well, I see it hasn't changed. Had to ask for a fresh drink when you ought to have had your eye on it. And there you are half on your back in that chair. Sit up straight, Harold."

"I beg your pardon?" he said.

"You heard me. Put your feet down and stop slouching in the chair that way. Isn't good for your insides. It'll ruin your digestion."

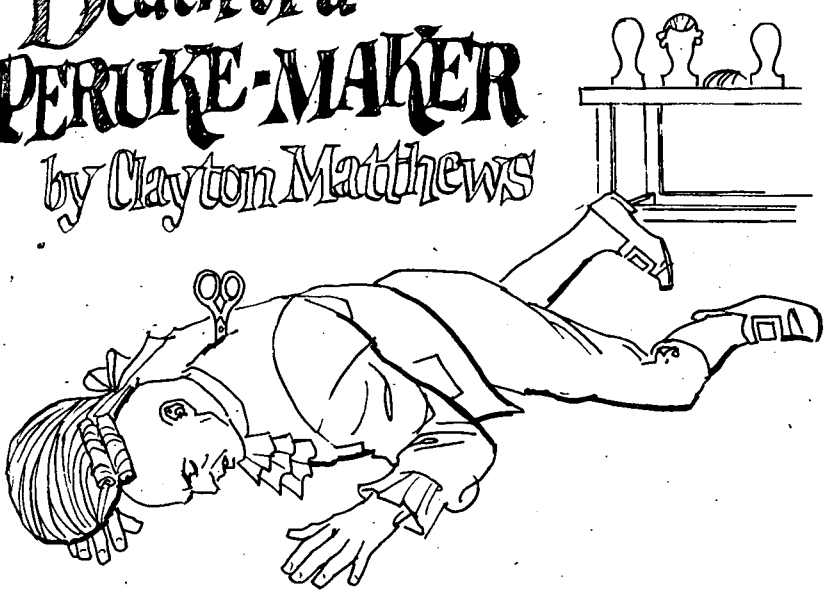
Harold, blinking, corrected his position. "All right, Aunt Barbara."

"Straighter, Harold," the old woman snapped. "Straighter!"

The Constable went as pale as wig powder. "Oh, this is a dreadful business, sir . . . "

Death of a PERUKE-MAKER

by Clayton Matthews



Williamsburg
23 April, 1773

My Dear Wife:

Temperature on arising at 6 o'clock 54°.

Friend Patrick, who is sharing bed with me at the Raleigh, sports me for washing my feet in cold water on arising, even while he himself suffers from the ague.

After my morning meal, I sallied forth along Duke of Gloucester Street bound for the Capitol Building. It was a gray day and bespoke foul weather. Gloucester was ajostle with carriages, wheels striking sparks from the worn cobblestones. Tradesmen and hucksters were all about plying their wares. More so than on a normal day, since 23 April, as you know, dear wife, is St. George's Day, the day of the yearly town fair.

On this day I did not reach the Capitol Building. The House of Burgesses was not graced by my presence.

As I started past Thomas Devereaux's wigmaking shop, a lad of 12 or thereabouts came out pellmell. Twas young John Lyons, Devereaux's apprentice. He had horrifying news to convey.

He gasped out, "Murder, sire! Murder most foul!"

He made as if to scurry on. I seized his arm and shook him. "Who, lad? Who is the victim of the deed?"

"Tis Master Carpenter, sire."

You may recall, dear wife, that Andrew Carpenter is Thomas Devereaux's journeyman. He, I believe, tended to your wig when you were in Williamsburg this autumn past, residing with Friend George Wythe.

Journeyman Carpenter was a dandy, something of a womanizer and a toper, I understand. I have never cared for the man. That, I will grant, may be an unwonted prejudice on my part. Wigmaking does not seem to me a profession befitting a man. I do not care much for the wearing of a wig, yet it does seem a necessity for a man in Public Life.

To young John Lyons, I said, "On your way to the Courthouse and fetch Constable Turner. Away with you now."

Young Lyons hastened on his errand and I went into the shop of the peruke-maker. With great reluctance, since I have an abhorrence of violent deeds.

The day outside being so dark and no lamps lighted inside, at first I could see little. Like all wigmaking shops, it was a bewildering clutter. To my left was the high work bench on which sat a miscellany of wig blocks, so like human skulls they are I always get a chill. And toward the rear, on my right, was that instrument of medieval torture, the Satan-blessed barber chair. Well do I recall this winter past when I suffered the agonies of the damned with an abscessed tooth and came to Thomas Devereaux to have it lanced in that same chair. The infamous

rack of the Inquisition could not compare.

Still, I did not see anything untoward. Thinking that young Lyons must be suffering from vaporous imaginings, I ventured around the high bench and saw him there. Journeyman Carpenter on his face in death's grip, a pair of barber shears buried to the hilt between his shoulder blades.

I knelt and felt his flesh. It was cold. It was plain to me that he had been long dead, perhaps as long as last eventide.

His own wig had fallen awry, revealing his shaven skull. I mused upon tales I had heard of wigmakers ofttimes making their wigs from their own sheared locks.

That recalled to me something I had once read in Diderot's *Encyclopedia*. In general the hair of persons not given to excesses lasts a long time, while that of men who live in sexual debauchery, or of women who give themselves to the uses of men, has less sap, dries out, and loses its quality.

If the veracity of all the tales told of Journeyman Carpenter's debauchery is to be believed, the quality of his own hair was not of the best quality.

Then I took note of something mystifying. The wig awry on his head was not his own, at least not one I had seen him wear. This wig was a brown dress bob much like my own, much like most men of substance in Williamsburg wear, whereas on all the prior occasions that I had seen Journeyman Carpenter he had been adorned with a cadogan wig, that elaborate affair so much beloved by the young fops of England who affect to call themselves "macaronis."

At the sounds of a commotion in the doorway, I got to my feet to see Constable Turner bustling in. I saw a number of villagers gathered outside. I reflected that young Lyons had served effectively as the town crier.

Constable Turner is short, red of face, hard of breath, and as plump as a market-day shoat.

"Constable, I would counsel closing the door against the curious."

"Good counsel, sir, good counsel."

He touched his forelock, his own hair I daresay, and puffed over to close the door. Constable Turner has been in office for some years, but I am sure he has yet to be involved in a crime as violent as murder. A debtor to lock in the Gaol, a drunkard pilloried in the Stocks, a thief to

be investigated, a tradesmen dispute to be arbitrated, perhaps roisterers to be quelled, have thus far been the extent of his duties.

This judgement was confirmed when he came around the bench and had his first glimpse of the dead man.

He went pale as wig powder. He swayed, as though from an attack of the vapors.

"Oh, this is a dreadful business, sir, a dreadful business."

"Indeed it is, Constable," I said with some dryness.

I let him go about his affairs, which consisted of little more than staring at the corpse, insofar as I could see, and continued my perusal of the shop. I was searching for nothing in particular, but I have learned from my study of the law that it is of great value to catalogue every item present on the premises later to be in debate in a legal proceedings. Not that I had any intentions of being engaged in such a debate, but I was there. No person will have occasion to complain about the want of time who never loses any.

I could see nothing untoward.

I did note Thomas Devereaux's account book open on the bench, which struck me as a queer place for it. I stepped up to inspect it. You are well aware, my dear wife, how addicted I am to account books.

By some happenchance the account-book pages open for inspection included those of my own and one Richard Jones. I noted that so far this year past I had purchased from Thomas Devereaux two brown dress wigs, a pair of curls, a pound of wig powder, one dressing, and had been charged with the aforementioned lancing. Total, one pound, four shillings.

I turned my attention to the account of Richard Jones. I was not personally acquainted with the man, but I knew him to be a local tobacco planter, with a small plantation a few miles distant from Williamsburg.

The amount due from Richard Jones was considerable, a sum in excess of ten pounds. It dated back two years, with no payments on the principal. Much can be told about a man from a look at the account sheets of his creditors. Richard Jones had a rather large family and several slaves. Thomas Devereaux had charged him for a number of wigs, both male and female, several dressings and shavings, as well as numerous bleedings and teeth pullings for his slaves.

There is nothing at all unusual for a wigmaker's customers to be a year or so in arrears. The cursed Crown forbids us here in the Colonies

to mint our own coins. Almost all accounts are settled yearly, most often in tender instead of coin of the realm. Warehouse receipts for varying amounts of stored tobacco are universally acceptable for payment of debts. This year past the tobacco crop had fared poorly. Richard Jones had my sympathy.

A knocking came at the door. I looked in that direction. It was Thomas Devereaux himself. Constable Turner hastened to allow him entrance.

Thomas Devereaux is rather portly and not too young in years, being a man for strong drink and gambling, yet a fellow of uncommon good nature. I have always liked him.

He gave me a rather distracted greeting, and said to the constable, "What are these bad tidings I hear?"

"Bad tidings indeed, Master Devereaux. A dreadful business."

So saying, the constable showed him the mortal remains of Journeyman Carpenter.

Thomas Devereaux blanched and removed his brown dress wig to mop at his pink scalp. "Distressing. Oh, yes, distressing. But I cautioned him that such could happen."

"And why is that, sir?" I said, rather sharply I am afraid.

Thomas Devereaux turned his gaze on me. "He had a liking for the ladies, did young Carpenter. And he cared not if they were wed. He did much dressing and fitting of wigs for ladies who wished not to venture forth to my shop. And many a husband has complained to me about his undue attentions to their spouses. With some I fear it went beyond that."

"You are saying then that some cuckolded husband has committed this deed?"

His faded eyes shifted away from mine. "All I am saying, sir, is that my journeyman was too free and easy with the ladies."

Was the peruke-maker being evasive or was he belatedly becoming precautionary about blackening the good name of a dead man? Or was there a reason for Thomas Devereaux himself to wish his journeyman dead?

I was pondering these questions when a loud voice spoke from the doorway. "Your journeyman was indeed free with the ladies, Thomas Devereaux. Just inquire of Silas Marlowe." The voice now turned into braying laughter.

I looked in the direction of the voice and saw that the constable's opening the door to Thomas Devereaux had, in effect, opened Pandora's Box. The entrance was crowded with the curious. In the forefront was a slat of a man with the red nose of a toper, and I had the conviction that here was the man with the donkey's braying laugh.

I took a step forward. "And just what should we inquire of Silas Marlowe, sir?"

"Inquire of him about his spouse and Journeyman Carpenter. Just last eve he conversed with me over several pints. Gone in drink he was, mumbling about being cuckolded by young Carpenter yonder. He swore to me that he would venge himself, as any proper husband would."

Voices behind him murmured agreement, several averring they had heard these selfsame words from the lips of Silas Marlowe.

I said, "Who is this Silas Marlowe?"

The response came from Thomas Devereaux. "Silas Marlowe, the silversmith. His shop is on Nickolson Street."

Cries came from the doorway.

"To the Gaol with him!"

"A murderer must know the hangman's rope!"

"It is our duty to see that he pays the penalty!"

The slat of a man with the red nose looked about him with a startled manner.

To him, I said, "And who might you be, sir?"

"Richard Jones." He bent a knee. "At your service, sir."

It was now clear to me why he was in debt to Thomas Devereaux so heavily. Idling away time in taverns instead of seeing to the industry of his plantation.

I raised my voice above the hubbub. "It would be advisable if you fetch this silversmith from his shop, Constable. Escort him to the Apollo Room at the Raleigh posthaste and we shall thereupon inquire into the truth of this matter."

It was nigh onto the noon hour when I crossed Gloucester to the Raleigh Tavern. So occupied had been my thoughts with the murder that I had not measured the passage of time. I had long since missed roll call in the House of Burgesses, but since there were no pressing matters on the agenda, I assumed in all good conscience that my presence would not be sorely missed.

The carriage and foot traffic had quickened along Gloucester, and people were thick as flies on syrup. Tradesmen were hurrying toward Market Square toting their wares to display at the fair.

I was delighted to escape the street noise and into the Raleigh. Unfortunately, the tavern was equally boisterous. The tap room and the game room rang with loud voices. And even the Apollo Room, where so many times we had repaired from the Capitol Building to decide matters we could not settle on the floor of the House of Burgesses, was also full. It was even fuller by the time Constable Turner arrived with Silas Marlowe.

As you very well know, dear wife, I have an abhorrence of mobs. If I could not get to Heaven but with a party, I would not go there at all. It came to mind to instruct Constable Turner to insure us privacy, but I curbed my tongue. It was not within my province. Besides, rumors would fly enough. Who can hazard what rumors might gain currency if our proceedings were conducted in privy council, as it were?

