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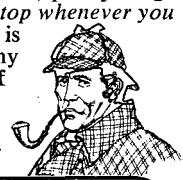

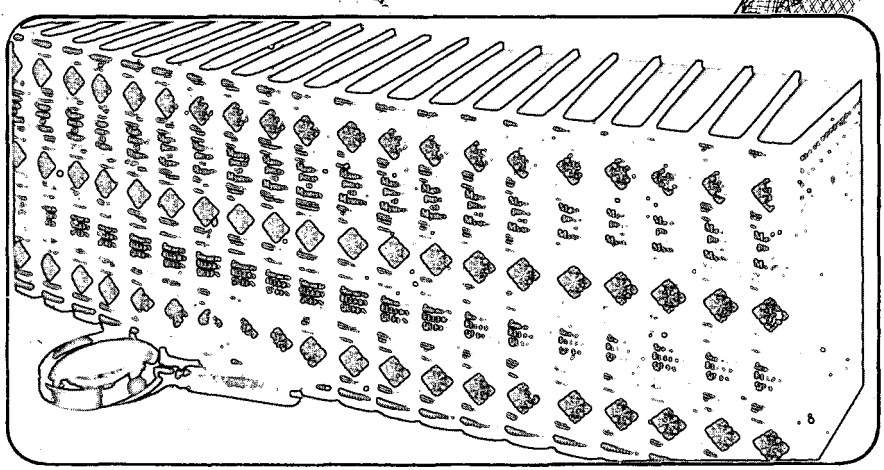

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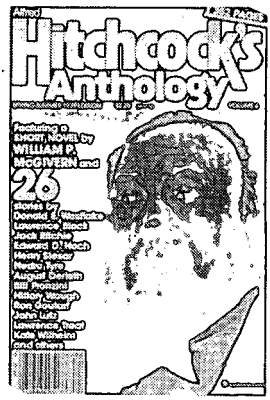

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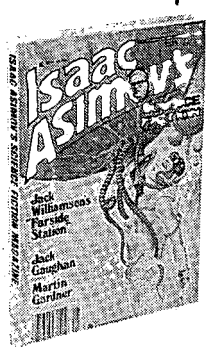

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NOVELETTE

SHORT STORIES

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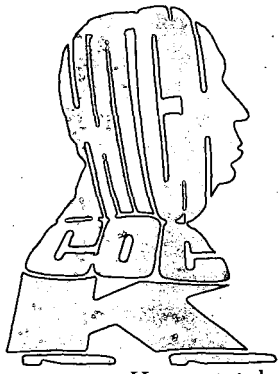

January 1979

Dear Reader:

January 6th being the birthday of Sherlock Holmes, it seems appropriate to recall his words. For example, "I abhor the dull routine of existence," the Master said, deploring the lack of originality on the part of London's criminals. "I crave for mental exaltation."

He certainly wouldn't have complained about this month's issue, whose criminals deserve high marks for inventiveness.

Seiko Legru tells about a most unusual and bizarre theft in "Inspector Saito's Simple Solution." A strange setting adds horrific atmosphere to murder in "The Queen Anne's Murders" by Frederick Simonelli, an author new to our pages. Edward D. Hoch's "The Mummy from the Sea" features his psychic detective Simon Ark, "pursuing his investigations of the strange and Satanic."

And there's an echo of Holmes's sentiments in Barry N. Malzberg's thought-provoking "Every Day in Every Way." Despite its title you'll find nothing routine about this or any of the nine uncommon stories we bring you this month—or, we fervently hope, any month.

Good reading.

Alfred Hitchcock

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All she wanted was to retrieve her grandfather's boots . . .

INSPECTOR SAITO'S SIMPLE SOLUTION

by SEIKO LEGRU

The lip was still swelling. The inspector was amazed. Surely any phenomenon has its reasonable limit. His lip had to be an exception to a common rule, or the insect that had caused the protuberance, at first limited to the far left side of Saito's mouth, but now spread out to the other side.

He observed his face in a mirror he had improvised out of the glass top of his desk and a piece of dark cardboard. The Zulu warrior effect.

All he needed was a bone to stick through the lip. He looked perfectly ridiculous.

Saito pulled the piece of cardboard away and dropped it into his waste paper basket. The affliction would be temporary and shouldn't interfere with his good mood. He had done well that morning. He had managed to get up early and had breakfasted and shaved at leisure. He had even done some useful work: raking the small yard in front of his garage. Now he was in his room at Kyoto police headquarters, the first room he had ever had to himself in the big forbidding building. He had, in a way, been promoted. He was still an ordinary inspector, of course, but he had been nudged up the ladder. And the door had his name on it—SAITO MASANOBU, in bright brown characters.

He sat down and frowned. It would be nice if he had something to do. He frowned again. What was wrong with asking, with framing a desire? He closed his eyes and concentrated, opened them again, and smiled—with his upper lip only. Not only had he asked, he had specified his request. The words had flashed onto the screen of his mind. "I, Inspector Saito, want something to do, something worthy of my intelligence."

The inspector was a great believer in the power of positive thought. But forty minutes passed and his telephone didn't even ring. Meanwhile he busied himself. First he tried to scratch his lip. Then he made a pot of strong tea on the small hotplate on his desk. Finally he read his newspaper.

There was a knock on the door.

"Yes?"

"Sir," the constable at the door said, "there's a lady in the corridor. The desk sergeant has sent her upstairs because he doesn't want to listen to her any more. He says she is confused, her complaints are unclear, but she refuses to be sent away. All the other inspectors are busy, sir. Would you—?"

"Yes," Saito said pleasantly, "I would. Bring her in. But wait just a minute, Constable, just a minute."

The constable stood at attention while Saito lit a cigarette. If the desk sergeant said the woman was confused, then she undoubtedly was. Saito hadn't dealt much with confused women so far, but the constable was more experienced. He was an older man with a thin, wizened, understanding sort of face and bright eyes. Saito remembered

his own age: twenty-six. He also remembered that it wasn't a good idea to listen to complainants with no one else present.

"Bring the lady in and stay with us."

"Sir!" the constable barked, and marched away, leaving the door open.

He was back at once, followed by a slender girl in a white kimono printed with a pattern of delicate blue flowers. She made a series of bows, each one deeper than the last. Her voice belied her slight appearance. It was low, a little husky even. Saito noted the large eyes, slanting steeply. Although she was dressed conservatively—the flower pattern suited her age, which couldn't have been much more than twenty—her hair, cut rather short, betrayed a more modern influence.

"Excuse me," the girl was saying. "Please. I am causing so much trouble today. Please excuse me."

Saito indicated two chairs. She sat down carefully and folded her hands. The constable bowed briefly, took one step back, bent his knees and sat down too. He looked most efficient in his crisp olive-green uniform.

The girl glanced at the constable's large revolver, protruding almost obscenely from an impeccably polished holster. "Yes," she said softly, "I did not want to bother the police, but what can I do? The boots are stolen and cannot be replaced. I must get them back—my grandfather is terribly unhappy. He is old, you see, and ill, and I look after him. There are only the two of us. The boots remind him of better days. He was a corporal once in the Imperial Army, and he was very brave and commanded many men. He fought in China. And he used to wear these high boots, in the old-fashioned style, with separate compartments for the big toes.

"He was always telling me about the boots. He lost them when he returned to Japan. But when we were in Kobe last month he saw a new pair in a store window. The price was high, but I had the money, and we bought them. And now they are gone. I already telephoned the store, but they are sold out now and they say that they do not know where others are available. My grandfather is so sad. He wore them in the garden all the time and he marched around and sang and gave orders. He is old now, and he has so few pleasures left."

"Ah," Saito said. "I am sorry to hear that. How did the boots disappear?"

"You must excuse me. I am so silly This morning I had to go into the garden to get some radishes for breakfast. It was wet and I put grandfather's boots on. I shouldn't have but I did. And then a man came jumping across the fence and stole the boots."

Saito had been fingering his lip again, but stopped, trying to visualize the scene. "But you were wearing the boots! Did the fellow take them from your feet?"

