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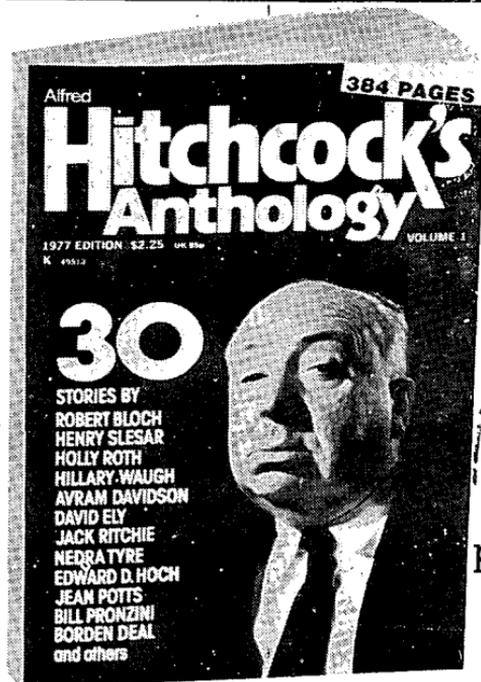
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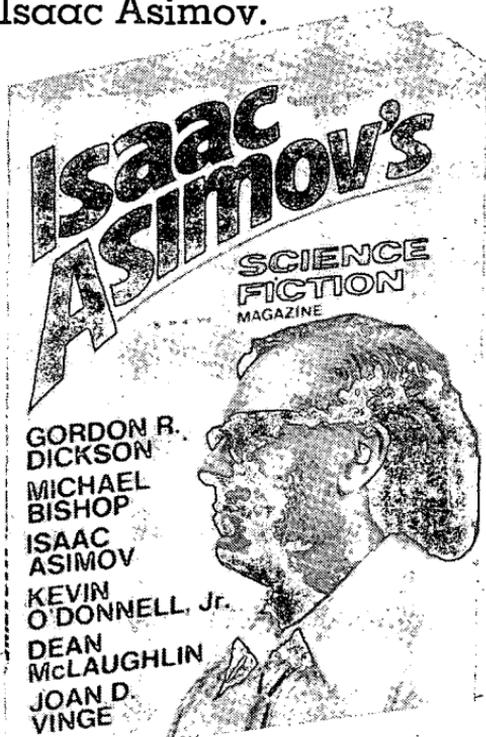
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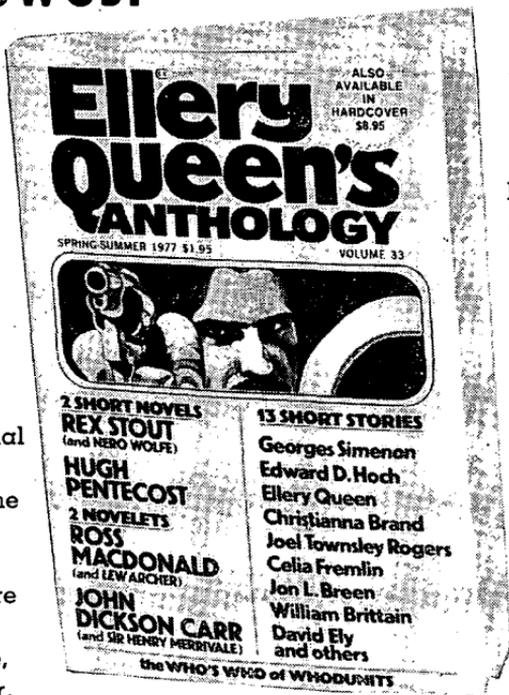
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May 1977



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THIS CRAZY BUSINESS

by
**Lawrence
Block**



The elevator, swift and silent as a garotte, whisked the young man eighteen stories skyward to Wilson Colliard's penthouse. The doors opened to reveal Colliard himself. He wore a cashmere smoking jacket the color of vintage port. His flannel slacks and broadcloth shirt were a matching oyster-white. They could have been chosen to match his hair, which had been expensively barbered in a leonine mane. His eyes, beneath sharply defined white brows, were as blue and as bottomless as

the Caribbean, upon the shores of which he had acquired his radiant tan. He wore doeskin slippers upon his small feet and a smile upon his rosy lips, and in his right hand he held an automatic pistol of German origin, the precise manufacturer and caliber of which need not concern us.

"My abject apologies," Colliard said. "Of course you're Michael Haig. I regret the gun, Mr. Haig, even as I regret the necessity for it. It's contradictory greeting you with a gun in my hand and bidding you welcome, but I assure you you are welcome. Do come in." The doors wept silently shut behind Haig. "Guns," Colliard said distastefully. "But of course you understand."

"Of course, Mr. Colliard."

"This crazy business of ours. Always the chance, isn't there, that you might turn out to be other than the admiring youngster you're purported to be? And surely there's a tradition of that sort of thing, isn't there? Just look at the Old West. Young gunfighter out to make a name for himself so he goes up against the old gunfighter. Quickest way to acquire a reputation, isn't it? Why, it's a veritable cliché in the world of Western movies, and I daresay they do the same thing in gangster films and who knows what else. Now I don't for a moment think that's your game, but I've learned over the years never to take an unnecessary chance. And I've learned that most chances *are* unnecessary. So if you don't mind a frisk—"

"Of course not."

"You'll have to assume an undignified posture, I'm afraid. Over that way, if you don't mind. Now reach forward with both hands and touch the wall. Excellent. Now walk backwards a step and another step. That's right, very good, yes. You'll hardly make any abrupt moves now, will you? Undignified, as I said, but utilitarian beyond doubt."

The old man's hand moved expertly over the young man's body, patting and brushing, making certain that no weapon was concealed beneath the dark pinstripe suit, no gun wedged under the waistband of the trousers, no knife strapped to calf or forearm. The search was quick but thorough, and at its conclusion Wilson Colliard sighed with satisfaction and returned his own weapon to a shoulder holster where it reposed without marring the smooth lines of his smoking jacket. "There we are," he said. "Once again my apologies. Now all that's out of the way and I have the opportunity to make you welcome. I have a very

nice cocktail sherry which I think you might like. It's bone-dry with a very nutty taste to it. Or perhaps you'd care for something stronger?"

"The sherry sounds fine."

Colliard led his guest through rooms as impeccably furnished as he himself was dressed and seated him in one of a pair of green-leather tub chairs on opposite sides of a small marble cocktail table. While he set about filling two glasses from a cut-glass decanter, the younger man gazed out the window at his elbow.

"Quite a view," he said.

"Central Park does look best when you're some distance above it. But then so many things do. It's a great pleasure for me, sitting at that window."

"I can imagine."

"You can see for miles on a clear day. Pity there aren't more of them. When I was your age the air was clearer, but then at your age I could never have afforded an apartment like this one." The older man took a chair and placed two glasses of sherry on the table. "So you're Michael Haig. The most promising young assassin in a great many years."

"You honor me."

"I merely echo what I've been given to understand. Your reputation precedes you."

"If I have a reputation, I'm sure it's a modest one. But you, sir—you're a legend."

"That union leader was one of yours, wasn't he? Head of the rubber workers or whatever? Nice bit of business the way you managed that decoy operation. And you had to shoot downhill at a moving target. Very interesting the way you put it all together."

Haig bared his bright white teeth in a smile that gave his otherwise unremarkable face a foxlike cast. "I patterned it after a job that went down twenty years ago. An Ecuadorian minister of foreign affairs, I think it was."

"Ah."

"One of yours, I think."

"Ah."

"Imitation, I assure you, is definitely the sincerest form of flattery in my case. If I do have a reputation, sir, I owe not a little of it to you."

"How kind of you to say so," Colliard said. His fingers curled around

the stem of his glass. "The occasion would seem to call for a toast, but what sort of toast? No point in honoring the memory of those we've put in the ground. They're dead and gone. I never think about them. I've found it's best not to."

"I agree."

"We could drink to reputations and to legends."

"Fine."

"Or we could just drink to the line of work we're in. It's a crazy business, Lord knows, but it has its points."

They raised their glasses and drank.

"When I was young," Colliard was saying, "I drank whiskey on occasion. A highball or two in the evening, say. And I often had a martini before dinner. Not when I was working, of course. I never took alcohol when I was on a job. But between jobs I'd have spirits now and then. But then I stopped that altogether."

"Why was that?"

"I decided that they are damaging. I'm not talking about what they might do to one's liver so much as what they do to one's brain. I think they dull one's edge like a file drawn across a knife blade. Wine's another matter entirely. In moderation, of course."

"Of course."

"But I'm rambling, Michael. You don't want to hear all of this. I've been talking for an hour now."

"And I've been hanging on every word, sir. This is the sort of thing I want to know."

"You're just taking it all in and filing it away, are you?"

"Yes, I am," Haig admitted. "Anything you can tell me about the way you operate and—and even the way you live, your whole style. If there were fan clubs in our profession I guess I'd be the president of yours."

"You flatter me."

"It's not flattery, sir. And it's not entirely unselfish." Haig lowered his eyes. He had long lashes, the older man noted, and his hands, one of them in repose on the marble table, were possessed of a certain sensitivity. The fellow had no flair, but then he was young, unfinished. He himself had been relatively undefined at that age.

"I know I can learn from you," Michael Haig went on. "I've already

learned a good deal from you. Oh, it's hard to separate hard fact from legend, but I've picked up a lot from what I've heard about your career. Even though we've never met before, what I know about you has helped form my whole attitude toward our profession."

"Really."

"Yes. Some months ago I had a problem, or at least it seemed like a problem to me. The, uh, the target was a woman."

"The client's wife?"

"Yes. Do you know the case?"

Colliard smiled, shook his head. "It's almost always the client's wife," he said. "But continue. I gather this was the first time you had a woman for a target?"

"Yes, it was."

"And I gather that it bothered you?"

Haig frowned at the question. "I *think* it bothered me," he said. "The idea of it seemed to bother me. I wasn't afraid that I couldn't do it—if you pull a trigger, why should it matter what's standing in front of you?—but, oh, I had difficulty with my self-image, I guess you might say. It's one thing putting the touch to some powerful man who ought to be able to look out for himself and another thing putting it to a defenseless woman."

"The weaker sex," Colliard murmured.

"But then I asked myself, What about Wilson Colliard? How would he feel about a situation like this? And that straightened me out, because I knew you'd killed women in your career, and I decided that if it was all right for you, it was all right for me."

"And you went ahead and fulfilled the assignment."

"Yes."

"With no difficulty?"

"None." Michael Haig smiled, and Colliard felt there was pride in the smile. Proud as a puppy, he thought, and every bit as eager. "I killed her with a knife," he said. "Made it look like a burglary."

"And it felt no different than if she had been a man?"

"No different at all. There was that moment when I did it, that sensation that's always there, but it was no different from the way it always was." Then a shadow flickered on the younger man's face, and Colliard, amused, left him wondering for a moment before rescuing him.

"Yes," he said. "That little shiver of delight and triumph and something more. It's always there for me too, Michael—in case you were wondering."

"I was, sir."

"The best people always get a thrill out of it, Michael. We don't do it for the thrill, of course. We do it for the money. But there's a touch of excitement in the act and it would be puerile to deny it. Don't worry about it."

"I don't know that I was worried, exactly. But thank you, sir."

Colliard smiled. Now of whom did this young man remind him? The eagerness, the sincerity—God, the almost painful sincerity. It all held a sense of recognition, but of whom? His own younger self? The son he'd never had?

But he didn't think he'd been very much like Michael Haig in his own younger days, not really. Had there been a veteran hand at the game whom he'd idolized? Certainly not. Could he ever, at his most callow, have been capable of playing the role Haig was playing in this conversation? No. God, no.

Nor would he have wanted a son like this youth, or indeed any son at all. Women were a pleasure, like good food and good wine, like anything beautiful and luxurious and costly, but they were to be enjoyed and discarded. He had never wanted to own one, or to breed with one, to produce offspring, to litter the landscape with copies of himself.

Yet he could not deny that he was enjoying the afternoon. The younger man's company was refreshing in its way, and his idolatry was pleasant food for the ego.

It was not as if he had any pressing engagements.

"So you'd like to hear me talk about—what? My life and times? My distinguished career?"

"I'd like that very much."

"Anecdotes and bits of advice? The perspective gained through years at the top of this crazy business?"

"All of that. And anything else you'd care to tell me."

Wilson Colliard considered for a moment, then rose to his feet. "I'm going to smoke a cigar," he announced. "I allow myself one or two a day. They're Havanas, not terribly hard to get if you know someone. I acquired a taste for them, oh, it must be twenty years ago. I did a job down there—but I suppose you know the story."

"No, I'd love to hear it."

"Perhaps you will. Perhaps you will, Michael. But first may I bring a cigar for you?"

Michael Haig accepted the cigar. Somehow this did not surprise Wilson Colliard in the least.

As the afternoon wore on, Colliard found himself increasingly at ease in the role of reminiscent sage. Never before had he trotted out his memories like this for the entertainment and education of another. Oh, in recent years he had become increasingly inclined to sit at this window and look back over the years, but it had been a silent and solitary pursuit. It was quite a different matter to be giving voice to his memories and to have another person on hand, worshipful and attentive, to draw out his recollections. Why, he was telling Haig things he hadn't thought about in years, and making mental connections and developing perceptions he never had before.

With the cigars extinguished and fresh glasses of sherry poured, Colliard leaned back and said, "How far are we with our Assassin's Credo, Michael? Point the first—minimize risk. Point the second—seize the moment, strike while the iron is hot. Is that all we've established? It's certainly taken me a great many words to hammer out *those* two points. And the third principle is more important than either of them."

"What is that, sir?"

"Look to your reputation."

"Ah."

"Reputation," Colliard said. "It's all you have going for you in this business, Michael. We have no bankable assets, you and I. We have only our reputation. And what reputation we possess is an underground matter. We can't hire public relations men or press agents to give us standing. We have to depend wholly upon word of mouth. We must make ourselves known to those who might be inclined to engage our services, and they have to be supremely confident of our skill, our reliability, our discretion."

"Yes."

"We are paid in advance, Michael. Our clients must be able to take it for granted that once we have received our fee the target is as good as dead. And because the client himself is a party to criminal homicide, he must be assured that whatever fate befalls the assassin, the client

will not be publicly involved. Skill, reliability, discretion. Reputation, Michael. It's everything to us."

They were silent for a moment. Wilson Colliard aimed his eyes out the window at the expanse of green below, but his gaze was focused on a middle distance, across time.

Tentatively Haig said, "I suppose if a man does good work sooner or later he develops a good reputation."

"Sooner or later."

"You make it sound as though there's a better way to go about it."

"There is," Colliard agreed. "Sometimes circumstances are such that you can be your own advertising man, your own press agent, your own public relations bureau. Now and then you will find yourself with the opportunity to act with a certain flair that captures the public imagination so dramatically that it will go on to serve as the very cornerstone of your professional reputation for the remainder of your life. When such a chance comes to you, Michael, you have to take hold of it."

"I think—"

"Yes?"

"I think I know the case you mean, sir."

"It's quite possible that you do."

"I was wondering if you would mention it. I almost brought it up myself. I don't know how many times I've heard the story. It's at the very heart of the legend of Wilson Colliard."

"Indeed? The legend of Wilson Colliard."

"But you *are* a legend, sir. And the story—I hope you'll tell me just what did and didn't happen. I've heard several versions and it's hard to know where the truth leaves off."

Colliard smiled indulgently. "Suppose you tell me what you've heard. If I'm to tell you the truth it wouldn't hurt me to know first how the legend goes."

"Well, from what I've heard, you accepted two assignments at about the same time. A businessman in New Jersey, in Camden—"

"Trenton, actually," Colliard said. "Not that it makes any substantial difference. Neither city has ever been possessed of anything you might be inclined to call charm. Of course, this was some time ago and the urban blight was less pronounced then, but even so both Trenton and Camden were towns no one ever went to without a good reason. My client manufactured bicycle tires. The business is long gone now. I be-

lieve some bicycle manufacturer bought up the firm and absorbed it. My client's name—well, names don't really matter, do they?"

"He wanted you to murder his wife."

"Yes. Men so often do. If they want their mistresses killed they're apt to perform the deed on their own, but they call in a professional when they want an instant divorce."

"And before you could conclude the assignment, a woman hired you to kill her husband."

"It's an interesting thing," Colliard said. "When a woman wants her husband done away with she's very much apt to hire help, but what's odd is she more often than not engages the services of a rank amateur. The newspapers are full of that sort of thing. Typically the woman works it all out with her lover, who's likely to be some rough-diamond type out of a James M. Cain novel. And the paramour knows someone who went to jail once for passing bad checks, and the bad-check artist knows somebody who served time for assault, and ultimately an exceedingly sloppy operation is mounted, and either the woman is swindled out of a couple of thousand dollars by a man who hasn't the slightest intention of killing anybody or else the husband is killed and the police have everybody in custody before the body's had time to go cold."

"Well, after you'd accepted both assignments, and of course you'd been paid in front by both clients—"

"A matter of personal policy."

"—then you discovered that your two clients were husband and wife, and each had engaged you to murder the other."

"And what did I do?"

"According to what I've heard, the husband hired you first, and so the first thing you did was murder the wife."

Wilson Colliard nodded, smiling gently at the memory. "The husband had to go to Chicago on business. We scheduled the affair for that time. I called him at his hotel there to make very certain that he was out of town. Then I went to his home. He and his wife shared an enormous Victorian pile of a house in the heart of Trenton. It was still a decent neighborhood then. I went there and did what I was supposed to do. Made it look like a burglary, left signs of forced entry, overturned dresser drawers and added a few professional flourishes. I killed her with a knife from her very own kitchen. I thought that was a

nice touch.”

“And of course the police figured it as a burglary.”

“Of course they did. A burglary for gain followed by a murder on impulse. There was never the slightest suspicion of my client. He was rid of a wife and home free.”

The younger man was breathing more quickly and his face was slightly flushed. “And then?” he said.

“Yes?”

“Then you killed him.”

“Indeed. Why would I do a thing like that?”

“Because the wife had hired you and once you accepted a fee the target was as good as dead. Of course you didn’t *have* to kill the man. The only person who knew you’d been hired to kill him was the woman who hired you, and she was already dead. You could have kept the fee she paid you and done nothing to earn it and no one would ever have known the difference. But you were true to the ethics of the profession, true to your own personal ethics, and so you killed him.”

“I waited almost a month,” Colliard said. “I didn’t want his death to look like murder—I didn’t even want it to take place in Trenton—so I waited until he made another trip, this time a short one to Philadelphia. I followed him there, stole a car off the street, dogged him until he stepped off a curb, and then performed vehicular homicide. He turned in my direction just as the car was about to remove him from this life, and do you know I can still see the expression on his face? I don’t know whether he recognized me through the windshield or whether he simply recognized that he was about to be struck down and killed—facial expressions at such times are distressingly ambiguous. Anyway, I had no trouble making a clean getaway.”

“So it really happened that way,” Haig said, his eyes shining. “And so your reputation was made—everyone knew that when Colliard took on an assignment the target was a dead man, no matter what.”

“Yes. They all knew.”

“So the legend is true.”

“The legend of Wilson Colliard,” Colliard intoned. “It is an effective legend, isn’t it? Well then, do you see what I meant when I said about the importance of reputation?”

“Yes. But isn’t it still just a question of being true to your professional ethics? Oh, I can see how you must have functioned as your own

press agent and all that because you would have had to be the source of the legend. Only the man and the woman knew they'd hired you, and even they didn't know that you were hired by both of them, so the story could never have gotten out if you hadn't done something to spread it in the first place. But what you did, that was a matter of behaving professionally."

"Do you think so?" Colliard raised his prominent white eyebrows. "Don't you think it might have been more professional to keep the woman's fee and not kill her husband? After all, she was in the grave and certain to remain silent. The only reason to kill her husband was for publicity purposes. Otherwise, I'd have been better advised to adhere to the first principle of minimizing risk. But by performing the second murder I assured myself of a reputation."

"Of course," Haig said. "You're absolutely right. I should have realized that."

Colliard made a tent of his fingertips. "Ah, Michael," he said, "there's more to it than you could possibly realize. It's interesting that the legend is incomplete. You know, I think this is really one of those rare occasions where the truth is more dramatic than the legend."

"How do you mean?"

"This crazy business of ours. Wheels within wheels, complexities underlying complexities. I wonder, Michael, if you have a sufficiently Byzantine mind to distinguish yourself in your chosen profession."

"I don't understand."

"The woman never hired me."

Michael Haig stared.

"Never hired me. Never knew of my existence as far as I know. She and I never set eyes on one another until the night I stuck a Sabatier carbon-steel chef's knife between her ribs. For all I know the poor woman adored her husband and never would have harmed him for the world."

"But—"

"So I killed her and went on my way, Michael, and then about a month later I happened to be in Philadelphia for reasons I can't at the moment recall, not that they matter, and whom did I chance to see emerging from Bookbinder's after a presumably satisfying lunch but the Bicycle Tire King of Trenton. Do you know, the mind is capable of extraordinary quantum leaps? All at once I saw the whole thing plain,

to shape the entire legend would take. All I had to do was kill the old man and my place in my profession was assured. It was the sort of thing people would talk about forever, and everything they said could only be found to my benefit. I followed him, I stole a car, and the rest is history. Or legend, if you prefer."

"That's—that's incredible."

"I saw an opportunity and I grasped it."

"You just killed him for—"

"For the benefit that could not help but accrue to my reputation. I killed him without a fee, you might say. But his death paid me more handsomely in the long run than any murder I ever undertook for immediate gain. Overnight I became the standard of the profession. I stood head and shoulders above the competition as far as potential clients were concerned. I had an edge over men with infinitely more distinguished careers, men who had far more years in the business than I. And what gave me this advantage? An elementary hit-and-run killing of a former client, an act that but for the ensuing publicity could have been pointless beyond belief. Remarkable, isn't it?"

"It's better than the legend," Michael Haig said. There was a film of perspiration on his upper lip and he wiped at it with his forefinger. "If people knew the real—"

"I think it's ever so much better that they don't, Michael. Oh, if I were to write memoirs for posthumous publication it's the sort of material I'd be inclined to include, but I'm not the sort to write my memoirs. No, I think I'd rather let the legend continue as it is. It wouldn't do me much good if my public knew that Wilson Colliard was a man who once killed one of his clients for no reason at all. My reputation has been carefully designed to build a client's confidence and that sort of revelation might have the opposite effect entirely."

"I don't know what to say."

"Then don't say anything at all," Colliard advised. "But let us have a small tot of sherry."

"I've had quite a bit already."

"It's very light stuff," Colliard said. "One more won't hurt you." And, returning with the filled glasses, he added, "We ought to drink to legends. May the truth never interfere with them."

The younger man took a sip. Then, when he saw his host toss off his drink in a single swallow, he imitated his example and drank off the

rest of his own sherry. Wilson Colliard nodded, satisfied with the way things had gone. He could scarcely recall a more pleasant afternoon.

"Minimize your risks," he said. "Seize the moment. And look after your professional reputation."

"The three points of the Assassin's Credo," Haig said.

"Three of the four points."

"Oh?" The younger man grinned in anticipation. "You mean there's a fourth?"

"Oh, yes." Colliard studied Haig, paying close attention to his eyes.

"Are you going to tell me what it is?"

"Squash the competition."

"Oh?"

"When it's convenient," Colliard said. "And when it's useful. There's no point in doing anything about the bunglers. But when someone turns up who's talented and resourceful and not without a sense of the dramatic, and when you have the opportunity to wipe him out, it's just good business to get rid of him. There are only so many top jobs available every year, you know, and one doesn't want them spread too thin. Of course, when you eliminate a competitor you don't noisily announce it around the office. That sort of thing's kept secret. But there have been eight times over the years when I've had a chance to put the fourth principle into play.

"And you've seized the opportunity?"

"I could hardly do otherwise, could I?" Colliard smiled. "You're number nine, Michael. That last glass of sherry had poison in it, I'm afraid. You can probably feel the numbness spreading. It already shows in your eyes. No, don't try to get up. You won't be able to accomplish anything. Don't blame yourself. You were doomed from the start, poor boy. I shouldn't have agreed to see you this afternoon if I hadn't decided to, uh, purge you from the ranks."

The younger man's face was a study in horror. Colliard eyed him equably. Already he was beginning to feel that familiar sensation, the excitement, the thrill.

"You were quite good," he said charitably. "For as long as you lasted you were quite good indeed. Otherwise I'd not have bothered with you. Oh, Michael, it's a crazy business, isn't it? Believe me, lad, you're well out of it."

Everyone knows how important fair play is in a detective story . . .

FAIR GAME



by Francis M. Nevins, Jr.

Half an hour out of L.A., at about 39,000 feet, we hit turbulence. First just a few little jolts of wind nibbling at the jumbo jet's flanks, enough to make the cocktails in their clear plastic glasses slosh gently. Enough to set my innards jittering. Then the heavy stuff started to hit us with a *bounce bobble bobble bounce*. The little illuminated signs FASTEN SEAT BELT/ATTACHEZ VOTRE CEINTURE clicked on and the pilot's voice came over the PA system, speaking fast, telling everybody to get back

in their seats and strap themselves in tight.