The silversmith, I was surprised to see, was an elder. Not in his dotage but far beyond the years where a man's spouse would normally cuckold him.

Seized by a sudden suspicion, I leaned to the ear of Thomas Devereaux. "How old a wife has this silversmith?"

"Oh, young, sir," said Thomas Devereaux with a bawdy grin. "Little more than a maid."

That, of course, explained it. I do not look with favor upon a man taking for wife a woman so tender of age, thus making him the likely victim for barnyard humor.

This Silas Marlowe was a brawny fellow, for all his years, with sturdy forearms from years of working a smith's bellows. He could have driven the shears into Journeyman Carpenter's back with ease.

With a pewter plate I pounded on the table for quiet. When the bedlam died, I said, "What say you, silversmith? Rumor has it that you, sir, while in your cups, did voice threats against the life of Journeyman Carpenter. What truth to the charge?"

"The threats I did make, sir. But I was indeed in my cups," he said in anguished tones. "It was an empty threat, on God's oath I swear! Tis not in me to slay a man, though he did make free with my wife." The poor man wrung his hands in despair.

Loud voices were raised, and the villagers crowded close. I was

troubled, fearing that my judgement in not excluding them might have been a grave error. A motley crowd can be fickle, changing from good humor to rancor in a twinkling.

The poor wretch of a silversmith, frightened out of his wits, fell to his knees, hands clasped together, face upturned in prayer. The crowd jostled, closing in, smelling rancid as a swine's breath. So unruly did they become that Thomas Devereaux, standing by my side, was sent staggering, wig falling to the table. In an agony of embarrassment he snatched it up again to cover his bald pate.

In a distemper I pounded the pewter plate on the table and roared, "Silence and order! Be you men of good will or barnyard animals brawling at the feeding trough? If I do not have silence and decorum, Constable Turner shall clear this room!"

To my astonishment the room fell quiet at once. What a blessing it would be if the House of Burgesses could be brought to order so easily during one of our not infrequent heated debates.

To the silversmith, I said, "Get to your feet, man. It is not seemly that a man should shame himself so before his peers."

All a-tremble, Silas Marlowe got to his feet. He glanced in terror at the glower of faces surrounding him.

"Stand back and let the silversmith breathe!"

"Sir, he might take flight," said Richard Jones. "The wretch is a murderer!"

"Is he indeed?" To Thomas Devereaux, I said, "This journeyman of yours. . .Was it his custom to wear wigs other than his own?"

Thomas Devereaux's face puckered in worriment. "Not to my knowledge, sir. Tis not sanitary."

"Yet the wig he was wearing at the moment he was struck down was not his own. It was much like yours."

"Oh, that I can explain." The wigmaker's face broadened in a smile. "He was engaged in making a new dress bob for me. Although not of my wishing, he ofttimes used his own head instead of a wig block. Our skulls, strange as it may strike you, were identical in size and shape."

"Are they indeed?" I observed the wigmaker closely. "He could, in fact, be taken for you, in poor light. You are of identical height."

Thomas Devereaux looked startled. "True. Except for. . ." He patted his ample girth, that protuberance so much like a woman quick with child.

"Yet from behind that would not be so easily observed."

Thomas Devereaux's eyes widened: "What might you be suggesting?"

"I am suggesting, sir, that the murderer made a grave error. He mistook Journeyman Carpenter for you. You, sir, were the intended victim."

A concerted gasp came from the onlookers, and the wigmaker blanched. "But who would wish to slay me?"

"A man in mortal fear of debtor's prison."

I had not taken my gaze from Richard Jones. Now I saw him slipping smooth as an eel toward the door. "Stop that man, Constable!"

Constable Turner followed the direction of my pointing finger, gaping in befuddlement. Had not there been so many men present, Richard Jones would have made good his escape. But the crowd, now alerted, closed in around him, a new victim for their bile, and in a twinkling he was brought to stand before me, arms held in a vise at his sides.

He did not cringe, not this Richard Jones. "What is this calumny, sir? I have dawdled overlong here and was taking my leave to oversee the affairs of my plantation."

"Better you should have concerned yourself heretofore. Else you would not be in your present straits. Wigmaker, have you not been pressing Richard Jones for payment of his account? Have you threatened him with debtor's prison?"

The wigmaker's round face flushed with indignation. "I have indeed! His account is long overdue. He pled inability to pay. My patience was at an end."

"And so you, Richard Jones, thinking to cancel your debt, crept like a thief into the wigmaking shop last eve," I said. "Mistaking Journeyman Carpenter, in poor light, for Thomas Devereaux, you drove barber shears into his back, thus slaying him!"

His head went back, black eyes flashing defiance.

"What was even more reprehensible, you endeavored to then place the guilt on the silversmith. Do you deny the charges, sir?"

"I deny nothing! I admit nothing!"

I stared at him with some sorrow. In our present state, the Colonies need men of such fire and spirit. It is indeed sad that economic repression by the Crown should drive men to such desperate deeds.

It is not that I hold a brief for his act. The rule of law must be observed. And whenever you do a thing, though it can never be known but to yourself, ask yourself how you would act were all the world looking at you. "Murder will out." Thus did Cervantes say it.

I sighed and gestured. "Take him to the Gaol keeper, Constable, for safekeeping. A week or so to ponder and he will be amenable to confessing the deed, I wager."

As the constable took Richard Jones out, the villagers melted away like butter in a hot skillet. Soon, I was alone in the Apollo Room with Thomas Devereaux.

"I am grateful to you, sir, for unveiling our murderer. To think that he had selected me as his victim." His face creased in thought. "But now that he is in Gaol, how do I collect for his overdue account?"

"Mayhap the silversmith will, in gratitude, assume his debt."

Leaving him gaping after me in wonderment, I repaired to my quarters upstairs.

I am presently writing this letter to you, dear wife, from the desk at the window overlooking Gloucester. The weather has turned fair. All bodes well for the fair in Market Square.

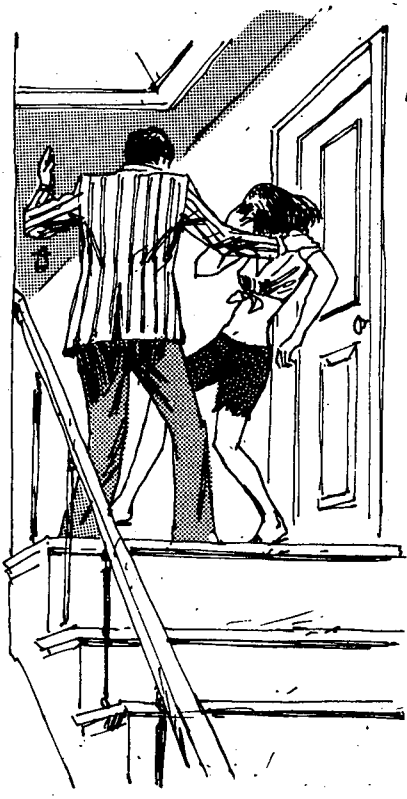
It will shortly be time to sup. And Patrick Henry will soon come roaring in, demanding from me the reason for my absence from the House of Burgesses. Knowing his appetite for adventure, I can anticipate his relish for the tale I have to relate.

Yours affectionately,
Th: Jefferson

A parlor used to be a room for special guests. It still is, in a manner of speaking. . .

PARLOR GAME

by GARY BRANDNER



Even in bright sunshine Western Avenue is not one of the beauty spots of Los Angeles. In the rain it can be downright ugly. I stood in the rain on the corner of Western and Romaine and squinted up at the window of my new office. The window was dirty and had a crack across one corner and no name on it. The name was down at the foot of the stairs in white plastic letters stuck on a black directory board. *D. Stonebreaker, Private Investigator.*

The new place was not much, but it was no worse than my old office downtown on Fifth. That building was being demolished so they could put up some future slums. It's called urban renewal.

The new neighborhood looked lively enough. Right under my office was the Erotique Massage Parlor. Next door was a movie theater advertising *Hard Core Nudies–Open All Night.* Also in my block were beer bars, pawn shops, a pool room, a Mexican lunch stand, and a Chinese laundry. And a couple of places whose business I couldn't guess.

I was getting wet. I ambled back across the street and started up the stairs. Just before I got to the landing I heard the moist smack of a fist on flesh. I went on up, and there just in front of my office a big-shouldered stud was slapping around a slim girl in cutoff jeans. She had shiny black hair that bounced away from her face every time he hit her. I walked up behind the big guy and grabbed him by the meat of his shoulder.

"You're blocking my door," I said.

He spun around as though he was going to let me have one too. He had a big-jawed handsome face spoiled by a pouty little mouth. When he got a look at my size and my face, which is not cheery at best, he changed his mind about hitting me.

"What's the matter, mister?" he said. "You a hero or something?"

"Beat up your woman someplace else. You're bad for my business."

The girl, who couldn't have weighed more than 100 pounds, looked from one of us to the other with dark frightened eyes. The left side of her face was red where the guy had smacked her.

Just so she wouldn't think he was chickening out, the tough guy said to her, "Remember, there's more where that came from." He walked away and down the stairs, turning to give me a fierce look when he was out of reach.

The girl was rubbing the side of her face when I turned around. "Damn, I hope I don't get a black eye. Listen, are you the private detective who's moving in here?"

I admitted that I was.

"Can we go into your office?"

"Sure, but we can't sit down. The furniture isn't here yet." I unlocked the door and the girl walked in ahead of me. She was wearing a lightweight shirt with the tails tied in front, exposing a whole lot of

skin north and south of the navel. She glanced around the empty room without enthusiasm.

"It'll look better when I get the carpet laid and the stereo in," I said.

She ignored the sarcasm. "I'm Abby Deane. I work downstairs in the massage parlor." She waited a couple of seconds to let me absorb the information. "Does that make any difference?"

"Why should it?"

"Some people don't want to do business with a girl who works in a massage parlor."

"Some people feel the same way about private detectives. What kind of business did you have in mind?"

"I think I'm getting in some trouble that's bigger than I can handle. I might need your help."

"Tell me about it."

She looked at the big colorful watch strapped to her wrist. "Listen, I have to go now, I've got a ride home waiting for me. I've got to be back here to go to work at seven. I'll come an hour early and talk to you then. If you're going to be here."

"I'll be here."

She started out the door.

"Wait a minute." I eased out past her and walked softly down the stairs. Sure enough, just inside the doorway where the rain wouldn't spoil his hair style was the tough guy with the shoulders.

"Forget something?"

He looked at me and licked his pouty little lips. "What's it to you?"

"I don't like you in my doorway. You scare away clients."

"What are you gonna do about it?"

"You don't really want to know, do you?"

He thought that over, measured me again with his eyes, and decided he had business somewhere else. He sauntered up the street and got into a grubby Volkswagen. From long habit I memorized the license number.

I went back upstairs and told Abby Deane it was all clear below. She hurried out and left me standing in my bare office feeling restless and depressed and listening to the rain rattle against the window.

By six o'clock the movers had all my stuff in place. When I say "all," I mean desk and swivel chair, two straight-back chairs for clients, a

pair of four-drawer file cabinets, and an elderly typewriter with matching stand. For the walls a couple of sincere landscape prints. I was lying before about the carpet and stereo.

An hour later it was dark. The rain still slapped my window and the cars going by on Western Avenue made a melancholy hissing sound. Abby Deane failed to show. I sat there for another hour trying to decide whether I liked my file cabinets on the left or should I move them over to the right. At eight o'clock I decided to leave them where they were. To hell with Abby Deane. It wasn't the first time I'd been stood up. Still, something nagged at me. It was that persistent little nag that has gotten me into more trouble than I like to think about. It couldn't hurt, I decided, to look in downstairs and see if she went to work on schedule.

I let myself out of the office and clumped down the stairs into the wet night. The entrance to the Erotique Massage Parlor was a few steps toward the corner. It is possible, I hear, to get a legitimate massage in one of these joints, but it's the optional extras that pay the rent. This one had a little anteroom with a soft carpet, all rosy lights and strawberry incense. The walls featured unlikely nudes painted on black velvet. A curtain of beads parted and a chesty blonde girl swayed up to me and flapped her eyelashes.

"Hi there," she said. "I'm Bunny."

"You would be."

"How about a nice massage tonight?" Her fingers were already busy with the buttons of my coat.

"Maybe another time," I said. "I just looked in to see if one of the girls showed up for work."