She nodded. "Yes. You see, he didn't just come for the boots. He must have seen me bending over to pick the radishes. I wasn't dressed properly. I thought nobody could see me. He leaped across the fence and grabbed me, then he turned me around and pushed me into the tool shed. I screamed but my grandfather is deaf and there are no close neighbors. There's some mulch in the shed and he told me to lie down, but I bit him and yelled and yelled. Then he slapped my face and I fell, half out of the shed. I felt him tugging at the boots and when he got them off he ran away with them."

Saito gasped. "But that's rape, attempted rape anyway, Miss—what's your name?"

"Washino."

"—Attempted rape, Washino-san. Here this ruffian tries to rape you on your own property and you come here prattling about boots!"

She looked at him, her eyes sad and forlorn.

"Yes, sir," the constable said, "that's why the desk sergeant lost his patience. She isn't interested in pressing the rape charge. She only wants the boots back. The boots are worth perhaps six thousand yen, not a big sum. If we do find the culprit and charge him with theft, the court will not be interested. The sergeant did tell Washino-san to go away but she wouldn't, and so—"

"So you brought her to me," Saito said, feeling his lip. He winced.

"Did a deerfly bite you?" the girl asked.

"I don't know. A bee, perhaps, or a wasp. Something big. I never noticed the sting. It must have happened this morning when I was raking the yard, but I didn't notice because I was so busy. It hurts."

She was looking through her bag. "Here, try this. It is for dry skin. It will make the lip less irritated."

Saito studied the object she held out to him. It looked like a lipstick. Perhaps the crazy girl was trying to play a joke on him. "No, thank you, Miss. It'll pass, whatever it is. Well, you've heard what the

sergeant said and now you've heard what the constable said. My colleagues are right. The court will throw the case out unless you accuse the suspect of attempted rape."

She dropped the stick back into her bag and bent her head. "Please, sir, please help me. You are the police. You can find the boots. You're an officer. You have many men under you, many cars. I see them everywhere. You can find the young man and make him give you back the boots so that grandfather can walk in the garden again and sing to himself. It will stop his pains. He's ill. He hasn't very long to live. I can't bear to see him unhappy." The vibration of her low voice filled the small room. Saito's spine tingled. The constable shifted on his chair.

"Don't you want us to arrest the suspect?" Saito asked.

"No, sir. I have no time to go to court, and if I take the time I may lose my job. I am a waitress in the Lotus Pond Restaurant. The owner says I work well and he may put me in charge of the other girls. But if he hears that I am in trouble, that I may have been raped, he will tell me to go away. He's very refined, very proper. He must not hear about this. I just want grandfather's boots back, that's all."

Saito groaned. He avoided the girl's steady gaze and his eyes rested on a file. He had put the file on his desk, meaning to look through it sometime. It contained his diploma and other papers. It wasn't so long ago that he had passed his inspector's examination. One of the important questions he had answered to the satisfaction of the officers facing him across the brocade-covered table was, "What is the task of the police?"

He had given the textbook reply: "The task of the police is to maintain order and to extend help to those in need of help."

There had been further questions as to the philosophical implications and historical background of the task of the police. The officers had nodded briefly when he had told them that the state, represented by its servants, the police, maintains order so that the citizens can go about their lawful business and that the samurai, the noble warriors of the past, had always defended the rights of the people.

"Yes," Saito said. "Very well, Miss. Where do you live?"

The address meant nothing to him and he found his map and unfolded it. The girl indicated an area in the extreme north, where the city petered out into fields and country lanes.

"I know that lane," the constable said. "There's just one house. I used to go fishing in a pond nearby when we still lived in the north."

"That's right. There's only our house."

"Describe your assailant, Miss."

"But you will not arrest him, please."

"No, but I must ask him to return the boots. If I don't know who he is I can't ask him."

"He is young, about twenty years old, I think. He has some hair on his face, like he hasn't shaved for a while. He's missing a tooth in the middle."

"Long hair?"

"No, very short. He had a cap on but it fell off."

"Do you have the cap?"

"No, but he left his shoes. Excuse me, I put them in the corridor."

She got up and fetched a parcel wrapped in dark cloth. She folded the cloth back and put a pair of sneakers on Saito's desk. The sneakers were old and torn and the short zippers on the sides no longer worked.

"And how did he leave? On foot?"

"On a motorcycle. I didn't see it. Our hedges are rather overgrown and I am not tall. But when he left I heard an engine."

"What was the sound like?"

She smiled. "Do you want me to make the sound?"

"Please."

She giggled and covered her mouth with her hand.

"Go ahead, Miss."

"Burrum! Burrum! Bur*RUM*!"

The third "burrum" was on a higher pitch than the first two.

Saito nodded. "A motorcycle, a 350cc no doubt. A racing machine, highly geared. They are very popular nowadays, and expensive. How was the man dressed?"

"Tight jeans, a leather belt with a big brass buckle, and a short black-leather jacket."

"Do you have a telephone, Miss?"

"No."

"All right. We have your address. You'll hear from us."

She left, muttering her thanks and bowing. The sneakers were still on Saito's desk. The constable closed the door behind her and stood at attention.

"Sit down, Constable. Let me think."

Saito got up and walked over to the small bookcase he had stocked the previous day with the books he had studied for his inspector's examination. He picked up a thin volume and flipped through its pages.

"This is an interesting book, Constable," he said. "It is called *Parallel Cases Under the Pear Tree,* a classical Chinese text on detection and jurisprudence. One hundred and forty-four cases solved and judged by famous magistrates. Ah, here is what I am looking for."

He cleared his throat. " 'A married woman was washing clothes on the bank of a river. There came a traveler on horseback who violated her and rode away after he had changed his old boots for her new ones. The woman went to the prefect. The prefect summoned all the old women of the city. He showed them the old boots saying falsely: "A man on horseback was robbed with violence on the road. These are his boots. Is there not a relative of him among you?" An old woman wailed: "My son!" Thus the criminal was found and arrested.' "

Saito looked at the constable. "Have you listened?"

"Yes, sir."

"What did you think?"

"When did that happen, sir?"

Saito looked at the book. "During the Ch'i Dynasty. That would have been around the year 550. The prefect became a prince, Prince Ch'ieh. A famous statesman in his later days, I believe."

The constable bowed briefly in deference to the early date and noble rank. "But we cannot imitate the prince's method, sir. There are a million people in Kyoto—more now. Somebody told me that another half million have been added since the last count. We cannot show the sneakers to all the old women of Kyoto."

Saito replaced the book. "True, Constable. Times change. But there's something here. The minute I heard you say 'boots' I thought of the case solved by Prince Ch'ieh. Then when the girl said that the villain also tried to rape her I couldn't believe the coincidence. There's really nothing new under the sun. But you are right, we cannot summon all the mothers of Kyoto. We need more information so that our field of investigation is narrowed."

"The criminal will be a member of a motorcycle gang, sir."

"Yes. Usually these louts operate in groups. There are many such

gangs, isn't that so?"

"Several, sir. But there's only one in the north. Each gang has its own district."

"Good. Do you know where they gather?"

"In the mountains, sir. There are many strange types out there. Hermits, monks, woodcutters, hunters—but also bandits. I'm glad we moved to the city, for my wife was always frightened when she was alone. A gang used to race down the lane where we lived. A colleague once took part in a raid against those fellows. An informer told his superior officer that the gang had moved into a deserted temple compound, a ruin. Perhaps the temple was once a monastery. It's well placed strategically, on the top of a hill, with a clear view on all sides. The gang must have seen the police approaching and got away in time. They are dangerous when cornered. They once attacked a highway patrol—one of the constables was badly wounded, but there were no arrests."

Saito sat down. "We'll have to go out there and get into the compound somehow. I am sure it can be done. I don't see any other way of retrieving Washino-san's grandfather's boots, do you?"

The constable began to cough.

"Don't you think so, Constable?"

"Excuse me, sir. Perhaps not, sir. There's no charge. The woman doesn't want to go to court. To go to the gang's hideout would mean to go in force, and for that you will need permission from a chief inspector. It would have to be properly organized. Many men would be involved."

"Yes," Saito said thoughtfully. "Yes, I see what you mean. What do you advise?"