The slender young blonde girl in the print blouse and jeans who had the aisle seat across from mine sat bolt upright, her hands clutched and her lips moving as if in prayer. As we bucked and bounced, I spotted her as a member of my club—the people who have to fly a lot but fear it in their guts like death by slow torture. The Courageous Chickens. The minute a plane hits rough weather we recognize each other. I gave the girl a feeble we're-in-this-together grin and reached across the aisle to lay my hand on top of her own.

We were lucky. The pilot went into a steep climb, up about two thousand feet, and when he leveled off the turbulence died down to the original light nibbling.

"Thanks," the girl said. Her hair was long and straight and the color of fresh corn. She wore no makeup and no jewelry, especially no rings, which meant she was fair game for a recently divorced man with healthy urges. The bright cover of a dogeared Agatha Christie paperback stared up at me from the vacant center seat next to her.

"Likewise." I smiled back at her. "A little rough air goes a long way with me too. Jack Payne's my name." After a few seconds' hesitation she said: "I'm Robin Amory."

"Going to Boston on business?"

"Sort of. I'm in the permissions department at Houghton Mifflin. The publisher. I'm going home from a workshop at UCLA Law School on the new copyright act. How about you?"

"I don't know a thing about copyright," I said, "except for the first three letters. I used to be a cop. Major Case Squad in St. Louis County."

"Oh, wow," she said, the way some kids still do who came to awareness in the late '60s. "A detective! I've loved detective stories since I was in the ninth grade." Her eager mobile face suddenly went grave. "You say you *used* to be a detective?"

I gave her my heartiest grin of the day. "No, I wasn't kicked out for taking graft or anything like that. You won't believe this but I won \$15,000 a year for life in the Illinois State Lottery last year and decided to retire early, go back to school, get a law degree. I'm starting my second year at Harvard."

"Wow," she breathed. "That's terrific."

"I don't suppose it would surprise you if I said that detective stories

and real police work are about as much alike as a minuet and a right hook."

"Detective stories are better," she said. "More—oh, more intellectually exciting, more fun. No pain or danger or boring routine."

That remark tipped me off as to which of my war stories to tell her. "Well, every so often a cop gets handed a case that's like a detective novel. I had one like that the year before I won the lottery."

We were still jouncing a bit, but she grinned bravely at me. "Well, don't stop now!" she said.

A cop has to know how to nudge people into saying what he wants them to say. So does a lawyer: The FASTEN SEAT BELT signs were still lit but I pressed the button to push the back of my seat into a half-reclining position.

"The people who write detective stories love gimmicks," I began. "Some gimmicks they use over and over until they grow long grey whiskers. The death that looks like suicide except that the gun was in the wrong hand. The dead guy that leaves a dying message and three or four suspects who each fit the message in one way or another. The dog that did nothing in the night."

"Well, yes," she argued, "but in the really good detective stories . . ."

"Would you believe that the case I had brought all those old clichés to life?"

The place where it happened (I began) was a suburb called Country Club Hills, which tells you right away the kind of community it was. As I drove up to the address I'd been given at the station that Saturday morning I saw it was a long ranch-type house on a big grassy lot with a landscaped garden. The dead man's name was Edward Laurenz. He was the president of a company called EduToys which was located in Clayton, the county seat, and marketed educational toys for kids. He was the creative brain of the company and had made a pile of money originating most of its top-selling products.

His cleaning woman had come by at 8:00 A.M. and found him lying slumped across the desk in his workroom and had called the local station. By the time Major Case Squad had gotten the squeal and I'd reached the scene, the routine work was well under way. He'd been shot through the right temple and the normal powder burns were

around the wound. The gun was a Colt .32 and it was in his right hand when the cleaning woman found him. The preliminary medical examination placed the time of death between eight and eleven Friday night. He was wearing blue slacks and a blue-and-white blazer with a sort of jigsaw-puzzle pattern and a long-sleeved grey shirt with the edge of the left cuff badly frayed. There was a wallet in his pocket with three hundred and twelve dollars in cash and four major credit cards, but the watch on his right wrist was a cheap stainless-steel Timex that looked to be at least twenty years old. Well, already any Agatha Christie fan can see that it wasn't suicide, right?

The local men had already learned a lot about Laurenz from the neighbors. He was a widower, 56 years old, and seemed in good health except for a slew of allergies he'd had since he was a boy. He'd lived alone since his wife's death, except for his dog. The Timex watch had been a gift from his wife many years before when they were flat broke, and he still wore it for sentimental reasons. He'd been a two-pack-a-day smoker till the year before, when he got scared enough about lung cancer to quit cold turkey. The cleaning woman came in six mornings a week to make Laurenz his breakfast and take care of the house. The rest of his meals he'd either cook for himself or eat out.

The dog was a friendly little rascal, two years old, short, brown with white markings, and answered to the name of King Tut. The skin all over him was very loose so that he always looked like he was frowning at the world. A lot of dogs will get excited when a dozen or so detectives invade a house, but Tut hardly let out a peep. He was a nice pooch.

There had originally been three bedrooms in the house but Laurenz had had the wall knocked out between the two in the back and converted them into a workroom—a soundproof workroom, by the way, which is why none of his neighbors heard the shot. That room was where he played with ideas for new EduToys, and the place was an incredible clutter. Flash cards with monkey and rabbit decals for teaching little kids their arithmetic. Learn-to-read games. A set of a couple of hundred dominoes with letters of the alphabet on them to teach kids how to spell and pronounce words right—dozens of toys and prototypes of toys he wanted to market.

In the right-hand side pocket of that jigsaw-puzzle blazer he was wearing we found three of the lettered dominoes. An I, a K, and an L.

Let me jump ahead just a bit. One of the first questions you have to ask on a homicide is who had a motive. After a little poking around we found three people with extremely good motives. First, there was another named Irving Keith Laurenz, who was the dead man's only close relative and the principal legatee under his will. Irving lived over Webster Groves, which is another suburb of St. Louis County. He visited his brother once or twice a month, but when we talked to him he said he hadn't seen Edward in three weeks.

A former lawyer named Warren Kyle had gone to school with Laurenz and been close friends with him for thirty years—until Mrs. Laurenz died and Kyle was asked to handle the estate, and Laurenz caught him juggling some of the assets around so that they wound up in his pocket, whereupon he had filed an ethics complaint against Kyle and gotten him disbarred. That all happened three years before but it made a hell of a revenge motive for Kyle.

Finally, an Ina Louise Kellerman had been sponsoring a stockholders' proxy fight to kick Laurenz out as president of EduToys and run it in an all-female management. This gal was so liberated she once went to court to have her last name changed to Kellerson. Well, that case had been laughed out of court, but she was convinced that EduToys made sexist products and she was determined to organize the women stockholders and force a change in corporate officers. She'd made two visits to Laurenz's office in Clayton since the proxy fight had begun, and both times they'd gotten into a fierce brawl.

So much for our three suspects. You notice that they all fit the letters in Laurenz's pocket one way or another, just like in detective stories.

Shortly before I arrived on the scene, one of the local men who'd been checking all the neighbors got lucky, the kind of luck that wraps up most cases. A nine-year-old kid who lived down the block was hooked on spy games and spent a lot of time watching the other houses on the street through binoculars, pretending he was in the CIA or something. It happened that he had the Laurenz house under surveillance between 7:30 and 10:00 the night before. He'd logged a car stopping in front of the house at exactly 8:48 P.M. and observed a person emerge from the car and stand at the front door. After a minute or so he saw the visitor being let in, although he couldn't hear any words they said or any sounds at all except that of the front door being shut.

The person came out of the house by the front door and the car pulled away at 9:17 P.M.

Unfortunately, the boy couldn't tell one make of car from another, couldn't describe the color of the car because of the darkness, couldn't make out the license number, and couldn't tell us what the driver looked like or even whether it was a man or woman. Just a dark figure and a big car.

Of course it was possible that this visitor was completely innocent and the real murderer had come to the house after the kid down the block had gone to bed. But on the assumption that the 8:48 visitor was the killer, it was easy to put together a picture of the way it could have happened. Visitor rings the bell, Laurenz lets visitor in. They chat in the workroom. Visitor says or does something that gives Laurenz premonition he's about to be murdered. Laurenz saunters over to the table where his alphabetical dominoes are laid out and pockets as many letters as he dares so as to leave us with a clue to his killer. Visitor doesn't notice what Laurenz has done, holds the .32 to his temple, fires, arranges the weapon in Laurenz's right hand, does any straightening that's necessary, and takes off.

Now I've told you all the important facts. You tell me: Who killed Edward Laurenz? Was it IKL, Irving Keith Laurenz, the brother? Was it KIL with a long I, Warren Kyle, the disbarred lawyer? Was it ILK Ina Louise Kellerperson, the liberated lady? Or, to quote from a recently cancelled TV series, was it someone else?

The jet was high over the clouds now, and the turbulence had settled down to an occasional nudge. Robin Amory leaned back in her seat and massaged her chin. "O.K., let's see. You said Mr. Laurenz had a two-year-old dog."

"Right," I agreed solemnly. "King Tut." I turned to look out the plane window at the cotton-candy cloud floor that stretched as far as could see.

"Then it's easy!" she exclaimed. "You said that the boy who was watching the house heard no sound when Mr. Laurenz let the visitor in, except for the front door being shut. That means that when the visitor arrived, *the dog didn't bark*. It follows that the visitor must have been familiar to King Tut. Which rules out the woman, who had called on Laurenz only at his office. And rules out the ex-lawyer.

whom Laurenz had had disbarred a year before the dog was born. So the murderer must have been the brother, Irving, who visited regularly once or twice a month!"

"Bad reasoning," I said. "The premises don't support your conclusion; I'm afraid."

"Where did I go wrong?" she demanded unbelievably after a minute's reflection. "Everything I said makes perfect sense."

"Except," I pointed out, "that you forgot the dog's name and description and the fact that Laurenz suffered from several allergies. You see, King Tut was a basenji, a breed descended from the Egyptian hunting dog and a favorite pet among people with allergies that prevent them from acquiring other breeds of dog. And the distinguishing characteristic of the basenji is that *it does not bark*. Remember how I mentioned that King Tut hardly let out a peep with all the detectives in the house. That is known as playing fair."

She twisted her hands together in a fury of concentration. "Well, technically it may have been fair but it was tricky. Let me try again,

"Ah, of course! You started out telling me this story to demonstrate the difference between detective stories and real-life murders. The point you've been trying to make is that in a detective story if a dying person has the opportunity to name his murderer he does something ridiculously complicated like leaving an anagram or a rebus for the police to figure out, but in real life he'll simply leave the killer's name! Now of the three suspects in your case, there are two who match the dying message only with their initials: IKL for the brother, and ILK for the woman. But the letters Edward Laurenz pocketed spell out the name of the third suspect in full if you just arrange them right and pronounce it with a long I. So it must have been the lawyer, Warren Kyle, who did it."

I flashed the young lady a smile of unmitigated delight. "I thought you would reason along those lines, but unhappily you have once again jumped the tracks. Remember that I mentioned how the alphabet dominoes were designed to teach kids to spell *and pronounce* words right?" She nodded, and a look of puzzlement darkened her face like a cloud passing over the sun. "The set included three or four dominoes for each vowel in the alphabet on which there was a straight line engraved above the letter to indicate the long sound. If Laurenz had meant to name Kyle, he would have pulled an-I with such a line, not

the I without a mark as he did. No, Kyle was not the murderer. It turned out he was in Hawaii on business at the time of the murder."

Her eyes drew down in mock defeat as she gathered her forces for a final round. When she was ready she pointed her forefinger at me in the manner of a first-grade teacher. "I've got it! You never told me exactly how you knew Laurenz's apparent suicide was murder, but you did say that any Agatha Christie fan could figure it out. And I have!

"You said that he wore his old Timex on the right wrist. That told you that he was really left-handed, because a right-handed man always wears his watch on the left wrist." She held out her own left hand. "A right-handed woman too, as you can see. But the Colt .32 was in Mr. Laurenz's right hand when the cleaning woman found his body! That's how you knew two things, first that he was murdered and second that his murderer didn't know he was a lefty. Now which of the three suspects wouldn't have known? His brother would have. The lawyer who'd been close friends with him for thirty years would have. But the liberated lady, who had seen him in the flesh only twice, probably wouldn't have realized. So the murderer is Ms. Kellerman!"

"Wrong again," I told her gently. "Wrong twice again, actually. Ms. Kellerman wasn't the murderer and Laurenz wasn't a lefty."

Something very close to anger flared in her steel-blue eyes. "Now wait just one minute. Mr. Payne, you distinctly told me he wore his watch on his right wrist . . ."

"Yes, and I also told you, but you forgot, that the left cuff of his shirt was badly frayed. One of the problems with those cheap stainless-steel watches is that the edges can become very sharp after some years—literally sharp enough to cut through shirt fabric if you wear the watch on your left wrist, with the sharp edge rubbing against the cuff. Now if you get in the habit of wearing your watch on the right wrist, then the sharp edge, the side opposite the stem, doesn't rub the cuff and the problem's solved. That's why Laurenz wore his watch on the right wrist, not because he was a southpaw."

The anger had left her face as I explained; it was replaced by a look of supreme and utter bafflement. She picked up the Christie paperback from the seat beside her and clutched it to her like a life preserver. "But there's no one left any more. You've eliminated all the suspects! Unless . . ." For a few moments she looked as if she had been stricken dumb. "Is—is this like *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd*?" She almost

choked on the question. "Is the narrator the person who committed the murder? *Is that why you're not on the force any more?*"

"Brilliant! Brilliant!" I crowed in delight. "Here I thought you were going to say that the only one left who could have killed Edward Laurenz was Edward Laurenz himself, that it *was* a suicide Laurenz had arranged so that it looked like one of his enemies had killed him. You actually came up with something much more ingenious. Congratulations! But I'm happy to tell you you're wrong again. I didn't kill the man.

"Actually you were right the first time. It *was* his brother, Irving Laurenz, who killed him for the money. But you were right for the wrong reason. I never said you'd picked the wrong suspect, just that the premises didn't support your conclusion."

"You, Mr. Payne," she said grimly, "are a trickster."

"Yes," I agreed, "but I always play fair." The FASTEN SEAT BELT signs clicked off and the stewardesses began wheeling the drink cart up the aisle, taking cocktail orders. "Do you want to know how I solved the case and pinned it on him?"

"Are you sure I'm intelligent enough to follow your deductions?" she asked me witheringly.

"Deduction didn't have a thing to do with it. All we had to do was check the registration on the .32, which turned out to belong to Irving Laurenz. The damn fool had used his own gun! You see, that's the big difference between real life and a detective story. Most killers in real life, except the professionals of course, get caught because they do something so dumb a writer couldn't get away with using it in a story. All it takes is a little boring routine to trip them up. By the way, what are you drinking?"

We lifted our plastic cups in a silent toast as the pilot's voice over the PA system promised smooth flying the rest of the way.



There are times when you have to question the wisdom of trying to keep it all in the family . . .

THE KILLING OF WINCOE JONES



by
**Lawrence
Treat**

It was a hot day and the cop had stripped to the waist, there in the small airless room that had a steel desk and a couple of chairs and not much else. The room had no name, but it had an indefinable odor that reminded you of sweat and garbage. It was exactly the right setup for the cop.

The small, quick man got the message. He was in enemy territory. His beige shirt that fell open in exactly the right folds and his leisure

suit that fitted him so well were an insult to the cop. He should have been dressed either in rags or in bad taste, then maybe the cop wouldn't have started off with that tone of voice.

"You know why you're here," he said. He was holding his shirt in his hands, as if he wasn't sure where to put it.

The small quick man remained silent, and the cop snapped at him. "Answer. Hear me?"

"Ask me straight questions, and I'll answer."

The cop pushed his shirt aside and then, slowly, he unbuckled his gun belt, took the gun out of the holster, and let the belt drop to the floor. Staring at the small man, he hefted the gun, seemed to be puzzled by something. He unhinged the chamber, flipped it over, and took the cartridges out of the chamber. He put the cartridges in his pocket and stuffed the gun inside the band of his slacks.

"Just in case I get tempted," he said. His face looked as if it had once been hacked into small pieces and then put together again.

"Look," he said. "Let's not kid around. You come from the city, you're a big shot and you know all about your rights without my spelling it out, so I'll lay it on the line. You killed Wincoe and you're going to tell me about it. It's going to be signed, sealed, and delivered; and I got the confession right here." He tapped a sheet of paper.

The small man blinked, neither admitting nor denying anything the cop had said, although by his silence he seemed to accept the ground rules. Let the cop lay them out—all the small man wanted was to know what they were.

"O.K.," the cop said. "Now that that's settled, let's get down to business."

He put his hands on his hips and pulled back his shoulders to point up his power and muscle, and waited for the small man to protest, to claim innocence. When he didn't, the cop seemed to flounder; he had to start all over again.

"Wincoe was nothing much," he said. "He's dead and nobody's crying over him, but Cynthia is something else again. Maybe she never told you, but back in high school and long before you even knew her, she and me were sweethearts. So now you know why we're here, just the two of us. This is personal, and you're going to sign, or else they're going to take you out of here in pieces."

"I have a right to a lawyer," the small man said.

The cop grinned. "Mister Enright," he said sarcastically. "Mr. George Morrow Enright the Third, you got a right to a lawyer. But Georgie-Boy, what you got a right to and what happens here are two different things. Got it?"

"I never did anything to you, so why the grudge? Tell me the reasons."

"Georgie-Boy, one reason is that anywhere else, you're the big shot from the city, with that big summer place you rent up on the hill and with the best piece of land in Coversburg that you just bought, while I got a shack with walls falling apart because I ain't got the dough to fix it. And another reason is you're the head of some kind of a furniture business that does millions of dollars' worth of business that you inherited from George Morrow Enright the Second, while I'm just a small-town cop. And another reason is I'm just as smart as you are, and I'm going to prove it. So do we start in?"

"What's the point?"

"The point is I'm going to break you. I could pick you up with one hand and throw you up against the ceiling, and you know it. And even if you know I won't do it, you're still scared. Because I might. If you get me riled up, I just might. So how about that?"

"Wincoe Jones was shot. I don't have a gun."

The cop took his gun from his waistband, examined the barrel for a moment, and then tossed the gun at Enright. It landed in his lap, and he gave a start and squeaked out a word that sounded like *ouch*. He picked up the gun as if he didn't know what to do with it. After a few seconds he put it on the desk.

"You had one then," the cop said. "You had one when you shot Wincoe. That one."

Enright frowned. "What are you trying to say?"

"Let me tell you something about Wincoe," the cop said. "He wasn't exactly bright, but he was kind of stubborn. It took him ten years to get through grade school, but by God he made it!"

"So?"

"We Coversburg Burtons stick together; we give jobs to anybody that can work. The only people on relief are people who are too old or too sick to get out of bed. We even found a job for Wincoe. We put him on the road. We taught him how to drive a truck, but the dumb bastard went and drove it into the lake. Said the truck was dirty and

had to get washed up."

"The town idiot?" Enright said.

"No. We got a couple of *real* idiots. Wincoe was only kind of a half-idiot. He did what he was told to, and he did it pretty good. The trouble was, nobody could think of all the things to tell him not to do. Give him a shovel and tell him where to dig, that was O.K. except he didn't know where to stop. He'd keep on shoveling and he'd dig up flowerbeds and underground wires and stuff like that."

"What are you driving at?"

"I'm trying to tell you the kind of guy he was. Sort of everybody's pet. Always smiling, trying to please people."

"He didn't try to please me."

"You don't count. You don't belong here. But the people who live here—when they find out you shot Wincoe, they'll want to lynch you. And when a jury sits on the case, what kind of a break do you think you'll get? Georgie-Boy, you're in trouble."

"Tell me some more about Wincoe. How come he got this job of his? Who gave it to him?"

"The Mayor. He's a building contractor, and when the town didn't know what to do with Wincoe the Mayor came up with the idea of making Wincoe the building inspector."

"But he had no training for the job. He doesn't know how to build a house or even how to fill out forms."

"We don't bother with forms. Nobody reads them anyhow. We like to have a guy like Wincoe around, who isn't bright and won't make waves."

"You mean the Mayor wanted somebody incompetent to hand out building permits and make inspections?"

"Exactly. And that's why you killed him. You wanted to build, and he wouldn't give you a permit. And you know why?"

"Let me guess," Enright said.

"You don't have to guess, I'll tell you. He wouldn't give you a building permit because they told him not to."

"They did? Who are they?"

"All of us. We don't like the way you're throwing money around. We needed a place where working mothers could park their kids; you gave them a house. We needed dough for football equipment up at the school; you gave it. But Georgie-Boy, we Burtons run this town and

we don't like outsiders. The Mayor's a Burton, the chief here is a Burton, and I'm a Burton. You're not."

"You're pretty frank about it," Enright said. "Aren't you afraid I'll report you?"

"Who to?" Charlie said. "To a Burton?"

"Burtons don't run the *world*," Enright said. "Do you expect to get away with this?"

"You're going to sign a confession, or else you're going out of here on a stretcher. You got sore, you went wild, I had to beat you up; that's my story. The cards are stacked against you."

"You have no evidence against me, and you know it."

"I got plenty of evidence. Maybe you don't know that two whole days before Wincoe got shot, somebody stole my gun from here. I reported it too. That was around the time you were here to see Wincoe about the layout of your house plan—the time you got sore and said he had something against you and he ought to get fired. You made a real fuss, didn't you?"

Enright didn't bother arguing the point. "Just how do you claim you got your gun back?" he asked.

"Found it in your car."

"When?"

"Exactly one hour ago, just before I brought you in."

"Then you put it there, which would have been easy enough. Two days ago you claim you lost it. Now you claim you found it in my car, and that somehow or other you knew it was the murder weapon. Mr. Burton, it won't wash."

"Your car was parked in front of a meter that had time-expired. I was walking down the street with Jackie Vincent. Because he was in uniform and I wasn't, I told him to check the registration and write out the ticket. He opened the car door and looked in the glove compartment and there it was. This gun." Charlie thumped it lightly with the fingers of his right hand.

"You guessed it was your gun and guessed it was the murder gun?" Enright said, his voice dripping with sarcasm. "Just when did you plant it in my car?"

"We got a blowup of the bullet that killed Wincoe. We got a blowup of a bullet fired from my gun—we did that a couple of years ago and it's still kicking around. Jackie Vincent came back with me and *he* saw the

connection right off. *He* said it was the gun that killed Wincoe. So I told the chief and he said go ahead and bring you in for questioning. And here we are. Beginning to get the picture?"

"What kind of a motive could I possibly have?"

"Wincoe was making himself a nuisance to you, and you got all riled up. You tried a couple of times to get him fired. Once when he said he couldn't find where your boundaries were, you went and put new ones in and he said they weren't the same as on the map. So you asked the surveyor to make a new map, only he wouldn't do it, so you brought in a new surveyor."

Enright pursed his lips. "That's when you cooked up this rule that the surveyor has to be familiar with the area," he said. "And the business about rights of pasture and an easement to drive an ox team across the land—was that your idea too?"

Charlie nodded. "Pretty raw, isn't it? So raw that you got mad and couldn't see straight. If people get sore enough, they go out and kill somebody."

"Just like that?"

"Oh, no. Nothing like that. You got sore all right, but you had sense enough to know we could string you along for years, and your only out was to get another building inspector. Either that, or make the payoff to Wincoe."

"Why would I shoot him if I could buy him off?" Enright asked.

"You couldn't buy him off. That's the point. That's the beauty of it. Everybody in town knows that while Wincoe was a little slow in the head, he was honest. So you made this appointment with him on Powderhouse Lane, and when he wouldn't take your dough you shot him."

"You've made a lot of allegations, but you won't get away with it."

The cop leaned back comfortably. "I don't expect to get away with it. With all those high-priced city lawyers you'll hire, you'll probably squirm out of it. But it'll take months and it'll be pretty rough. That's where Cynthia comes in."

"Cynthia? What about her?"

"Well, she won't want to be married to a murderer, will she? Even if he gets away with it. So what would be more natural than if she went back to her old sweetheart, the high-school football hero that's now a cop? And she'd have all that dough of yours, Georgie-Boy. For me!"

"Why, you lousy—" Enright didn't complete the sentence, not when Charlie's mouth tightened up, not when Charlie stood up and grabbed the pistol by the barrel and held it up threateningly.

"Sorry," Enright said, "but I want to get this straight. You really think that, because of a trumped-up case, Cynthia's going to divorce me and marry you? Do you really believe that?"

Charlie put the gun down, dropped back into his chair, and leaned back, staring at the little man. After about a half minute, he began laughing. There was nothing forced about his laugh. It was made up partly of relief, partly of triumph. "My testimony, your signed confession," he said. "That will settle everything, and nothing can contradict it. Nothing."

"I haven't signed that confession."

"But you will. Otherwise people will find out the truth."

"What is the truth?"

"I know damn well you didn't shoot Wincoe," Charlie said, "because I was there."

"You shot him?"

"No," Charlie said, "but I saw who did."

"Who?"

"Cynthia."

Enright jerked forward. His mouth dropped open and he started to stand up, but he sank back in his chair. "You're really mad," he said.

"Not by a long shot," Charlie said. "Want to hear about it?"