"What's on your mind, fella?" The voice came from across the room where a kid of twenty or so sat behind a small desk. He had oily black hair and an uncertain complexion. One of his hands was out of sight below the desktop where he probably kept something to quiet troublesome customers.

I went over to the desk and glowered down at him. "There's a girl named Abby Deane says she works here."

"So?"

"Did she come in tonight?"

"You're not a cop."

"My name is Stonebreaker." I jerked my thumb at the ceiling. "I'm

your new neighbor."

The kid relaxed a little, but his hand stayed out of sight. "You say you're a friend of Abby's?"

"Just met her today. We had a business appointment couple of hours ago. She didn't show up."

"No, she didn't come in tonight." The kid brought his other hand back up on the desk. "She didn't call either."

"Did you try to call her?"

He threw a glance over his shoulder at a door somewhat hidden by a dark red drapery. The door was open a couple of inches. "I couldn't call her because I don't know her number," he said. "I don't know nothing about her. All I do is work out front here."

The door opened inward the rest of the way and a neat little man walked out to join us. He was wearing a dark suit and vest of the type you don't see any more, with a starched white shirt open at the throat. He was bald with a long skinny nose and a little excuse-me moustache.

"What's the trouble, Rick?" he asked the kid.

"No trouble. This guy was just asking about Abby."

"Who are you?"

I told him. He was not impressed.

"My name's Otto Boatman," he said. "I'm the owner. What did you want with Abby?"

"Just curious. She was afraid she was in some kind of trouble."

"It's possible. These girls don't come here straight from the convent, you know. What they do on their own time is none of my business. Yours either, as far as I can see."

"Maybe not," I said. "Would you mind giving me her address?"

"Can't do it. For all I know she's freelancing, and if I steered you that would make me a panderer."

"We wouldn't want to do that," I said. I'd taken it as far as I'd planned to, anyway. I didn't owe Abby Deane a thing. As I started out into the rain something plucked at my sleeve.

"Come back some time," said Bunny. She grabbed my hand and gave it a little squeeze.

I winked at her. "Keep the table warm." I left the massage parlor and stepped into the shelter of the stairwell to read the note she had pressed into my hand. It had Abby's name on it and an address on Willoughby over near the Desilu studios. Inside my head a small, wise

voice said, *Don't get involved.* Sound advice. I got my jalopy out of the parking lot and headed west toward Willoughby.

The apartment was one of those stucco and redwood numbers that went up all over L.A. during the building boom of the Fifties. It was a little frayed around the edges now. At one spot rainwater poured in a splattering stream over the clogged roof gutter. The squatty date palms out in front looked wretched. Los Angeles should never be seen in the rain.

I took a look at the six mailboxes. White envelopes showed through the grill of number three, which was Abby Deane's, putting her downstairs at the rear of the building. I walked along the edge of a small swimming pool to a redwood fence with a metal 3 hanging on the gate. Inside the fence was a two-by-four patio with a sliding glass door into the apartment. I pushed the button and listened to the harsh buzzing inside. Nobody came to let me in.

Okay, said my wise little voice, *you've done all you can. Let's get out of here.*

In a minute, I told the voice. Why, I wondered, if Abby Deane was on her way home when she left me this afternoon, didn't she take in the mail? I popped the door lock with no trouble and stepped into a small, cluttered living room. A quick look in the kitchenette, bath, and bedroom turned up no dead bodies. So much for the good news.

I prowled around a little, getting a feel for the girl who lived here. There was food in the refrigerator and the usual junk in the bathroom, plenty of clothes in the bedroom closet and drawers, and a matched pair of suitcases under the bed. If Abby Deane had gone on a trip, it must have come up mighty sudden. On the way out of the bedroom I stopped to admire a mounted Polaroid shot of Abby and oily-haired Rick from the massage parlor. They were standing by the pool outside her patio with their arms around each other, grinning self-consciously.

A card table was set up in one corner of the living room. Among the papers spread across the top was a pocketsize address book. I thumbed through it and glanced at the clusters of numbers inside that were almost surely names transcribed into a simple number-for-letter code. All the groupings under the *A* section began with the figure *1*, under *B* the figure 2, and so on. It wouldn't take the CIA to crack Abby's code.

Also on the table was a sheet of lined notebook paper ruled into

three columns. Entries in the first column were dates, in the other two were figures in the thousands. For every date the figure in the second column was larger than the third. The dates covered the month just past, but the figures meant nothing to me. I stuck the sheet in my pocket along with the coded address book in case it might mean something later. I went out the way I came in and clicked the lock on the sliding door back into place.

A cold wind was blowing the rain around and Western Avenue was deserted when I strolled back into the Erotique Massage Parlor. Bunny and another girl, both in shorty nightgowns, were sitting on the floor with a deck of cards telling fortunes. Rick slouched behind the desk reading a motorcycle magazine. Bunny saw me first and started to get up. I waved her back down and walked over to the desk.

"It's not nice to lie to people, Rick," I said.

"What do you mean?"

"You told me you didn't know Abby Deane or anything about her. I just came from her place, and there was a nice picture of the two of you groping each other out by her pool."

Bunny came over to join us. "Is Abby all right? How come she didn't show up tonight?"

"I don't know if she's all right or not," I said. "She wasn't home. Why did you hold out on me, Rick?"

He jerked his head back toward the curtained door, closed tight now. "The boss was back in the office, and he don't want me to date any of the girls. He'd fire my butt if he knew."

I pulled out the address book and the sheet with the figures and showed them to Rick. "These were in Abby's apartment. It looked like she'd just been working on them. Do they mean anything to you?"

Rick shook his head.

I said, "If this book is what I think it is, your girl friend might be in as much trouble as she thinks she is."

Beside me Bunny drew in her breath sharply. "Can we go in the back and talk?"

I nodded and followed her through the curtain of beads. Along one wall were half a dozen stalls with what looked like padded operating tables inside. Curtains could be pulled across the front for privacy. Straight ahead was a washroom with a couple of showers. Bunny and I

were the only ones back there. She took me into one of the stalls.

"I didn't want them to hear this up front," she said.

"Something about the address book?"

She nodded. "Abby had a little thing going on the side. When a customer came in and took a shower—everybody has to take a shower first—Abby would go through his wallet. She never took anything, just wrote down the names. The next day she'd check out the names to see if any of the johns were rich or famous or anything. If he was a nobody she'd forget it. If he was some guy with money she'd call up and see if he, um, wanted to give her a little present or whatever you call it."

"You call it blackmail," I said.

Bunny toyed with a bottle of scented oil from a shelf over the table. "Abby didn't think of it like that. She never asked for a whole lot of money, and I don't think she'd have done anything about it if the john refused to pay."

"Are you telling me the names in this book are the guys on her sucker list?"

"Maybe. She said she kept them in some kind of code."

"Yeah, very clever of her." I left the message booth and rattled back out through the beads.

Rick looked up quickly from the desk. "Are you going to try to find Abby?" he asked.

"Why should I?"

Bunny came up behind me and said, "Because you're a detective and she came to you for help."

"I do this for a living," I told her. "Helping people buys no bananas."

She looked disappointed in me. "How much do you charge?"

I named my daily rate.

Bunny looked over at Rick. "I'll go half if you will."

"I don't know, that's a lot of money."

"After all, you did have a thing going with her."

After a little more discussion they came up with the money. I pocketed the bills and went home, where I did the first thing a good detective will always do. I called the police.

Sgt. Dave Pike of L.A. Robbery-Homicide used to be my partner before I left the force over a disagreement I had with the Supreme Court. Dave came on the line after a minute or so of clicks and buzzes.

"I've got a missing girl," I told him. "Age 22 or 23, five foot five, maybe a hundred pounds, long black hair. Bruise on left side of face. When I last saw her she was wearing short cutoff jeans and a shirt tied in front with a lot of bare skin showing."

"Hang on a minute while I check with DB."

While I waited for Dave to query the detectives on dead body detail I shook out a Pall Mall and lit up. I was down to one pack a day, but it didn't look like I would get any lower.

Dave came back on the line. "No stiff answering that description. It's a slow night for killings."

"Must be the rain," I said. "Give me a call if she turns up, will you?"

"Sure. Stonebreaker?"

"Yeah?"

"Are you sitting on anything that I ought to know?"

"I hope not, Dave, I sincerely hope not." I hung up and scowled at the phone for a while. I didn't much like the idea of Abby Deane being dead, but little girls who play with blackmail are likely to get that way.

The next day was another dreary wet one. I ate a late breakfast at a Mexican cafe that served *menudo,* and went over to the Department of Motor Vehicles on Hope Street. I paid a small fee to the girl there and she punched out the license number of the tough guy's Volkswagen on a computer keyboard. In a couple of seconds a name and address flashed on the TV-like screen in cool blue letters. The name was Joseph Kady, the address was up in the Silver Lake district east of Hollywood.

The place was one half of a duplex on a street of tired little houses that looked as uncomfortable in the rain as I felt. I picked my way across the muddy front lawn and knocked on the door. A washed out brunette of about thirty opened up. She had nervous, unhealthy eyes.

"I'm looking for Joseph Kady," I said.

"What do you want with him?"

"I'm a private investigator." I flashed my card, which the woman ignored. "I want to ask him a couple of questions."

"Oh my God, what's he done now?"

"I don't know that he's done anything. Is he here?"

"No, he's at work. You're not from the probation office, are you?"

"No. Where does he work?"

"He's got a job as driver for Lew Harvester."

"The state assemblyman?"

"That's right. Joe says he's going to be governor some day."

"That's nice. Have you got Harvester's address?"

She went away and came back with a number on Roxbury Drive in Beverly Hills. I thanked her and left. While I was driving out Sunset I got to thinking that Lew Harvester—rich, important, ambitious—was a likely candidate for blackmail. I pulled to the curb and got out Abby Deane's address book. Under *H* I found *12-5-23. 8-1-18-22-5-19-20-5-18.* It didn't take a computer brain to translate that into *Lew Harvester.* The mix of letters and numbers under the name would be the Beverly Hills address. I put the book away and drove on through the rain. In the mirror I noticed that a black Buick that had stopped half a block behind me started up again when I did.

The lawn in front of Harvester's white colonial house was a little smaller than a football field and green enough to hurt the eyes. I walked up the wet flagstones leading to the front door and thumbed the button. Inside the house a set of chimes played a muted tune. While I waited I glanced over at the three-car garage. The door was raised, and inside a man in a grey uniform was peering under the hood of a Mercedes. I couldn't see his face, but I recognized the shoulders. I could talk to Joe Kady later if I had to.

The front door opened and a man in a tailored leisure suit grinned at me and stuck out his hand. He smelled of expensive cologne.

"Hi, I'm Lew Harvester. I expect you're Frank Endersbee from the citizens' committee. Come on in, Frank, and get out of the rain. Isn't this weather something else?"

"I'm not from the citizens' committee, Mr. Harvester," I said when he was through greeting me. "My name is Stonebreaker. I'm a private investigator."

He dropped my hand as though it had grown fur.

"Can we go inside and talk?" I said.

"Why, uh, yes. Certainly."

Harvester led the way through a living room filled with furniture that looked too good to sit on. We went into a smaller room where there were soft leather chairs, a clean desk, and lots of books in bright new bindings. Harvester perched uncomfortably on the edge of the

desk. His politician's smile had come all unstuck. He looked worried.

"I'm looking for a girl named Abby Deane," I told him.

He made a try at looking mystified. "Should that name mean something to me?"

"How about the Erotique Massage Parlor on Western Avenue?"

"I—I don't know what you're talking about."

Harvester's eyes got all shifty and he started to sweat. He couldn't lie worth a damn. He would probably never make governor.

I spelled it out for him. "Abby Deane worked at the massage parlor. She had your name in an address book as one of her customers. Yesterday your chauffeur was down there slapping her around. Today the girl is missing. What can you tell me about it?"

Harvester stood there stammering and blinking, the guiltiest man since Jack the Ripper.

There was a movement behind me, and a cool blonde woman in a tailored pant suit came into the room.

"Let me handle this, Lew," she said to Harvester. He gave her a grateful look and hurried out.

"I'm Christine Harvester," the blonde said when we were alone. "I'm the one you want to deal with."

"I do?"

"Sometimes my husband suffers a lapse in judgment. Like getting drunk at a fund-raising dinner last month and going off to that massage parlor with his so-called buddies. Trying to prove his manhood, I suppose."

I could see where Harvester's manhood might need reinforcing, but I didn't mention it.