"Perhaps the inspector-san should not deal with this unfortunate business."

"Yes. And the boots? The old grandfather who is ill and in pain?"

"The *inspector*-san should forget the matter, sir. The desk sergeant will be needing me, Saito-san."

Saito paced the room after the constable had left. It was true there was nothing to be done in his official capacity, but he was also a private individual. Private individuals have many opportunities, especially if their actions involve no one but themselves. Private individuals aren't hemmed in on all sides by police regulations.

He was home a quarter of an hour later, eyeing the big Honda motorcycle in the rear of his garage. He had owned the Honda for several years now and had taken good care of it. It was still fast. He kicked the starter and the heavy twin cylinders purred. He turned the key and ran into the house, got out of his dark suit, and tore off his tie. He put on a pair of torn jeans and a disreputable cloth windbreaker, then rummaged about in a drawer and found a little leather cap. He also found a pink scarf and knotted it around his neck. Then he studied the map again.

The constable had pointed out the location of the temple compound, pretending to believe that the inspector was merely curious. The desk sergeant had come over to see what the inspector and the constable were doing; but by then the constable's finger had slipped to the center of the city and they were discussing traffic problems. Saito grinned and quickly felt his lip again. It didn't itch any more, but it still hurt. He looked at the mirror in the bedroom, then looked away again. He was a monstrosity.

His automatic pistol was on the bureau, complete with shoulder holster and straps. Should he take it with him? He wouldn't use it, of course, but it would give him confidence. Its magazine held sixfold death, sure death, for Saito knew how to handle it. He had been well trained. No. He opened a drawer and dropped the pistol on a stack of shirts.

He ran down the steps, trying to whistle. The whistle wouldn't pass his lip so he hissed instead. A samurai on his way to the stable to fetch his trusted steed.

The Honda was ready, gleaming in the light of the garage's single lightbulb. He took out his wallet and slid it into a tear in the saddle's lining. The engine roared to life. Within the next few minutes he passed three orange traffic lights. Samurai were good men, but they were also rather wild. They wouldn't have thought much of traffic lights.

The city's heavy traffic stayed behind when he reached Kyoto's northern outskirts. There were only buses now, and small three-wheeled trucks and even horse-drawn carts carrying rows of wooden buckets filled with human manure. The Honda performed well. He found the lane where Washino-san lived and rode slowly. She wouldn't be home yet—the streetcar didn't go that far and the buses were only

scheduled at one-hour intervals. She might have had to walk. There were lilac trees growing from the garden into the sidewalk. He saw the spot where the ruffian had scaled the fence, indicated by broken twigs and a split board.

He revved the engine as a salute to Washino-san's honesty, made a sharp right turn, and found the highway leading to the mountain pass. After another few miles, he took a left. But he had forgotten his directions and had to stop a few times to check his map.

It was half an hour before he saw the temple on the hill, or what was left of it. The clay outer walls of the compound had been eaten away by a hundred years of rain and wind, and the large sloping roof of the main building had partially caved in. Wildflowers grew on the road leading to the sagging gate and the vast courtyard was overgrown with knee-high thorny weeds. There were rough paths through the wilderness, however, made by feet and tires. Nobody seemed to be about but a clothesline sported some gaily colored shirts. He switched the engine off, kicked the Honda on its heavy metal strut, and took the sneakers out of the saddlebag.

When he walked to the temple's main door two men rushed him and grabbed his arms. They frog-marched him into the building.

"Easy," Saito said gruffly.

"Easy yourself. What do you want here?"

Three other young men were waiting for him inside. He was pushed against a wall and his pockets were quickly searched. A dirty handkerchief, a clasp knife, a packet of cigarettes, and a dented lighter joined the sneakers on the floor. A rough hand grabbed the collar of his jacket, yanking him back, and he turned and faced his opponents. He was angry by now, and red in the face, spitting his words. "You swine! Can't you see I am a friend? I came here to do one of your gang a favor, but now I'll say nothing. Look at his shoes. You know the shoes, don't you?"

"Taro's shoes," a tubby fellow said. "How did you get them?"

"I won't tell you."

"O.K. You're clean, but we've got to be careful. There are some that don't like us and they may send spies."

"A spy on a motorcycle?"

"Could be. We've got to be careful. Everybody gets the same treatment at first. You got no papers? No money?"

"Maybe I have. Maybe I left them somewhere. Are you the boss?"

The tubby fellow nodded and sat down on his haunches. His round belly hung over his belt. He was barefoot and a towel was wrapped around his neck. "You came early. I was just going to take my bath."

Saito checked his watch. "Early? It's almost eleven."

The tubby fellow laughed. "That's early for us. We live at night. Don't you?"

"Sure."

"What's wrong with your mouth?"

Saito touched his lip. "Oh, that? A fight. Because of your fellow."

"How come?"

"You're through with the rough stuff now?"

"Yes. You're a guest."

"I am riding through town," Saito said, gesturing widely, "looking for a bar, you know? And I find one. Last night nothing happens so I need a little strong stuff today. I go into the bar and a fight starts just as I come in. Your fellow and the owner are pushing and shoving. I don't know what the fight is about but your fellow looks like a brother so I hang around. I think maybe the owner doesn't like Taro—that's his name, right?"

"Yes."

"—Doesn't like Taro and wants to throw him out. So I help brother Taro a little bit and then the owner's friends come in. It turns into a big fight."

"Taro fights good."

"I fight good too, but there are six on the other side. And by and by the police come. The owner says that Taro has stolen money from the bar and the police find money on Taro. A lot of bills, all folded in half. The owner says he always folds his money before he puts it into the till. So Taro gets handcuffed. They come for me too and go through my pockets, but I have no big money—just a little, my own money. The owner says he knows Taro, he's hung around there before. He says he doesn't know me. Taro says he doesn't know me. I said I was doing nothing but when somebody hits me I defend myself. Then Taro stumbles and falls and I help him up and he whispers to me. 'Go tell 'em,' he whispers, 'temple in the mountains, north.' So I make it out here. I've never been here but I asked somebody where the temple in the north is and he told me."

"How'd you get Taro's shoes?"

"He lost them during the fight. I found them when the police left. So I put them in the saddlebag and here they are."

"So they got old Taro, hey?" the tubby fellow said. "That's bad. And he was riding my new Suzuki. That's bad too. Did you see the Suzuki maybe?"

"No."

"No? But it must have been outside the bar."

Saito thought quickly. "It was the Rising Moon Bar, behind the second bridge, in the willow quarter. That's in an alley, you can't park nothing there. Maybe the Suzuki was around the corner, in the avenue."

"You can go pick it up, chief," a young man said.

The tubby fellow shrugged. "Without a key? Taro has the key. I can pick it up in the truck but the truck has gone to town. To get some beer, I hope. When they come back tonight we can go and find the Suzuki. We've got to be careful. The police get suspicious when they see a motorcycle in a truck."

Saito picked up his belongings and lit a cigarette. He nodded. "Yes, tonight is better."

"Thanks for coming," the tubby fellow said, "and sorry about messing you around. You want some lunch?"

"No, I've got things to do. But I'd like to come back."

"Come tomorrow. Friday night is party night. It'll last all weekend, maybe longer if the beer holds out. You don't have to bring nothing, not this time. Or next time either. What gang are you with?"

"No gang," Saito said sadly. "I've been away in Tokyo—just got back. In Tokyo I was with the Skulls and Bones."

The tubby fellow smiled. "Good. Maybe you can teach us some tricks. The Tokyo gangs have fun."

"Tomorrow then," Saito said. "Are you fellows going to see Taro?"

"Not in jail, we won't. He'll come out again."

Saito broke into a sweat when he rode through the gate. They could have caught him out so easily. Why did he have to make that comment about eleven o'clock not being early? But they hadn't seemed to notice. And the absence of Taro's motorcycle was another trap. He had dodged out of that one in the nick of time. He hadn't thought of Taro's

bike. A new Suzuki. Pity he didn't know the color. But to ask would have involved too much risk. He thought of the main danger he had faced. Taro could either have been in the temple or arrived while he had been talking to the gang. If they'd found him out they might have killed him. But he hadn't been found out. Thanks to luck, or to Kwannon, the goddess of compassion and the patron saint of the samurai. Taro was probably still in town, having a few beers after his adventure of the morning or roaming about the willow quarter, looking for a prostitute. But Taro would come back. All he had to do now was wait.