"It should be interesting," Enright said sarcastically.

"First off, you weren't with Cynthia that night, were you?" Charlie said.

Enright shook his head. "No," he said, "I wasn't with her."

"Well, we got that much straight. *She* made the appointment with Wincoe. He told me about it ahead of time, like the nice little guy he was, so I went along to watch. And she had a thousand bucks with her. Right?"

"Go ahead," Enright said. "It's your story."

"Just look in your safe," Charlie said, "and you'll find she took out a thousand. I got it right here." He took a roll of bills from his pocket and held them up. "Here. In hundreds."

"Then she was making some kind of a payoff to you," Enright said. "What for? What kind of a dirty trick did you pull?" But when Char-

ie's mouth twisted in anger and he started to get up, Enright cringed. "What I mean is," he said, "why did she think she had to pay up a thousand dollars?"

"Georgie-Boy, you're asking an awful lot of questions."

Enright sat up straight. "Cynthia doesn't keep things from me, nor I from her. But sometimes I get sleepy after a couple of drinks, and I went to sleep right after dinner that night. When the call came for me to meet Wincoe in Powderhouse Lane and bring the thousand in cash, he fell for it. She went, and she found Wincoe sitting in that old rattrap of a car of his, and he was dead. Shot. Then somebody grabbed her, she didn't see who, but it had to be you. You knocked her down and took the money. She panicked. She ran back to the car and drove home as fast as she could, and she didn't tell anybody about it except me."

Charlie looked pleased with Enright's admission of the payoff and his admission of Cynthia's presence at the scene. "You got part of it right," he said, "but what you left out was how you sneaked into my locker the other day and took my gun. I have this bad habit of not locking up and the chief's had me on the carpet for it, but I reckon I trust people too much."

"You dreamt this up pretty well so far," Enright said. "Let's hear the rest of it."

"I'm giving you the *facts*," Charlie said sanctimoniously. "Cynthia had the gun with her when she went to meet Wincoe. She had some kind of a misunderstanding with him and she shot him, but she kept the gun and put it in the glove compartment and it was still there—this morning. I told you, I got a witness, Jackie Vincent, a *cop* witness, to back me up. So do you want to sign that confession, or do you want Cynthia to get arrested and charged? It's up to you, Georgie-Boy."

"Charlie," Enright said, "a little while ago you said you wanted to show me you were smarter than me. All right. The gun business, pretending you lost it, then planting it in my car and finally letting another cop find it—I admit that was smart. So you win, and it looks as though it's either Cynthia or me."

"Which?"

"I'll sign," Enright said. "Just let me read it over first."

"Your privilege," Charlie said.

Enright studied the paper. "You're a little weak on grammar and you

could take lessons in spelling, but it makes a plausible case. Now between you and me, I'd like to know the truth. You told Wincoe to go out to Powderhouse Lane and wait. Then you phoned me, but Cynthia answered and said she'd come. By the time she got there, you'd shot Wincoe. All you had to do was knock Cynthia down, take the money, and plant the gun and beat it. Is that a fair statement of what happened?"

Charlie didn't answer, and Enright spoke again. This time his voice was firm. "Is that a fair statement?" he demanded.

Charlie got up, muttering, "You got this coming, Georgie-Boy."

The little man cringed and tried to back away but Charlie's fist caught him on the upper cheek and sent him sprawling. He held his arms up defensively, to protect his face. "Don't! I'll sign—let me up. Don't hit me!"

Charlie put his hands on his hips and tossed his head. "All right," he said. "Get over there and sign."

Enright picked himself up and regained the chair. He had to hold his right wrist with his left hand while he scrawled out a trembling, almost indecipherable signature.

In the anteroom outside, Chief of Police Anthony Burton watched Officer Charlie Burton escort Enright from the interrogation room.

"Here it is," Charlie said, handing the confession to the chief. "Signed and delivered."

The chief glanced at the paper before he turned to Enright. "Is this your signature?" he said.

"Yes," Enright said. "But I signed under duress."

"Sure," the chief said. "You can tell your lawyer all about it."

Enright reached inside his shirt and took out a small microphone, the size of a silver dollar. "No need to tell him," he said. "He's outside in a car with my wife. They've heard it all and have it down on tape."

The chief looked at the microphone, then walked over to the window and looked outside. When he turned around, he stared at Charlie and began tearing up the confession.

**The June 1977 issue of Alfred Hitchcock's
Mystery Magazine will be on sale May 12.**

for a penny, in for a pound, as the saying goes . . .

A SIMPLE LITTLE THING



by
**Edward
D. Hoch**

Joanne finished her volunteer work at the hospital a bit earlier than usual, and walked quickly down the curving sidewalk to the parking lot where her little car was waiting. With luck she'd be home before dark, able to catch up on a few Saturday afternoon chores before going out for the evening. The day was cold, with the first threat of winter in the air, and she bundled her leather collar up tightly around her face as she walked.

Looking down at the sidewalk, she did not see the man until spoke. "Joanne! Joanne Bates!"

She knew the voice at once, and the face too—even though it had been a year since she'd seen him and now he wore a beard. "It's Tommy. I thought you were still in jail."

"Nasty as ever, aren't you? The judge gave me a suspended sentence—as you damn well know."

She'd stopped to face him, to study the familiar blue eyes above the fresh growth of beard. His eyes were what she'd first noticed about Tommy Marvin. "They still pay off the judges pretty well in this town, I guess."

"I didn't wait for you to be insulted, Joanne."

"Why did you wait for me? A year's a long time."

"I wanted to see you again."

She shivered with the cold, and something else. Perhaps memory. "I have to get home, Tommy."

"I get the brush-off? Is that it?"

A tiny pang of guilt formed somewhere inside her. Tommy Marvin had always had the knack of doing that to her, even against her better judgment. "No brush-off, Tommy. It's just that I have to get home. I have a date this evening."

"Well, sure. Saturday night and all. I hardly expected you to be sitting around at home. Who are you going with these days?"

"No one you know," Joanne replied, not wanting to admit that her evening's date was with a couple of girls from the insurance office.

"Will you invite me up for a drink?"

"I told you, I have a—"

"Date. I know." His blue eyes twinkled over the beard, and she knew almost at once that she'd end up inviting him. She'd never been able to resist his eyes.

"Oh, all right, come on! But only one. You can't turn up out of nowhere after a year and expect me to drop everything to entertain you."

He smiled down at her. "Same old Joanne. You never change, do you?"

He followed her home in his car, and parked across the street as he'd done in the old days. Joanne was a bit apprehensive as he climbed the stairs behind her, remembering how it had been.

Tommy Marvin did not turn up for no reason. He wanted something from her, and she wondered what it was this time.

She'd met Tommy two years earlier, at a New Year's Eve party at a friend's house. She was 27 and he was 31, and they were both at loose ends. Her job at the insurance company was proving to be a dead end, and she'd just broken off an affair with an older married man. Tommy was handsome and unattached, and seemed to know everyone. It was not until she'd been seeing him for a few months that she realized he was deeply involved in organized crime, acting as a bagman for a group that controlled gambling and prostitution on the west side of town.

"It's no different from any other job," he'd told her one night. "I go around and make collections, just like one of your insurance agents. It's no different."

And at times she almost believed him. Once, when he was stranded out of town by a snowstorm, he'd phoned and asked her to make a pick-up for him. She'd done it, driving through the night to a little cigar-store on the west side where she'd simply mentioned Tommy's name and been rewarded with a thick envelope of twenty-dollar bills. There seemed nothing wrong with it.

Nothing, that is, until Tommy had been arrested in the fall of last year and charged with perjuring himself before a grand jury investigating police corruption. Joanne had seen nothing of him since then, and she had in fact believed him to be in prison. Until now, when he'd stepped back into her life as if he'd never left it.

"Why didn't you call me if you were out?" she asked, getting out the bottle of his favorite scotch that hadn't been touched in a year.

"I was away. Things got hot here, and they fixed me up with a job in Las Vegas. You know the temperatures get up to 120 there in the summer?"

"You could have written. Dropped me a card, at least."

"Well, I should have. But you know how it is. I thought maybe you didn't want to get involved after the trouble I was in." He tasted the drink and smiled. "You still stock my brand."

She lit a cigarette and asked, "What do you want, Tommy?"

He shrugged. "Maybe to take up where we left off."

"We're both a year older, Tommy. And maybe wiser. I gave you a drink, but that's all."

For a time he was silent, and she turned to stare out the window at

the traffic in the street below. Finally he came up behind her. "Call up and cancel your date, huh?"

"What'll it get me? Another year of sitting home looking at these walls while you're off in Vegas?"

"It's different now. I've got money now."

She smoked another cigarette, watching the street in silence. A chill November rain was beginning to fall, and traffic had slowed to a crawl. It would not be a good night to be out alone, driving to meet a couple of girls she saw every workday anyhow. She went to the phone and called Beth and said she was feeling ill.

In the morning, over breakfast, Tommy asked, "Are you still doing your volunteer work at the hospital?"

"You know I am. You met me there yesterday."

"Sure, but I didn't know if you were still going regular."

"Monday and Wednesday evenings, and Saturday afternoons."

"That's a lot."

"I asked for a lot. I like to fill my days."

"You take books around, huh?"

"That, and sometimes I write letters for the patients."

He fell silent, sipping his orange juice. "I wonder if you could do something for me," he said at last. "A favor, a simple little thing."

"What's that?"

"Just take something to one of the patients."

"If it's so simple, why can't you do it yourself?"

"Look, Joanne, I'll level with you. The guy's under guard."

Immediately she remembered the policeman at the door of room 311. A heavily bandaged man wounded in a gun battle with the police, one of the nurses had told her. A dangerous customer.

"The man in 311," she whispered.

"That's the one."

"You came to me for this? You waited for me outside the hospital for this?"

"Of course not! I was there trying to see him, and I ran into you."

"Is this all you want, Tommy?"

"Could you get something to him, in a book?"

"What? An envelope full of twenty-dollar bills?"

"No, no! Look, can I come back tomorrow?"

"I'll be at work. And I go to the hospital from the office."

He thought about that. "All right. I'll see you later tomorrow night, then. You can give it to him Wednesday."

"I'm not promising anything, Tommy."

He came over and kissed her. "Sure, honey. We'll talk about it."

On Monday evening she wheeled her book cart into room 311 at the hospital, acutely aware of the burly policeman who guarded the door. The man in the bed, whom she'd barely noticed before, was fairly young—but with a hard look about his eyes and a paleness to his skin that might have resulted from a long stretch in prison. On some days he had ignored the book cart completely, but today at her urging he glanced over the titles and chose a book on deer hunting. The policeman had stepped into the room to watch the proceedings, but he made no effort to check the book. Joanne smiled at him as she pushed the cart back into the corridor.

A few minutes later, when she emerged from the room across the hall, she asked the officer, "What did he do?"

The policeman seemed thankful for an opportunity to talk to someone. "Name's Sonny Trupo. He's a triggerman for the mob. We wanted to question him about a gang killing last week, and Sonny pulled a gun. He got a couple of bullets in him, but by the end of the week we should be able to transfer him to a nice little jail cell."

"This must be dull duty for you."

"It's not exciting, but someone has to do it."

She gave him a parting smile and pushed the book cart on down the hall.

That night, about an hour after she arrived home, Tommy Marvin arrived. He was carrying a brown paper bag. "How's it going, honey? Did you see my friend?"

"Trupo? If he's your friend, you're hanging around with the wrong crowd."

"Sonny's all right. He just got caught on a bum rap."

"He pulled a gun on a policeman."

"It was a plainclothesman, and Sonny thought it was the husband of his girl friend. Hell, anybody could make a mistake like that."

"Sure."

"What's the matter, Joanne?"

"Are you using me again, Tommy, like you did the last time?"

"Take my word, Sonny Trupo's all right. He never killed anybody." He opened the bag and pulled out a thick book—an anthology of British and American poetry. "I just want you to give him this."

"He doesn't seem the poetry type," Joanne observed. She reached out to take the book, and immediately felt its unusual weight. Opening the cover, she saw that it had been hollowed out, with the page edges glued together. Resting in the revealed space were a small flat automatic pistol and a note.

She slammed the cover shut and dropped the book onto the couch. "You must be out of your mind, Tommy!"

"Wait a minute—calm down!"

"You want me to smuggle a *gun* in to him?"

"Joanne—"

"Get out, Tommy! And take that book with you!"

"Look, can I at least get a word in? Can I at least tell you how it is?"

She sat down, drained of strength. "I'm listening."

"He's going up on a bum rap, honey. He saw a man with a gun, and he pulled his gun and got shot. For that, he goes to prison for five or ten years?"

"A jury will decide his guilt or innocence."

Tommy opened the book again. "Look, read this note. Go on, read it!"

She picked up the piece of paper. It said simply, "*Midnight guard has been fixed. Show the gun and you're free. Clothing and car outside.*"

"You see, honey? He's not going to shoot anyone with it. The whole thing's arranged. He just needs the gun to make it look good, to scare off any doctors and nurses who might see him."

"Still bribing the cops, aren't you, Tommy?"

"Will you do it? For me?"

"No."

"Why not?"

"I'm not going to have a killing on my conscience, Tommy. Not for you, not for anyone."

"Who's talking about killing? I told you the cop is fixed. Sonny just waves the gun and walks out of there."

"Suppose some doctor tries to stop him? Suppose he shoots someone

accidentally?"

Tommy sighed and sat down beside her. "Look at this."

"Get that gun away from me!"

"No, look at it." He released the clip of bullets into his waiting palm and removed one to show her. His fingers twisted the lead slug out of the brass cartridge and he tipped it upside down. "See? No powder—they're empty. Harmless."

"But—"

"It's just for effect, honey. He couldn't shoot anyone with this gun if he tried. Nobody's going to get hurt. Sonny Trupo's just going to walk out of that hospital and vanish from sight."

"I can't, Tommy. Too many things could go wrong."

"Did anything ever go wrong with me in charge before? Remember the time you picked up the money for me? What went wrong then?"

"Nothing," she admitted.

"This is the same. Nothing will go wrong."

She felt herself weakening, gazing into Tommy's deep blue eyes she wanted to trust so much.

"Let me think about it," she said at last. "Until tomorrow."

On Tuesday he was waiting in the apartment when she returned from work. He'd brought a bottle of champagne and some expensive food. "I thought we could eat in tonight, honey. I'll even cook it for you."

She looked over the packages. Then she said, "Tommy, I've decided not to do it."

"What? Why not? What's the trouble now?"

"You're forgetting one thing in this great plan of yours. Trupo runs away—providing he's feeling well enough to run anywhere—and the police find that hollowed-out book. Where does that leave me?"

"He's well enough," Tommy said. "They're moving him at the end of the week."

"Your information's good. I heard the same thing." She started opening the packages. "But what about the book?"

"I've got that figured too. You go back for it. You leave it with Trupo for an hour or so, and then you go back and ask him if he'd prefer something else. He'll find the gun right away from the weight of the book, and hide it under his sheets."

"The nurses change the sheets."

"In the morning, not at night. By morning he'll be gone."

"I don't know."

"You'll be doing it for me, honey."

"For you, or for the organization?"

"For me." He took the package from her hands and kissed her gently on the lips, and she could feel the bristles of his beard against her face.

On Wednesday evening, as she pushed the loaded book cart down the corridor to her first stop, she thought that she had never done anything so foolish and dangerous in her life. The book of poetry, with its hidden gun, was nestled safely out of sight behind the outer row of volumes—but what if it fell open as she was handing it to Trupo? What if the policeman on duty proved to be a poetry lover and asked to look through it? What if a nurse found the book before she could retrieve it?

But she was into it now, and she knew she would go through with it. The questions, the doubts, were forced to the back of her mind as she entered the first room and smiled down at the woman in the bed. "How are you today? Do you feel like reading some new books?" It was the same in the next room, and the next. When she reached Trupo's door she saw that it was closed, and the policeman was not in sight. Her heart skipped a beat. Could he have been moved to prison earlier than planned?

But then the door opened and two white-coated doctors came out. They had been examining Trupo, apparently, and the police officer was inside standing guard. "You're coming along fine," one doctor said over his shoulder. "A few more days."

Joanne entered the room behind her book cart, surprised to see Trupo sitting up in a chair. The police officer stopped her and reached down toward the cart. "What's this?"

She froze. "What?"

"A book on fishing. Can I borrow it to glance through?"

"Oh. Sure." Her heart started beating again, and she turned to the man in the chair. "How about you, sir?"

"Nothing today."

She pulled out the thick poetry volume. "There are some good things in here."

“Poetry?”

“Glance through it. I’ll stop on my way back and you can return it if you don’t like it.” Before he could say no, she forced the book into his lap.

Then she turned, pushing the book cart, and left the room without looking back.

She hurried through the rest of her rounds and returned in twenty minutes. Sonny Trupo was back in bed, and seemed asleep. She cleared her throat, and his eyes shot open, surveying her with new interest.

“Did you like the book?”

“No. Take it back.” He pulled it from under the covers and handed it to her. She knew from the weight of it that the gun had been removed. She had done what Tommy wanted.

He phoned her that night but he did not come over. She was a bit disappointed at first, but then she decided she would rather be alone. The night was dark and dreary, with fallen leaves still plastered to the pavement by an afternoon rain. She sat for a long time by her window, simply watching the street below.

Finally, at 11:30, she could stand it no longer. She decided to go to the hospital. Tommy would be there, waiting with the car. She had to see him, to gain his reassurance.

She drove by a well-lighted route, avoiding dark side streets. When she got there and parked her car, she spent a half-hour searching for Tommy, but he was nowhere in sight. Disappointed, she decided that the car had been merely parked there for Trupo to find. Tommy was already far away.

She was walking back to her car when she heard the shots from inside the hospital. It was just 12:25. She broke into a run, heading for the staff entrance. What had gone wrong? What!

The first floor was in confusion, with doctors and interns scrambling for the stairway.

On the third floor, a large group had collected outside the door of room 311. Joanne pushed her way through, afraid of what she might see.

The police officer on the midnight shift and a young doctor were kneeling beside the sprawled body of Sonny Trupo. “Dead,” the doctor said simply, finishing his examination.

The officer nodded. "He had a gun. He came at me with it. I had to shoot him."

Joanne turned away, her vision hazy with tears. She ran down the stairs and out to her car without speaking to anyone.

For a long time she simply drove around the city, wondering what to do. Finally, sometime after two o'clock, she returned home. The telephone in her apartment was ringing as she came in the door.

"Joanne? Where in hell have you been? I've been calling for an hour."

"I'm here, Tommy."

"Joanne, I have to talk to you about what happened at the hospital."

She gripped the receiver tighter. "We don't have to talk. I was there."

"There? At the hospital?"

"Yes." She felt very tired. "I know that Trupo is dead."

"Yeah. I just heard. It didn't work out the way I planned."

"It worked out exactly the way you planned, Tommy. Exactly!"

"What do you mean? Why does your voice sound so funny?"

"You killed Trupo. You killed him as surely as if you pulled the trigger yourself."

"That's crazy!"

"Is it, Tommy? The cop wasn't fixed, was he? All he saw was a guy who'd already had one gunfight with the police coming at him with a pistol. He did what any cop would do. He shot him dead."

"Hell, honey—why would I want him dead?"

"So he wouldn't talk. So he wouldn't tell what he knew about you and your friends. About who ordered the killing he was paid to do. Seeing him dead was a lot safer to you than seeing him escape."

"It wasn't like that!" Tommy insisted. "They both had guns . . ."

"But Trupo's gun was full of empty cartridges, remember? Empty cartridges that he never knew about. He showed the gun like you told him, and got shot dead by a cop who wasn't fixed."

"That was the mistake—the wrong cop was on duty!"

"No, Tommy. No, no! No mistake. You planned it all! If the cop was really fixed, you wouldn't have needed me. The cop could have slipped him the empty gun to make it look good. And what did you need the empty cartridges in the gun for? There's no way of seeing the bullets in

an automatic without removing the clip. The cop wouldn't know if it was loaded or not—so why go to the trouble of removing the powder from the cartridges? Only to fool Trupo into thinking it was loaded. To fool him into trying the escape, and maybe even pulling the trigger when he saw the cop was going to shoot. You couldn't trust Trupo with a loaded gun, though—because then maybe he would have really gotten away. And you wanted him dead!"

She was out of breath, gasping, and when she paused Tommy shouted into the telephone, "Joanne, don't do anything! I'm coming right over. I'm on my way over!"

He hung up and she sat staring at the telephone. Then she got up and lit a cigarette and worked at fighting the tears from her eyes. She waited by the window until she saw his car pull up across the street, then she picked up the phone and called the police.

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He who steals another man's words can find himself in deep trouble . . .

THE LAST PLAGIARISM

by **Bill Pronzini** and
Barry N. Malzberg



When Spohr brought his sedan around the last curve in the winding dirt-and-gravel road, he was surprised by the cabin he saw backed against Woodbine Lake. It was a small, weathered A-frame, fronted by two tall pines and a patch of weedy grass—not nearly as ornate or expensive as he had expected. In fact, it was the kind of place he had sometimes dreamed of owning himself, a simple, middle-class retreat better suited to a writer of modest desires than to a flamboyant hack like James

Zuckerman. Only he had never been able to afford such a retreat, and he had long ago resigned himself to the fact that he never would.

The Zuckermans of the world took this from me too, he thought bitterly. Along with my words and my ideas and my future.

He parked near the A-frame, reached across the seat for the mint copy of *Detective Mystery Stories* for September 1949, and stepped out into the mild spring sunshine. There was another car parked around to one side, a new British sports job, so Zuckerman was here as advertised. The author's biography which had appeared in the major-circulation men's magazine with "Run, the Tired Hunter" had said that he lived alone from March through July, following a rigid work schedule, "in a cabin on Woodbine Lake in upstate New York." A little unobtrusive detective work had gotten Spohr the exact location.

He crossed to the cabin. From inside he could hear the clacking of a typewriter, and when the sound continued after his knock he rapped harder, using the flat of his palm. Another five seconds passed; then the clacking ceased and Spohr heard heavy footsteps.

The man who opened the door was tall and bearded, dressed in a denim shirt, dungarees, and sandals, Zuckerman, all right: the author's photo in the slick had been a good likeness. He looked self-indulgently poor, the way most successful writers seemed to look. It was the failures like Spohr who wore suits and ties, who strove consciously for the illusion of elegance.

For ten years Spohr had wondered how he would feel if and when he came face to face with Zuckerman. He had thought he would probably seethe with rage and hatred. But now that the moment had arrived, those emotions were oddly blunted by weariness and a sense of hollow resignation. He would do what he had come here to do—make sure that "Run, the Tired Hunter" was Zuckerman's last plagiarism of the work of Lawrence Spohr—but he knew there would be little satisfaction in it. I'm denied even that, he thought.

Zuckerman was frowning at him. "If you're selling something—"

"I'm not selling anything," Spohr said. "Not any more."

"Well then? What do you want?"

"My name is Lawrence Spohr."

Zuckerman blinked and his mouth tightened. There was a moment of tenseness; then his eyes turned carefully blank, as if shutters were being drawn behind a pair of windows. "Is that supposed to mean

something to me?" he said.

"Suppose we talk inside."

"Talk about what?"

"Inside," Spohr said again and stepped forward, crowding the bigger man. Zuckerman gave ground, backing toward the center of the room, as Spohr came inside and shut the door.

Across the room was an old rolltop desk with a portable typewriter perched on it. The floor surrounding the desk was strewn with crumpled paper, stacks of old pulp magazines, recent issues of *Esquire* and *The New Yorker*. Spohr nodded slightly. This at least was the kind of thing he had expected to find.

Zuckerman said, "All right, you're inside. Now what's this all about?"

"Plagiarism," Spohr said, "as if you didn't know."

"What the hell is that supposed to mean?"

"Oh, come on, Zuckerman, don't play games with me. We both know you've been stealing my work for at least ten years, mine and probably a dozen other writers'."

"That's a goddamn lie," Zuckerman said, but his voice was nervous now. Little pinheads of sweat glistened on his forehead.

Spohr extended his file copy of *Detective Mystery Stories*. "Page fifty," he said. "'Sinners Die Young,' by Lawrence Spohr."

Zuckerman looked at the magazine but did not touch it.

"That's where you got the plot and the characterizations for 'Run, the Tired Hunter,'" Spohr said. "You dressed them up, changed them a little, but they're still mine."

"You can't prove that—"

"No, I can't prove it, damn you. I couldn't prove any of the other plagiarisms either. You're clever, you don't copy verbatim; you comb out plots, you rewrite and restructure just enough to leave a legal doubt. That's what the lawyers I've been to see in the past ten years have told me. I'd have had no chance of winning a lawsuit, even if I'd had the money to take you to court in the first place."

Zuckerman seemed to relax somewhat. "Then why did you come here?" he said.

Spohr went on as if he hadn't spoken. "You're the lowest form of pirate, Zuckerman. All a writer has is his work, and you take it away from him for your own ends. What did you get for 'Run, the Tired

unter'? Three thousand dollars? More? I got a penny a word for 'Sinners Die Young' twenty-eight years ago, one hundred dollars for ten thousand words, and it took me three weeks to write it because I'm a reful worker. Then I wasn't paid until three months after publication, and at that I had to put time into a lot of letters and phone calls before got the check. But what do you know or care about that sort of struggle? There's nothing inside you but self."