Christine Harvester went on, "Then when that little tramp came around asking for money Lew went to pieces. I had to handle that for him too."

"So you sent the chauffeur out to beat up the girl."

"Of course not. I sent Joe to pay her off. Getting rough was his own idea. He probably kept the money I gave him for himself."

"It's tough to find good help any more," I said.

"Joe doesn't know it yet, but he just lost his job. Now, what about you, Mr. . .Stonebreaker, was it? How much do you want? I don't suppose you'll take a check, so I'll have to go to the bank."

"How much do I want for what?" I said.

"For the girl's address book. I heard you tell my husband about it. Just give me your price and let's not waste time."

"The book is not my property," I told her. "And even if it was, it wouldn't be for sale. That's not my line of work."

She gave me a look that could knock a man down. I found my own way out and across the acre of green to my car.

Driving back to Hollywood I added up the score so far, and it depressed me. It was still raining, Abby Deane was still missing, and the Buick was following me again.

At least I could do something about the last of those problems. I waited for a stoplight where the Buick pulled up behind me, then got out of my car and went back to knock on the driver's window. He rolled it down a couple of inches and I looked in at a pair of beefy individuals in expensive suits and tinted glasses.

"Hi, fellas," I said. "If it would make it any easier for you, I can write out a schedule of where I'll be the rest of the day. Just in case we get separated in traffic."

The hood on the far side leaned toward me. "Smartmouth son of a . . ."

"Shut up," the driver cut him off. To me he said, "Mr. Giordano wants to talk to you."

"Mr. Anthony Giordano?"

"That's right."

"What if I don't want to talk to him?"

"Mr. Giordano wouldn't like that."

We could have carried on the tough guy dialog for a while, but I was tired of standing out in the rain. I parked my own car and got into the Buick. We drove in silence out to the gleaming high-rise island called Century City where Anthony Giordano kept a suite of offices. "Tony John," as he was known to his pals, had a finger into most of the illegal pies in the city, but he worked hard at keeping his name out of the papers.

We found Giordano on the twenty-first floor of one of the steel and glass towers. The layout was more like a plush apartment than an office. There were a couple of furry sofas, a free-form coffee table, built-in audio equipment, and a bar. Giordano was standing in front of a tall tinted glass window with his hands clasped behind him. He had a beautiful health club tan and shiny black hair that faded to a dramatic

white at the temples. He got right to the point.

"I want to know what your interest is in Otto Boatman and his massage parlor."

"Maybe I wanted a massage."

"Or maybe you're doing a job for Boatman."

"What if I am?"

"I'm curious. Let's say I have a certain financial interest in the operation."

"Let's say you own it."

"Not me personally," said Giordano, "but the people I represent."

"Uh-huh. No, I'm not working for Boatman. I'm trying to find one of his girls. Abby Deane. Know her?"

"No. I don't get involved with the merchandise."

"Good for you. You must have been watching Boatman for some reason to pick me up this fast. Are you worried about him?"

"My people like to keep an eye on their investments, that's all. Thanks for coming in, and good luck in finding the girl."

"Sure."

Giordano walked over and touched a button that was concealed in the arm of a sofa. The door opened immediately and the hood who drove me out stepped into the room.

"Vinnie, take our friend wherever he wants to go," he said, and I was dismissed.

I had Vinnie take me back to my car, which was looking cleaner than it had in months after being rained on for two days. The talk with Giordano gave me something to think about as I drove back to my office. When I got there I had even more to think about. My answering service had a message for me to call Sgt. Pike. I dialed the police number and got right through to Dave.

"We found your girl," he said.

"Where?"

"Griffith Park, in the brush along the road that goes up to the observatory. A cruiser was checking out a lost child report, and there she was. White female, early twenties, black hair, dressed the way you described."

"Dead, I suppose."

"Sure, dead, what do you think? Strangled with a necktie still knotted around her throat so tight the coroner had to cut it off. No I.D. on

the body. Who is she, Stonebreaker?"

I gave him Abby Deane's name and the address on Willoughby.

"Anything else?"

I hesitated. "Not yet, Dave. I'll get back to you."

"Stonebreaker, you're holding out on me."

"Would I do that?"

"You would."

"I'm just looking out for my client's interests, Dave. I guarantee that by tonight you'll know everything I do."

Dave Pike started to chew me out, but before he could really get going I told him goodbye and hung up.

At about seven o'clock I strolled into the strawberry scented anteroom of the Erotique Massage Parlor. A customer sidled out through the beads as I entered. He assumed a preoccupied look, as though he were just gathering material for a book.

I ignored the customer and walked over to the desk where Rick was looking at me worriedly. "I've got bad news," I said.

He shook his head and gestured toward the door behind the red drapery. The door was open a couple of inches.

"This is something your boss ought to hear too." I said it loud enough to make sure he did.

Otto Boatman came out of his office wearing the same dated three-piece suit as the day before. His narrow striped tie was also out of step with the current fashion. At the same time Bunny came through the bead curtain. She was wearing see-through harem pants and some spangles across her chest.

"What is it I ought to hear?" Boatman asked.

"First, Abby Deane is dead."

It took a second for them to absorb the information. Bunny was the first to speak.

"What happened?"

"She was strangled and dumped in the weeds in Griffith Park."

"Do they know who killed her?" Rick asked.

"Not yet, but they will soon."

"What do you mean?" said Boatman.

"Chances are it was somebody from right here at your massage parlor."

Bunny's eyes went wide. "You mean one of us?"

While they all stared at me I went on. "When I talked to her yesterday Abby was in a hurry to meet someone who was supposed to give her a ride home. Who but somebody she knew from here would pick this spot to meet?"

"I hope you're not including me," said Boatman.

"I haven't seen her since night before last," said Rick.

"I don't even own a car," said Bunny.

"Even though she wasn't very good at it," I went on, "Abby was a blackmailer. It figures that she was killed by somebody she was trying to shake down. I wondered what she could have on anybody that was heavy enough to get her killed. Some people might be embarrassed to be caught going into a massage parlor, but you don't commit murder out of embarrassment. On the other hand, if you were stealing money, very dangerous money, you might go all the way to keep that quiet."

"I don't think I like what you're getting at," Otto Boatman said.

"No, I don't suppose you do, Otto. I had a talk with Tony John today, and he let me figure out who really owns this place. I also got the idea he doesn't quite trust you."

Boatman whitened around the nostrils, but he kept his indignant expression in place.

"At Abby's apartment I found a sheet of paper that shows he was right." I let Boatman have a quick look at the page with the columns of figures. "It doesn't take an accountant to figure out that after each date the first figure is the money you took in, the second is what you reported to Giordano. Tony John would be very interested in this."

"That piece of paper doesn't mean anything," Boatman said, but there was no conviction in his voice.

"You probably met Abby here to talk about her price for keeping quiet. The price must have been too high."

Boatman's little eyes glittered. "You're just guessing. You don't have one real piece of evidence."

"Gathering evidence is the D.A.'s job," I said. "Sure, maybe you can beat the rap. If you want to. Then again, maybe you'd rather be safely locked up than out on the street where Tony John can reach you. It's something to think about."

Otto Boatman started to come apart then. "If only she hadn't started snooping around in the office. She shouldn't have tried to hold me up. I didn't mean to. . . I would never have. . ."

Boatman swayed on his feet. Rick got up fast and let him drop into the chair. The little man sat there staring at the wall. His face was the color of mozzarella cheese. I picked up the phone.

After the police came and took Boatman away I stood out on Western Avenue with Rick and Bunny in front of the padlocked massage parlor. The rain had quit and people were beginning to show up on the street.

"You know," Rick said, "you really didn't have much to go on." He sounded resentful, as though he had caught me cheating.

Bunny came to my rescue. "Well, I think you were fantastic, the way you figured it all out." Then she added, "But you were guessing a little, weren't you?"

"Not much," I said. "You see, I didn't exactly tell Boatman about the most important piece of evidence."

"What's that?" Rick asked, right on cue.

"The necktie he used to strangle Abby. I had to get a look at him tonight to make sure he usually wore one. That corny suit and vest outfit looks even worse without a tie, but last night he had his collar open."

Bunny said, "But why would he leave the tie behind after he. . . after he. . .?"

"The knot was too tight for him to pull it off. He couldn't risk parking up there indefinitely wrestling with a dead body. He probably got nervous and shoved her into the brush when he heard a car coming."

I was losing Rick's attention. He shuffled his feet and looked up at the sky, where the clouds were breaking up and stars were showing through the chinks. He said, "At least it stopped raining. Look, man, I think I'll split."

It was nice to know Abby Deane's death hadn't ruined his whole day.

Bunny was fidgeting too. "Hey, I ought to go too, you know."

"Go ahead."

"I mean, I'd stick around, but the night's young and a girl has to make a living. Unless you're interested?"

"Some other time," I told her.

Bunny gave me a farewell smile and strolled up the street in her short, tight skirt and vinyl boots. The storm was over, the people were out, and on Western Avenue it was business as usual.

Deciding who lives or dies could become just a mathematical game. . .

HERE COMES MR. PRITCHARD

by S. S. RAFFERTY

"Well?" Henley, the younger nurse on the ward said, looking from the lazy electronic flicker on the oscilloscope to Nurse Merchant.

Merchant pursed her lips and feigned thought, generating just about as little brain activity as the scope showed in the head of the man in bed 326-A.

Merchant was decidedly old-fashioned. On her head was a crinkly cap that make her look like an early nineteenth-century maid. At her

breast was an extravagant gold pin proclaiming, with the cap, that she was a product of a stern and long-abandoned system of training. Henley wore no cap. No pin. Her white pantsuit was of Dacron. Drip dry.

"Well?" Henley was impatient.

"I don't think so. The respiration is good."

Henley smirked. "It's your ward, Merchant, but that's as close to a flat pattern as I've ever seen."

"Not that flat. . .oh!" She turned to the soft, hushed squish of crepe soles on linoleum. "Well, here comes Mr. Pritchard."

Mr. Pritchard moved rather than walked, every movement precise. Left arm forward as right leg took the stride. Then the right arm and left leg in unison, as if choreographed. The squish of his soles was the music to the piece. The ombudsman of finality entered, brought his creped orchestration to its coda, and smiled.

"Good evening, Merchant," he said. " 'Lo, Henley, how's tricks?"

Merchant bowed her capped head. Henley burst into a grin. "Wow, that's a zippy tie, Mr. Pritchard."

"Father's Day, Father's Day," he said, as if commenting on unavoidable things. "Problems here?"

Henley sprang to the initiative and handed Mr. Pritchard the clipboard. "326-A, Jorden or Jergins, or something. Stroke, coma, almost flat read-out. Hell, look at the scope. It's like an Iowa horizon."

"Hmmm." Mr. Pritchard looked at the record she had handed him. "I won't add all this up, but it looks like this is running $300 a unit. That's high, very high."

"The temp is normal," Merchant put in.

Mr. Pritchard smiled. "Not that normal, Merchant, but no matter."

"That $300 a unit is a ballpark figure, Mr. Pritchard," Henley said, taking the clipboard back. "More like $450. Intake, downstairs, says we could. . ."

Merchant cleared her throat as if a piece of bone had caught there. "Intake really isn't our province, Miss Henley."

"It's your ward," Henley said, with a shrug.

"His name is Jorgenson, by the way," Merchant parried. "Paul Jorgenson. Bricklayer. Before he coma-ed, he told me that he put down the final bond—that's the last row of bricks, you know—on the base of the World Trade Center. Flemish bond, he said. Wasn't supposed to be Flemish, he said. The architects had never heard of it. The

union never heard of it. He sneaked it in and no one noticed."

"The base of which tower?" Henley wanted to know. "There are two, east and west. Or is it north and south?"

"It doesn't matter," Mr. Pritchard said with disinterest. "At $450 a unit. . .well, what can I say? And I'm not letting that 'intake isn't our province' fly by, Merchant. We are all part of a system here."

Henley put the clipboard back on its hook at the end of the bed, being careful first to ground herself from any body static that the Dacron might have worked up in friction with her young skin. Henley knew the dangers around oxygen tents. "Well," she said again.

"Pull the plug," Mr. Pritchard said.

Henley looked at him and then turned to Nurse Merchant. "It's your ward," she said, walking off with her hands buried deep in her pants pocket. Mr. Pritchard squished away to another floor. To another decision. To plug or to unplug was his job, and he performed it with the same precision as he walked.