He found a good spot at the side of the road and sat on a rock beside the Honda. After a while he got up and checked the gas in his tank. There wasn't much. He went back to his rock and smoked. Once in a while a car passed. The narrow path leading to the hills and the temple beyond was quite invisible.

The afternoon passed slowly. Saito became thirsty, then hungry. He had run out of cigarettes. He forced himself to stay awake and alert.

Dinnertime had come and gone when he heard the whine of the Suzuki. It was at a considerable distance, but the hills echoed the high-pitched gurgle of the small but speedy machine. Saito jumped up and started the Honda. He could hear the Suzuki shift down to climb the steep slope around the corner. He turned the Honda around and drove off. The speedometer touched fifty-five when the Suzuki tried to overtake him. He opened the throttle completely and the Honda nearly jumped from under him. He stayed next to the Suzuki. Its rider looked at him. Saito shouted and the rider shouted back. Saito saw the missing tooth. The rider had to be Taro. Saito glanced down and saw the boots. His hand shot out and made contact with Taro's shoulder.

The Honda rode alone while the Suzuki swerved and hit the soft shoulder of the road. Saito braked and looked back. Taro was struggling to maintain control, but the Suzuki was falling over. Taro jumped, rolled over, and landed on his feet.

Saito stopped, parked the Honda, and waited. Taro came running at him and he assumed the judo posture, arms dangling, head down, legs apart. Taro yelled as he ran, the high yell of the karate fighter. He was close enough now and Saito stepped aside, almost casually hitting Taro's head as he flashed past. Taro ran on until he crashed into the Honda. He tried to hold on to the heavy motorcycle, but his legs folded and he crumpled to the ground.

Saito ambled toward him and knelt, pulling off one boot, then the other. He sat down and removed his own shoes. He slipped into the boots and pushed Taro's feet into his own shoes. Then he got up, picked up Taro, and threw him down in the weeds on the lower bank.

When he turned around a long low green and white Toyota was parked behind him. There were three policemen in the cruiser. The driver leaned out of his open window. "What happened?"

"An accident."

"Get out, men," the driver said. His sleeve showed the stripes of a sergeant. The two constables tumbled out of the cruiser. "Check them both."

"Papers," one of the constables barked.

"They're in my motorcycle."

"Go get them. I'll go with you. No tricks now."

Saito pulled his wallet out of the saddle of the Honda. The constable read the driving license and compared the photograph. "Saito, eh? What do you do for a living, Saito?"

"Nothing right now. I'm looking for a job."

"A bum, eh? Let's see the registration."

The registration was in order and the constable reluctantly returned the wallet.

"This fellow is out, Sergeant," the other constable was saying.

The sergeant clambered out of the cruiser and nudged Taro's immobile body with his boot. Taro opened one eye.

"Are you all right?"

Taro tried to get up and was helped to his feet by the constables. He pointed at Saito. "Arrest him. He pushed me off the road and beat me up."

"Papers!" the sergeant shouted. "And you, you with the lip! Get that Honda off the road. Somebody will smash into it. Push it over here and stay near it."

"I left my papers at home," Taro said.

The sergeant walked back to the cruiser and sat behind the wheel. He spoke into his microphone, looking out of the window to read the Suzuki's characters and numbers. Taro glared at Saito and Saito studied a raspberry bush next to the wheel of the Honda.

"Right," the sergeant said. "Thank you."

He jumped out of the car and walked over to Taro. "Forgot your

papers, eh? You're a liar and a thief, boy. And under arrest."

He turned and faced Saito while the constables handcuffed Taro and led him to the back of the cruiser.

"You. Tell your story. What happened here?"

Saito swallowed. "I was riding up this road and saw the Suzuki slipping around. He'd taken the curve too fast and then must have hit some loose gravel. He fell and I stopped to see if I could help. He was just lying there and I thought he might get run over, so I dragged him into the weeds."

The sergeant narrowed his eyes. Saito bowed. "That's the truth, Sergeant."

"Yes?" the sergeant said. "How come that fellow says you forced him off the road and then beat him up? You were fighting, Shifty Eyes! You may as well admit it—look at that lip!"

"I've had this lip all day, Sergeant. A bug must have bitten me this morning."

"Come here," the sergeant said. He looked at Saito's lip. "Yes, I can see the bite, in the corner here. A deerfly. O.K., that much is true then. But you're lying too."

One of the constables returned. "Saito's papers are in order, Sergeant. The fools were probably playing chicken, and the moron on the Suzuki lost. He should be grateful he's still alive."

Taro's head appeared at the cruiser's window. "I'll remember your face, you bastard! When I see you again I'll—" He spat.

"You what?" the sergeant asked.

"I'll kill him!"

"Good idea," the sergeant said. "If you vermin would kill each other off we wouldn't have to work so hard." He turned to Saito. "On your way! And don't let me see you again today or I'll run you in. We'll think of the charge later. Harassing a deerfly or something like that."

Washino-san gasped when she opened the door.

"It's me, Miss. The police inspector you saw this morning. I came to return your grandfather's boots. Here you are."

She took the boots and put them down carefully. "Thank you, sir. My, you look terrible! What happened? Where are your own shoes?"

"I lost them, Miss. It doesn't matter, they were old."

"Oh, *no*! Do come in, please. You can't go home in your socks."

He turned and walked to the gate. The sharp gravel hurt his feet bu he tried to walk normally. He opened the gate, turned, smiled at th gaping girl, turned again, and walked off. His lip was worse; he coul feel it throb. He found the Honda and tried to kick the starter, but i snapped back and hit his unprotected foot. He hopped about on on leg, made a full circle, and tried again. The engine caught.

"Samurai, hah!" he muttered as the Honda hobbled slowly over th lane's badly paved surface. He reached a main thoroughfare and turne the throttle. The engine coughed, failed, coughed again, and died. H braked. He was out of gas. He peered hopefully inside the tank. Noth ing. He shook the motorcycle. Still nothing. He felt very tired. H had no idea where the nearest gas station could be. He would have t inquire. The closest house was the Washino cottage. He parked th Honda and began to walk back. His foot hit a sharp stone. The pai was so intense he had to lean against a tree.

"Samurai," he mumbled again. Noble warriors in lacquered armor in feathered helmets, armed with long curved swords. To imitate th ancients is a foolish game. Prince Ch'ieh, ha! Kwannon, ha! The nam of the goddess infuriated him most. Now he knew why she smiled. Be cause fools like himself hurt their toes, and ran out of gas, and wer insulted by baboons in uniform. No wonder Kwannon was amused. H limped on.

"You're back," Washino said. "Oh, I am *so* pleased."

"I ran out of gas, Miss. Can you tell me where the nearest pum is?"

"Surely. But please come in. You must have a bath. The tub is full And have some sake. My grandfather has gone to sleep already, witl his boots next to the bed. He was so pleased. After the bath you ca taste my noodle soup and some fried shrimps. *Do* come in."

When Saito sat in the wooden tub a few minutes later and felt hi fatigue evaporate with the steam, he laughed for the first time tha day. The swelling in his lip was going down and it no longer hurt. He sighed with joy and reached for the sake jug perched on the edge o the tub. He refilled his cup and sipped. He could hear Washino-sa busy in the kitchen on the other side of the thin wall. The splutterin would be the shrimps falling into hot oil, being fried in a delicious layer of crackly batter. The spluttering stopped. The door of the bath room opened an inch. Two large slanting eyes peeped through the

steam.

"Is the water hot enough, Inspector-san?"

"Yes, very nice."

"Enough sake?"

"Oh, yes."

"After dinner I want to hear everything that happened. Fortunately, this is my night off from my job. You can stay as long as you like."

Saito waved the steam away. "Until tomorrow morning?"

"Is the story that long?"

He tried to think of a suitable answer.