"I think I've listened to about enough of this—"

"Not yet, you haven't," Spohr said. "Because the thing is, you went the step too far; you got too complacent, you didn't think anybody would touch you after all these years. Well, I was able to live with all the other plagiarisms, but not this one. 'Run, the Tired Hunter' is going to be your last plagiarism, Zuckerman."

He took a revolver out of his jacket pocket.

Zuckerman's face went pale. He took two paces backward, lifting a hand as though to erect a wall between himself and the gun. "My God," he said, "put that away!"

"I'm going to use it," Spohr said grimly. "I've made up my mind."

"If you're trying to scare me, you've succeeded. Now put it away!"

"Is that what you think? That I came all the way up here just to put scare into you?"

"You can't *kill* me!" Zuckerman said. "For God's sake, man, you'll be caught if I turn up dead! You'll go to prison—"

"Oh no I won't. No one connects me with you."

"Those lawyers you went to—"

"They forgot I existed the minute I left their offices," Spohr said. "But it wouldn't matter anyway because you're not going to turn up dead. I was always pretty good at crime plotting, you should know that if anyone does. I'm going to shoot you, yes, but then I'm going to take your body out to the lake and weight it down and sink it. Then I'll come back here and pack up all your stuff and drive your car off the bluff two miles down the road. You'll just disappear without a trace. Maybe you'll even become part of literary folklore; maybe you'll be the Ambrose Bierce of the seventies."

Zuckerman's face was slick with sweat. "We can work something out," he said desperately. "I'll pay you, I'll give you a check for every cent I made off those stories of yours. We can go right now to my bank—"

"You don't understand," Spohr said. The gun seemed to have grown heavy in his hand and he had to bring the other hand over to steady it. "I don't want your damned money. It's tainted, you made it through lies and deception. My stories are forgotten, my career ended twenty years ago; this is all I've got left."

Zuckerman made a whimpering sound, groped his way to the worn couch, and sank onto it. He cupped his cheeks with shaking hands, squeezed his eyes shut.

The face of fear, Spohr thought abruptly, and nausea churned in the pit of his stomach. But I've got to go through with it. I can't lose my nerve now, he deserves to die—

"Don't kill me," Zuckerman whispered, "please, Spohr, please. Listen, there's got to be *some* way I can make it right for you."

"There's no way."

"Suppose I write a letter, a confession? We could take it down and have it notarized and then you could publish it in every magazine I've sold to in the past fifteen years, you could sue me for every dime I've got. Spohr?"

"No. You deserve to die."

"Not like this, not for what I've done. I'm a plagiarist, yes, but I never wanted it that way. I wanted to be a real writer like you, only I never had the tools, I was only good at using somebody else's visions. Is that something to die for? I'm begging you, Spohr—don't kill me. Let me write a confession. The world will know it was your work that made me successful, and that's all you really want, isn't it? You don't want to be a murderer any more than I wanted to be a plagiarist."

Spohr could feel himself weakening. Zuckerman was right: he did not want to be a murderer. He only craved justice, a little justice for all the indignities he had suffered. A letter of confession and a public exposure of Zuckerman would accomplish that . . .

Seconds passed, a full minute. Zuckerman's eyes pleaded with him. "All right," he said. "All right, damn you, I'll accept a confession. But it has to be airtight; I don't want you coming back later and saying I forced you into it under duress."

Relief made Zuckerman sag loosely on the couch. "Anything you say, Spohr," he said thickly. "Anything!"

"Get up."

Zuckerman stood on wobbly legs and crossed to the desk on the far

side of the room. Sitting before the typewriter, he inserted a fresh sheet of paper and began to type. Spohr moved behind him, standing so that he could read over his shoulder, and watched the black words of confession appear on the paper, becoming so absorbed in them that when Zuckerman glanced up from his typing, he did not shift his eyes from the paper—

Zuckerman's hands came off the keys in a sudden upward motion and his fingers clawed at Spohr's arm. Spohr was slow in reacting, slow in realizing that he had been holding the revolver loosely. He tried to pull the gun clear, but Zuckerman's hand closed around it and wrenched it free as he came to his feet and kicked the chair out of the way. All of the pleading and supplication had vanished from his face now and his eyes had a merciless sheen. The hand holding the revolver was far steadier than Spohr's had been.

"You're a fool," he said. He reached behind him with his free hand, tore the confession out of the typewriter, crumpled it, and threw it on the floor. "But you're a penny-a-word hack, so what else would you be but a fool?"

Staring at the gun, Spohr felt a sense of utter hopelessness overtake him, not only for himself but for all the people like him: the losers, the victims of circumstance.

"What are you going to do?" he said.

"What do you think?"

"You could call the police—"

"Don't be ridiculous. The last thing I can afford is a public spectacle involving you and your accusations. No, Spohr, I'm going to do exactly what you were too weak to do."

"You can't get away with shooting me."

"Can't I? You laid out the plot sequence, remember? All I have to do is rewrite it a little, switch the names of the characters."

Spohr understood in that moment the monstrous irony of what was happening. He heard himself whisper, "The last plagiarism . . ."

"The last plagiarism," Zuckerman repeated, nodding. And pulled the trigger.



What better place for intrigue than an island? . . .

THE NORTH CAROLINA CORRUPTION



The horrendous slam of the door shuddered an echo throughout the sitting room, mayhaps the entire Inn of the Bashful Swan. Cork shot a lazy glance at the closed portal which had just told him resoundingly that he was curt and rude. He shrugged at it and at the woman who had just stormed out of it.

"You must forgive her, sir," Mr. Amos Afflack, the lawyer, said

apologetically and with magisterial calm. "She is young and impetuous."

Cork drained the Apple Knock from his cup and gave forth with what I would call an insufferable sigh. "Of course," he said, "but don't put it down to some caprice of youth. It's really the pressure that boils up when a child finally realizes it is not immortal."

I put my own cup down with an emphatic thud. "It's all very well of you, Captain Cork, to wax philosophic, but you have just insulted a troubled young lady by calling her a fool. Where are your manners, sir?"

"My manners are akin to shopping for a hat, Oaks. I can only do what fits. Miss MacGregor's talk of visions and monsters is not of my size, so I deem her foolish—not a fool. While you are asking forgiveness for Miss MacGregor's hasty exit, Afflack, I will have to ask you to overlook my friend's pique with me. You see, we are not supposed to be here in North Carolina at all. This gentleman, Mr. Wellman Oaks, is my financial yeoman. His horizon is a balanced ledger and our sojourn here in Beaufort vexes him. Now tell me, Afflack, is there such a thing out there off the coast called the Red Soaring Fish?"

"Ah, you are a fisherman," Afflack said. "Yes, Captain, it's a wondrous denizen requiring two stout men to boat. You'll enjoy the battle."

"Hell, man, I came here to eat them, not fight them."

Afflack looked appalled. I was not. I knew this six-foot-six fakir who would rather devour seafood than make money. I have him well on his way to being the richest man in the colonies, and he shuns industry as the Red-whatever would repel a lure. This was June 1, the initial day of the second quarter of 1758, and we had much to do. There was the problem of delivery at the chocklit factory he owns in Connecticut. And the Horse Protection Agency had not turned a profit in two years. That was only a start on our complications. While on our way up from the Sugar Islands, a fellow passenger had told the Captain about a strange fish that had suddenly come into waters off Beaufort, and his mind stopped dead like a rundown clock. Nothing else would do but that we be put ashore—and here we were, waiting for Red something-or-other to be broiled and buttered and stuffed into his lazy maw.

"You say you haven't ever tasted the fish," Cork was saying, "but I can only assume that it is active and runs deep, so we can expect good,

dark, oily musculature. Vinegar could well temper that.”

I glowered anew at him. “This young woman is in the grip of a terror and you babble on about vinegar. Captain, I protest; you must help her.”

Now there was that smirk-a-mouth of his. He didn't have to fish for red soaring things. He had me, Wellman Oaks, on his line. He hauled me in, damn him.

“Well, well, you are actually asking me to become embroiled in a social puzzle, Oaks? What of all your entrepreneurial schemes? What of profits and ledgers and goading me to gold?”

“The girl needs help, Captain,” I pleaded.

“Well, if you insist, Oaks,” he smirked again. I could have bashed him with a buckbasket for his maneuvering me into finally sanctioning his idle dalliance in the solution of mysteries. Damn his eyes, he's clever.

“I'm just trying to be humane,” I said defensively. “Someone is trying to cheat Miss MacGregor out of a vast estate.”

“All right,” Cork said, “then let's to it. Mr. Afflack, your client was a bit agitated; so be good enough to put this matter in perspective for us. Would you like some more Knock?”

“Mercy, no.” The lawyer put up his palm. He was a curious specimen, compact as a young stunted bull. He had sure hands hanging from strong arms and stronger shoulders. He was in the latter part of his third decade, yet his teeth seemed good and his eyes quick. What made him curious was his uncertainty. I had put it down to bashfulness. In Cork's neighborhood, most people fall into that demeanor.

Since Afflack had refused the drink, Cork felt obligated to honor the flacon so it would not become lonely, and poured. The lawyer started to give us the perspective.

“Mind you, gentlemen, I have only what I have been told, and hearsay, sirs, is dangerous. First as a proclusion—”

“Spare us the Inns of Court procedure, Mr. Afflack,” Cork said. “Just cough it up, man. All I have now is that your client spent a night in a castle on an island off this coast, and was beset by monsters. I detest tales told *in medias res*; they are cruises without bearings.”

“She's a woman, is all,” I said.

Cork cast a stern eye at me. “Muliebrity is a poor defense, Oaks, and one that Miss MacGregor would reject. Despite her fiery temper

and obvious confusion, she is a strong individual."

"Precisely!" Afflack said. "Otherwise, I would have dismissed her case as the rantings of a lunatic . . ."

He stopped short because the door opened and Amy MacGregor stood squarely in its frame. Her Celtic red hair fell loosely about her sharply sculptured face and draped over her remarkably broad shoulders. Her sea-green eyes leveled at Cork. We were witnessing a rare event; a Scotswoman was about to apologize.

"I'm sorry my temper got the best of me, gentlemen," she said, stepping forward. "I know it sounds like madness, Captain Cork, and I don't blame you for not believing me."

"Miss MacGregor." Cork rose like a tree to his full height and brought a chair to the table. "When I said that belief in monsters was foolish, you didn't let me finish. Things can *appear* to be monstrous. Now please, Ma'am, sit down and tell us the problem from the beginning."

She sat and she did. It was an eerie tale, fit for All Hallows' Eve and not a warm summer afternoon. Yet as she told us in a soft voice flecked with a Highland burr, I felt a slight horripilation up my back.

Amy MacGregor had arrived in Beaufort only twenty-four hours before, having come down by coaster from Philadelphia. She had recently arrived in the American colonies in search of her uncle, Fergus Doone.

"My mother's brother went to sea from our home in Talisker on the Isle of Skye before I was born. The family assumed he was lost at sea, for not a word was heard from him in fifteen years or more. Then, out of the blue, a sailor arrived at our doorstep seven years ago with a packet of gold coins. The man told my mother that they were from her brother Fergus, who was now a captain in the American whaling trade. The money was gladly welcomed, gentlemen, for my father had passed on, leaving my mother and me to dip and scrape for a living at the washing tubs. The sailor, Rob Dougal by name, told us that he had served on my uncle's ship and was entrusted with his errand on his way home to Edinburgh. Of course, my mother was anxious to write to her brother, but Dougal said that was impossible, since the *Scimitar* roved the seven seas."

"Surely Captain Doone had a home port?" I queried.

"My mother's exact words, Mr. Oaks, but it seems that my uncle sold his catch at any port handy."

Cork grunted and sipped more Knock.

"Well, there we were with a sack of good fortune, but my mother was chagrined that her beloved benefactor was out of her reach for thank you's and affection. I was only twelve at the time, and in poor health. Had I not been so, I think she would have come to the colonies to search for him.

"Last winter, the fevers carried my mother off, and I was left alone in the world. The Isle of Skye held nothing for me and I decided to use what money I had left to come here for a new life and possible word of my uncle."

As she spoke, I found myself wondering if all the young bucks on the Isle of Skye were blind. Certainly this lassie was worth a wooing to keep her to home.

"I landed in Philadelphia and found work as a serving girl at the Inn of the Hanging Dog. I must have become an oddity around the Inn, for I was always inquiring after my uncle from travelers. Then two weeks ago what I thought was good fortune came my way. A seafaring man on his way to New York told me that he had heard of Captain Doone. He said he lived in a great castle on an island off the coast of North Carolina. I was overjoyed, gentlemen, and took passage on the next coaster for this place."

"The island is known as Twisted Lip," Afflack explained. "It gets its name from two rugged ridges that flank its small harbor. It lies about a mile to the southeast and I am told that the castle was actually a monastery built by monks from St. Augustine in the Floridas. It was abandoned years ago. Of course, that's also hearsay; I'm new in this area myself." Afflack seemed to be new to the law as well, for he surely loved its terminology.

Miss MacGregor's face grew dark as she went on.

"I was anxious to get to the island and hired a boy with a small sailboat and set off for my uncle's home. The lad put me ashore in the late afternoon and went back to the mainland, for a heavy fog was settling in. It was near dark when I reached the great stone house and pounded for admission. Finally, a man answered the door and he was both shocked and puzzled to see me standing there.

"I told him my name and mission and asked to see my uncle. You can imagine how I felt when he told me that my uncle was dead, lost at sea five years ago. Basker, that was the fellow's name, a tall, dark-

eyed man, told me I would have to return to the mainland immediately. He was quite upset when he learned that I had dismissed my transport. He wasn't even going to let me in until I insisted.

"I'll take you back myself," he snarled, but when he saw the heavy fog banks rolling up to his door, he knew a return passage was impossible.

"Everything I said seemed to upset him. Being tired and hungry, I offered to make myself some dinner, and he became alarmed beyond reason. He told me to follow him and, instead of taking me deeper into the house, he led me outside and along the west wall. My heart was pounding with fear, for the man could have been a scoundrel. We walked a short way in the fog until we reached an outside staircase. Ascending it, he led me to a wooden door in the castle wall, and then into a small chamber—no bigger than a cell.

"As frightened as I was, I demanded an explanation of why I was being treated in such a rude way. After all, I reminded him, I was the niece of the owner.

"'Former owner,' he corrected me. 'You see, Ma'am, your uncle left this place to me for loyal service as his first mate on the *Scimitar*. I can't take you back mainside till morning, so you are welcome to spend the night—but you must stay in this room. I will have food sent to you.'"

She stopped for a moment and closed her eyes. "The food was simple fare brought to me by a small creature of oriental cast. He spoke not a word, placed the tray on a small table, and left. I was about to pour some cider when I heard the door being locked from the outside. I was a virtual prisoner in a strange house. The room was solid stone from floor to ceiling with no way of escape—and indeed, if I got out, where would I go? But tears are not in my make-up, gentlemen, and I calmed myself and ate the meal. I was so tired from the long trip that the simple cot in the corner looked inviting. Perhaps I should have feared for my life, but fatigue had me in its grip and I drifted off in slumber."

"You are a brave young woman, Miss MacGregor," I complimented her. "Most men would have cringed in a corner."

"Any bravery I may have had was drained from me before the night was over, Mr. Oaks. I do not know how long I slept, but it must have been hours, when something woke me. It was a noise, or maybe some-

thing inside me that sensed danger. I opened my eyes and there before me was a living gargoyle in the candlelight. You say monsters don't exist, Captain Cork, but this ogre did. The nose and lips were bloated and twisted out of shape and the cheeks were shriveled. It was horrible!"

Afflack was on his feet pouring her a drink, which she took.

"Thank you. No matter how many times I tell it—relive it—it never gets easier. Of course I screamed, and the foul thing disappeared in a puff and I was left in the darkness until I heard the door being unlocked. Basker entered with a lantern and calmed me, suggesting I had experienced a bad dream, which of course was nonsense. I saw what I saw. At dawn, Basker ferried me back here. He was full of apologies for having been a poor host and gave me a sack of coins. To my surprise, it was a small fortune.

"He said my uncle would have wanted me to have it. It was all so strange that I sought out legal assistance, and after relating my story to Mr. Afflack he said we were in good luck because he had heard that the famous Captain Cork was in Beaufort. And so he brought me here."

"I suspect some wrongdoing, Captain," the lawyer said. "As I said when we first met, this Basker fellow could be doing the woman out of an estate."

"Of course," I agreed. "And this monster's appearance could have been a trick to scare her off."

Cork sighed. "First the man scares her and then he gives her money! How much did he give you, Miss MacGregor?"

"If it's a question of paying a fee for your services," she said, untying a small pouch from her belt and tossing several coins on the table, "I have plenty. Over 400 pounds. The rest is in a strongbox at Mr. Afflack's office."

Cork picked up one of the coins and fondled it. "I don't charge fees, Ma'am. I was interested in how far Basker would go to be rid of you." He stopped for a moment and then examined the coin more closely. "Is this doubloon one of the coins Basker gave you?"

"It is."

"Strange. This coin is many years old, and yet it looks newly minted."

I picked up one and, sure enough, it was a Spanish doubloon bearing

the imprint A.D. 1690 in Roman figures. "It looks polished," I commented.

"They are all like that," the young woman said.

"Polished or not," Afflack put in, "they bespeak an intent to bribe her. I feel that this Basker may have more than an island and a castle under his control. I intend to demand to see Captain Doone's last will and testament. None was ever filed for probate at the courthouse. I checked. Furthermore, I suspect that Captain Doone's death might not have been by natural causes."

Cork seemed not to be listening. "Tell me," he asked Miss MacGregor, "do you remember if the coins sent to your mother were bright like these?"

She smiled at a long-buried memory. "Definitely not. I remember because my mama scolded me for biting one. She said they were filthy, and they were. Why do you ask?"

"It is the curse of the fact-finder. Do you have any knowledge of Basker, Mr. Afflack—personal or hearsay?"

"Very little. All I could gather is that Judd Basker suddenly appeared here one day and took possession of the island. He had the deed transferring it from Captain Doone to himself. It could have been forged, however. There is an oriental fellow whom Miss MacGregor mentioned who lives out there with him.

"When Doone lived on the island between trips to sea, the only contact he had with any of the locals was with Diddlefield, the owner of this inn."

"Then by all means let's have at him. Oaks, will you fetch mine host? Thank you, Miss MacGregor. I suggest you put those coins away. Oh, Oaks, don't waste the trip. Have some more Knock sent up."

† Most innkeepers of our acquaintance seem to follow a common demeanor. They are usually round and hearty as plum puddings and cheery as their own firesides. Myles Diddlefield, however, looked more like a curate in a pot-poor parish; aloof and dour, tall and thin, and the worst walking advertisement for hospitality in God's creation. Despite the physical drawbacks of its owner, the Bashful Swan offered well-laid tables, fluffy clean beds, hot water at one's beck and call, and a general air of efficiency. Cork once said of Diddlefield that he would make an exemplary ship's master, for what he lacks in solicitude he

makes up in sedulity. An admirable trait for a man in charge.

"I trust everything is to your satisfaction, Captain," the innkeeper said with suspicion on being asked into our rooms.

"Quite passable, although I had hoped to find the Great Red Fish on my supper board before this."

"Your offer of 20 pounds has been broadcast to the fishermen hereabout, and should set them stirring for the prize."

I was irked, and my glance at Cork told him so. If he was going to pay out £20 in good coin for a fish, it had better be as big as a whale and have gold teeth. Of course he ignored my scathing glance and dug into the innkeeper.

"Why is this red sea creature so elusive, Diddlefield? Perhaps the trollers don't fish in proper waters. How about the lee of Twisted Lip? I've heard rumors it might be a feeding bed."

Diddlefield smiled as best he could. "Not a chance, Captain. No one hereabouts boats in there any more. Mr. Basker won't have it and he has a cannon to enforce it."

"Why, that's illegal," Afflack sputtered.

Cork calmed him. "Cannons have a quick repeal to law, sir." He turned his head back to our host. "Tell me about Mr. Basker. I hear you provision his island—or should I say Captain Doone's island?"

"It's Basker's island since the *Scimitar* went down."

"Where did the vessel sink?"

"I couldn't tell you, Captain. Captain Doone didn't spend much time on the island. They were always away at sea for two and three months at a time, and then home again for several weeks. Doone bought the island and the castle from the monks who lived out there. They gave up trying to convert people and went back to St. Augustine. Mr. Basker told me that the *Scimitar* went down in the Caribbean with all hands except himself and the Chinese fellow, One-Step-Ho."

"Did you provision the ship when she was home?"

"Of course, and a fine account it was, sir. The hands on the *Scimitar* ate like Royal Governors. Of course, with the ship gone and just two men living out there now, it's a piddling business. They come in twice a month for staples and a bit of meat."

"Nothing else?"

"Some tools now and then, and of course the lye." He chuckled as much as his sour face would allow. "They take as much of that as they

do flour and sugar. They must be plagued with rats out there, I can tell you."

"You're paid in gold coin, no doubt?" Cork asked.

"To be sure. Shiny ones at that."

"You look like a shrewd man, Diddlefield. Have you ever had those coins assayed?"

He was obviously flattered and forced another smile. "Each and every one as I get them. Those old doubloons are genuine, sir. It seems Mr. Basker likes to polish his money, which is all right with me. Captain Doone never did, but each man has his own ways."

"And I have mine. I think I will try my hand at catching that fish. Can you arrange for a boat for us?"

The innkeeper said he could and went to see to it.

"I have a suspicion," Amos Afflack said, "that this Basker might have led a mutiny against his master, killed him, and took over his estate. When Miss MacGregor popped up, he quickly gave her a large sum of money, thinking to be rid of her."

"Perhaps, but the fact that he gave her money at all puzzles me," Cork said. "She told him *and* us that she is Captain Doone's niece. Can you prove it, Miss MacGregor?"

The girl raised her eyebrows at what she felt was an impertinence. "Well, I *know* who I am, Captain!"

"We all do, I hope. But because I *say* I am Captain Jeremy Cork does not stand any test of proof. Oaks here can vouch for me, as can numerous friends, but you are new in these colonies with no friends, no vouchers so to speak—"

"I'm sure her birth is recorded," our lawyer interjected. "Did you bring letters or any memento to prove you are Doone's niece?"

The girl was truly angry. "I did not. I didn't come to claim an estate, you know, I came to see my mother's brother. Anyone on the Isle of Skye can attest to my identity."

"That is a geographical difficulty, my dear woman," Cork retorted. "But calm yourself. I am not questioning your word, but I doubt I would simply give you a bag of gold just because you say you are who you are."

"I think we are overlooking one point," I said. "Doone could have told Basker about his niece."

"How so? She wasn't even born when he left Skye. True, Basker

could have known of Doone's sister and assumed she had a child, but it doesn't add up. Suppose you could make a case at law, Afflack—how would you proceed?"

"We would first have to substantiate her birth and lineage with records on Skye. That, of course, would take time. That done, we would demand to see the will and testament of Captain Doone."

"And if there is none?"

"All the better, Captain. If Doone died intestate, we would claim a *per stirpes* share of the estate."

"I'm sorry," Miss MacGregor said, "but I'm confused."

"Lawyers have a way of doing that," Cork smirked. "A *per stirpes* share is a division of an estate to heirs in respect to their order of descent from the ancestor. It does not have to be an equal share."

"Correct, but in this case her mother was the only heir and Miss MacGregor is next in line. As I see it, she stands to take it *in toto*."

"Unless our sinister Mr. Basker states that he was given a deathbed testament by Doone. He conveniently has the Oriental as a witness to back him up. It might be wiser to take your 400 pounds and be satisfied, Miss MacGregor, for there are aspects of this case that tell me there are some secrets on that island that you might not care to know."

"What secrets? Have you an inkling, Captain?"

"No, Oaks, just a mere whiff. Some inconsistencies and disorders. Well, Miss MacGregor? It is your decision."

"If that man had something to do with my uncle's death, I owe it to my mother's memory to avenge him. In fact, gentlemen, with you at my side, I would like to go back to the island and confront Basker."

"Confront him with what, Madam?" Cork wanted to know. "Have a care lest you put zeal before common sense. I would suggest that Mr. Afflack proceed with his paperwork, and he will need particulars from you. In the meantime, Oaks and I will put our heads together and present you with a plan tomorrow."

When I had shut the door after them, I turned to Cork. "You must be losing your touch, sir. This is the first time you've had to *think* about a plan of action. Usually we are off on the scent with the first—what, are you going to bed? It's only six o'clock!"

He was turning down the covers of his bed and then, to my surprise, he stripped it of its sheets.

"The plan is in place and operating, Oaks, but it will work better if

Miss MacGregor is employed elsewhere. She's a strong-willed woman and not disposed to follow orders."

As he talked, I watched him with great curiosity. He took one of the sheets and cut a hole at its center and then put his head through it, letting the material drape around him like a tent. He tied the waist with a belt and took a pillowcase, cutting diagonally across it with the knife blade. He then fitted the larger piece into the neck opening of his new garment and pulled it up over his head.

"By jing, you look like a monk, sir."

He bowed humbly. "Friar Jeremy at your service. Come, Oaks, take your sheets and join the order. We have a date with a monastery."