Merchant picked up the chart, checked her watch and then took a pen, an old-fashioned fountain pen that required ink and the effort to fill it. She noted the time—10:37 p.m.—marked the chart "Termination per Pritchard," and replaced the chart, not worrying about static. Her cotton uniform, like her cap, was starched. Crinkly and nonconductive. It rustled, though, as she walked to the back of the bed and uncoupled the plug from its wall socket. All was quiet, except for the noise of a stiff skirt brushing against her cotton stockinged legs.

She came back to the bedside and looked at him. Then, almost compulsively, she took his hand in hers, gently held it. Flemish bond, she thought. Why, she didn't even know what a Flemish bond was.

Well, that was that. Work to be done. Outtake to be called. Survey the equipment. Intake, to be informed. Fresh sheets. General housekeeping.

Merchant went about her assignments. Intravenous for 327-B. Check scope on 328-A. Good, high profile! Forward details to diet control. Write out a complaint to Administrative Control about air conditioner in Section 22.

Merchant would be on duty till five a.m., and she kept busy. She didn't even recheck the outtake slip when they came for Mr. Jorgenson. She had said her good-bye already. If she allowed herself, and of course she wouldn't, but if she could, she would be angry and sad, or

both. Not now. Too many reports. It was her ward.

Around 4 a.m., Intake called her for a clearance. She gave it and went to bed 326-A, turned down the fresh sheets, plumped the pillow, and waited.

The Intake people were always gabby, which Merchant frowned on, but what could you do? They were in a separate section. A world apart.

"Don't bother with the pillow, Merchy," one of the boys said, wheeling the white draped table into the ward.

"You let me worry about that, Smitty, and keep your voice down, please."

"He won't hear us," Smith said. "Walked in front of a bus. Emergency was against sending him up, but that's the policy with the big shots."

When the man had been gently shifted from table to bed, Merchant set the dials and put in the plug. The scope flicker was lazy. Then, for a moment, just a quick moment, the patient looked up at her.

"Merchant," he said, "don't let Henley. . ."

"It's my ward, Mr. Pritchard," she said, taking his hand.

Cities haven't changed much since ancient times—now, as then, they are populated by dragons. . .

HERE BE DRAGONS

by R.L.STEVENS

Sam Rivers left the party early that night. It was a heavy-drinking after-work affair like many he'd attended before, with bleary-eyed secretaries wandering from man to man and nobody worrying much about the bill the bartender was adding up.

Sam had drunk too much, but by the time he reached his building on the west side of town he was reasonably sober. He unlocked the door of his ground-floor apartment without difficulty and went in.

There had been Friday nights when he might have brought one of the girls home with him, but this time he was alone in his bachelor quarters, tense and tired after a week of minor frustrations with a new account. The advertising business was more than bleary-eyed secretaries and parties on a Friday night.

The apartment was in a good section of the city, renting for just a bit more than he could really afford. He'd taken it two years earlier, when a reconciliation with his ex-wife still seemed a possibility. But since then she had remarried and moved to California, and he was left with an apartment too large even for Friday-night entertaining.

He was hanging up his raincoat in the closet when he heard a dull thud from behind the closed bedroom door.

He moved toward the bedroom uncertainly, remembering the frequent reports of robberies in the neighborhood. But perhaps the drinks had given him a sense of courage. He threw open the door and switched on the light.

A man was crouched in the center of the room, frozen by the sudden light into a tableau of thievery. He had pulled Sam's metal strongbox from the closet and was in the act of breaking off the lock with a hammer and chisel.

In that moment he was the ugliest man Sam Rivers had ever seen. Bent in that position, his arms dangling above the strongbox, he seemed to Sam like an ape, his skin a grayish mold, his lips thick and ugly. His eyes were the beady darts of a heroin addict. He was the personification of all the evil Sam Rivers had ever known or imagined.

The man sprang at him like a tiger, sweeping the steel hammer back and aiming a fast blow at Sam's skull. The nightmare was real, and in an instant Sam was fighting for his life. He managed to butt the charging man with his head, deflecting the hammer's aim, and then they were rolling over together on the floor. The man was as powerful as he appeared, and in an instant he'd fastened his hands around Sam's throat.

Sam's desperate fingers clutched at what he could find, and in his blindness he found the fallen hammer. He grasped it and, with one last gasp of breath, brought it down on the thief's head.

The man's grip on his throat relaxed and Sam rolled the inert body off him. He stood, still trembling, and surveyed the scene. The man at his feet did not move, and though there was little blood from the

wound where the hammer had landed he was almost certainly dead. Sam walked to the kitchen to pour himself some whiskey, and then called the police.

With the promise of aid on the way, he returned to the bedroom. The man on the floor had not moved. Sam closed the door and sat down with his drink to wait for the police. His hands were still trembling and he was aware now of a growing soreness about his neck. He shuddered and closed his eyes. How could he kill a man he had never known, here, in his own apartment, when only a half hour earlier he had been relaxing with friends?

The two policemen who arrived were efficient. One, a brown-skinned man with a gold-toothed smile and hard eyes, asked, "Where's the burglar?"

"In here," Sam said, leading the way. "I think I killed him."

The second policeman grasped his revolver, but when Sam swung open the bedroom door, the room was empty. The strongbox still lay on its side where the man had dropped it, and the bloody hammer was nearby, but there was no sign of the man Sam had left for dead. He sighed, feeling something like relief. "I didn't kill him," he said.

The black policeman was at the window, scanning the adjoining roofs. "Check the street, Mac." he said to his partner. "I'll take a look on the roof."

But the thug was gone, vanished without a trace. The patrolmen wrote a report of the incident while Sam checked the apartment for missing items. But nothing was gone.

"He's not likely to come back," the white officer said. "You must have given him a good headache. We'll check the hospitals in case he went somewhere for treatment."

After Sam thanked them and saw them to the door, he poured himself another drink and checked the bedroom window to make certain of the lock. The experience had exhausted him, and when he went to bed he dropped quickly to sleep.

Except for a call from police headquarters to confirm that nothing had been stolen in the robbery attempt, the weekend passed uneventfully. With women assaulted on the streets and banks held up almost every day, the aborted burglary of his apartment did not even rate a line in the newspapers. Even so, Sam found himself on Monday morn-

ing entertaining the office staff with his account of the adventure.

"This city's a jungle," the receptionist said. "You're not safe anywhere."

"I had my purse snatched one night last month," a pretty young secretary added. "Right in the lobby of my apartment house!"

On the wall of Sam's office was a large antique map of the Far East, drawn before Marco Polo. It had been used by the agency in an advertising campaign a few seasons earlier. Sam hardly noticed it any more, but now, facing it, he saw the faded inscription on the yellow parchment, written in one corner of the land area by a draftsman centuries earlier. *Here be dragons*, it read, in the quaint lettering of the day. Here be dragons, Sam thought. Perhaps the same legend should appear on the maps of this city as well, warning residents from the streets.

It was late Monday afternoon when the phone call came. "Sam Rivers?" a husky male voice asked. "Is this Sam Rivers?"

"Speaking."

"Rivers, I'm going to kill you for what you did the other night."

"Who is this?"

"You broke my skull with that hammer, and I'm going to do the same for you."

Sam hung up. He lit a cigarette and was in deep thought when the phone rang again.

"I wasn't fooling," the voice said. "I'm going to kill you, Rivers."

Sam slammed down the phone. He considered reporting the call to the police, but decided against it. It could be a prankster from the office, ready to laugh at him if he showed signs of nervousness. After all, the thief hadn't spoken to him. Sam had no way of recognizing his voice. And a common burglar wouldn't take the risks involved in this sort of revenge. The man would simply bandage his injured head and forget about it.

And yet, as Sam walked home that evening he was more conscious than ever of the jungle his city was. A crumpled figure in a doorway, drunk or drugged or dead. A tired streetwalker, throwing him an offer before proceeding on her way. Beneath, in the darkness of a subway station, someone might be the victim of a mugging or a murder at this very moment. This was the city: dirty, ugly, dangerous. Like in the

map of old, *Here be dragons.*

As he was entering his apartment building, something heavy hit the pavement behind him, narrowly missing his head. It was a hammer like the one the thief had carried. Sam went inside and called the police.

The detective who came was a tall, sleepy-eyed man with a nervous habit of chewing on a toothpick. His name was Sergeant Calener, and he wore his suitcoat open, as if it make it easier to reach his gun. Perhaps that was the way it was on burglary detail.

"You say he took nothing?"

"That's right," Sam said, and went on to tell about the strongbox.

"Well, come downtown in the morning and we'll run through the rogues' gallery. With a face like the one you've described, he should be easy to spot."

"I'll never forget it."

"I wouldn't worry too much about the phone calls if I were you."

"What about the hammer that just missed my head?"

"I looked on the roof," the detective told him. "I didn't find a thing. Could have been some kids playing. A coincidence." But neither of them really believed it.

"I'll be down in the morning," Sam said.

He called his office the following morning and said he'd be late. When he reached headquarters, Sergeant Calener was waiting for him with a desk piled with mug shots and Wanted posters. He had a toothpick in his mouth.

"These in this pile are the most likely," he said. "These men have worked your neighborhood in the past, and have been known to use violence."

It didn't take long. Sam stopped when he reached the ninth photograph. There could be no mistaking the thick lips and beady eyes. "That's him!" Sam said.

Sergeant Calener sighed. "His name is Arlo Cozzic. He's been arrested five times for burglary and two for felonious assault. Just got out of prison a couple of months ago. All right," he said. "We'll issue a pickup order. But sometimes these guys are tough to locate. If he calls you again, phone me right away. In the meantime, I'll assign someone to keep an eye on your apartment."

Sam thanked him and caught a taxi to the office. He spent the rest of the day with an ear half cocked for the telephone, and each time it rang he gave a little jump. But it was always a client, or some artist or copywriter asking about a campaign in progress—never Arlo Cozzic.

That night when he returned to the apartment there was a letter among the bills and ads. Something about the irregular block printing of his name on the envelope caused him to tear it open at once. *Rivers,* it read, *the hammer was to show you I mean business. My aim will be better next time. Pay me five thousand dollars and I'll leave you alone. Otherwise you die.* There was no signature.

He called police headquarters, but Sergeant Calener was gone for the day. He left a message and hung up, staring at the note for a long time. Then he went to the window and looked down at the street. Someone was there, in the shadow of a doorway. It might be Cozzic, or the detective Calener had promised, or neither—a different dragon, waiting in the dark for someone else.

He finally reached Calener in the morning, but the detective seemed unconcerned with the news of the threatening letter. "It's more of the same," he said. "Just keep your eyes open and don't worry."

Sam wasn't seriously worried. Cozzic was a burglar, not a murderer. But then he picked up the morning newspaper and read of a mugging near his apartment. A man had tried to fight off his attacker and was now in the hospital, near death from a stab wound.

He had to face it. Cozzic had almost killed him that night in the apartment. Cozzie could kill him yet. Like any of the men who prowled the streets and alleys he would kill if need be.

On the way home Sam tried to spot his police guard, but there was no one. He was convinced there never had been a guard. That was only Calener's little lie to keep a taxpayer happy. He was simply playing the odds, trusting to luck that Sam Rivers would stay alive.

And if Sam had any doubt of it, that was dispelled when he reached his apartment. The bedroom window had been smashed and another hammer lay on his bedspread. There was a note attached. *The next one hits your head, one night while you're sleeping, or one day while you're walking. The cops can't stop me. Only you can stop me, with five thousand bucks. I'll phone you tonight. Tell me your decision. Then wait for instructions.*

Sam went to the phone to call the police, but it rang before he could reach it. He picked up the receiver, knowing instinctively that it would not be Sergeant Calener. The silence on the other end confirmed his intuition. Cozzic, watching from somewhere near, had given him just time enough to find and read the note.

"Who is this?" Sam asked. Then: "I know your name now, and so do the police. It's Arlo Cozzic, isn't it?"

There was a grunt from the other end, more terrifying than any spoken threat. "Cozzic? Speak up if it's you."

But there was only heavy breathing and then the single whispered word, "Well?"

Sam had to make his decision, and he decided. The police could do nothing. It was up to him. "I'll pay," he said quietly. "I'll pay you the five thousand."

There was a click at the other end and the line went dead. Sam Rivers hung up the phone and stood staring at it. Then he went to his bedroom and drew blinds over the broken window. He got out the strongbox and unlocked it. From beneath the insurance policies and savings bonds he withdrew the loaded .32-caliber pistol with which he planned to kill Arlo Cozzic.

Sergeant Calener phoned him at work in the morning. "Anything new from our friend?"