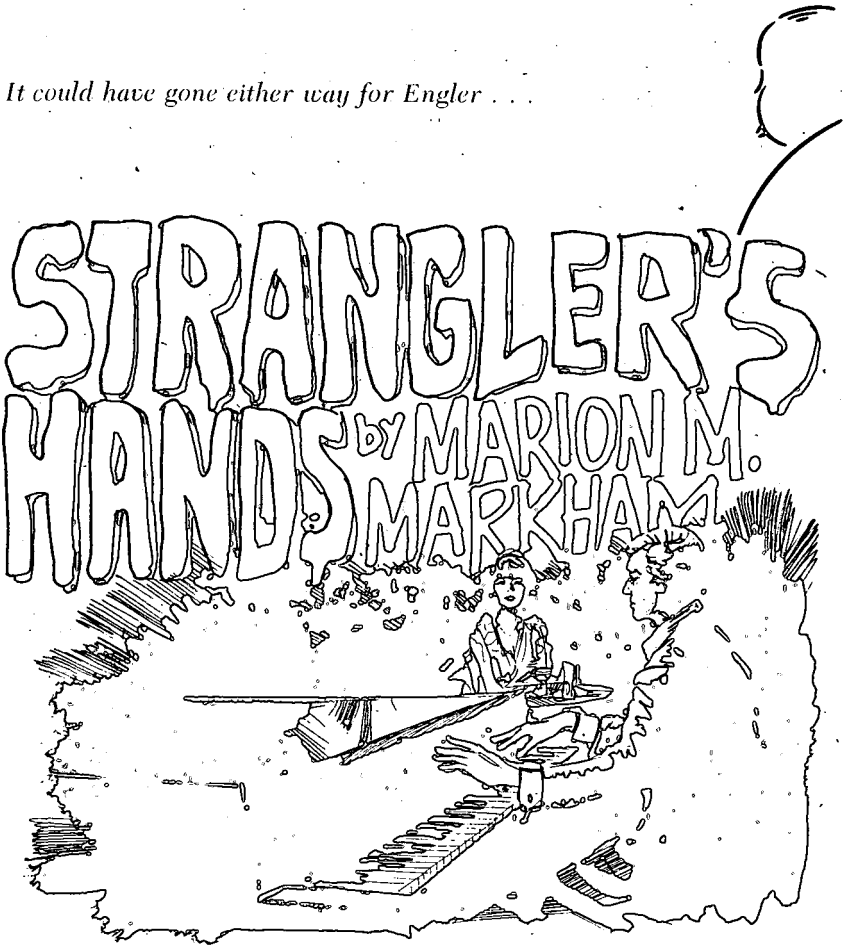
Washino giggled. The door shut slowly.

Saito folded his hands and bowed. He hoped that Kwannon hadn't heard him. He hadn't really intended to insult her. It was only because he had hurt his toe. Surely the goddess would understand.

It could have gone either way for Engler . . .

STRANGLER'S HANDS

by MARION M. MARKHAM



Before I became the editor, I was a damn good crime reporter—dedicated to justice and truth. I believed in all the clichés. Until I covered the Engler case.

Sometimes, in the middle of the night when the full moon shines in through the bedroom window, I still wake up and think about him. It's too late to print the story now. Darrin Engler is dead, executed for the murder of Police Officer Bernard Pattan. That ought to tell you how

long ago it happened. No one's been executed in years. In fact, Engler was the last convicted murderer to be electrocuted in this state.

He had long slender fingers that he clasped and unclasped in the artificial grip of a concert singer. Even in that nervous movement they were graceful fingers—a pianist's fingers or a surgeon's. Or a strangler's. It could have gone either way for Engler.

He paid his way through medical school by playing piano in a bar on Argyle Street. I heard him a few times and he was good, too good to be playing where he was.

He was in a dream when he played, a romantic remote world I could barely glimpse. I only felt it, that deep interior place from which his music came. He was good enough to be a concert pianist, but he turned his fine hands to medicine. Yes, it could have gone either way for him, and the way it went was wrong. Who knows why a man who could create music like that and had a wonderful future as a surgeon became a strangler?

But I wanted to know. His murder trial was my first assignment for the newspaper, and several years later I wrote about his execution. It was a good story—full of hearts-and-flowers morality about the young man with the golden hands who went astray—but it wasn't as good as it could have been. I didn't write that the same romantic impulse that had made his music memorable had also made him kill.

I'd been trying to see Engler for months. Finally, the day before the execution, his court-appointed lawyer called. Engler would see me.

The lawyer hoped I might get the real story, something he could use for a last-minute appeal to the governor. The public defender didn't believe any more than I did that a man whose fingers made such music could use them for murder.

Engler met me in a small visiting room in the prison. He clasped and unclasped his hands absently.

I said, "It's your last chance to tell what really happened."

He seemed not to hear me.

I was shocked at how he'd aged. I still remembered how his red-blond hair had looked under the single spotlight behind the dark bar. In the courtroom I'd seen only the back of his head or his profile when he lifted his face from his hands. Only when he was being led away after the sentencing did I see the crazy quirk to his mouth that made

me think he was laughing at all of us. Now in the prison, the quirk was gone and so was the glint in his hair. Three years in death row can age a man.

I said, "Do you really want to be remembered this way? Tell me your story—the real story, not what your confession said." Still he twisted his hands. I wanted to scream—to make him stop twisting them and look at me. "I heard you play the piano. You played 'Sweet Lorraine' and some other songs I didn't know. I always thought they were your own compositions."

He looked at me then. His eyes were even older than the rest of his face.

"They *were* my own songs, most of them. Songs without words or names." He smirked. "That could be your story. A writer of songs without words who goes to his death without explaining."

"Didn't any of them have words?"

"Not at first. Then she came into the bar, and all the words were about her."

"Her?"

"She was wearing a pale-blue dress. I never saw her in anything but that soft filmy blue dress. She told me blue was her favorite color. It was a striking contrast with her black hair.

"She always sat at a small table near the bar, ordering drinks she didn't touch. It was like she was paying rent for her chair. She never took a sip. I didn't know then that she couldn't."

Engler wasn't talking to me. He didn't even notice I was taking notes. He was remembering and his troubled eyes didn't see me any more.

"Most girls come into a bar alone to find someone to talk to. She never spoke to anyone. I felt that she just wanted to be where there were people. It was as if she was lonely and didn't know what to do about it. I couldn't understand how a girl that beautiful could be lonely, but I knew what it was like never being able to talk to people easily. I was like that too. Until I met her."

As I listened, I thought that she must really have been special. There was something, almost a reverence in his voice, that said more than the words.

One Saturday, when he left work, she was waiting outside the bar. "Not for me," he said. "I just happened to come out and there she was,

looking like she didn't know where to go."

He offered to buy her a cup of coffee, but she said she'd rather walk. In the light of the full moon, her blue dress looked almost white, and her step was so light that she seemed to float.

She was surprised when Engler asked her name. "She laughed and said she was Catherine. She was amazed that I didn't know. She was famous. She'd been in all the newspapers once." He paused then, as if listening.

They'd walked west to Ravenswood and then turned north. He kept asking her what her last name was, but she talked about her family instead—how sad her mother and father were since it had happened, and how she missed her younger sister. Near a cemetery she stopped and thanked him for walking her home. Then she pushed open a rusty iron gate and disappeared into the darkness inside the wall. He waited for a while, thinking it was some kind of joke, but she didn't return.

She came into the bar every weekend, but she never let him walk her home again. She told him that it was scary where she went but that she could handle it better alone and she'd rather he would just walk to the elevated station with her.

Engler said, "She asked once if I'd read about her, and seemed hurt that I hadn't. But still she came back. When I played, she stared at me with those beautiful eyes. She knew I was playing just to her. Somehow we understood each other's loneliness. One night she said it was her anniversary. June 27th. Exactly five years since she'd been in the newspapers."

He found the story in the university library. Her picture was spread across two columns on the front page. Catherine Kirbie. Nineteen years old. Killed by a policeman. The cop—Pattan—had stopped her for speeding along Sheridan Road. She'd tried to run. His gun went off accidentally when he grabbed her. A bullet ricocheted off a building and struck her in the head.