It was past nine o'clock that same night when we pushed off in the boat that Diddlefield had procured for us. Cork chose that hour to catch the outgoing tide which would minimize our rowing to Twisted Lip. The night was moonless and fog was rolling in from the sea, which could make navigation difficult had Cork not had two stable boys build a large bonfire on the beach. Using the fire as a guide, he was sure he could hit the island by dead reckoning.

His plan was simple, yet ingenious. We would present ourselves as traveling monks who thought the castle was still a monastery. It was enough to get us in the door without arousing suspicion, and then, as Cork put it, we would make our chances as best we could. It was the part about making our chances that made me a bit anxious.

We had rowed for almost an hour, and the beach fire was a vague dot through the wisps of fog. "It can't be much farther, Oaks," he said from behind me. "I can feel the current changing now. Hold up, boat your oars." He whispered the last part and I obeyed in confusion. Ahead, from the water, I could hear and see nothing, and yet Cork scrambled to the prow and peered out into the blackness, his ear cocked into the wind.

Then, suddenly, I heard it above the plangency of the waves. It sounded like a moan or a droning noise and as it grew louder, it was a chant: "Hee stroke, hee stroke, hee stroke." It came across the water on a chilled wind like a ghostly whine. Now I could hear oars cutting into water and the sea-sweep against a hull. Then, through a break in the fog, I saw it, and felt a grab in my chest. There before us was a large longboat being sent through the water by twelve oarsmen. A

helmsman sat at the tiller under a lantern which hung from a short pole. "Hee stroke, hee stroke"—the chant grew louder as the boat slipped past without noticing us. I watched the scene with surprise and, I admit, a touch of terror. All the men wore monk's robes with cowls hooding their heads and shadowing their faces.

"What do you make of it?" I asked Cork as the chant faded in my ears.

"It confounds one premise, and yet props up another. Come, lad, to the oars."

He was right about being close to the island, for we drew into a small cove with twenty more strokes. Above the beach standing clear of the fog and mist loomed Doone's Castle, although from its vague outline the word "castle" was loosely applied. It was a two-storey structure running some fifty yards in length. At one end was a bell tower that rose twenty or so feet above the main house. Lights shone in the left wing near the tower.

We beached our boat and dragged it onto the sand.

"Are you clairvoyant?" I asked him as we rested. "Did you expect to find monks out here when you dreamed up these get-ups?"

"It was the last thing I expected, Oaks. We are not dealing with just two men—we have fifteen on our hands, and that calls for new tactics. Come, let us see if we can find the stairway that leads to the outside room where Miss MacGregor spent her night."

We scaled the hill to the house and after some prowling in the dark we came upon the wooden staircase and ascended it. The door was unlocked and we entered. Cork struck the flint on his Lucifer light and cast its beam about the room. Miss MacGregor's description of the place was accurate. It was stone from floor to ceiling, containing only a simple cot, a chair, and a rude table. There was a strong chemical odor in the air and Cork was sniffing like a hound.

"Look here," he said, casting light on a section of the floor next to the back wall. "This area has been washed recently, but these three squares of stone only. They are almost bleached."

"They smell awful."

"There is a stong lye odor. And see, Oaks, the washed squares lead out from the wall."

"Did Miss MacGregor's monster disappear through the wall?" I chuckled.

"Of course," he muttered. "Damnation, here we are, dressed as monks, standing in what was once a monastery, and it never occurred to me. It should have come to mind when the young woman told us her tale. A room cut off from the main house sounded strange at the time, but now that I see it in a monastic context . . . Yes, Oaks, we are standing in a *salle des pas perdus*." As he spoke he began tapping at the square wall bricks.

"What in creation is a *salle des pas perdus*?" I asked.

"Literally, the hall of the lost footsteps," he answered, and went on with his wall-tapping. "Before a religious novice took his final vows, he could elect to leave the order, but not before a night of contemplation. A separate room, separate from the monastery but still connected to it, was set up for the vigil. Symbolically, the contemplating novice still had the right to remain or leave—ah, here is an iron ring affixed to this top block."

He tugged at it and a section of the wall opened into a dark passage. "This explains the monster's sudden disappearance. Come quietly and be ready, Oaks," he said, and I followed him into the opening.

Cork was moving ahead quickly as if he knew where he was going, and I whispered, "I can still smell that odor."

"We also have a trail. See the floor? A two-foot path has been washed along here."

And so it was. We followed it across the hall and turned with it down a corridor. At its end, I could see a speck of light and, like moths, we were drawn to it. When we reached its source, it proved to be a small barred window high up in the wall. Cork's immense height allowed him to peer through easily.

"As I thought," he murmured.

He turned to me with a grave expression. "Perhaps it's best you don't look," he said.

"I have come this far," I said. "Give me a hand, please."

"As you please," he said, and made a stirrup with his hands.

If through some injustice I should find myself sentenced to hell at the final judgment, I could enter that underworld without a flinch. The sight before my eyes had hardened my senses to stone.

I was looking into a large chamber with a cooking hearth ablaze at one end. At its center was a long dining board and around it sat the

thirteen boatmen, their cowl tossed back to expose their features. It was a congregation of monsters. Their faces were bloated and twisted into horrible masks of evil disfigurement. My flesh crept as Cork lowered me to the floor. My gut was so tight I could hardly speak.

"Heaven help us," I finally managed to say. Cork did not get a chance to reply, for a voice behind us said, "Put your hands over your heads and turn slowly."

We did so and found ourselves facing a dark-haired man and a short Oriental, both holding a brace of pistols.

"Mr. Basker, I presume," Cork said quite coolly. "You are indeed a brave man. I think we should have a talk. It will be in the best interests of your secret."

Five minutes later, after we were led back through the darkened house, we were ushered into a homey chamber that appeared to be the sitting room of a small apartment. For all the ferocity of his eyes, Basker was limp. He sat in an easy chair while the Oriental, One-Step-Ho, brought wine. Cork had introduced ourselves on the way back from the horror chamber, and his reputation was known to our host.

"It was the girl, wasn't it?" he said with an air of defeat. "I knew she wasn't satisfied."

"Nor am I, completely," Cork said.

"Well, you know the worst." Basker's voice took on the color of despair. "What can I tell you?"

One-Step-Ho had put down goblets for us, and I seized mine, hoping the liquor would calm my nerves.

"How long have Captain Doone and his crew been like this?"

"Those ogres are Doone and the crew of the *Scimitar*?" I said. "Impossible."

"Good Lord, Oaks, has it not dawned on you yet that you are in a lazaretto?"

"Lepers!" I cried, dropping the goblet. "This is a leprosarium?" I clutched my throat in panic.

"Keep your head, man," Cork admonished. "Basker here has taken great care to isolate this end of the house. As I said, he is a brave man."

Basker sat forward and put his head in his hands, and then looked up.

"Five years. Five long years. I wasn't on the last cruise of the *Scimitar*. I was laid up with monkey fever and Doone left One-Step-Ho behind to nurse me. The Captain took the ship around the Cape and into the Pacific. They put in at a small island which they thought was a paradise and stayed on for over three months. When they found that there was leprosy among the natives, they fled the place and put to sea, but it was too late. One by one, they came down with the dread disease and were unable to make any port, for people would shun them.

"They sailed back here, scuttled the *Scimitar*, and walled themselves at the far end of the house. We communicate through the window."

Cork smirked in triumph. "And when Miss MacGregor suddenly arrived, you shut her away in the *salle des pas perdus* and informed your Captain. He came in at night to see her. She woke and screamed and he made a hasty retreat through the hidden passage. He must have noticed a family resemblance in the girl and ordered you to give her the money. The crew was careful to holystone and lye the floor areas on which he walked, leaving me a fine trail-marking."

"You are most observant. You intimated that you intend to keep our secret."

"Nothing would be gained by exposing you. I suggest that, when you soak the gold coins brought back on the *Scimitar* in lye water to insure they do not carry the disease, you dirty them up again. People take note of such things."

"I never thought of that," Basker said. "I am careful about buying enough food for two people to allay Diddlefield's suspicions. Those poor devils live on the fish that they catch each night. Can the girl be trusted?"

"Yes, I'll handle her. Well, Oaks, I think we have our answers."

Basker got to his feet. "I'll have One-Step-Ho show you to the door."

Cork put his palm up. "I confess to a flair for the dramatic. We will spend the few hours till dawn in the *salle*, and take our leave from there."

We were shown back through the secret door and watched it rumble to a close.

"What a nightmare," I said, shaking my head. "We are safe from contamination, are we not?"

"Yes, my old worry-wart, you touched nothing they handled."

"You know, I'm not a religious man, but it might be fitting if we said a prayer for these poor souls. To think of their agony now and over the years to come. Why, it's a living hell."

"Don't waste your time, Oaks. There is a perfect irony at work here."

"How can you be so callous, sir?"

"I don't waste my sympathy on cutthroats and pirates, my old son."

"Pirates?"

"Yes. That's what initially roused my curiosity. Diddlefield told us that the *Scimitar* was at sea for two or three months and then came back to port. Didn't that tell you something?"

"Of course I was caught up in other details; the cleansed coins and the lye purchases. Whaling ships are at sea for a year or more, until they've filled their rendering barrels with oil."

"And very few are paid off in Spanish doubloons, but it's common booty in the Caribbean. And what better place for a pirate's lair than an island?"

"I see the perfect irony, Captain. These men who have killed and pillaged for plunder now are chained to their lair and doomed to their fate."

"Ah, Oaks, there is hope for you as a poet yet. But the washing of the gold would have been better symbology. They can wash the blood off it and use it to buy lye to wash their clothes and chambers."

"Why the monks' robes, I wonder? Are they seeking expiation?"

Cork shrugged. "Probably more comfortable on their diseased bodies. Well, it's almost dawn, so we'll leave our footsteps lost behind us."

He opened the outer door and the cool morning sea air blew in, if only for a moment, to freshen that dismal place. It is a good thing to breathe on a dawn's air. Smacking and alive. I followed him, thinking to myself that I could be a poet. The dawn, like Cork, was definitely smacking and alive.



Sometimes you can actually weigh the difference . . .

THE SAME AS CASH



by

Fred

S. Tobey

No secret is a secret for long in a town as small as Careyville, and when it concerns a sum of money kept in hiding by a very old woman it might as well be posted on a bulletin board.

Everyone in Careyville believed Sarah Motley had money concealed somewhere in the ramshackle farmhouse where she had lived in seclusion since the death of her husband a few years before. Josiah Motley, who forty years earlier had lost a small fortune in the "bank holiday" of

the great Depression, had made no secret of his contempt for banks. There was, of course, wide disagreement among the townspeople as to just how much he had been able to salt away after the financial disaster, the guesses running all the way from a few hundred dollars in old banknotes to a sack of gold coins worth half a million. The general feeling, though, was that it was about twenty-five thousand dollars, and although no one seemed sure just where that round figure came from, it was thought that Sarah herself had once mentioned it. But having passed her ninety-third birthday, she tended sometimes to be a little vague in her statements.

On one point everyone in town was agreed, however: whatever the hoard amounted to, Sarah Motley was a very foolish old woman to keep the money in the house.

Reverend Paul Kilbourn, pastor of Sarah's church, was especially concerned, for he knew her childlike trust in the people of Careyville was not as justified now as it once might have been. The little town had its share of robberies and violent crime these days. If she did have money in the house, he wanted to see it moved to a safer place, not only for her sake but for another good and compelling reason: whatever she left was willed to the church. So Josiah Motley had said, at any rate, a short time before his death.

Still, the last thing the pastor wanted was to frighten Sarah half out of her wits by warning her of thieves who might come in the dark of night to rob her. He felt he must persuade her, instead, of the importance of putting the money where it would grow. Somehow he must convince her, despite what her husband had said about it, that the money would be safe in a bank.

The pastor had made a parish call on Sarah at least once a week since the death of her husband, but he had never mentioned the hidden money. One snowy December day he decided to talk with her about it.

"There's something I've hesitated to mention to you, Sarah," he said, "because I don't like to intrude in the personal affairs of my parishioners.

"But it's common talk around Careyville that Josiah concealed a large sum of money in this house, and that since his death you've continued to keep it here."

They were in the kitchen where Sarah spent most of her time of

ate, sitting in the old Boston rocker by the iron stove that furnished the only heat in the small old house.

She nodded assent in unison with the motion of the rocker.

"Josiah hated banks," she said. "We lost everything when Roosevelt closed the banks. Josiah said he'd never trust his money to a bank again."

"I understand how he felt," said the pastor, "but your money ought to be earning interest for you, not just lying idle here."

Sarah plucked at the hem of her dress with gnarled fingers.

"I don't need more money," she said. "The Social Security pays for my food. I only want the money for an emergency. If I should be sick." Her mouth took a petulant set and the tempo of her rocking increased.

The pastor rose and put a conciliatory hand on her shoulder.

"I must go, Sarah," he said, "but I'll come back to see you soon. Think about what I've said. The bank disaster was forty years ago. There are laws to protect you now, and bank deposits are guaranteed by the government. I know Josiah put his faith in cash, but today a bank account is perfectly secure. The little deposit book they give you is really the same as cash, Sarah."

She was staring at the wall, her watery blue eyes vacant. Had she heard him, or had her mind wandered off as he spoke? The pastor wasn't sure. He shook his head and left the house.

Wilbur Krell paused outside the door of the pastor's study, hearing voices within. Wilbur had been doing the maintenance work at the church for almost a year, ever since the day he drifted into town and showed up hungry at the church. The pastor had offered him a small amount to do some much-needed work on the grounds, and when the big man ran through the heavy labor as if it were child's play he had offered to keep him on. "We need a sexton," the pastor had said. "If you don't mind doing whatever sort of work there is, I can pay you a small salary." Wilbur took the job, and although he was a constant grumbler he had persisted—until a week ago when he had given his notice. Today he was quitting.

One of the voices coming from the study was the pastor's. The other Wilbur recognized as that of John Barton, a deacon and the church's senior trustee.

"I know how you feel about not wanting to scare the old lady," Barton was saying, "but we have the church to think about. Her money goes to us when Sarah Motley dies, and the Lord knows we need it. We've got to get her to put that money into a bank. Maybe *she* can afford to lose it, but we can't. Did you mention the will, and the church's interest?"

"No, I thought it might seem—well, selfish."

Barton snorted. "Selfish! There's nothing selfish about wanting it for the church. I think I'd better go with you next time you call on Sarah. Josiah and I were close friends. Sarah will remember that, and I think she'll listen to me."

The pastor's chair scraped the floor, and Wilbur left his listening post and hurried down the hall. But he was not quite fast enough—the pastor was in the hall before he could turn the corner.

"Did you want to see me about something, Wilbur?" the pastor called.

"No, sir. Just heading for the basement to clean the furnace room."

"You haven't changed your mind about leaving us, have you?"

The sexton turned and came slowly back along the corridor.

"Nope," he said, "I'll be heading south early in the morning."

"I'm sorry we can't pay you more to stay, but the budget just doesn't permit it." The pastor sighed. "There are so many things we could do if we only had the money."

Wilbur grinned. "You and me both, Reverend."

Snow was falling heavily at ten o'clock that night as Wilbur pushed open the unlocked front door of Sarah Motley's house.

Sarah was sitting in her rocking chair, close beside the stove. Often, when the nights were windy and cold, she slept in the chair; it was warmer than in her bed in the next room. She was not asleep when Wilbur arrived, but she felt no fear at first as he appeared in the doorway of the room and stood there, snow-covered, holding his hat in his two big hands. She peered at his face, thinking she must know him; these days her memory was confused and unpredictable.

Wilbur came straight to the point.

"You've got some money in this house, old lady," he said.

Sarah nodded assent. Was this someone from the church? In any event, she had no intention of denying the truth.

Wilbur's heart leaped. The rumors about the money were true then. "All right then, you tell me where you've got it stashed away. I'm going to take it and put it in a safe place for you."

Sarah's eyes widened. This could not be anyone the pastor had sent. She shook her head vigorously. Josiah had told her never to reveal their hiding place to a stranger.

"Oh, no," she said. Wilbur moved closer, and for the first time in years Sarah felt fear.

"Oh, yes," he said. "You'll tell me, all right." He clapped his dripping hat back onto his head, so that his hands were free.

Sarah shook her head again, her old heart pounding frantically. "I don't know who you are. Josiah said not to tell."

Wilbur found the thin little voice irritating. "You'll tell me, old woman, if you know what's good for you." His hand reached for Sarah's neck and began to tighten. "Just let me know when you're ready to talk."

It had not been Wilbur's first experience with forcible persuasion, but his earlier subjects had been less than half Sarah's age, and their hearts had been stronger. When, after what he thought was a reasonable time, Sarah made no sign, he released the pressure of his fingers and found to his astonishment that she was dead.

Unbelieving, Wilbur stared at her, then took hold of her shoulders and shook her. Dead!—and before he had got one word out of her about the hiding place! Now he would have to search the house until he found where the money was hidden.

He stood a moment clenching and unclenching his hands in frustration, as if by force of will he could bring Sarah and her secret back within his grasp. When he finally relaxed, he dropped his arms to his sides and began his search.

A musty smell of very old cellar dust rose up the stairwell. Wilbur began to descend, stepping with caution on the rickety half-logs that served as treads.

As he reached the bottom step he stood a moment, shielding his eyes from the glare of a bare light bulb that hung from a rafter. The walls were of rough fieldstone. The cellar was tiny, not more than half the area of the house, and empty except for a few rotting pieces of old furniture.

In the dry dirt of the floor there were footprints between the stair and the opposite wall. Wilbur's eyes followed their path to the end then fixed on a loose stone in the wall just above it. He burst into an involuntary laugh. Was this the hiding place? If it was, it might as well have its identity printed on it. Repeated removal and replacement had so distinguished the stone from its neighbors that there was no chance of missing it.

Stooping to avoid the low rafters, Wilbur proceeded to the opposite wall and took hold of the loose rock. It came out easily, and as he laid it on the floor and raised his eyes to the wall again he saw that the hole he had uncovered was nearly filled by the folds of a heavy canvas sack.

Ah, the church could whistle for its inheritance now! Wilbur grasped the sack by its drawstring and pulled it out of the cavity.

The instant his hand lifted the big bag he knew something was wrong. No matter what form the money was in, it should be heavier than this. But the drawstring had been pulled tight and meticulously knotted as if there were something of value inside. Cursing at the knot, Wilbur picked at it until he finally got it untied.

Opening the sack, he peered into it. It was not empty. Way down in the bottom was something small and black. Putting his arm in, he drew it out.

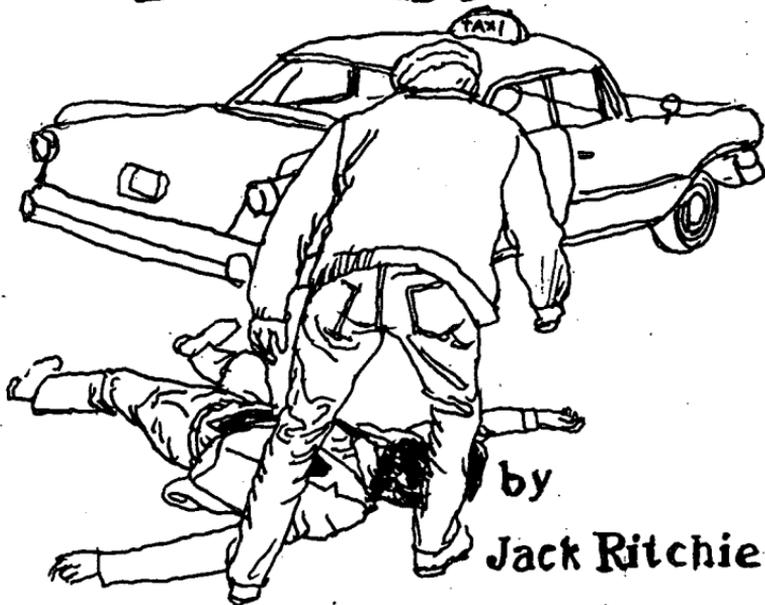
It was a passbook from the local savings bank, with a smell of newness about it. With fumbling fingers Wilbur opened it. There was just one entry, dated that day, showing a deposit of twenty-five thousand and seventeen dollars.

The pastor must have talked Sarah into depositing her money in the bank that very afternoon. And why wouldn't she hide the bankbook here? Hadn't she been assured that it was the same as cash?



the victim had been drinking, but that's not what the captain meant when he said he was shot when he was dead . . .

an odd pair of socks



by
Jack Ritchie

Ralph and I were waiting in the squad room for more information.

Ralph yawned. "The victim was wearing one blue sock and one green."

"Ah," I said. "That can tell us many things."

"Like what?"

"There is a strong possibility that the victim was color-blind. Either that, or he dressed in the dark."

"Maybe he was just blind."

"No, Ralph. He had a pair of prescription glasses in his jacket pocket."

Ralph chuckled. "I'll bet he's got another pair of socks just like the other at home."

"Not necessarily, Ralph. He could just have been frugal."

"What does frugal have to do with it?"

"Ralph, it is seldom that *both* of a pair of socks wear out at the same time. It is, though, common practice to throw away the entire pair when one of them wears out. However, a frugal person would *save* the good sock, anticipating the possibility of matching it in the future when a similarly colored pair wore out."

"Then why didn't he wait until he got a match-up?"

"This would indicate to me that the victim was a bachelor."

Ralph waited.

"Ralph, bachelors are notorious for putting off doing their laundry. There is a *strong* possibility that this frugal bachelor had run completely out of clean socks—except for the single blue sock and the green one. What else could he do? He put them on, knowing that his trouser legs would cover them anyway, and besides, who ever actually looks at your socks to see if they match?"

Ralph sighed. "Well, anyway, this is what we got solid. The victim was found dead in an alley off Fremont Street at six A.M. Sunday by a taxi driver taking a shortcut. The victim is approximately six foot two in his late twenties, and weighs about 200 pounds. He appears to have been shot once through the heart. He had no wallet on his person, so for now he is unidentified. It seems possible that he was accosted by a holdup man, resisted, and was shot."

Captain Witherspoon came into the squad room with some papers. "We checked out the victim's fingerprints. His name is Mickey Tyler. He has a record of assaults and batteries, one drunk and disorderly and one count on the possession of pornographic films. Also he drowned."

Ralph raised an eyebrow. "Drowned? His clothes weren't even wet?"

"I know. Probably wasn't wearing them when he drowned. Look like somebody dressed him after he was dead."

"What about the bullet hole in his heart?"

"It didn't kill him. He was shot when he was dead. The coroner

noticed that there was practically no bleeding. So he investigated and found the water in his lungs."

"Was it fresh or salt?" I asked.

Captain Witherspoon stared at me. "Henry, we are two thousand miles from the nearest ocean."

"True, Captain," I said. "True. But there is always the possibility that he was an employee of the city aquarium and drowned in one of the saltwater tanks."

"No. He worked for the Renaldi Landscaping Company. It's one of those outfits that comes around every week or so and cuts your grass and waters the flowers."

I rubbed my jaw. "I presume that chlorine was present in the fresh water in his lungs?"

Captain Witherspoon looked at me again. "Henry, why do you presume that there was chlorine in his lungs? Why couldn't he have drowned in a pond, a river, a lake?"

"Because he was either naked or wearing a swimming suit when he drowned, and the weather this time of the year is much too cold for anybody to go swimming—or wading, for that matter."

"Why couldn't he have drowned in a bathtub?"

"Were there any bruises or contusions? Was there any alcohol in his blood? Drugs?"

"No bruises, contusions, or bumps. Also no drugs. But there was some alcohol. Probably he had two or three drinks before he died."

I nodded. "The only way he could have drowned in a bathtub was if someone had held him under the water. But that would have taken some doing. After all, he was six foot two, weighed 200 pounds, and was in nearly full possession of his senses and strength. There would have had to be some marks or bruises."

Witherspoon agreed. "You're right, Henry. There was chlorine in the water in his lungs."

"That means he was pushed into the deep end of an indoor swimming pool and allowed to drown. Obviously he couldn't swim, or he would have. And then someone went through the rigmarole of dressing him and dumping him in an alley with a bullet through his heart. The purpose, apparently, was to make it seem as though Tyler had died somewhere else and in a different way. How long was he dead before his body was discovered?"

"The coroner places death at around midnight, give or take an hour."

I allowed my mind to compute for a moment. "Mickey Tyler was drowned in a private indoor swimming pool."

Witherspoon folded his arms. "The indoor swimming pool I'll accept, Henry. But why does it have to be a *private* indoor swimming pool? Couldn't he have drowned in a public natatorium, or a high-school pool, or something like that?"

"All the public pools were closed and locked at the time he died, which was around midnight Saturday. Besides, the alcohol in his blood suggests a private pool and a very private party. A tête-à-tête. No witnesses. Just the two of them. The murderess and her victim having a tryst."

"What's a tryst?" Ralph asked.

Captain Witherspoon explained it to him.

"Hell," Ralph said. "Why didn't you say so in the first place? So there they were having this tryst beside the swimming pool and she pushed him into the deep end. Why?"

"Ralph," I said. "How many people in the world can afford indoor swimming pools?"

"Not many," Ralph conceded.