"Another note," Sam answered vaguely. "Is your man still watching the apartment?"

"Off and on. Let me know right away the next time Cozzic makes contact. I don't think he'll follow through on anything as serious as extortion, but you never can tell."

No, Sam thought, you never can tell. For a moment after he hung up the phone, he recalled Cozzic's strong hands pressing on his throat, but when he felt the reassuring firmness of the gun in his pocket, the sensation vanished.

A letter was delivered to him by messenger that afternoon. He recognized the handwriting on the envelope before he opened it. *Bring five thousand to the park across the street tonight at seven. Leave it on the first bench by the fountain in a paper bag. Tens and twenties only. Don't call the police if you want to live.* Now, in apparent recognition of the fact that his identity was known, he'd signed the note with a carefully printed *C*.

"A girl's not safe on the streets," his secretary was saying to someone outside the office door. "I'm going to get one of those little tear gas things to carry."

"They're illegal in this state," her friend said. "Besides, a good hatpin is just as effective."

The two girls paused in their conversation as Sam hurried through. He took the elevator to the branch bank on the main floor and went to a teller's window. In case Cozzic was watching from somewhere, it would appear that he was withdrawing the necessary money.

"Can you give me change for a twenty?" he asked the girl.

"Certainly, Mr. Rivers. How are you today?"

"Fine. Just fine."

The paper bag was easy. His secretary had brought her lunch in it. At the end of the day Sam retrieved it from her wastebasket, smoothed it out, then filled it with cut-up sheets of typewriter paper. He stood a while by his office window, staring down at the park across the street. He could see the fountain, though it had been turned off, probably because there was threat of rain. An old woman was sitting on the nearest bench, but she would soon be gone. This little park in the busiest center of the city was no longer safe after dark.

Sam sat at his desk until it became dark enough so that, returning to the window, he could see only his own lighted reflection. The homebound crowds had gone from the street below. It had begun to rain and the passing cars had their wipers going.

Staring at his reflection in the glass, Sam was almost able to conjure up a picture of the adversary he would see again so soon. The gray skin and thick lips. Call the police, he told himself. Call Sergeant Calener and be done with it. Let them be waiting in the park with their elephant guns and dragon traps.

But no, he knew this was something he must do himself. If the police trap failed, Cozzic would surely come back and batter his head in with a hammer while he slept. Facing Cozzic himself, with his own gun, was the only way.

At ten minutes to seven Sam turned out the light in his office and took the elevator down to the street, the brown paper bag under his left arm.

The rain was sweeping across the park, blown by a wind that had

come with the darkness. Few people were on the street, and those that were hurried purposefully along.

Sam entered the park and followed the line of dim streetlights toward the fountain at the center. Rain played against its marble base and windy gusts sent occasional splashes of water along the sidewalk. Sam glanced around, saw no one, and deposited the package on the first bench, then walked away as instructed.

As he passed the second streetlight, he ducked into the water-soaked bushes and waited. Working into a crouching position where he could see the bench where he had left the package, he slipped the gun out of his pocket.

He did not have to wait long. Soon a figure in a raincoat appeared, bundled against the driving wind. Sam raised the gun an inch, imagining Cozzic's ugly face once more. As soon as he picked up the package! As soon as. . .

The man stopped by the bench, glanced around, and shoved the soaking paper bag under his coat. Sam Rivers pushed a branch aside and started to squeeze the trigger. It was in that final second, as Sam whispered the name "Cozzic," that the figure in the raincoat turned toward him beneath the streetlight.

It was not Cozzic. It was a young girl, perhaps no more than sixteen years old. "Don't!" she cried out, catching a glimpse of the gun.

"Who are you?" Sam said. "Where's Cozzic?"

"You're Sam Rivers, aren't you?" she asked. "You're the one who killed him."

He stared at the girl, forgetting the pistol he still held pointed at her. "Killed? I didn't kill him—he's been trying to kill me!"

"No he hasn't—he's dead. He managed to stagger home after you hit him with the hammer, but though I tried to get him to a doctor he wouldn't go. He wanted to make you pay for it. He found out who you were and phoned you twice. But then he died. He'd been bleeding inside his head."

"But the notes—the hammers!"

"I did all that. For him." Her face was hard and defiant in the dim light. "I even phoned you that last time, after he was dead."

"Who are you?"

"His sister." She tossed her damp hair in a gesture of defiance. "Well? Are you going to kill me too?"

"I almost did."

The sound of running footsteps reached them then, converging from both sides of the park. Sergeant Calener appeared from somewhere, reaching out a gloved hand for the damp paper bag the girl still held. Then he motioned toward the gun. "What the hell were you going to do with that, Rivers?"

"I don't know."

"You should have told us what you were up to. We've got better things to do than follow you around day and night, protecting your skin."

"Cozzic's dead," Sam told him. "This is his sister." In his mind he still could not quite grasp it. The ugly intruder with the hammer had been transformed into this girl, and the gun now seemed foolish in his hand. He was relieved when Calener reached out to take it.

"Come along, young lady," one of the detectives said.

Sam watched them go through the mist of rain. "You got a permit for this gun?" Calener asked.

"Yes."

"Next time give us a chance, instead of trying something foolish on your own."

Sam Rivers left the detective at the park entrance and headed back to his apartment. He remembered the old map on the wall, and its warning, *Here be dragons*. For a while he had come near being one of the dragons himself.

Out of the past comes the darling boy she thought was dead. But was it really her son?. . .

The bearded youth walked slowly past the house. He felt he knew it well, the house and grounds described so many times. . . rolling lawns, flowers, oak trees, big house. . .*you enter a large hall—living room at one side, sitting room and library at the other. . . wide staircase. The woman? The mother? Dignified, soft-voiced, all wrapped up in her son.*

The young man, with a beard and the eyes of a boy, started back and up the long driveway only to change his mind and plunge down it

again to hurry off and away from this quiet, tree-lined street, back to the motel blocks away.

He was sweating when he arrived at his room. He tore off his jacket and shirt and threw himself down on the bed, not wanting to go through with that for which he had been trained.

He lay there listening to the late afternoon traffic, making tentative plans. . . he'd go somewhere else, but where? Get a job. What kind? Lose himself. . . That would be easy. He was already lost.

He listened to the outdoor sounds, purring cars that roared people on their way home to other people. He turned on the bed and buried his hairy face in the pillow like a child, a lost child. He felt, rather than saw, the sudden flash of headlights and remembered Eudie's words: *Twilight is short out there. The sun goes down and boom, it's dark.* He rolled over on his back to watch the restless city lights.

The woman moved about the house turning on lamps. She hated this time of day, hearing with her heart and her inner ear the little-boy evening sounds, between the dark-and-the-dinner-hour talk. Mom-and-boy together—*their* time.

Fifteen years! she chided herself. *He would be a grown man.* But that did not stop her from waiting for her child's happy treble each darkening night. She had tried to break this illogical habit of listening for his voice, of glancing within each car on the street that carried a little boy passenger, of peering hopefully at every six-year-old she saw—frozen within the year of 1960 when her small son had been taken from her.

The young man swung his legs over the side of the bed, reached for the lamp and switched it on. Trouble with him was he couldn't slip into an instant role as Eudie and Win instructed. . . *Look now, we'll go over it. You walk up to the door and give her the pitch, and then when you get inside. . .*

What if she don't let me inside?

She will. Look, she's still got ads going. Can you imagine?

I don't know. I don't even want. . .

We're doing it for you. Not for us, for you, to give you a good future. We're losers. You stay with us, you'll lose too. We're doing it for you.

The young man ran his fingers through long tangled hair, wishing he were somewhere else, someone else, then he laughed without mirth. He was, oh, he was someone else for sure!

He leaned forward and unwedged his wallet from his hip pocket. There wasn't much money, but then there never had been. *It's the last chance–the only chance for you.* The silver locket offered a name, address and telephone number. *She's still there. We checked that. The telephone number is unlisted, may be changed by now, but probably not if you want to play it that way. Anyway, the locket is the final proof. . .*

The young man picked up the telephone and, in the pool of lamplight, he dialled the number. "Mrs. Worthington?" he asked.

"What'd he say? What'd he say that's got you looking this way?" Hallie grasped her shoulders firmly and shook. "Mrs. Worthington!"

Allowing a now limp hand to drop away from the cradled phone at last, the woman raised her eyes. "He said he is my son."

"Well now. Well now. How could he be after all this time? Probably saw one of those ads you've still got going all over the place. . ." Hallie nodded her head with a vigorous and worried impatience. "That's it. You've got everything in that ad. The year, the name. . .

"But not where I live."

"He could find out," cried Hallie. "People can find out where you live. That'd be easy."

"But it wouldn't be easy to find my phone number."

"Oh, I don't know, Mrs. Worthington. I suppose there are ways to get a hold of an unlisted number. These rip-off guys. They've got ways. Look now, why don't you go in and eat your supper? I've got it all laid out. A nice chop, a nice salad. . . What did you say to this man?"

"I told him to come and I'd talk to him."

"Come here? Here to the house? When?"

"Now," said Mrs. Worthington. "As soon as he could get here."

"Oh, migod! Look, Mrs. Worthington, you go in there and eat your supper and I'll call the police."

"No." Mrs. Worthington remembered the early spineless efforts of the police. . . *They're doing all they can,* her child's father had said pacing the floor. But it wasn't enough, thought Mrs. Worthington, to scour the hills and alert the patrol cars. *All right now,* said the father

once hope for a ransom request had passed, *now we'll plaster it all over the papers and get it on the newscasts with a reward.* Which brought forth, claimed the police, only the usual crank calls, the nuts and reward seekers until one lost child was no longer news and the police were concerned with more timely matters.

"No police," declared Mrs. Worthington.

"But it's dangerous," squeaked Hallie.

"Maybe. Maybe it is. However, the boy says he's my son and I'm going to let him into my house and find out if he is my son. Without the police."

Hallie wrung her hands.

Mrs. Worthington rose wearily. "Hallie, clear off the table, please." Then, "This is your bingo night. You go ahead."

"And leave you here with heaven-knows-who? No way, absolutely no way," She bustled off and Mrs. Worthington walked carefully toward the front windows, setting her feet down cautiously as if she were treading air.

She attempted a total recall of the phone conversation. What, exactly, had he said, what had his voice been like? She tried to sort out the inflections, the timbre. . . No matter—who could compare the voice of a 21-year-old with that of a six-year-old child? If he were her son—would there not be a feeling, a knowledge, a woman's, a mother's intuition to inform her, beyond the shadow of a doubt?

He is dead, his father said with conviction after the child had been gone a year. *We will have to face it. He is dead or we would have heard.* He cancelled all reward announcements, all television and radio pleas, all the imploring advertisements. *We will have to take up our lives and go on. . .* Easy for him, busy working at his afternoon soap series.

Between the window draperies, as if she were looking out onto a stage, Mrs. Worthington watched the approach of the young man who might be her son. First, she saw him momentarily bright under the street light as it shone down on his long dark hair, then in biased distortion from the slanted beams of the post lanterns at the end of the driveway. She followed his long-legged shadow as it loped toward the house, holding her throat in tight-fingered watchful waiting.

The door chimes brought Hallie at a dead run from the kitchen. "I'll get it," called Mrs. Worthington and stepped forth, from the living

room to the hall.

Hallie moved back, pressed against the wall, hands behind her, rigid and alert. Mrs. Worthington opened the door and saw, bathed in terrace light, a stranger. He is too tall, she immediately thought as she looked up at him—no one in my family, nor in C.R's either, has ever been tall.

"Mrs. Worthington?" he asked.

She ushered him in and, leading the way to the living room, showed him to a chair in a circle of lamp light. She sat at a distance, in the very center of a wide divan as if she needed room to breathe and space for her thoughts. Hallie, still with her hands behind her, slipped inside the room and stood on guard, against the wall.

"Okay," wrote the young man in his motel room, "it's started. I've been there, got in the house and talked to her. I can't tell what she thinks or if she believes. I did rock her when I showed her the locket, but she handled it cool, looking like she wondered what gutter I'd picked it out of or off what dead body. She didn't even touch it. She said to come back for a visit if I wished. That's the way she put it, if I wished. I'll let you know how the acting lessons and the dialogue go off. I just hope I can see it through okay." The young man signed the name, "Son," and addressed the note to E. & W. Blank, at a post office substation in New York.