"I loved her, and she was a ghost," Engler said. "I knew then why her voice was sometimes so faint and breathless and why her face, in the moonlight, had an ethereal glow, as if it had been powdered with silver. She'd been dead for five years." Engler looked at me and there was pain in his eyes.

"Pattan was suspended for thirty days. A trigger-happy cop kills a beautiful vibrant girl and he's only suspended for thirty days. She

wasn't the first teenager he'd shot. There was a boy a couple of years earlier, who didn't die."

Engler didn't notice I had stopped taking notes. There wasn't anything he'd told me that I could use. Yet, if I had, could his lawyer have taken it to the governor and gotten a reprieve? He might be alive today if I'd written the facts as he gave them.

But what kind of life would he have had? His medical career was finished. And he might have learned about his phantom love.

I knew a few things about Catherine Kirbie that he didn't. Reckless was better than vibrant to describe her. She'd run because her license was already suspended for too many speeding violations. She was selfish and spoiled, but there had been a mystique about her. Her mother and father doted on her. Her sister, Carole, who was fourteen when Catherine died, had never gotten over her death. Catherine's high school sweetheart still took roses to her grave every year on her birthday.

Her sister had the same charisma when she got older. To fall in love with one of the Kirbie girls was to stay in love for life.

"It was murder!" he shouted. "Pattan got away with murder, just because he was a cop." His hands were clenching again. "She cried sometimes, and it tore me apart. I didn't like to think of her lying in that cold place and being so unhappy." He rose and began pacing. Then he turned to me. "What would you have done?"

I wanted to tell him that he was a damn fool—that it was a waste of those hands to use them for killing. But I didn't know what I would have done if she'd selected me as the instrument of her revenge.

"What would you have done?" he repeated. I couldn't answer. I had fallen in love with the younger Kirbie sister during Engler's trial, when she sat in back with a big hat covering her dyed hair and most of her face. Sometimes it's hard to know the right thing to do.

When Carole Kirbie was asked at her wedding what she thought of the Darrin Engler case, she replied that justice had been done. Whether she meant Engler or Pattan no one knew. I don't suppose Engler saw the story on the society page. The photograph was pretty blurry.

I wondered why Engler had never told anyone else about Catherine.

"If I said I killed him because her ghost asked me to, they might decide I was crazy. I'd rather be dead than spend my life in an asylum.

I did what needed doing. Now I want to find peace too. Maybe with her." I understood, then, his half smile after the judge had sentenced him.

The door opened and a prison guard said our time was up. I was afraid Engler would offer me his right hand to shake. Instead he clasped his other hand with it and turned away. At the doorway he stopped.

"I've got a couple of tapes—not 'Sweet Lorraine,' but some other things I used to play, and a couple of my own songs. I'll ask the warden to give them to you."

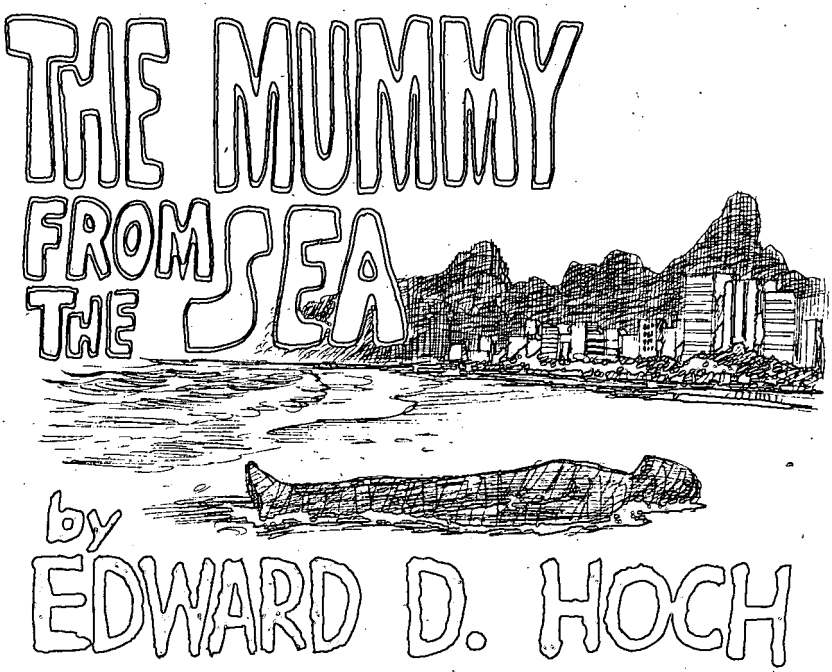
I think he knew I wouldn't write about his ghost. Instead I wrote what he'd suggested—about a man who composed wordless songs and died without speaking of what had driven him to a revenge killing. How could I write it any other way?

I couldn't admit that my wife—almost identical to photographs of her older sister except for the color of her hair—had incited a man to murder.

At least, I think it must have been Carole in the filmy blue dress with silver powder on her face. I've never asked. I've never dared play Engler's tapes when she's home either. I'd rather believe in Catherine Kirbie's ghost demanding justice.

Yet sometimes, in the middle of the night, I remember Engler's hands and then I can't get back to sleep. And in my mind I write the real story—this story.

Could the mummy really have come from an Egyptian tomb? . . .



It was several days after Christmas when I arrived in Rio de Janeiro with Simon Ark, but the season was summer there and the wave of heat that hit us at the airport was a pleasant change from the wet snow we'd left behind in New York.

Simon had phoned and asked me to make the journey with him. "I need you, my friend," he'd said. "You are one of the few stabilizing influences in a world gone increasingly mad."

"Does the Devil wait for you in Rio, Simon?" I asked. After knowing him for twenty-five years I was too well aware of his interest in the diabolic and mystical.

"Perhaps," he replied. "A lawyer I know there telephoned me this morning to report on an extraordinary crime. A mummy has been found washed up on Copacabana Beach."

"A mummy! Wrapped up and everything? Like in Egypt?"

"Yes."

"Maybe it fell overboard from a ship. Is it very old?"

"It is surprisingly new. It is the mummy of the lawyer's client, who disappeared from his home the day before Christmas."

I knew then that I'd be going to Rio with Simon Ark.

My wife Shelly was upset at my missing New Year's Eve at home, but she understood as well as anyone my strange relationship with Simon Ark. It is a relationship that has brought us together sometimes after years apart, and carried us to distant places while Simon pursued his investigations of the strange and Satanic. I once edited a book of Simon's on witchcraft, and my firm published it. Although I didn't really believe his claim that he'd been searching out evil for nearly two thousand years, I had to admit he knew a great deal about it. And there were times, looking at his weathered face and tired eyes, when I'd have believed him to be just about any age he said.

So we were in Rio.

The lawyer who'd summoned us was an American named Felix Brighter, a portly man in his forties whom Simon had known in New York. When I asked what he was doing in Brazil, Simon only smiled wisely and said, "I believe there was some trouble with money. And of course Brazil has no extradition treaty with the United States."

Whatever brought him there, Felix Brighter had made the best of it. His office in one of the big new buildings facing the ocean commanded a sweeping view of the Avenida Atlantica and the hundred-yard-wide expanse of Copacabana Beach beyond.

I stared out the window at the wavy mosaic pattern of Copacabana's promenade far below. "It was almost opposite my building that the body was found," Felix Brighter said, directing our gaze a bit to the south. "In fact, I saw the police cars and the crowd around the spot when I came to work that morning."

"It's a very wide beach," Simon observed, "yet the body was by the water rather than here near the street?"

"Exactly. As if it had been cast up by the ocean."

Simon and I resumed our seats opposite the lawyer's desk. "Tell me everything you know about the victim," Simon said.

"I'm afraid that's very little. His name was Sergio Costa, and he operated a tourist shop just down the street with his brother Luiz. They sold native pottery and artifacts, and I did some legal work for them when it was needed. Sergio was divorced from his wife and living with his unmarried brother in a small house in the Canoa section. He disappeared on Christmas Eve, but Luiz didn't think much of it at first. His brother had been depressed about the breakup of his marriage, and Luiz thought he was off getting drunk somewhere."