"Exactly," I said. "And as a contrast, let us for a moment consider the socioeconomic status of the victim."

They considered and waited.

I continued. "It is my contention that the murderess subscribes to the services of the Renaldi Landscaping Company, and further that she is on Tyler's route. It is the old Lady Chatterley routine all over again, only this time with a yard boy. And I believe that we are looking for a rather strong woman. A Valkyrie type, I would imagine."

"Why?" both Ralph and Captain Witherspoon asked.

"Because she had to have the strength to haul him out of the pool, dress him, and drag him to a car."

"All right, Henry," Captain Witherspoon said. "And now *why* did she kill him?"

"My guess is blackmail. He wanted money or he would expose the whole affair. Perhaps she had been paying, but balked at his increasing demands. Or perhaps she refused to pay at all, lost her temper, and gave him that fatal push. But whatever it was, our murderess is a hefty

married woman—discontented, yes—but by no means ready to lose a home, a husband, and his income just because of a little affair.”

Captain Witherspoon rubbed the back of his neck for a while. “Married woman, strong and hefty, indoor swimming pool, on Tyler’s route? How many people could fit that?”

Ralph shrugged. “Let’s hope there’s at least one.”

Ralph and I went to the Renaldi Landscaping Company and got a list of the suburban homes Tyler had serviced. We drove to the area and began our questioning.

By late afternoon we found the one—and only—indoor swimming pool in the neighborhood.

We questioned the sole occupant of the house and from the evasive responses we received it was evident that we had struck pay dirt.

We took the suspect to headquarters for booking and then I went to the nearest window and brooded.

“Now, Henry,” Ralph said. “Don’t take it so hard. After all, you *did* lead us to the spot. And you were absolutely right. Except for that one detail.”

“Ralph,” I said, “when I say ‘tryst,’ I mean ‘*tryst*.’”

“I know,” Ralph said.

“And when I mean ‘*tryst*,’ I also mean a man and a woman. Not a man and another. . .”

“Times change,” Ralph said. “But one of them still wasn’t quite ready to let the world know about himself. Or to be blackmailed for it either.”

He helped me watch the traffic on the street below and then said, “Henry, I deduce that you are a frugal bachelor who’s running awful short on clean laundry.”

I looked down at my socks.

Damn. I had been hoping nobody would notice.



There are problems in going home again . . .

THE ULTIMATE BETRAYAL

by Stephen
Wasylyk



The house was modest, a small split level shadowed by the surrounding trees, the gravelled driveway gullied by the melting snows of winter and the driving rains of summer. Like many others in this mountain community, it seemed as if the plans and materials had been available wholesale and the color of the roof shingles the only option available to the buyer.

Sweeney Mako let the car idle for a moment before he turned into

the driveway, thinking that it really didn't make much difference what a house looked like, it was the people inside that counted. He turned the wheel, touched the accelerator, and pulled up behind the light-blue police cruiser parked in front of the garage.

He walked slowly to the front door and pressed the bell.

The man who opened the door was tall and broad-shouldered, his face bony, his medium-length hair blond; he wore a tan uniform decorated with dark-blue piping and a gleaming shield on his shirt pocket. From the napkin in his left hand Sweeney knew he had interrupted his breakfast.

The man looked at him, recognition delayed only by the soft hat that shadowed Sweeney's face. Then he grinned, pushed the door open quickly, and grasped Sweeney's biceps with strong hands as if he wanted to be sure that Sweeney didn't vanish. He stood like that for a long moment before he released him, took him by the elbow, and led him through the house to the kitchen where a dark-haired young woman in a quilted dressing gown leaned against the counter, sipping coffee.

"I think someone left him on the doorstep like a foundling, Trudy," said the man.

The woman's face softened with delight. She placed the cup down and came forward quickly to kiss Sweeney.

"Oh, welcome home!" she said. "How is my handsome brother?"

The tiredness and the tension in Sweeney eased a little and he gently touched her face. "I wasn't sure I still qualified for a welcome. Three years is a long time to neglect your only sister except for a card at Christmas."

She smiled. "We understood. Since mother died, we were about the only reason you had to come back here and you have a life of your own. Sit down and join Ralph for breakfast. Tell us what you've been doing since the last time you were here."

Sweeney sat and leaned back in the chair, enjoying the smell of percolating coffee, the hominess of the kitchen, and the pleasure in Trudy's eyes. Then he told them the story he had rehearsed, hoping the fact that he was lying didn't show in his face or his voice.

After breakfast, he walked out to the police car with Ralph.

"You promise you'll stay with us for a week?" said Ralph. "Is there

anything in particular you want to do?"

"Fish," said Sweeney. "For a long time, I've been wanting to get back out on the lake in one of Wilker Nolan's boats and relax. If I should catch something while I'm doing it, I wouldn't mind, but it isn't necessary."

The house was halfway up the side of one of the rolling mountains and Ralph looked out over the broad valley and the sparkling lake below. "I know how you feel. Why not do it right now? I'll lend you the gear and drop you off on the way to work. I can't join you but I might be able to tomorrow."

"I didn't know being sheriff was such a big job," said Sweeney.

Ralph shrugged. "It isn't. But it's a big county and I have a great deal of territory to cover, especially now that I am one deputy short." He grinned. "You wouldn't want the job, would you? The only qualifications are that you be over twenty-one, in good health, and never convicted of a felony. It helps if you can handle a gun, but since you grew up here, you can certainly do that."

"It isn't for me," said Sweeney.

"I didn't think it was," said Ralph. "After all, you're twenty-seven, assistant manager of a trucking company, and moving up. You probably make as much in a week as the deputy's job pays for a month."

"Some wise man once said that money isn't everything," said Sweeney.

Ralph looked at the house thoughtfully. "He probably wasn't paying off a big mortgage and trying to keep up with a fistful of bills every month." He held the car door open for Sweeney. "Let's go down to Wilker Nolan's."

Wilker Nolan's boat rental service was conducted from a rickety pier, a ramshackle boathouse, and a small office that looked as though they would never survive the next strong winter wind.

Ralph pulled the car into the small parking area and they walked up to Nolan, a minnow of a man well into his seventies and only slightly more hunched than when Sweeney had worked for him ten years previously. He shook Sweeney's hand warmly.

"I always said I never had anyone who took care of the boats as good as you did, Sweeney. I'm glad to see you back. You want a boat?"

"Yes—and a little advice about the best place to use it," said

Sweeney. "That is, if the fish still talk to you."

Nolan chuckled. "All it takes is a little common sense. 'Course, I've been fishing the lake for almost fifty years, so maybe I do have an edge."

"Why not the cove?" asked Ralph.

"Sure," said Nolan. "You remember, Sweeney?"

"I was thinking of trying the other end," said Sweeney.

"No," said Ralph. "The cove's best."

Nolan nodded. "Day like this with a south wind, it should be good."

"I see you have a boat left," said Sweeney.

"Yeah," said Nolan, "but some guy reserved it for the whole week. I don't like him much—big-mouth type, if you know what I mean—but his money is good."

"What time does he usually show up?" asked Ralph.

"He's usually out on the lake by now."

"Then forget him," said Ralph. "Give the boat to Sweeney."

"Rules say I give the man an hour. He's got ten minutes yet."

Ralph looked at Nolan, his face impassive.

Nolan grinned. "All right, you don't have to wave your badge at me. I said I didn't like the man anyway."

"Let's get the tackle," Ralph said to Sweeney.

He opened the trunk of the police car and pulled a tackle box and rod case from beneath a rifle and a shotgun.

"You travel well equipped," said Sweeney.

"I have to," said Ralph. "You never know what you might run into up here and you're usually too far from the office to go back for something you need. Call me when you're finished and I'll pick you up."

Tackle box in one hand, rod case in the other, Sweeney watched Ralph gun the car toward town, feeling that he hadn't been wrong to come back, feeling safe for the first time in months.

It took Sweeney ten minutes to cross the lake to the cove, the sun high enough now to promise a hot afternoon. Sweeney decided he'd stay only until noon and avoid the buildup of heat because he knew that at mid-day the slight breeze would disappear. He skirted the edge of the promontory that concealed the cove and steered toward the center, slowing the outboard gradually before turning it off and letting the boat drift.

The small finger-shaped cove was surrounded on the three sides by heavily wooded hills that rose steeply from the water's edge, an underbrush-choked barrier that seemed to prevent access to the lake, but Sweeney knew the appearance was deceptive, that at the head of the cove was a small sandy beach often used for picnics that was reached by a rocky path leading down from the road above.

Fifty yards away another small boat drifted. In it a stout man in a bright red shirt trailed his line.

He waved to Sweeney.

Sweeney waved back and fitted his rod together slowly, thinking that since he had chosen to come here, he should have told Ralph and Trudy the truth.

He leaned forward for a sinker from the tackle box, felt something tug violently at the back of his loose jacket, saw the splash and heard the unmistakable chirp a bullet makes when it hits water. Without thinking, he rolled over the side of the boat into the lake just as the report of the rifle rocketed from the hills.

Sweeney let himself sink for a moment, then stroked once and came up, his head barely above the surface, using the boat as a shield against the sniper.

A second report came and then there was silence. Sweeney waited, then cautiously peered around the bow of the boat. The other boat still drifted, but there was no sign of the man in the red shirt. Sweeney cursed softly, grasped the gunwale with both hands, and with strong slow kicks began to force his boat toward the other, keeping himself hidden from the rifleman, expecting to hear the rifle again, but there was only his own labored breath and the soft gurgling of the water. He felt a dull bump and cautiously edged around to the other boat, where he lifted himself up for a quick look inside.

The man in the red shirt lay still, awkwardly crumpled in the bottom of his boat.

Sweeney peered at the hill where the shots had come from and saw nothing.

Taking a deep breath, he heaved himself aboard, examined the man for signs of life, cursed again, then crossed back to his own boat, tied a line from the dead man's to his, and headed back to Wilker Nolan's boathouse, feeling a coldness that had nothing to do with his wet clothing. . .

Several hours later, he sat with Trudy and watched Ralph pace the small living room.

"I don't understand it," Ralph said. "The man had no enemies. He was just a hardware-store employee from the next town. We've all known him for years. Why should someone want to kill him?"

"He was a witness," said Sweeney.

"A witness to what?"

Things had a way of boxing you in, thought Sweeney, buffeting you from side to side and gradually forcing you into a position where you had to make a choice. And you made it and the process started all over again. It was never any easier, no matter what choice you made. All you could hope was that maybe someday if you made enough right choices you could walk free.

"I told you I was shot at *first*," he said. "The rifleman missed, but he couldn't know that, because when he fired I went over the side. He probably assumed the bullet had knocked me overboard. He fired once more and killed the other man. I was the target, not him."

Ralph scrubbed at his face with one hand. "You want to tell me why someone would want to kill you?"

Trudy's lips parted and closed as if she had intended to say something but changed her mind.

"You asked me why I haven't been here to see you in several years," said Sweeney. "I told you I've been very busy. That's not the truth. The truth is that I was ashamed."

"Ashamed?" asked Trudy.

"I didn't want to lie," said Sweeney. "I didn't want to come here and pretend that everything was fine, knowing that I was enough of a crook that my own brother-in-law wouldn't hesitate to put me in jail."

Ralph's eyes were expressionless. "You'll have to explain."

Sweeney walked to the window and looked out over the valley. "As far as you were concerned, I was the assistant manager of a trucking company. What you didn't know was that the company was a syndicate-backed operation, making far more money hauling illegal merchandise than it ever made from legitimate shipments. I was part of it. I was paid to be part of it and I did as I was told."

Ralph's voice was low. "Just tell me. Why did you have to be part of it? You knew better than to get in, and once in you could always have walked out."

"Money," said Sweeney. "A great deal of money. You want it on the line, all right—I went for the money. Nothing else. The trouble was that after a time, I didn't want it any longer. I guess it takes a special kind of conscience to live as a thief and I don't have it, but you're wrong that I could have walked out. Once you're into a syndicate you stay in, and maybe I'd *still* be in except for one thing. Helping run a company that handles illegal merchandise is bad enough. Murder is worse."

"My God," said Trudy. "You don't mean that you—?"

"Not me," said Sweeney, "but I was there and I saw it. One of our drivers lost a shipment. He claimed he had been hijacked, but management didn't buy that. They thought he had sold out and wanted him killed as a lesson to the others. I was working late that night and either they didn't realize I was there or they had forgotten. I walked right into it before I knew what was happening. For a time, I thought I would join the driver but they must have decided they were already in too deep. When I walked out of that place, I decided that was it. I wasn't going to stay with it and I wasn't going to run. I called the D.A., set up a meeting, and told him I was willing to testify. That was six weeks ago. Ever since, I've been living in a hotel room guarded by detectives around the clock, knowing that the people I worked for had to make a try for me because without me there would be no case. And they were running out of time because the trial comes up next week."

"You should never have left that hotel room," said Ralph.

"I had no choice," said Sweeney. "I told you they had to make a try and they did. Two nights ago the detective I was with became careless. We had been expecting a waiter to bring our dinner, and when the knock came he didn't bother to check first. Even if he had, it might not have made any difference. I don't know how they found me except that there must be a leak in the D.A.'s office. Anyway, the man pushing the cart wearing the waiter's coat waited until he was in the room. then pulled a gun and shot the detective. I suppose he took him first because he had a gun and I didn't, but he was close enough to me so that I decked him with an ashtray. I had no way of knowing if there was more than one so I got out the back way, thinking that if I disappeared they would just assume the D.A. had moved me. If no one knew where I was, I could take care of myself for a week and then go back for the trial. I dropped my car halfway here, picked up a rental,

and checked into a motel for the night. I left at dawn this morning. No one could have followed me, so I suppose when they discovered the D.A. didn't have me they sent someone up here to wait on the chance I might show up."

"But how would they know you'd come here and particularly to us?" Ralph asked.

"You don't get into those deals without being checked out," said Sweeney. "Think back three years ago. There would have had to be someone up here asking questions."

"Insurance," said Trudy.

They looked at her.

"A man came to me three years ago, before Ralph became sheriff. He said he was conducting a routine investigation because Sweeney had applied for a policy and I was listed as beneficiary."

"That's it," said Ralph. "They could have staked out the house, tailed us, seen you take the boat, and followed on the road that runs around the lake."

Sweeney threw up his hands. "I didn't want to cause anyone any trouble, particularly you. Listen, I'll just get in the car and leave. I'll find somewhere to hide out for a week."

"No," said Ralph. "I can't let you leave."

"You don't understand," said Sweeney. "You saw what happened to the man in the boat. Once they know I'm still alive, they'll try again. If you or Trudy is with me— No, I should have had more sense than to come here in the first place."

"Coming here was the smartest thing you could have done," said Ralph. "But you should have told me when you walked in. If you had, that man in the boat might still be alive. I'll tell you what I'm going to do, and what I would have done if you had told me. I'm putting you in a cell, not because I'm wearing a badge and you're in trouble with the law, but because that's the best way I know how to protect you. No one is going to get past me or my deputy. We'll call the D.A. and tell him where you are and he can send a couple of men to help out. We'll keep you there until the trial. What kind of deal did you make with the D.A.?"

"I didn't ask for a deal," said Sweeney. "I was willing to testify no matter what happened, but he's offering immunity from prosecution because all I'd be liable for would be receiving and transporting stolen

goods and contraband. He's content to put the company out of business and get the others for murder. This isn't the biggest case in the world—it's not going to shake up the city or turn anything around. All the crooks will still be in business except for the two I'll send to jail—and if they kill me first, even they don't go. What it comes down to is that it's really important to only three people—the two of them and me."

"More people than that," said Trudy. "It's important to us too." She came over to Sweeney and hugged him.

Ralph drove Sweeney to the sheriff's office in the basement of the county courthouse building.

"First I'll call the D.A.," he said. "I want to discuss arrangements."

Twenty minutes later, he hung up. "He's not agreeable to you spending the rest of the week here. He's sending two men to bring you back. I couldn't refuse because he'll just get a warrant. They should be here in about three hours. I suggest you get into a cell and relax because whoever shot at you is still out there and that means I have to look for someone who may have noticed a car on the lake road and check on whether anyone noticed a stranger casing my house." He indicated a young deputy who was seated at a desk. "Deger here will be in the office with his shotgun handy. No one is going to get by him."

He led Sweeney down a corridor behind the office that had a small cell on either side and ushered him into one. "There's a back door that is locked from the inside, so no one can get in without going through the office. Since I don't expect you to go anywhere, I'll leave the cell door unlocked. If you want anything, see Deger."

He left and Sweeney lowered himself onto the cot, his hands clasped behind his neck. He forced his mind to remain blank because he had the feeling that if he let his thoughts take hold, he might crack up.

He was running with agonizing slowness while a dozen guns poured a steady stream of fire at him, when suddenly there was a man standing before him with a large automatic trained on his chest at point-blank range and Sweeney stopped, frozen, braced for the shock of the bullet. Then he woke to Ralph shaking his shoulder.

"I thought you'd like some dinner," said Ralph. "Do you want to go out or shall we send for something?"

Sweeney sat until the dream-fear faded and the tightness inside him is gone.

"Are the men from the D.A. here yet?"

"No."

"How about you?" asked Sweeney. "Have you made any progress?"

"Not really. We found the place from where the man could have ed, but there were no spent casings on the ground. There's a serce station at the intersection at the north end of the lake road and e man there reports noticing only one car anywhere near the time of e shooting and that was driven by a young fellow named Loft who is been here all week with his wife. I talked to Loft myself. He says e didn't see anyone or anything on the road while he was on it, but e couldn't remember exactly what time he was there."

Sweeney stretched. "If that's the case, the man is still out there, so e'd better have some food sent in."

Ralph nodded. "I can't disagree with that."

An hour later, Sweeney tossed his empty coffee container into Deger's wastebasket and leaned back. He hadn't realized how hungry he ad been. Ralph was at his desk, while Deger leaned against a filing abinet.

A man opened the door of the office and stepped inside, followed by another. The first man was short and bull-necked, with a flat nose and protruding chin. The second man was tall and younger, well tanned, his hair brown but partially bleached by the sun.

The first man asked. "Which of you is the sheriff?"

Ralph stepped forward.

"My name is Collins," said the man. "This is Rudenko. We're from he D.A.'s office." He flashed an I.D. folder, the silver badge gleaming, before he replaced it in his pocket. He indicated Sweeney. "Is this he man we came for?"

"Yes," said Ralph.

"It's a long drive back, so we'll just take him and go if you don't mind."

"I mind," said Ralph, "but I can't do anything about it."

"I can," said Sweeney. He scooped up Deger's shotgun and leveled t at the two men.

"Just stand still," he snapped.

Collins's eyes were flat. "What's going on?"

"Nothing that can't be straightened out if I'm wrong," said Sweeney. "Both of you. Hands behind the neck."

They obeyed, their faces cold and impassive.

"From behind him, Deger," said Sweeney. "Take his I.D. card and bring it to me."

Deger did as he was told.

Sweeney glanced at the I.D. "This is phony," he said.

Ralph's gun was in his hand. "Shake them both down," he told Deger. "From the top of their heads to their toes. Clean out their pocket and cuff their hands behind their backs."

The younger man with the sun-bleached hair seemed to stiffen.

"Don't do it," Sweeney warned softly. "This thing will blow you right through the door."

The blond man smiled and shrugged, his elbows moving forward, and Ralph yelled, "*Stand still!*" The blond man, surprised, opened his mouth to say something and Ralph shot him, the heavy slug driving him up against the door, his eyes wide in astonishment. The man who had said he was Collins yelled something, his hand darting under his coat, and Ralph shot him too.

The smell of gunpowder hung heavy in the small office, the silence almost ear-aching after the thunderous reports.

Sweeney swallowed and lowered the shotgun. "Get an ambulance," he said to Deger.

His face white, Deger dropped to one knee alongside the bodies. He raised his head. "No hurry."

"Why?" Sweeney asked Ralph. "It wasn't necessary."

"You saw them," said Ralph. He pointed. "That one was going for his gun."

"Only because you shot his partner and he didn't do a damn thing to deserve it."

"I thought he was bringing his hands down," said Ralph. His eyes narrowed. "What are you trying to say? You should be glad they're dead. Whoever they are, they're not the detectives the D.A. sent. What made you suspicious about them anyway?"

"The I.D. came and went too fast," said Sweeney. "And the other's hair was bleached by the sun and he was too tanned. That takes plenty of time on the beach at the seashore and no D.A.'s man gets that much time off."

"You'd better go back to the cell," said Ralph. "We'll take care of things here. I'll call the D.A. and tell him what happened."

Sweeney walked back down the corridor to the cells but he kept on going to the double-bolted back door, where he slid the bolts loose and stepped out into the growing darkness. He followed the walk around to the front of the building to the broad lawn, bypassing the small knot of people standing at the door to the sheriff's office. He saw Wilker Nolan's small pickup and headed for it when two men left a car and came toward him.

"This way, Sweeney," said one.

Sweeney nodded. "Fergus, isn't it? I've seen you in the D.A.'s office."

"Yeah," said Fergus. He indicated the other man. "This is Slattery. I don't think you know him. Are you ready to go?"

"One stop first," said Sweeney.

Fergus gestured toward the knot of men. "What's going on in there? Someone said there was a shooting."

"A couple of hoods tried to pass themselves off as you two and pick me up. The sheriff shot them both."

Fergus stopped and stared at him. "What the hell. How did anyone know where you were? The D.A. told only the two of us."

"How did they know where the hotel room was? There has to be a leak in the office."

"No," said Fergus. "There was no leak on that. The waiter put two and two together and spread the word around because he figured someone had to be looking for you. He made himself a hundred dollars with the information but he can't spend it because he's in a cell." He took Sweeney's arm. "Let's get out of here before that sheriff decides he needs you more than we do. Where do you want to go?"

Sweeney directed them to Ralph's house, left the car, and tapped at the door. Trudy opened it, smiled, and looked beyond him. "Where's Ralph?"

"He'll be along," said Sweeney. "I just stopped to say goodbye and to leave the keys to the car. Will you see that it gets back to the rental office?"

She pulled at his arm. "You can't just run away like this. Come in for a minute."

Sweeney stood in the center of the small living room.

"Ralph told me you would be going back with two detectives. Are they in the car?"

"Yes," said Sweeney. He took a few steps away from her, turned, and came back. "This afternoon, when I told you why I was here, you already knew, didn't you?"

She folded her arms and lifted her chin. "No."

"Some people lie well," said Sweeney. "You don't. How did you find out?"

Her eyes dropped. "The district attorney called the morning after you escaped from the hotel room. He suspected they hadn't taken you but that you had just run away and he thought you might come here. He spoke to Ralph, not only because he's county sheriff but because he's your brother-in-law. Ralph and I talked it over. If you came here, it was because you trusted us and if you wanted to tell us what it was all about, fine—if you didn't, that was fine too. We decided we would go along with whatever you wanted to do."

"I see," said Sweeney.

Her lips tightened and she hugged herself, her face suddenly covered with a sheen of perspiration.

"You're not well!" said Sweeney.

She smiled. "Just a woman thing, Sweeney. The doctor says it should all go away soon but if it doesn't there will be an operation that will take care of it."

"How long has it been going on?" asked Sweeney.

"Six months," she said.

Sweeney kissed her forehead gently. "Take care of yourself."

He closed the door behind him. It was completely dark now, the stars close-packed and gleaming, the air soft. As he descended the steps, Ralph's official car wheeled into the driveway, tires squealing, the red roof lights flashing.

Sweeney walked toward the car as Ralph opened the door.

"Where do you think you're going?" asked Ralph.

"Back," said Sweeney. "With the men who were supposed to pick me up. They'll put me into another hotel room with a guard and this time I'll stay."

"I'd better check them out," said Ralph.

"Forget it," said Sweeney. "The badges are gold this time."

"What does that mean?"

"It was more than the looks of the two in the office. They could fake the photo and the rest of the card but not the badges. Either they didn't know or didn't care, but D.A. detectives carry gold, not silver."

"I didn't know that," said Ralph.

"It didn't matter. They didn't expect anyone to examine that I.D. very closely."

"What are you talking about?"

Sweeney's voice was weary. "I came here this morning and had breakfast with you and we talked a little and then we left the house. When I said I would like to do some fishing, you suggested that I start right then and there. You took me to Wilker Nolan and talked him into giving me the boat and insisted the best fishing was in the cove. Less than three hours after I arrived, I was out on the lake and I hadn't even wet my line when the shots came. Now that was pretty fast, even if someone had been watching the house and had seen me—and I know damn well no one followed us to the lake. So there were only two people who knew I would be in that boat in the cove—you and Wilker Nolan, and Nolan's eyes aren't good enough to shoot at that distance. It had to be you. You drove around the lake and took the rifle from the trunk of your car and tried to kill me."

Ralph's voice was soft. "My God, I'm your brother-in-law. Do you know what you're accusing me of?"

Sweeney leaned against the side of the car. "I was sure the man in the other boat was killed because he was a witness—but a witness to what? He'd have heard the shot and maybe seen me ditch the boat and looked up on the hill to where the report came from. But what could he see? At that distance, all he would have seen was a car and a man, both too far away to be identified." Sweeney's voice grew hard. "Unless there was something distinctive like roof lights on a light-blue car or a wide-brimmed hat on the man."