Hallie had been with Mrs. Worthington for 11 years. . . "She needs someone to live in," explained the departing housekeeper as she showed Hallie around and outlined her duties. "With Mr. Worthington gone now, she's all alone in this big house. He died of a heart attack right on the set. He was in TV, one of them producers. They all work too hard, play too hard too if you know what I mean. He never did take the boy's kidnapping like Mrs. Worthington did—but that's a man for you, and anyway, a mother feels more. . . I know. I'm a mother. Are you a mother?" she asked Hallie. Hallie shook her head.

"Well, I don't know what I'd do if one of my kids was snatched, but they won't be—that's one of the blessings of being poor, I guess. They never got a ransom note, though, not one, no call, no nothing. . . let me tell you, this place was swarming with police and FBI men—maybe that was the reason—maybe the kidnapper knew he didn't have a

chance and killed the kid.

"That's what Mr. Worthington thought, anyway. But Mrs. Worthington—well, she still has hope—four years and still has hope! That poor woman, losing her boy, then her husband, it's a wonder she's still got any brains left. Anyway, you'll like her, she's nice—a little crazy, but I guess we all would be if it happened to us. The work's easy, she doesn't entertain any more, and your rooms are nice—here, off the kitchen, a bedroom, kind of a little sitting room and your own bath. So, if you can stand the quiet. . ."

Hallie welcomed the quiet, adored the pleasant suite of rooms she could call her own, kept the house shining, served excellent meals and would have died for Mrs. Worthington.

She closed the front door after the young man who had called himself Mrs. Worthington's son, stepped to a side window to watch as he entered the dark of the driveway, reappeared between the post lanterns to become a shadow on the sidewalk, brightened for an instant by the street light and was lost in the night. She checked the front door to be sure it was locked, knowing that it was, and stood in the living room entrance to see how Mrs. Worthington was taking the encounter.

Mrs. Worthington still sat in the exact center of the divan, hands clasped in her lap, gazing toward the now empty chair where she had placed her visitor. "You can put away whatever it is you're hiding, Hallie," she suggested without looking at her housekeeper. "He is not dangerous, or was not, whoever he is or was."

"Yes, ma'am," said Hallie and took the knife to the kitchen and put it in the drawer.

Christopher Robert Worthington, Jr., six years old, had been kidnapped on an August afternoon in 1960. The father, C.R. Worthington, was, of course, at the studio where he spent most of his time; the mother, Berenice Worthington, attending an auction (she collected porcelains). The gardener mowing the front lawn didn't see a thing. . . "I was out in front all afternoon," he claimed. "No car drove in. I would've seen. Nobody walked up the driveway. Nobody parked out in front."

The housekeeper, Geraldine Pease, a day worker who did not live on the premises and had been with the Worthingtons since before the child's birth, was beginning dinner preparations in the kitchen. "He

went out to his playhouse," she said. "I gave him some cookies. He said he was going to have a teaparty with those animals in that story his mother's always reading to him. I saw him go in and that's all. . ." she dissolved into tears.

The playhouse, quite an elaborate structure, was no more than fifty feet beyond the kitchen windows; and the wooded barranca, off-limits to the child, another fifty feet behind the playhouse, extended the breadth of the property line to the next block.

An hour after Christopher Robin, as his mother called him, had entered his playhouse, Mrs. Worthington drove her Cadillac into the garage and entered the kitchen. Geraldine, slipping a roast in the oven, said Christy, as she called him, was in his playhouse.

The gardener pushed the mower into the tool shed and closed the door. The child was gone.

They searched the playhouse, the grounds and the main house. C.R. Worthington, briefcase of scripts dangling from his hand, arrived home, received the news, said Chris, as he called him, had wandered—okay, he forgot, probably followed something, a rabbit or a squirrel, into the barranca and there they searched, Worthington and the gardener, floundering through brush while Mrs. Worthington and Geraldine called from the bank. The sun was setting. It was red, clear, bright enough to quickly discover that there was no small boy in the gully of the shrubbery.

The police came into the picture the next day, the FBI a week later. Everyone who ever worked in the Worthington household was checked out. Everyone who ever worked on the Worthington studio set was checked out. Everyone, that is, who could be found and traced. It is not easy to locate domestics—it is damn near impossible to trace TV performers who live in fantasyland anyway, and change their names with the hope of changing their luck.

C.R. Worthington was sure Chris was dead, and after a year the rewards, newspaper ads, radio appeals were withdrawn, the private detectives taken off the case, and Mrs. Worthington could only hunt for her son by peering at every seven-year-old she saw on the street.

Later, when C.R. died of a heart attack on the set, leaving her quite alone, Geraldine Pease convinced her that she must have someone on the place, a live-in housekeeper, and Hallie arrived. Hallie, friend and guardian, who thought it touchingly therapeutic when Mrs. Worth-

ington re-established her search by again advertising for her lost child. . . plaintive little paragraphs described sunny curls, hazel eyes, a baby lisp, last seen August 16, 1960. It gave her something to do, kept her Christopher Robin alive with hope, and that was the important thing.

Mrs. Worthington had converted her husband's study into an office with files on the kidnapping—one four-drawer steel file case held copies of advertising, reward bulletins and crank replies. Another, its manila folders neatly indexed, held the dossiers of former house, yard and studio employees, some with intermingled jobs. She explained it to Hallie on those days she felt like talking and said, "Sit, Hallie." So Hallie sat in the armchair at the side of the desk while Mrs. Worthington, in the leather swivel, told how it had been—all the tangles, the clues real and false, the dead-ends and of the couple she suspected then, still suspected if only they could be found.

The man, a would-be script writer of minimal success, did occasional odd jobs for the Worthingtons, simple repair work, extra gardening, carpentry when needed, and the woman, his wife, an actress of indifferent ability and a paucity of roles, sometimes helped Mrs. Pease prepare for a party. . . "And those two took Christopher Robin," declared Mrs. Worthington with certainty.

It was a reasonable suppostion, but not certain, thought Hallie, as did the police who had checked out the two—Winfield Warren and Eudora Eustace (their professional names). There was no picture of Winfield in the file folder but there was one of Eudora, a studio portrait of a rather pretty girl with an expressionless face. These two had been difficult to follow, for they were rent-jumpers and name-changers, owning nothing except their wardrobes and a child—at least some said there was a child in the background—those who faintly remembered were uncertain as to age. . . a boy, maybe, of about eight, nine or 10. . . actually, no one knew anything of a specific nature, or remembered anything for sure.

"If there was a child," reasoned the police, "these people would not be likely to kidnap another. . ." but Mrs. Worthington's reasoning was that if they had one of their own they would know how to entice another and they were familiar with the house and grounds. . . the so-called Winfield had repaired the playhouse. . . the so-called Eudora had prepared Christopher Robin for bed on party nights while Mrs.

Worthington attended to last-minute details. . . true, the two had not been regularly employed at the Worthington house, but they knew her son and the books she read to him, the game they played together—and there was his name and their names. . . it was all a matter of names.

Mrs. Worthington, the investigator, had not come up with her absolute conclusion until weeks after the disappearance of her son. . . after all, this Winfield-person and the Eudora-woman had dropped out of sight at least three months before the child was gone—and were only possible suspects to be checked out. But Mrs. Worthington, the mother, brooding over it, thinking of nothing else, knowing her child, sure that an obedient boy could only have been tricked to enter the forbidden barranca through the game and the book by people of imagination—a writer and an actress, parents themselves who would be familiar with the children's classic that Christopher Robert lived as Christopher Robin with the toy donkey, Eeyore, and the stuffed bear, Winnie-the-Pooh.

"You see the connection of names?" cried Mrs. Worthington, leaning forth at this point, "Winfield was Winnie-the-Pooh, the bear—and Eudora was Eeyore, the donkey. They worked on the names and who knows how many times during those three months they visited Christopher Robin in his playhouse, sneaking through the barranca, before they got him to go with them—probably with promise of honey for the bear or a tail for the donkey—you know the story!"

Hallie did not, but she listened.

"He came into the kitchen for cookies for his animals. A teaparty. For a live bear and a live donkey, who led him to a car parked on the other side of the barranca and took him to his death."

Hallie, lost during these explanations, nodded in sympathy, as the police who had been lost fifteen years before nodded in sympathy while conducting their investigations in the approved manner. C.R. had not been so lost as angry that his wife, mother of his namesake, had so steeped the son and herself in a fantasy that she sought to identify a bungled kidnapping with it. Mrs. Worthington allowed Hallie, during her 11-year-employment, access to the playhouse, an elegant structure, with the stuffed bear and toy donkey seated at the tea-table. . .

Why? asked Hallie, if it were a kidnapping, elaborately planned and

executed, was there no ransom note? Why a kidnapping without profit? It was then she learned of the child's allergies. . . "He was being tested, through a process of elimination, to learn what, or which things caused the attacks." And Hallie viewed the inhalator set up in the child's room on the second floor of the main house (a six-year-old's room, left as he had left it). Feathers, they had discovered, so his bed pillows were stuffed with kapok which he could tolerate. Cat fur. Certain foods, such as shellfish and chocolate. The tests had not yet been concluded, so anything in the car that Eeyore and Winnie-the-Pooh drove could have caused an attack, lethal without the inhalator, fatal with the addition of fear. . . So he died and the kidnappers panicked, buried the body and gave up the plan, which did not explain Mrs. Worthington's ads for a child 15-years-dead, unless she had hope—some kind of hope of her own.

The young man allowed two days to pass before he phoned again to ask for permission to visit. During those two days, Mrs. Worthington spent much time in her office with the Winfield Warren/Eudora Eustace file before her and in studying the album of her son's baby pictures taken from the time of his birth until the age of six.

"It was the locket?" Hallie asked, "the real locket, the one you told me about?"

"Yes," said Mrs. Worthington, remembering the silver disc in the palm of the young man's hand, the chain dripping through his fingers like silver tears. She had leaned forward to read the name: Christopher Robert Worthington, Jr., the address and telephone number, recalling her son's total embarrassment when she had it made for him at the suggestion of the private school he attended and fastened it around his neck. He no longer minded once he discovered that his peers, children of affluence, all wore such name tags. "Where did you get it?" she asked the young man without touching it.

He stuffed it into his tight hip pocket and said he'd always had it, he guessed. It was with his things as he was bounced around from place to place.

"Doesn't seem reasonable to me," observed Hallie, "in institutions like, if what he says is true, and foster homes, why somebody didn't look at that name tag and do something about it."

"Maybe they just thought he found it."

"And maybe he did just find it."

"Maybe so."

Hallie resented the young man, the imposter. She resented his visit, the silver locket he carried. . . "He is tall and you say everyone on both sides of the family is short or medium," she argued with her employer.

"Statistics show that this generation is taller and broader than the last," Mrs. Worthington returned.

"His eyes are brown," reminded Hallie. "Your son's eyes were hazel. You said so. You said so in your ads."

"Hazel eyes are blue with brown flecks," explained Mrs. Worthington, "that sometimes turn darker as the person grows older, just as hair grows darker too." She added, "Sunny curls," quoting from her advertisements, "turn dark with the years and become less curly. . ." She remembered the young man's eyes peeking like blackberries through the dark and spiky hedge as he said he did not know why he had the locket or where it had come from. . .

"Well then," Mrs. Worthington had asked him, "what made you decide to trace it down now, now that you are. . . how old are you?"

He shrugged. He didn't know that either, he said. How could he since he knew nothing about himself? He thought about twenty-one—people had tacked ages on him through the years and so, since he was presumably twenty-one, old enough to begin to be curious as to his identity, he just thought he'd hitchhike out here from New York and see if there was such an address, such a telephone number and if the Christopher on the medallion might be the Chris he had always been called. . . The blackberry eyes popped with sincerity, and Mrs. Worthington murmured that he certainly looked older than twenty-one—he looked more like twenty-three or twenty-four, maybe twenty-five, but then, she added, boys looked like old men with the beards they wore nowadays.

The young man wrote daily to the New York substation. It was not until his sixth letter that he spoke of progress with the warning that the letters would stop for awhile until he knew how to handle future letter writing and the posting of them. "All right," he wrote, "I guess I've got it made the way you wanted it. I'm going to live there. She asked me to. I feel guilty, remembering, knowing what happened that night in

the car. . . okay, I realize it wasn't your fault—the awful part of it—there was something wrong with the kid and I know you both figure you're losers and I'll be one too if I don't latch onto this one chance—this crazy chance that you've both been working on for so long so I can get something out of it. The Good Life you say you've always wanted and missed. Eudie, your acting lessons paid off and Win, the dialogue seemed to hit the right note, so maybe you're not losers after all, at least for the future you are giving to Your Son."