"And the body?"

"Washed up on the beach two days ago. It was completely embalmed and wrapped in burial windings like an Egyptian mummy, as if it had been plucked from a tomb."

Simon Ark nodded. "It seems like a terrorist act—something to throw fear into people. Have you been troubled with urban guerrillas here in Brazil?"

"Of course, and that is what the police think. But Sergio and Luiz were not wealthy men, and no ransom was demanded."

"That may come later." Simon pondered. "Perhaps this death was meant as an example, so that other merchants will pay up out of fear."

The lawyer scowled. "Perhaps. But there is another possibility, and that's the reason I contacted you, Simon. I remembered your interest in the bizarre, especially regarding religion and the worship of strange gods."

"Some gods are so strange it is difficult to distinguish them from devils," Simon remarked. "The spirit cults of Rio have both gods and devils to worship."

"You know of their devil Exu?"

"Yes."

"And the she-demon Pomba Gira?"

Simon nodded.

"Then you must know of the sea goddess Yemanja. She is portrayed as a beautiful black-haired woman in a long blue gown coming out of the ocean. Soon, on New Year's Eve to be exact, that beach down

there will be alive with her worshipers. They will cast offerings of flowers and jewelry and even sacrificial animals into the surf for their goddess. If the offering is carried out to sea, Yemanja's aid and protection are assured. If it is washed back to the beach, it is a sign of her rebuff."

"And you believe—"

"That Sergio Costa was killed and his mummy cast into the ocean as an offering to Yemanja, who rejected it."

I was beginning to think that Felix Brighter had been living in Rio too long, but surprisingly enough Simon seemed to accept the theory in dead earnest. "That's a possibility worth looking into," he agreed. "But tell me, exactly what is your interest in this affair?"

"He was my client. I drew up his will and I'll be probating his estate. I feel someone should try to find his killer. For the police it'll be a routine investigation, quickly forgotten."

"What about Sergio's estate? Does his brother inherit?"

"Only Sergio's half interest in the shop, which isn't worth much. His house went to his ex-wife in the divorce settlement, along with much of his cash. He was still supporting her and their two children."

"I should speak with the police," Simon decided.

"The local police are working with a government detective named Marcos Orleans. I will arrange an appointment."

Brighter dialed a number and spoke briefly in Portuguese, listened, and then spoke again. When he hung up he said, "Orleans can see you in an hour. He suggests you meet at the city morgue. If you learn anything, I'd appreciate your letting me know at once. Orleans says he will help in any way possible."

"That needn't include showing us the remains," I grumbled.

But of course I went along with Simon to the morgue.

Marcos Orleans had curly black hair and a pencil-thin moustache. He was younger than I'd expected and there was a gleam in his eyes that hinted at a zest for more pleasant pursuits than the grim business at hand. He introduced himself as a member of the federal police and led us to one of the sheet-covered morgue tables.

"A terrible crime. Terrible!"

"How was he killed?" Simon asked.

"We suspect poison, and we'll remove certain tissues for examina-

tion. Of course with the body already embalmed it's impossible to state just when he died."

Simon bent to examine the corpse's skin, perhaps searching for needle marks. "Do you have any leads on who embalmed him?"

"None," the detective admitted. "Our federal industry is not as well regulated as it might be. We have the poor living in those shacks on the hillsides, and often they are dead and buried without anyone even knowing. Naturally we are checking all undertakers for any embalming they did on Christmas Eve or Christmas Day, but if the killer passed off Sergio as a poor slum-dweller there might be no record of it."

Simon straightened up. "Do you believe the embalming was done as part of an offering to the sea goddess Yemanja?"

"I am not a superstitious man, Mr. Ark. There is no place for superstition in police work."

"I think the lawyer, Felix Brighter, summoned me because he is a superstitious man."

Marcos Orleans smiled for the first time. "He has an office high above Copacabana Beach. I have been there. From his window, looking down at the tiny specks of humanity moving on the sand below, one might easily imagine himself to be something of a god. And, after all, gods are superstitious, are they not?"

Simon merely smiled. I could see he admired the detective without necessarily agreeing with him. Perhaps they had both seen something of Felix Brighter's character that I'd missed.

"Then you have no leads?" Simon asked as we were departing.

The detective shrugged. "Tomorrow is New Year's Eve and the great night of Yemanja's festival. The candles will burn on the beach, and the sea itself might give us an answer. I will be there."

"I thought you weren't superstitious."

"I'm not, Mr. Ark, but maybe the killer is."

Simon paused at the door. "One more thing. Is there anyone in Rio who could tell me more about Yemanja and the spirit cults?"

The detective considered his question. "Go see Father Rudolph at the Church of Santa Catarina. He is an American who has labored long among our people." He glanced at the wall clock. "Now he will be among the poor on the hillsides, but go in the morning when he says Mass."

"Thank you," Simon said.

We went out into the sunlit street and I was thankful for the fresh air after the closeness of the morgue. Feeling the warmth on my face it was hard to believe it was winter back home. "Now what?" I asked Simon.

"Now we visit the surviving brother, Luiz Costa."

The Costa brothers had known how to choose a good location. Their shop fronted on the six-lane Avenida Atlantica, next to a sidewalk café where tables with blue-and-white umbrellas offered a respite from the tropic sun. I followed Simon Ark through the front door, past display counters loaded with carved animals and woven baskets.

"We'll be closing soon," the man behind the counter informed us. "A death in the family."

He was short and clean-shaven, with black hair that half covered his ears. With the addition of a moustache he might have passed for the man I'd just seen in the morgue. "You are Luiz Costa?" Simon asked.

"Yes."

"I have come from New York to investigate the strange death of your brother."

"Who would care about my brother as far away as New York?"

"Your lawyer, Felix Brighter, asked me to come. I have had some experience in this sort of thing."

"You, an old man? How will you find Sergio's killers?"

"First by discovering the motive," Simon told him. "Who wanted your brother dead?"

"No one." But immediately he corrected himself. "Except maybe that ex-wife of his, Rosetta. That woman would stop at nothing."

"This hardly seems a crime of passion," Simon pointed out.

"She bled him of every penny. In the end he was living with me, having only his interest in this shop to keep him going."

"Could you tell us something of his disappearance?"

"He left the shop early on Christmas Eve. Generally only one of us worked here at a time, but during the Christmas season we had a part-time clerk as well. He had planned to do some last-minute shopping for his children. Naturally, I expected he would be home when I arrived there a bit past six o'clock. But his absence did not worry me at first. I assumed he had gone early to visit his children. In fact, it was not until Christmas morning when Rosetta telephoned me that I re-

alized something was wrong."

"He didn't go there?"

"No, she never saw him—or so she claimed. I telephoned some of his friends but no one had seen him. When he did not return home that evening I reported him missing to the police."

"And they found him two days ago?"

"Yes. On the twenty-eighth, early in the morning. The waves had rolled his wrapped body onto the beach."

"The body is still at the morgue."

Luiz nodded. "They are trying to determine the cause of death. It will be released later today, which is why I am closing early. The funeral must be tomorrow because of the New Year's holiday."

"Brighter said you thought he might have been off drinking because he was depressed at the breakup of his marriage."

"The thought occurred to me. I despised that woman, but we are a Catholic country, after all, and divorce is a very serious matter. It was a terrible blow to my brother."

"So he drank."

"Yes."

I paused at a counter to pick up a small stone carving of a llama. "This looks very old. Is it valuable?"

"Ones like it from pre-Columbian days are national treasures in Peru. But that is only a copy."

I set it gently on the counter. Simon seemed to have finished with his questioning. He paused only to study a framed photograph of the two brothers that hung on the wall behind the shop's cash register. Then he said goodbye and followed me outside.

"What do you think about him, Simon?" I asked.

"I don't know. I was struck mainly by the resemblance between him and his dead brother. With the addition of a moustache he could be the twin of the man in the morgue."

"I was thinking the same thing."

"Embalming a body removes one very specific means of identification—a person's blood type. The blood is drained and replaced by embalming fluid."

"So it could be Luiz in the morgue instead of Sergio?"