"You're paranoid," said Ralph.

"A paranoid is subject to delusions," said Sweeney. "Your killing those two men was no delusion. How did they know where I was and that two men from the D.A.'s office were due to pick me up?"

"You said yourself there had to be a leak in the office because they found your hotel room the other night."

"That leak was plugged," said Sweeney. "It had to be you again. Trudy told me the D.A. called. I'm sure the people who wanted me dead contacted you too. They wouldn't come right out and offer you a bribe so that you'd have an excuse to slap them in jail, they'd just plant the seed that you could collect a great deal of money if you arranged for me to be dead."

"Do you think I could do something like that to Trudy?"

"All you have to do is look me in the eye and deny it," said Sweeney.

Ralph looked at the ground for a long time and then he sighed, the sound almost a moan. "I guess I was crazy, Sweeney—that temporary insanity lawyers always bring up. For just a few hours, I lost sight of everything but how the money would pay off the mortgage and take off the pressure of the medical bills, maybe let me give up the sheriff's badge and buy a little business so that Trudy and I could live a little better. I don't regret downing the two men in the office. They would have killed us if they had the chance. I do regret the man in the boat. He had no part in any of this and there's no way I can justify that. But the worst thing is what I tried to do to you. Go with the men, Sweeney. Do what you have to do and come back here as quickly as you can because Trudy will need you."

Sweeney left him, the gravel crunching under his shoes, and he had reached the car when the shot came. He whirled to see the blood-red roof lights bathing Ralph's collapsing body and he felt as if he was witnessing the final scene in a macabre nightmare. Fergus and Slattery burst from the car and ran toward Ralph as Trudy came from the house, her scream a shrill keening in the night. Sweeney pressed his forehead against the cool metal of the car roof and told himself he understood.

To kill was one thing. To sell a man's life was another. Ralph could never have lived with that because it was the ultimate betrayal.



He was the Wonder Child, and his predictions were meant to come true . . .

THE SEVENTH SON

by
Jean
Darling



Now then, start at the beginning and don't leave anything out," Connors said, opening his collar. The man sitting on the other side of the desk stared down at his clasped hands. He licked his lips and said nothing.

"All right." Connors was losing patience. "Your name is Timothy Malone. You were born in 1937 in Skibbereen, West Cork. You're married to—"

"Ted." Malone spoke for the first time.

"What's Ted?" Connors asked.

"Ted, not Timothy," Malone said, still looking down at his hands.

Connors riffled through some papers, "It says here your name is Timothy Finbarr Malone."

"Ted. Always called Ted."

"Um. You're married to Moira Kennedy Malone, born in Dublin 1941, and you have one son, Malachy Stephen Malone, seven years old last July fifth." By the window a fresh-faced young man sat with ballpoint pen poised above a blue-lined pad. Rain tapped against the glass.

Connors lit a cigarette.

"Can I have a smoke?" Malone asked.

"You can, of course, as soon as you tell me what I want to know." Connors blew a tantalizing mouthful of smoke across the desk. "Well, Timothy, I'm waiting."

"Ted." Malone's jaw pushed forward in stubborn refusal to speak. Another puff of smoke swirled past his face. "I'll take a cigarette first," he mumbled.

Connors swung the chair around to face the window. He watched the rain splash in the courtyard below. The young man, eyes closed, chewed the end of the ballpoint. Malone looked up from his hands. "Look, I said I'll tell you, but I want a cigarette first."

Connors rocked back and forth, still looking out the window. At last, he swiveled around and shoved pack and matches across the desk to Malone. With fumbling hands, Malone lit up.

"That's good!" he breathed, tucking one trembling hand beneath his leg. He was a small man marked with the telltale signs of the heavy drinker. He sucked hungrily at the cigarette. "I don't know where you want me to begin."

"Your wife took Malachy in to the City Center to shop on December seventeenth. The boy was then three and a half years old. At two o'clock in the afternoon, they went to the postoffice to mail Christmas cards. They came out, the boy ran up to a complete stranger, a woman, and said, 'Goodbye, Mrs.' to her. The woman then stepped off the curb into the path of a bus on O'Connell Street. She was killed instantly."

"These aren't bad, you know. Filter tips. Myself, I always smoke the

untipped ones." Malone rolled the cigarette between his fingers.

"Look, you've had your cigarette. Is what I just said correct?"

"Oh yes, you're right. Malachy's a seventh son, you know. Seventh son of a seventh son. He was born with a caul, wore it in a little bag pinned on his dress." Malone lit a second cigarette from the half-smoked stub of the first. His eyes slithered to the young man by the window, then crept back behind shutters. "Like you were sayin', Malachy ran over to the old one and sure if she didn't bend down to the darlin' boy, him holdin' up his little arms and all. 'Goodbye, Mrs.," Malachy shouts, just like that, 'Goodbye, Mrs.' The woman was surprised, of course, her not knowing Malachy, you know. But she was well able for it, and leanin' down she says, 'Goodbye, pet,' and walks off the footpath right in front of a Number Three bus. I used to be a conductor for C.I.E. on the Number Three to Sandymount, that's why I remember so well which bus it was. She was killed dead, of course."

Connors listened, chin against steepled hands. The young man's pen flew over the page. A spider in the corner of the room was trussing up a newly caught fly.

"Now several people who were sellin' flags for charity saw what happened and sure if they didn't start roarin' about what Malachy said to the old one. The police talked to Malachy and the wife. All the newspapers sent reporters and photographers and next morning there was Malachy in the *Press* and the *Independent* looking the angel he was."

Connors picked up a scrapbook from the floor by his feet. "Yes, I have an album of press cuttings right here. Your wife gave it to me." He leafed through the album filled with two- and three-column pictures of an angelic-looking child, his head haloed with shining curls—though later pages revealed a rather sorrowful child of seven with a down-drawn mouth. Dozens of articles told of cures, predictions, and words of wisdom attributed to the Wonder Child, the clairvoyant, the healer, Malachy Malone. Most frequently, he was pictured in "The Healing Hall," where the sick and crippled came for the laying on of hands. The first Healing Hall had been small and poor, the second palatial. There were numerous pictures of the estate bought with the donations of Malachy's followers, a Georgian mansion, huge and elegant, overlooking the Scalp, a hill of shale in the Wicklow mountains.

"A few days after the O'Connell Street incident, Malachy ran next door and told our neighbor, Mrs. O'Brien, to find her little girl, Fiona.

Mrs. O'Brien laughed. Fiona wasn't lost, she said, hadn't she just seen the child not ten minutes since? But night came and Fiona didn't come home. Two days later she was found shut up in an old trunk in a vacant house. Smothered she was. It's all there in that album, you can read it for yourself." Malone jabbed a proud finger at the plastic-covered book, "Well, things kept happening the like of that and the newspapers kept printing stories about Malachy Malone, the Wonder Child. Then one day a woman came to the door. She walked with a cane and was so crippled with arthritis she could hardly knock.

"She came to the door of the house you had in Irishtown, before you gave up your job on the buses and moved?" Connors asked.

"Yes, the Corporation flats. Sure we moved," Malone said defensively, "Malachy's followers wouldn't want him to live in the Corporation flats."

Connors looked at a photograph of the formal gardens leading to the front of the mansion. "I notice the followers' donations only granted them admission at the rear, judging from the canes and crutches gathered at the tradesmen's entrance."

"Like I was saying, the woman knocked on the door of the house in Irishtown. 'I want to see the Wonder Child,' she said. Well, Malachy came over to see what was happening and the woman said, 'Put your darlin' hands right here on my poor crippled knees.' And sure if Malachy didn't put his two hands right where she said. And there they were, the two of them, praying, when all of a sudden she lets off a screech. 'Praise be to God! It's cured I am!' Then off she goes, screechin' and roarin' down the street with her blackthorn cane wavin' around her head and blessed if she doesn't walk as good as you or me. Soon everybody knows of this layin' on of hands and people started coming to Malachy to be cured. At first there were only fifteen or twenty a day, and sure if the darlin' boy doesn't see each and every one, layin' on his little hands and prayin'. Soon there were crutches and canes and wheelchairs in every room in the house. That's why we had to move."

"To a hundred-thousand-pound estate. Yes, I see." Connors' face was a study in distaste.

Malone ignored the sarcasm. "Sure, it got so Malachy didn't have a minute to spare, so when he was old enough to go to school we had to set visiting hours for the layin' on of hands. We had a special time,

from after tea till eight o'clock on weekdays and from three to six on Sundays.

"Now every so often during these sessions, Malachy would point to some man or woman and say 'Goodbye, Mrs.' or 'Goodbye, Mr.' or make a prediction about something. And every one of his predictions came true until eight months ago when he pointed his finger at a woman and said 'Goodbye' and sure if she wasn't back again the next day standin' in line as alive and bright as the day she was born. A few days later it happened again, another prediction that didn't come true. Then there was another and another. As time went on, Malachy grew pale and began to lose weight. He began to lose faith in himself. His layin' on of hands didn't have the power to heal like they once had and he gave up making predictions. His face grew pinched and he lay awake night after night.

"Now it's not good for a seven-year-old to worry like that, sure it isn't. They need their sleep at that age. It got so bad that his mother and I begged him to try just one more prediction. At last he agreed.

"Well, wouldn't you know, he points his finger at a lady, says, 'Goodbye, Mrs.' and the very next morning she's found face down in the River Dodder. A week later another prediction came true, and after that every time Malachy pointed his finger his prediction came true. He started sleeping again and put on weight. He had faith in himself again, you know."

Malone looked down at his hands. "Faith in himself," he repeated softly.

After a moment he continued, leaning forward, his hands flat on the desk. "And when the faith was back and all, new crutches and wheelchairs were left on the rear lawn at the Hall."

Connors was studying the picture of the pile of discards in the garden. "How many would you say there were?" he asked.

"I don't know. More than a hundred at a guess," Malone bragged.

"All from cures made by Malachy?" Connors pinned Malone with his eyes. "Every single one of them?"

"Well, if you want to put it like that." Malone's eyes wavered.

"I want to put it like that, Timothy."

"Ted." Malone stood up and moved toward the door. The stenographer started up after him. Connors waved the young man back to his seat.

Malone paused, his hand on the doorknob. "No," he admitted. "I bought some of them."

"What did you say? I didn't hear you."

"I bought a few! I bought a few! What more do you want?" shouted Malone, walking back to the desk and throwing himself into the chair. He lit a cigarette. "Not many—only a few."

Without speaking, Connors returned the scrapbook to the floor, then fanned several photographs across the desk facing Malone. Some were of men, some were of women, some were peaceful, some were ghastly. All were stamped DOA. "I had these sent over from the coroner's office. All, you will agree, were Malachy's predictions."

Malone said nothing.

Connors leaned back. "One thing has me puzzled. You've stated that Malachy is the seventh son of a seventh son and yet all his records show Malachy to be your only son. Perhaps you are a seventh son, but Malachy certainly isn't."

Malone licked his lips. The stenographer leaned forward to catch his answer. "I didn't think you noticed," Malone said.

"I noticed. And the caul, where did you pick up the caul?"

"That's real enough! The caul is Malachy's, sure it is!"

"Perhaps. I don't suppose you *are* a seventh son?"

"Eighth."

"Then it's all a fraud."

"About the seventh son, yes." Malone reached out a beseeching hand. "But not about the layin' on of the hands, not about Malachy. Just me, I'm the only fraud."

"That woman outside the postoffice?"

"She was real enough. Oh, I don't know. What can I say?" He put his face in his hands.

"If Malachy isn't a fraud," Connors said, "what made his predictions fail? Did he lose the gift?"

"I don't know, sure I don't. I've tried to figure it out. Perhaps it was all the publicity, people treating him like a little god. Perhaps it was my going back on the drink and hitting him. Yes, I hit him right across the face, right across his darlin' face." He began to cry in deep ragged sobs, his mouth open. After a bit, he wiped his tears away with his hand. "It was after I hit him that he lost his faith."

"It's strange that this didn't come out before, with all the news-

papermen digging after facts.”

“People believe what they want to believe, you should know that,” Malone said, finding his handkerchief.

“All right,” Connors said. “I’d like you to read this statement over and if you agree that it is what you told us here today, sign at the bottom of the second page.” He handed Malone the two pages the stenographer had brought to him. While the man from West Cork read the deposition, Connors flipped through the photographs on the desk.

“Can I have a pen?” Malone asked. The young man offered him the ballpoint. As Malone signed the statement, Connors pushed a button. The door was opened by a uniformed member of the Garda Siochana.

“Folan, take Mr. Malone downstairs, then see that this statement goes to Special Branch.” Malone rose, his eyes bright with tears. “Just one more thing, Timothy,” Connors said. “Why did you have to kill all these people?” He held up the harsh coroner’s prints.

Malone looked at the man behind the desk. “He needed faith in himself. Malachy has such wonderful healin’ hands, he has—I had to give him back what I stole away, bein’ his father and all.”

There was a pleading note in his voice. “You see, he has the second sight, him being born with a caul and all. And Malachy *could* be a seventh son. He could. We can’t know, him bein’ a foundling and all.”

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The book they were looking for couldn't have been any more intriguing than the circumstances surrounding it . . .

THE HENCHMAN CASE

by
James
Holding



My first stop on Monday morning was at a run-down duplex apartment in the West End, the abode of a Mr. Jefferson Cuyler. I parked my car at the curb under a plane tree that was shedding its bark in shabby strips, dodged through a cluster of pre-schoolers who, with intent faces, were playing some mysterious street game, and mounted the four steps to the door of Mr. Cuyler's residence.

Our records showed Mr. Cuyler was several weeks late in returning

ix books he had borrowed from the public library. He had neither renewed them nor heeded our postcard of reminder. So I had come in person to collect them.

That's part of my job. I'm Hal Johnson, book collector—or, as my former boss, Lieutenant Randall of Homicide, calls me, "library fuzz." I'm employed by the public library to chase down overdue and stolen library books. That sounds like a simple job, right? Well, it isn't. Not when you consider that in many public libraries (including ours) more than twenty percent of all the new books placed on the shelves vanish in less than a year. *Every* year. We're doing everything we can to cut down on this enormous loss. We're installing book detection systems, hiring extra guards, refusing public admission to certain stacks of out-of-print or rare books, and hiring ex-cops like me to shove fingers in the dyke.

Anyway, there I was on Mr. Cuyler's cramped front porch. I rang the bell. After a minute, the door was opened by one of the handsomest men I've ever seen in my life. He was tall and relatively slender, a year or two past sixty at a guess. His iron-grey hair was crisp and inclined to curl although it was cut short. His complexion was fresh and healthy under a moderate suntan. His features were almost classically regular. And his eyes were cobalt blue, their gaze so candid and friendly that you felt you could trust him with your life if need be.

He said, "Yes?"

I introduced myself and showed him my ID card. "Are you Jefferson Cuyler?"

He nodded.

"I've come for your overdue library books," I explained. "You've kept them out too long without renewal. So you owe us some fines."

"I know it," he said, his friendly eyes not cooling in the slightest. "I'm sorry, I've been away for a spell. I meant to bring them back today." He gave me a half smile. "They're here. Come on in."

He led me into his living room and pointed to a battered coffee table. The six library books made a neat stack on one corner of it.

The books were all that was neat in the room. Everything else looked like the aftermath of a cyclone. Somebody had jerked up the faded carpet and tossed it into a crumpled heap in a corner. The cushions and upholstery of the sofa and chair had been slashed in half a dozen places with a sharp knife. The pictures were torn from their

hooks, the draperies from their rods. A large TV lay on its side, shattered. The contents of the room's only closet had been dumped on the floor in disarray. Through an old-fashioned archway, I could see that Mr. Cuyler's dining room had been given similar treatment. And probably his bedroom and kitchen as well.

"What the hell happened here?" I asked.

His blue eyes brooded on the confusion around us. "Well, as I said, I've been away—fishing. This is what I found when I got home an hour ago. Somebody broke in through the back window."

"Have you called the police?"

"I guess I'd better, hadn't I?" He gave me a funny slanting look accompanied by a wry smile. "I've been checking out the mess. Lucky your library books weren't lost in the shuffle."

I gazed around me. "These weren't your ordinary friendly neighborhood burglars, Mr. Cuyler. I hope you realize that."

He shrugged. "I haven't had any previous experience."

"Well, I have. And I've never seen a more thorough job. Whoever turned the place over was looking for something special, I'd say."

Cuyler's handsome features shaped themselves into an expression of bafflement. "I don't know what it could be. It's not as though I owned the Hope Diamond."

"What's missing?" I asked. It wasn't my business any more, but old habits die hard.

"Nothing," Cuyler said, "as far as I can tell. Nothing here worth stealing, anyway."

"You're forgetting my library books," I said, keeping it light. "Did you know that it would cost the library an average of fourteen bucks apiece to replace these six books on the shelves if anything happened to them?"

"I had no idea a library book could be so valuable," he said. His cobalt eyes mirrored a new, nameless emotion for a brief instant. Anger? Uncertainty? Amusement? Triumph? Maybe a little of all of them. It wasn't until later that I recalled he'd said "could be" instead of the more natural "was." "How much of a fine do I owe?" he asked.

I told him and finished checking the titles of his books against my list while he got his money and paid me. "Thanks," I said. "I'm sorry to bother you when you've got all this on your mind." I gestured at the chaos of the room.

"Forget it," he said. "You couldn't have come at a more opportune time."

Politely, he saw me to the door.

That was Monday. The next time I heard anything about Cuyler, he was dead.

Lieutenant Randall telephoned me at the library during my lunch break on Friday.

"Listen, Hal," he said, "do me a favor."

"What is it?"

"A book called *The Henchman*. By somebody named Eugene Stott?"

"Yeah?"

"You got it in the library?"

"Yeah."

"You know the book?"

"Yeah. At least, the title rings a bell. It was on one of my overdue lists earlier this week."

"Good. Find out if it's in or out, will you? And if it's in, hold it for me."

"For what?" I said. "You know you can't reserve a book over the telephone, Lieutenant. Why are you interested in it?"

His voice held a note of weariness. "It may be a clue in a murder I'm working on." He put oral quotation marks around the word clue. "So move your tail, O.K.? Call me back at this number." He gave me a telephone number.

I moved my tail. Ten minutes later I called him back and told him that we had two copies of *The Henchman* circulating from the main library. Copy number one was on the shelves in its assigned place when I looked, and I'd taken it in charge for him. Copy number two had been borrowed on Tuesday by a lady named Carolyn Seaver.

Randall hesitated. "Could you drop the one you have off at Headquarters for me?"

"Sure, Lieutenant. On my way home. No trouble."

"Thanks. It may give us a lead, Hal. God knows we need one."

I had a cold flash of intuition. "Where are you now?"

"West End. Why?"

"I'm wondering if your murder victim could be a man named Jefferson Cuyler," I said.

Dead silence. Finally, "Still a show-off, aren't you? How'd you guess that?"

"He's the guy I collected the *The Henchman* from on Monday. I remember it now. He was a handsome . . ."

"He's far from handsome now." Randall paused. "Could you bring that book out *here*, Hal? If you saw this guy on Monday, you may be able to help us."

"Give me ten minutes," I said.

"I'll give you fifteen," Randall growled. "You're a private citizen now, remember. You can't break the speed laws with impunity any more."

"Yes, Lieutenant," I said humbly. He's never forgiven me for leaving Homicide to become a sissy library cop.

When I got to Cuyler's duplex, I told Jimmy Coogan, the Homicide cop on the door, that Randall wanted to see me, and Coogan, an old buddy of mine at the department, passed me inside with a friendly sneer about my present line of work.

I don't know what I was expecting to see on this second visit to Cuyler's house—maybe the same scene of chaos as the first time. Anyway, I was a little bit surprised at how quickly the place had been returned to a condition of normal bachelor neatness. The pictures and draperies had been rehung, the closet contents hidden away again, the rug replaced, the TV set repaired. Even the slashed sofa and chair had been treated to ready-made slipcovers that hid their knife wounds.

Lieutenant Randall was sitting in the chair. "Come in, Hal. You got that book?"

I held it out to him. He took it without a word and leafed carefully through it. Then, with a frustrated shake of his head, he put the book aside and fixed his spooky yellow eyes on me and said, "Tell me about seeing Cuyler on Monday."

"I can't tell you much. It was just a routine call for overdue books. Except that this house was a howling mess when I arrived. Somebody had broken in and been through it with a fine-tooth comb while Cuyler was away fishing."

"I already got that much from Robbery's report. Nothing was stolen, they say."

"Well, it wasn't just a casual break-in, Lieutenant. Somebody was

ooking for something special. Couldn't Cuyler give Robbery any hints about who or what?"

"Apparently not. But it stands out a mile that Cuyler's murder ties in with it somehow."

I nodded. "Who found him?"

"His once-a-week cleaning woman. She has a key, and tripped over Cuyler when she walked in at seven-thirty. The M.E. guessed he'd been dead less than seven hours when he was here at eight-thirty. So it happened early this morning, probably, not long after midnight. And we haven't got anything on it yet. Zilch. None of the neighbors saw or heard anything out of the way last night or this morning. And the killers didn't leave calling cards." He sighed. "They never do."

"Who was Cuyler, anyway?" I asked.

"Cuyler? Jefferson Rhine Cuyler, born and brought up in the East End, a widower for eight years, sixty-three years old, retired with a bad heart from Crane Express over a year ago, took early Social Security and has been living here alone. He had only one living relative, out of town somewhere."

"He must have had something more valuable than a distant relative," I said.

Randall said, "That seems obvious. That's why I asked you to bring the book. Whoever killed Cuyler beat the hell out of him before he died. Cuyler had three broken ribs, multiple bruises all over, marks on his wrists and ankles where he'd been tied up. And his face was a disaster."

I remembered Cuyler's good looks and his warm friendly manner, and thought that he wasn't the type to withstand torture for very long without cracking. Especially with a bad heart.

Randall seemed to sense my thoughts. "It's possible his killer didn't intend him to die. He may just have been trying to get Cuyler to talk. But the beating killed him, the medical examiner thinks. Caused heart arrest." Randall rubbed a big hand over his face and I could hear his whisker bristles rasp. "It must have been somebody he knew. There wasn't any sign of forced entry this time."

"The cleaning woman has a key, you said."

"She couldn't tie up a grown man and break his ribs with punches. She's seventy years old, four feet ten, and weighs 96 pounds!"

I grinned. "Just suggesting a possibility," I said.

He grunted.

I pointed to *The Henchman*, precariously balanced on the arm of Randall's chair. "So what did you want that for?"

In reply, Randall took an envelope from his pocket, and from it he carefully extracted a sheet of unlined memo paper, which he held out for me to see. "Ned Jordan found this when he was dusting for fingerprints. It's the top sheet of a memo pad Cuyler kept beside his telephone."

I leaned closer. The dusting powder had revealed faint impressions of handwriting on the paper's surface—indentations obviously made by a sharp pencil or pen pressing on the sheet above it. I could make out the smudged words quite easily:

The Henchman
Eugene Stott
Public Library

I looked at Randall. He nodded, somewhat sheepishly. "It's a chance in a million; I know that. But the handwriting doesn't match Cuyler's. So it might be that Cuyler's killers—or one of them—wrote the words on the memo pad."

"Making a note of information he'd beaten out of Cuyler, you mean?"

"Could be. Maybe the book stuff was all he got out of Cuyler before Cuyler cashed in. But then, I couldn't be that lucky. Your damned book doesn't seem to give us a thing."

"Let me look."

Randall passed me the book. I examined it carefully. Nothing. "Maybe this isn't the copy Cuyler had."

Randall said, "Check it, O.K.?"

I went to Cuyler's phone and called Ellen, the girl on the check-out desk at the library. I'm hoping she'll marry me someday. I usually propose to her every time I see her. "Listen, Ellen," I said, "find out which of our two copies of *The Henchman* by Eugene Stott I brought back on Monday from our card-holder, Jefferson Cuyler, will you?"

She recognized my non-courting voice: "Hold on," she said, all business. In a minute or two she was back on the line and informed me that copy number two of *The Henchman* was the one that Jefferson Cuyler had borrowed.

"Thanks." I hung up and turned to Randall who was standing beside

ly shoulder. "You hear that?"

He nodded. "Get me copy number two."

"It was borrowed on Tuesday," I reminded him, "by a Miss Carolyn Seaver."

"The day after you got it back from Cuyler?"

"Right."

"What's Carolyn Seaver's address? Do you know?"

"Prestonia Towers. On Clark Terrace."

"Let's go," said Randall.

Our luck was out. So was Miss Seaver. She had left for a visit with friends at the shore and had taken *The Henchman* with her to read on the plane. The woman in the adjoining apartment gave us this information, but was unable to give us the name, address, or telephone number of the friends Miss Seaver was visiting. "She'll be home Saturday afternoon—tomorrow," the neighbor said. "Can't you wait twenty-four hours? What's so important about a library book?"

Randall was honest with her. "We don't know ourselves. But it may turn out to be evidence in a crime. Will you ask Miss Seaver to get in touch with me the minute she returns?"

The neighbor's eyes grew round. "Of course." Randall gave her his phone number. We thanked her, left, and went back to Cuyler's place, where I'd left my car. As I climbed out of the police cruiser, Randall said, "Is *The Henchman* a popular book, Hal?"