"You mean he's coming here to live?" asked Hallie, astounded. "Here, as your son?"

"Right here, Hallie, He owns the locket. He is, by his statement, the correct age, with hair growing dark and straighter, with eyes turning from hazel to brown, with the kind of déjà vu memory that could only occur in the mind of a man who, as a child, experienced life in a certain place—this place."

"Or," said Hallie, outraged, "the kind of memory that was—what do they call it?—built in, like they build in memory banks in computers."

Mrs. Worthington looked at her with respect. "That too is possible."

"Just because he remembered the room upstairs, your son's room finally, remembered where it was located; your husband, remembering he called him Chris, and Mrs. Pease calling him Christie. . . little by little. . . as if it were coming back."

"Or perhaps, the way memories do come, by association—remembering one thing because of another."

"But not remembering what you called him, not until the playhouse."

"He remembered the playhouse by himself."

"Unless it was built-in memory—*programmed,* that's the word—unless it had been programmed into his computer brain to come along about then."

"You could be right, Hallie."

So Hallie was not sure whether Mrs. Worthington thought of this deceiver as her son or his substitute.

". . . A playhouse. I remember a playhouse," the boy had said with a sudden snap of his fingers on the sixth visit to the Worthington house. "I seem to remember a playhouse. Is there one?" She had taken him out onto the patio, through the back yard and to the playhouse. She

unlocked the door and what happened then was like a scenario, one well rehearsed but with rather banal dialogue. He entered, stopped dead, allowed his expression to go blank with shock, then quicken with amazed recollection as he saw the stuffed bear propped in the child-sized chair and the toy donkey in another. "Winnie-the-Pooh," he cried dramatically, "and Eeyore. . ." Then Mrs. Worthington knew.

"And who are you?" she asked.

"I," he said, "am Christopher Robin."

"How do you explain that?" Mrs. Worthington asked Hallie.

"Programming," she said stubbornly, "he's been programmed."

"By whom?" asked Mrs. Worthington.

"You know by whom. Those two. Those two you've told me about time and time again. With the names. . ." for now she believed Mrs. Worthington's theory—now it made sense. *What did not make sense was letting that Judas become the son of this house.*

The playhouse had two rooms, one that held the toys, tea table and child-sized chairs, the other a junior bed for napping and a juvenile library containing the A.A. Milne collection, including *Winnie-the-Pooh, The World of Christopher Robin, House at Pooh Corner*. . . the entire series.

"These are your quarters," she told the young man. "I will have a full sized bed brought in. . . you will live in the main house too, of course, and have your meals with me there, but please consider this your private retreat. Here is the key."

"You're certainly offering him a chance for a grand rip off," snapped Hallie.

Mrs. Worthington laughed—the first time Hallie had ever heard her laugh. "What can he rip off in the playhouse?" she asked, "except a life?" She held out her hand. "I have a key too. . ." And what did she mean by that? Hallie shook her head and watched and listened, and finally came to the conclusion that, false or true, this young man was good for Mrs. Worthington. He gave her a zest, a reason for living. She called him Christopher Robin and didn't let him out of her sight except for the times he retreated to the playhouse.

The playhouse became his private quarters. "We will combine the past with the future," declared Mrs. Worthington gaily as she stored the junior bed and small kapok-filled cushions in order to install a full-

sized bed with man-sized feather pillows. She lined the bottom shelves of the bookcases with the Milne series and brought, from her own extensive library in the main house, new adult fiction and non-fiction to fill the upper shelves.

"We will make up for all those lost fifteen years," she declared with enthusiasm, and pushed the toys, the tea table, Eeyore and Winnie-the-Pooh aside to make room for an easy chair and large desk equipped with notepaper, envelopes, a sheet of stamps, pens and pencils. . .

She attempted, with fervor, to bridge the gap between her lost child and this man with her child's identification. She drove him around the area her Christopher Robin had known, showed him the park with the merry-go-round, the private school, grown now with the addition of two more buildings, the medical center where, she said, once practiced the pediatrician he had visited so often. She never touched him, never offered a caress, but she showered possessions upon him to compensate, she said, for all the things he should have had that he had missed.

She outfitted him with a complete wardrobe, promised him driving lessons when he claimed he had no license, and a car of his own when he was ready—she gave and she promised, all except money, nor did she invite friends to meet her long lost son. "I am selfish," she said. "There are a lot of years to live through before I share you." Then she did not, after all, live those years by asking him questions or by giving him access to her office and the files which had been her life.

She discussed his education and promised him college, ". . .when the time comes."

Ever since Hallie had come to live with and work for Mrs. Worthington, she had taken over in the kitchen. "You order the groceries," Mrs. Worthington had said, "and prepare the meals." So that's the way it had been, without consultation, without direction, until the young man, this so-called Christopher Robin arrived. Now Mrs. Worthington created the menus. "Let's have steamed clams," she suggested, "and for dessert a chocolate soufflé." Or "shrimp and asparagus au gratin," or "abalone steaks," or "lobster Newburg with chocolate cream pie or a chocolate roll for dessert."

When this so-called Christopher Robin ate the shellfish, thrived, and relished the chocolate, Hallie tentatively suggested, "I thought your

son, Mrs. Worthington. . ."

"He must have outgrown his allergies, all of them, including feathers," Mrs. Worthington interrupted, and added, "That sometimes happens, Hallie. It is not for us to question, but to prove. I think I shall get him a cat."

The youth spent most of the daylight hours with Mrs. Worthington—eating at her table, riding in her car, sitting with her in her living room. . . Each twilight, however, as Mrs. Worthington moved about the house, turning on lamps, she again felt emptiness and the loss of between-the-dark-and-dinner-hour sounds of a very little boy even though the youth followed her and was close by.

Each night at ten o'clock he left the main house for the playhouse—this too became a ritual. "Good night, Christopher Robin," she said then and he answered her respectfully, left by the back door, unlocked the playhouse and Mrs. Worthington sat in the dark, watching from the big front window out onto the stillness and loneliness of night until, at last, she saw him hurry through the shadows of the driveway, past the dim beams of the post lanterns—quickly under the street light, and was gone for minutes—long enough, clocked Mrs. Worthington, to have reached the mailbox on the corner and back again. This too became a habit—the routine of Mrs. Worthington to watch, of the young man to leave and return, at eleven o'clock on two nights each week.

"Dear E. and W.," wrote the young man, "I feel like an interloper. She is so sure I am hers and she is so wonderful. . ." His letters, written twice a week, one on a Sunday night, the other on Thursday, to the New York substation, were not lengthy but were written in the manner of reports, ambivalent, indicating his enjoyment of this comfortable life he had never before known, but with feelings of unworthiness and guilt.

He wrote of his days and nights, of promises made and of his very bright future, ". . .for which I thank you. . ."

"I have complete privacy," wrote the youth, "the playhouse is mine. She has refurnished it. Hallie, the housekeeper, asks me to unlock it on Mondays and Fridays so she can clean and change the bed. Then, when she's finished, she has me lock it up again. . ."

"Why," Hallie asked Mrs. Worthington, "do I have to ask him to unock and lock up the playhouse on cleaning days?"

"So he will feel it belongs to him, to him alone."

"But you have a key, so why can't I use your key and not go through ıll the motions?" Hallie who had, for eleven years, been as much a ·ompanion as housekeeper, felt a resentful subordination when she ıeld out her hand for this interloper's key to unlock and lock up a ›layhouse that did not belong to him.

"He doesn't know I have a key," answered Mrs. Worthington. "I would prefer he did not know it. . . and, Hallie," Mrs. Worthington ıdded, "while you're in the playhouse, please check out the desk."

"The desk?"

"I supplied the desk with notepaper, envelopes and stamps—a sheet ›f stamps, 50 on a sheet."

"The desk is always empty, Mrs. Worthington, clean as a whistle—ust the blotter and pens and pencils. That's all."

"Search then. Look through the pigeon-holes, open up the drawers. want to know how many stamps are left. If there is an addressed en-'elope tucked away somewhere, tell me the address and who it is ad-lressed to—or a letter, or the beginning of a letter. . ."

"Yes, Mrs. Worthington," answered Hallie, who had never been a ·nooper, never been asked to snoop, but who snooped now with an mportant curiosity and reported finding plain envelopes in a long lrawer, and stamps, the sheet folded and slipped between plain ıotepaper in the same drawer.

"How many stamps are left on the sheet, Hallie?" asked Mrs. Worthngton.

"Forty-two."

Mrs. Worthington counted the eight times she had seen the drive-vay shadow—four Sunday nights, four Thursday nights during the six veeks the young man had lived with her here and in the playhouse. She nodded and seemed satisfied.

Hallie no longer understood Mrs. Worthington and her ambivalent ıcceptance of this dark-eyed man who seemed grateful, almost ob-ıequious, as if he did not belong and knew it. Why did Mrs. Worth-ngton, so carefully meticulous during her years of search, with all that ·crupulously filed information—why did she allow this bearded inter-oper the advantages and the name of her son without checking fin-

gerprints? The fingerprints would show—should prove. . . so why not? Why did she test him with feather pillows and shellfish and chocolate and excuse his toleration? Did she want him for her own?

And now the cat. The cat was the ultimate, the finishing-off, the finale, thought Hallie when Mrs. Worthington burst from the garage to the kitchen and announced, with triumph, "We have a cat."

Hallie looked up from her freshly baked chocolate chip cookies at a white Persian cat in the arms of the young man.

"Christopher Robin and I were out and stopped at this pet store. . ." Mrs. Worthington's words came in small jumps of sound. "He remembered a cat. He remembered the cat he had as a child. . . We're getting it all together, Hallie. All the past. Isn't it wonderful?"

It was now fall—cool days, chilly nights. Four more stamps had been used, reported Hallie. Mrs. Worthington watched from her window as the young man and the cat slunk through the dark, returning together twice that week—then another week and two more nights. Hallie counting stamps, watching the youth eat his shellfish and chocolate goodies and play with his cat, wondered that her employer could be so blind. Then one Thursday night at eleven o'clock she was awakened by a hand on her shoulder.

"Hallie?" whispered Mrs. Worthington. "Hallie."

Hallie sat up and in the light shining from the kitchen she made out Mrs. Worthington's shadow. "Hallie, get up. Get on your robe and slippers. I need your help."

Hallie rose and slipped on a robe.

She saw then that Mrs. Worthington was fully clothed and sweatered; and in a fog of sleep she followed her through the kitchen, out into the cold, along the path to the lighted playhouse.

Mrs. Worthington opened the door.

Hallie started forward, then stepped back. The young man, bloody coated, lay on the floor, arm out, stamped and addressed envelope just out of finger-reach, as if it had dropped as he dropped.

"We must bury him, Hallie," spoke Mrs. Worthington in a business-like voice. "I thought out at the edge of the barranca where the ground is soft."

Hallie swallowed and stepped inside. It was then she saw the cat, the white Persian cat, reddened now, still in its basket, kitchen knife

in its chest—the same knife, thought Hallie's subconscious, she had hidden behind her that first night the young man appeared.

"Why the cat?" she asked Mrs. Worthington.

"A cat killed my son."

Mrs. Worthington knelt, ignoring the body, to pick up the addressed and stamped envelope so near the dead fingers. She worked the flap open and read aloud: "Dear E. and W.: I wish you hadn't asked me to do this. I love Mrs. W. I won't write any more letters. You know now it has worked. I have what you wanted for me and Mrs. W. has a substitute of what you took from her, but I am sorry. Your Son."

"You see?" said Mrs. Worthington. "It was Eudora and Winfield—Eeyore and Winnie-the-Pooh, as I always said." She lay the letter on the desk, picked up the pen, dipped it into the blood of the young man and added, "Your son is dead." She slipped the letter back into the envelope, murmuring something about needing scotch tape to seal it and that she would mail it after the burial.

"Mrs. Worthington." Hallie's voice was a breath of sound. "I know this was not your son." She looked at the young man dead on the floor, and away again. "I know it and you know it. But why did you kill him?" She pointed a trembling finger at the letter in Mrs. Worthington's hand. "He didn't want to do this. He was innocent."

"So was my son," said Mrs. Worthington, and ordered Hallie out to the shed for a shovel.

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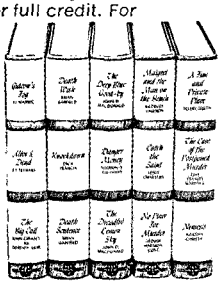

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