Randall doesn't know a best-seller from the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*.

I said, "Not any more, Lieutenant. The copy we have here hasn't been borrowed for three months, as you can see from the last stamped date on the card envelope. And copy number two, borrowed, it seems, by both Mr. Cuyler and Miss Seaver in less than a month, represents a real burst of business, I should imagine."

"Have you read it?"

"*The Henchman*?" I shook my head. "Historical fiction isn't my fish."

Randall pondered. "Listen. When you get back to the library, brief your librarians for me, will you?"

"On what?"

"Tell them to inform you—or me—immediately if anyone comes into the library and asks for *The Henchman*. And tell them to find out who's

asking, if possible."

"O.K. And what about the book? Tell anyone who asks that we don't have it?"

"Yeah. Until we check them out. And, Hal—"

"What?"

"Do one more thing for me. *Read* the goddamn book. Maybe something will jump out at you that seems significant."

"How am I supposed to recognize anything, even if it's there?"

Randall's yellow eyes took on that bland amused look. "How the hell should I know? *You're* the book detective, aren't you?"

The next day, Saturday, I stayed in the library all day, lining up my call sheets for the following week, so I was in my office when Eller phoned me from her desk. "Hal?" she said. "Somebody just asked Joar for your book."

I snapped to attention. "*The Henchman*, you mean?"

"Yes. Joan gave her a song and dance and put her in the reading room."

"What song and dance?"

"Joan told her we have *The Henchman* but it's out for repair at the bindery. I'm supposed to be checking now on when it'll be back on the shelves."

"Good for Joan," I said, "and good for you. I'm on my way." Then, in belated surprise, "Did you say *her*, Ellen? Is it a woman?"

Ellen whistled lewdly under her breath. "Wait'll you see her!" she said and hung up.

She was a woman, all right. A blonde, beautiful young woman sitting with her hands clasped around her handbag in one of the reading-room chairs. I went over to her and said, "The librarian tells me you want to borrow *The Henchman*. It will be back in circulation in just a day or two. If you care to leave your name and telephone number, we'll be glad to call you when the book's available."

She stood up and I could see what Ellen's whistle meant. Her figure, which a modish pants suit did little to hide, was nothing short of spectacular: Every eye in the reading room, male and female, turned her way as though magnetized. Her face took on a look of disappointment. "I didn't want to *borrow* the book," she said, "I just wanted to look something up in it here in the library. I'm from out of town."

She didn't look capable of breaking a man's ribs and beating him to death, but maybe she had a friend who was. I said, "In that case, perhaps we can help you, after all. What did you want to look up in *The Henchman*?"

"That's the trouble," she said, "I don't really know."

That shook me a little. I said, "I've read *The Henchman* myself quite recently, Miss—"

"Elmore," she said. "Nancy Elmore."

"Miss Elmore, maybe if you cared to be a little more specific, I might be able to help you. I'm Hal Johnson. I'm on the library staff."

Miss Elmore looked around self-consciously. "Can we go somewhere and talk, Mr. Johnson? I'm sure we're disturbing the people here."

I didn't think the people in the reading room minded being disturbed by this Miss America candidate, but I said, "Good idea, I'll just tell the librarian and we can talk in my office, O.K.?"

Joan, the librarian, was hovering outside the door of the reading room, her curiosity showing. I told her in a library whisper to call Lieutenant Randall at Police Headquarters and tell him somebody named Nancy Elmore had asked for *The Henchman* and that I was about to interview her in my office.

Joan nodded and scurried off.

I had barely got Miss Elmore settled in the one chair in my tiny office when my phone rang. It was Randall. "Is the girl still there?" he asked.

"Yes."

"She says her name's Nancy Elmore?"

"Right."

"Ask her where she's from."

"What?"

"Are you deaf? Ask her where she's from."

"Why?"

"Because if she says Minneapolis, she's probably Jefferson Cuyler's niece. The one we notified of his death. Only living relative, remember?"

"Oh." I looked across my desk at Miss Elmore with new interest.

"Don't let her get away," Randall said. "I'll be right over."

I hung up and turned to Miss Elmore. "You said you were from out

of town, Miss Elmore. Where do you live?"

"Minneapolis. Why?"

I said, "Nancy Elmore. Minneapolis. I *thought* that name sounded familiar. You've got to be the niece of the man who was killed here yesterday, Jefferson Cuyler. Right?"

She was surprised. "Yes, that *is* right. I flew in this morning to arrange for Uncle Jeff's funeral as soon as the police release . . . his body." She swallowed. "How did you know?"

"I collected some overdue books from your uncle on Monday, Miss Elmore, and he mentioned your name," I lied. "That's where I heard it before. Your uncle seemed very proud of you." As who wouldn't be? I was tempted to add.

"Was *The Henchman* one of the books you collected from Uncle Jeff?" she asked. Beautiful, I thought, but definitely not dumb."

"Yes, it was," I answered carefully, "so I'm naturally curious to know why you're so interested in it now."

She gave me an uncertain smile. "You won't believe this," she said. "It's crazy. Really wild. But Uncle Jeff told me that if he died unexpectedly, I'd find something in that book he wanted me to have."

"Do you know what it is?"

"I guess it's a kind of a will or legacy or something. But I don't know."

"When did your uncle tell you this?"

"In a letter I got from him this past Tuesday."

"Do you have the letter with you?"

She took a new grip on her handbag, which was answer enough. "As I say, I thought it was crazy—until I was notified yesterday that Uncle Jeff had been killed. Then I thought I'd better do what he said. So after I checked in at my hotel I came straight here to the library to look for the book." Impatience or some other emotion roughened her smooth voice. "And now it's not even here! So what do I do now?"

"In your place, I'd tell the police about your letter," I began, just as Lieutenant Randall walked into the room. "Speak of the devil," I said. "Miss Elmore from Minneapolis, this is Lieutenant Randall of our very efficient Police Department. He's in charge of investigating your uncle's death."

Randall put his sleepy-looking, unblinking yellow eyes on her. "If she's really Nancy Elmore from Minneapolis," he said ungraciously.

Then to her, "Are you?"

Her answering smile took all of the official starch out of Randall. He appreciates a good-looking woman as well as the next man. "I'm sorry," he apologized gruffly, "but I have to be sure, you know." He checked the driving license and credit cards she handed him. Then, satisfied, he said to me, "What about the letter, Hal?"

I told him, making it short.

"Do you mind showing the letter to us, Miss Elmore?" he asked her, as bland as coffee cream now.

She dug in her handbag and came up with it. I read it over Randall's shoulder:

Monday

Dear Nancy,

This is to tell you that the fishing trip of which I wrote you in my last letter went off very well. You'll be glad to hear that my ailing heart performed splendidly throughout.

I must tell you, however, that upon returning home this morning, I have noted certain disquieting signs that my spell of good fortune may be nearing an end. I won't go into detail but I'll be frank with you: I feel I may suffer an attack at any time now. An attack, which might even prove fatal.

I don't want to frighten you, Nancy. But I do want you to be aware that you are my sole heir. Hence this hasty letter, just in case.

You see, my dear, there are reasons, which I won't go into, why I can't just draw up a will in the usual way. So if anything happens to me, I suggest that you visit the main branch of our local public library and ask for a book written by Eugene Stott called *The Henchman*. In it, you will find my legacy to you for what it's worth. It will puzzle you, I'm afraid. So I further suggest that you consult our local police about it, showing them this letter. I am confident they will help you locate my estate, and will see to it, I trust, that you get what is coming to you.

Affectionately, as always,
Uncle Jeff

Randall didn't say anything for a few seconds after he finished reading. Instead he looked at me and raised his eyebrows.

I nodded. "I think she ought to know the score," I said.

Randall gave her the story: the attempted robbery, the murder, the memo-pad writing, the whole thing. Including where copy number two of *The Henchman* was at the moment.

She listened quietly. At the end of his recital, she sighed. "Poor Uncle Jeff. I honestly thought he might be turning senile when I read that letter. But he wasn't, was he? The 'disquieting signs' in his letter was the attempted robbery. And the 'attack' he feared wasn't a heart attack, but an attack on him by the people who killed him. Do you think he knew who they were?"

"Yes."

"Then why didn't he tell the police?"

"I don't know," said Randall, brooding. He tapped the letter with a forefinger.

I put my oar in, just to avoid being forgotten. "So what do we do now? Wait till Miss Seaver gets home from the shore with *The Henchman*?"

"No." Randall was emphatic. "You two are interested primarily in what's in the book. I'm interested in catching a murderer. So we put copy number one of *The Henchman* back on the shelves, Hal. And its file index card back in the cabinet. And we hope very hard that the murderer will still come in today and try to get the book." He reached for my phone. "I'll put a man in the library to nab anybody else who shows interest in it."

When I got back, Randall and Nancy Elmore were leaving. "When we hear from Miss Seaver," Randall was saying to her, "I'll be in touch."

She thanked him and gave him the name of her hotel. He said he'd drop her off there on his way back to Headquarters. Then she thanked me too, and they left. "Jimmy Coogan is on his way over to baby-sit with the book," Randall said over his shoulder. "Will you watch it until he gets here?"

"Sure," I said.

I went to the reading room and took a seat to the right of the double-door entrance. From there I could see the shelf where I'd put

The Henchman, could even make out the crimson cover of the book itself.

It was just as well I took up my vigil when I did, because it wasn't five minutes after Randall left that the action started.

A massive chunky man with shaggy hair and a drooping mustache hove into view at the far end of the aisle of bookshelves I was watching. He had the muscular sure-footed look of a pro fullback. His big shoulders strained the seams of the windbreaker he wore. As he came toward me, I caught a brief glimpse of his face: blunt features, small eyes sunk in deep sockets, a thin slash of a mouth under the mustache. Unlike the beautiful Miss Elmore, I thought, this specimen would be capable of breaking a man's ribs and beating him to death. He carried a battered black briefcase in one hand.

He moved unhurriedly up the aisle of bookshelves, his eyes turning from side to side as he scanned the numbers on the spines of the books, obviously seeking a certain number and a certain book.

It was warm in the reading room, but cold fingers touched my spine. I got the tight feeling in my stomach I used to get at the start of action when I was a real cop. After my relatively peaceful time as a library detective, the old sensation, oddly enough, was almost pleasant, a reminder of more exciting times. From behind a copy of *Newsweek*, I watched the man.

Suddenly he halted, reached out a hand, and plucked a book from the shelf. The book with the crimson cover. *The Henchman*. At the same time he gave a nod of satisfaction, as though congratulating himself on a stroke of good luck.

He raised his eyes to look around him. I dropped mine to the magazine. Evidently he saw nothing to alarm him, because when I risked a surreptitious look he was in the act of opening the book.

While I watched, he gave the book a superficial examination, first leafing rapidly through it, then holding it upside down by its covers and shaking it to dislodge anything that might be lying loose between its pages. Finding nothing, he pried up with his fingernail one corner of the card envelope in the front of the book and peered beneath it. Again nothing. He paused, considering his next move.

I was fairly sure what that move would be—a more thorough inspection of the book in a more private place. And I was right. After another quick survey of his surroundings, he casually opened his brief-

case, put *The Henchman* in it, and turned to leave.

I stood up and followed him toward Ellen's check-out desk, knowing with absolute certainty that he didn't intend to stop for Ellen to check out the book in the usual way. Ellen, busy with a half dozen customers, didn't even look up as he strode past her desk.

I caught up with him in the lobby before he was able to push through the glass doors of the exit. I tapped him on the shoulder from behind.

For the space of half a breath, he kept going. Then he halted and swung around, his eyes mean. "What?"

"You've forgotten something, haven't you, sir?" I asked in my smoothest library voice.

"Forgot what?" His knuckles tightened on the handle of the briefcase.

"I believe you forgot to check out the library book in your briefcase."

He blinked. "Who the hell are you?"

"A member of the library staff. I must ask you to check out your book in the usual way before removing it from the library."

"I don't have any book of yours, buster. Get lost." He began to turn away.

"I saw you put it in your briefcase," I said. I was beginning to sweat. What was I thinking of, bracing him before Jimmy Coogan arrived to back me up? For I knew after tapping that iron-solid shoulder that I couldn't take this gorilla alone the best day I ever lived.

He gave me a tight grin, displaying yellow teeth with a gap between the upper fronts. "You got it all wrong," he said. "I'll tell you one more time. I don't *have* a book of yours. So drop dead."

"Let's just have a look in your briefcase," I suggested mildly. "That ought to settle it."

"Not a chance, pal. This briefcase is private property. *My* private property. That means it ain't open to the public. So goodbye." He turned his back and started for the exit doors again.

I let him go, deciding with a feeling of immense relief that discretion in this case seemed the better part of you know what. That is, I let him go until I caught a glimpse of the cheerful Irish countenance of Jimmy Coogan climbing the library steps. It was a heartening sight—so heartening that I grabbed the book thief by one arm—the arm with the

briefcase—and whirled him around again. I said sternly, "I can arrest you, you know. So why not cooperate?"

"Arrest me?" He laughed out loud. "You and who else, junior?"

"Me and Detective Coogan of the Police Department," I said with a touch of smugness, "who is now coming through the door behind you." I raised my voice. "Hey, Jimmy! Here's a customer for you."

The man snarled like an animal and swung around, poised for flight. Coogan blocked his way. "Hold it!" he advised in a quiet tone that snapped like a whip. "What's going on here?"

"This guy's stealing one of our books," I said, giving Coogan a meaningful look. "It's in his briefcase."

"Is that so now?" Coogan murmured. "Would you mind opening the case, sir?"

"Why should I, there's no book in it."

"Yes, there is," I insisted. "A book called *The Henchman*." Another meaningful glance at Coogan.

Coogan clicked his tongue reprovingly. "In that case, sir," he said cheerfully, "I'm afraid you'll have to come downtown with me until we straighten this out. I'll just take charge of your briefcase in the meantime." He held out his hand, giving his prisoner a flash of his ID.

I could almost see the wheels going around in the thief's head. This is no big deal, he was telling himself. At the most they've got me for book theft—a crummy misdemeanor that I can settle by returning the book or paying for it.

After a moment's hesitation, he nodded sullenly and handed the briefcase to Coogan. I said, "Get him out of here, Jimmy, O.K.? Before we upset the whole library. I'm glad you showed up when you did." I winked at Coogan. "I don't think I could have handled him alone."

Coogan beamed at the thief. "But you won't give me any trouble, will you now?" he asked politely. Coogan can afford to be polite. He stands six feet five and weighs in at 260 on the police scales.

At four o'clock, Randall called me. "Thanks for Slenski," he said.

"Slenski? Is that his name?"

"Yeah. Truck driver based in Detroit. He could be our man, Hal. Although he denies it, of course."

"Both for the break-in and the murder?"

"We've already checked him out in Detroit. The trucking outfit he works for says his schedule put him here in town both last weekend and this."

"But he has airtight alibis for both nights, no doubt."

"Certainly." There was a shrug in Randall's voice. "When he's in town, he always stays with a waitress at the Radio Bar, name of Ellie Slack. And Ellie Slack tells us that Slenski was with her both of the nights in question. All night."

"Lying in her teeth?"

"Probably. Slenski also claims she recommended *The Henchman* to him as a good yarn to kill time with between runs."

I said, "That ought to prove she's a liar. Even a bar waitress would know it's no kind of book for a truck-driver."

"Slenski says he thought he'd just 'borrow' it from the public library and return it the next time he hits town—less trouble than all the red tape of applying for a non-resident library card and so forth. Obviously a crock. But we can't prove he's lying. At least not yet."

"He's lying," I said. "Take my word for it."

Randall laughed. He seemed in high good humor. "He's offered to pay for your damned book, so don't bad-mouth him."

"Well, that's generous. You're holding him all the same, aren't you?"

"Sure. At least until we find out what's in Miss Seaver's copy of *The Henchman*. I'm hoping that'll point us toward some sort of a connection between Slenski and Cuyler. So far, we can't find any."

"How about Miss Seaver?" I said. "Is she home yet?"

"That's why I called. She's home. Are you free to go with us to pick up the book?"

"I wouldn't miss it for the world," I said.

"We'll meet you at the library's main entrance in twenty minutes."

Miss Seaver didn't mind in the least giving up her copy of *The Henchman*. "I didn't even finish it," she said. "It's a poorly written, predictable story, and I can't imagine how it could possibly be connected with a crime . . ."

Randall suggested that she watch the newspapers to see if it actually *was* connected with a crime, and we left.

The Lieutenant pretended to be calm and properly official about the book, but he was just as anxious to learn its secret, if any, as Miss El-

more and me. Or else Miss Elmore's Christmas-morning look of anticipation won him over. He handed me the book as we settled into the police car for the ride back to town and said, "Here, Hal, you're the book expert. Give it a look while I drive."

I obliged. And of course, once you knew there was something to find in the book, finding it proved to be easy. What we were looking for wasn't in the book at all, as it turned out; it was *behind* the book. When I bent the covers back on themselves and held the book up against the light and peered through the opening between the spine and the binding, I could see it plainly. "There's *something* here, Lieutenant," I said, keeping my voice level for Miss Elmore's benefit, although I felt excitement quickening my pulse.

Randall took his eyes off the road briefly. "What is it?"

"It looks like a key," I said. I shook the book hard. "It's glued, I guess—to the inner surface of the spine."

"Well, get it out," Randall directed.

Easier said than done. The key must have been cemented to the inside of the spine cover with epoxy or something of the sort, because it stubbornly refused to be pried loose. In the end, I cut the book cover through with my pocket knife and jimmied the key loose with the screwdriver from the toolkit of the police car.

When I had the key free, Lieutenant Randall pulled over to the curb and parked, leaving the motor running. "Let's see it," he said.

I handed the key to him. Flat, about two inches long, with a rounded head, it looked something like a standard safe-deposit-box key; yet the notches cut into only one edge of the flat shank were far too simple and uncomplicated for that. The number 97 was stamped into the head.

Randall grinned at Miss Elmore. "Well, here's your legacy," he said.

"What do you suppose it's a key to?"

Randall turned the key in his fingers. "A locker of some sort, I'd guess."

I thought he was right. "Bus station, maybe?" I suggested.

He shrugged. "Could be. Or bowling alley, country club, railroad station, city club, almost anywhere. So all we'll have to do is try the key on number 97 of every bank of lockers in the city."

I didn't say anything because I knew he wasn't serious. Miss Elmore said, "But I know poor Uncle Jeff didn't belong to any kind of club, so

that should narrow it down, shouldn't it?"

"How about the YMCA?" Randall asked.

"Yes!" Miss Elmore cried. "He *did* belong to the YMCA! He went swimming twice a week in the YMCA pool. How did you guess that?"

"Just routine police work," Randall answered, deadpan. Then, "Look under the cement." He handed her the key.

Peering over her shoulder, breathing her carnation scent, I could see too, through the hardened gob of transparent cement still adhering to the key head, four small letters stamped into the metal: YMCA.

When Randall and I went into the locker room of the YMCA fifteen minutes later, Miss Elmore remained in the police car outside. All she said as we left her was, "Please hurry! I'm dying of curiosity!"

The locker room was sparsely populated: maybe a dozen men, mostly young, dressing or undressing, none of them in the aisle of lockers we wanted. We stopped in front of locker 97 and had our first surprise.

Locker 97 wasn't locked. What's more, there wasn't even a keyhole in the door to show that it *could* be locked. "Ouch!" I murmured.

Randall swore under his breath, grabbed the door handle, tripped the latch, and pulled the locker door open wide.

We breathed easier. The lower left segment inside was a locker within a locker—a little built-in safe in which you could leave your valuables, I guess, while you were swimming, playing basketball, or working out in the gym. The inner locker *was* locked. It had a keyhole. And Uncle Jeff's key slid into it smooth as grease.

Randall took a breath, raised his eyebrows at me, turned the key, and opened up.

We found ourselves looking at three bulging canvas bags crammed together into the three cubic feet of locker space. The bags had the words "Crane Security Express" stencilled on them. And they contained, as Randall told me later, three hundred and eleven thousand dollars in cash.

A few days later, over a pizza and beer which he insisted on paying for, Randall told me the rest of the story. I suppose it was his way of thanking me for my help in what he was already calling The Henchman Case.

"Cuyler was working for Crane Security when he had his heart attack and had to retire a year or so ago. But he only had his Social Security payments to live on because he hadn't been with Crane long enough to qualify for a pension. So there he was, a widower, a semi-invalid with an uncertain future, and all alone in the world except for a niece in Minneapolis."

"Yum," I said.

"Shut up, Hal," he said. "Do you want to hear this or don't you?"

"Continue," I urged him, "please."

"Cuyler is bitter at his rotten luck in being so poor so suddenly. He decides he'll try to steal enough money from his old firm to live high on the hog for whatever time he has left. After all, they wouldn't even pay him a pension, the ungrateful tightwads."

I said, "Where does your truck driver come in?"

"Cuyler hired him to do the actual robbery. He hadn't the nerve to do it himself."

"I remember the heist," I said. "A Crane Security Express van loaded with cash for three or four payroll deliveries was cleaned out in the parking lot of some diner while the guards were having lunch inside."

"Slenski did the cleaning out. Cuyler waited around the corner in the getaway car. It was a cozy set-up. Cuyler knew all about the routes, schedules, pick-ups, and deliveries of the Crane vans; he also knew the guards on that particular van always stopped for lunch on Wednesdays at that diner and left the van unattended in the parking lot. He so managed to get keys to the van's door-locks."

Something was bothering me. I said, "Two questions, Lieutenant. You told me we recovered the entire loot from the van robbery in Cuyler's YMCA locker. So why hadn't Cuyler spent any of it since the robbery? And what did the truck driver get out of the caper?"

Randall said, "Cuyler was probably waiting for the heat to die down a bit before he began spending hot money. As for Slenski's cut, it was five thousand dollars—a good hunk of Cuyler's savings—paid to Slenski half beforehand and the other half when Slenski turned over the loot to Cuyler. Slenski went off home to Detroit, apparently pleased with his windfall. But he didn't stay pleased very long. When he had a chance to think things over, he realized he'd been taken. And he decided not to hold still for it."

"So he tried to help himself to a bigger cut when he broke into

Cuyler's house that Sunday night?" I said.

"Sure. Who else would make such a shambles of the place?"

"So Cuyler figures he'll try again. Maybe right away. And telling the cops is out for obvious reasons. Even though he suspects Slenski may cut up pretty rough on his next visit."

"That's when he decided to write that letter to his niece, and to hid the key to his YMCA locker in your library book. He wanted his niece to know the score if anything happened to him."

"It seems to me it would have been simpler all around to send the key to his niece in the letter."

"It would. But Cuyler definitely intended to enjoy that money himself if he had the chance. And he was afraid, maybe, that his niece would get so curious about the key that she might find out he was a thief while he was still alive. And he didn't want that."

I finished off my pizza and drained my beer mug. I said, "Come on Lieutenant, you used to lecture me about the rules of evidence. What evidence—*hard* evidence—do you have that Slenski actually beat up Cuyler and caused his death? As far as you know and can really prove Slenski is just a petty out-of-town thief who snatched a book from our public library here. Isn't that right?"

"No, it isn't right." There was honey in Randall's voice. "Didn't I tell you, Hal? We found a memo in Slenski's wallet the day you turned him in. Oddly enough, the memo said: 'The Henchman. Eugene Stott. Public Library,' and was in the very same handwriting as *our* memo from Cuyler's house. We knew we had him cold for Cuyler's killing before we found the Scott loot."

"Mercy," I said, "you do play them close to your vest, don't you, Lieutenant?"

"When we showed him we had him all wrapped up for murder, he sang like a canary to get his rap reduced. How do you think we learned all this jazz about the robbery?"

"Routine police work," I said, grinning. I was quiet for a minute, thinking. Then I said, "The real screwball in the whole mess was handsome Uncle Jeff, if you ask me."

"I'm not asking you. But why?"

"That nutty letter to his niece for one thing. Telling her he was leaving her a legacy in a library book, then telling her to go to the *police*, for God's sake, to be sure she got it. That was a great legacy to go to

he police about! Three hundred thousand *stolen* dollars!"

Randall laughed. "Old Cuyler wasn't so dumb, Hal."

"No?"

"No. You're forgetting the reward."

I was. It had been widely advertised at the time of the robbery. Twenty-five thousand to anybody supplying information leading to the arrest of the thieves or the recovery of the money. I said, "You mean Nancy Elmore gets the reward?"

"Sure," said Randall. "The least I could do was to see she collected it." He paused. "Of course, Miss Elmore did see fit to write a big fat check for the Police Widows and Orphans Fund before she left for Minneapolis."

"How peachy for the Widows and Orphans," I said. "But I found the key in the book, remember. I snagged the murderer for you. Don't I get something for that?"

"Sorry," said Randall, his cat's eyes showing amusement, "but you're neither a widow nor an orphan, Hal. Will you settle for another beer?"

"I guess I'll have to," I said sadly.

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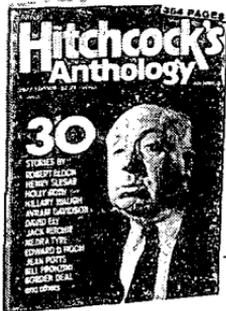
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