"We'll see."

Back at our hotel Simon telephoned the detective, Marcos Orleans,

and asked him how the body was identified. He listened and finally hung up, somewhat disappointed. "Sergio's ex-wife identified him. And his fingerprints checked out too. There's no doubt about the identification."

"It was a good idea, Simon."

We spent the evening strolling the streets of Rio near our hotel. Once we came upon a newsstand where large prints of religious scenes were sold along with the magazines. There was an agonized Christ, and the Last Supper, and St. Stephen pierced by arrows, and in the midst of them a portrait of a beautiful lady in a blue gown rising from the flower-strewn ocean waves.

"That would be Yemanja," Simon pointed out.

"They certainly mix their religious icons."

"The pagan and the Christian have always been very close in Latin countries. In the morning we will visit Father Rudolph, and perhaps he can help us."

I had been to Catholic Mass before with Simon, but nothing prepared me for the Mass we attended at the little Church of Santa Catarina. The entire front row of the church was filled with a row of native women, their heads shaved and their bodies and faces dabbed with spots of white paint. Colorful scarves were wound around their bodies and their necklaces and bracelets jingled when they moved. They seemed under the direction of a robed woman who wore a dozen or more crosses and strands of beads around her neck. As the Mass came to an end, she unbelievably lit a cigar and smoked it as she shepherded her charges out.

Father Rudolph, a tall smiling priest with a Midwestern accent, had been told to expect us. He shook hands and led us into the sacristy while he removed his vestments.

"Who were those people, Father?" I asked. "It seemed almost part of some initiation rite."

"That's exactly what it was. They are initiates into the Candomble spirit cult. The initiation ceremony lasts for several weeks and this is the final ritual. They are brought to attend Catholic Mass."

"I can't believe it!" I said. "That woman with the cigar—"

The priest merely shrugged. "The cigar is part of the ritual, and she is the Mother of Saint, the head priestess of their closed community.

They are mediums, you see, or think they are."

"But you allow them here?"

"Candomble is the oldest of the spirit cults, with roots in West Africa. Those white dots and lines painted on the initiates' bodies are meant to represent the scars cut into the flesh by African tribes. Theirs is a mixture of Christian and pagan ceremony, and in many ways they are an approximation of the Church. Though we deplore spiritism, we will not drive them away from our churches."

"Do these people worship Yemanja?" Simon asked.

Father Rudolph carefully folded his vestments. "No. She is a deity of the Umbanda cult, which is Rio's largest. And its most dangerous, I might add, since it fosters a subsidiary cult that practices black magic."

"The Devil."

The priest studied Simon. "You say it like the name of an old friend."

"Hardly a friend, but surely an acquaintance. He is never far away, is he?"

"Not here. Not where poverty drives the people down and superstition lifts them up. If the Church and the spirit cults cannot help them, they will turn to an older religion."

"I am interested in the death of Sergio Costa."

"Yes." The priest nodded. "The one wrapped like a mummy."

"A sacrifice to the sea goddess?"

"Perhaps. Tonight is New Year's Eve, and sacrifices will be made on Rio's beaches."

"Who would I talk to about the sacrifices?" Simon asked.

"Bamba Yin, perhaps. She's a fat ugly old woman who knows more about such matters than any human being should."

"Where will I find her?"

"You won't, today. She'll be meditating for tonight's celebration. Look for her before midnight on Copacabana Beach."

"Will you be there, Father?" Simon asked.

"I do not worship Yemanja. They may bring their gods to me, but I do not take my God to them."

When we left the little church, Simon suggested we call on the dead man's former wife. "A wife, present or former, is always a suspect in a murder case," he pointed out.

"We're not even certain it is murder, Simon. Unless Orleans has been able to establish the cause of death was poison."

"I think we can assume, my friend, that Sergio Costa had some unwanted help in departing this life. Let us visit the widow."

We arrived at the Costa home just as the family was returning from the cemetery. I'd forgotten this was the morning of the funeral. The children were taken inside by an older woman dressed in black while Rosetta Costa, also in black, greeted us on an enclosed patio. She was a lovely woman with long black hair, not at all what I'd expected, and it took me a moment to realize why her face seemed so familiar. It was because she bore an uncanny resemblance to the painting of the goddess Yemanja that we'd seen for sale.

I glanced at Simon and saw that his eyes were on her face. "Who would want to murder your husband, Mrs. Costa?"

"He hadn't been my husband for two years. I saw him only when he came to see the children. And this year he did not even send them his usual cards before Christmas. If he involved himself with the spirit cults he deserves what he got."

"Do you know for a fact he was involved with them?"

"I told you his life no longer concerned me. But years ago he was involved with them. I do some modeling, and an artist used a photograph of me to paint a picture of one of their goddesses."

"Yemanja," Simon said.

"Yes. How did you know?"

"The resemblance is still quite striking."

"They ask me to take part in their ceremony each year, on the beach. This year, because of the funeral, I should not go." She considered a moment and added, "But perhaps I will. Sergio was dead for me two years ago."

"It might be wiser to stay away," Simon cautioned. "But what about your brother-in-law, Luiz? Are you on friendly terms with him?"

"Why do you ask?"

"He did not come back here after the funeral."

"How observant you are. No, we're not on particularly friendly terms. He took in Sergio after I'd thrown him out. He was on Sergio's side through the entire divorce."

"Isn't that natural for a brother?"

"I suppose so," she said with a sigh, "but that doesn't mean I have

to like him."

"Did you ever stop into their shop?"

"Never, since the divorce."

"One last question, Mrs. Costa—if I may still call you that. Was Sergio involved in any criminal activity?"

"Do you mean the cults? They are not criminal, except for the black magic perhaps."

"Not the cults. Something else."

"No, no—there was nothing else while we were married. Since then, who knows?"

We left her on the patio and walked back to my rented car. "Why did you ask that last question, Simon? Do you know something?"

"No more than you do, my friend."

I thought about that as we drove back to our hotel.

There was a message for us to call Marcos Orleans. When I reached him he said, "You and Simon might want to come down here to police headquarters. We've solved the Costa murder."

When we got there Orleans greeted us with a smile. "We have filed charges against a Peruvian citizen named Juan Mira."

"Murder charges?" Simon asked.

"Yes, along with certain customs violations and other offenses."

"I thought it odd that a member of the federal police would be investigating a local killing unless there were other crimes involved."

I remembered Orleans' introduction to us at the morgue. Simon had caught the fact I'd missed—that he was a federal investigator rather than a local one.

"Mira has confessed to everything except the actual killing," Orleans said. "But we're certain he'll admit to that soon too."

"What did the customs violations involve?" Simon asked.

"Traffic in pre-Columbian art treasures. But I'll let you hear it directly from the man himself. He's more than willing to talk. We've been on his trail for some time."

He issued some rapid instructions in Portuguese over the intercom, and presently a slender man with sharp features was brought into the room. It was obvious at once why he'd been so willing to talk. There was a large purple bruise beneath one eye and he walked with a stiff painful gait that hinted at other unseen injuries.

"Ah!" Orleans greeted him, helping him to a chair. "These gentlemen would like to hear your story just as you told it to me."

Juan Mira shifted in his chair as if seeking a less painful position. I was reminded of the news stories of the Brazilian brand of justice, with torture of prisoners and the infamous death squads of off-duty policemen who sought out and executed known criminals without the formality of a trial. For an instant I even wondered if Sergio Costa might have been the victim of a police death squad. But then Mira began to tell his story.

"The government of Peru has very strict laws against the exporting of pre-Columbian works of art, whether jewelry or sculpture. Sergio hit on a method of moving the art objects across the border by using tour boats that operate on the upper Amazon River. The source of the Amazon is in the Peruvian Andes, not far from some of the famed Inca ruins. Tourists often visit the ruins and then take a boat trip partway down the river to visit some native villages. It is not difficult for the boats to wander across the border at this point long enough for a skilled skin diver like myself to remove certain packages secured below the waterline. Once the art pieces are inside Brazil I transport them to Sergio's shop here in Rio. They are sold as imitations for Customs purposes, with the buyer paying extra under the counter."

"Tell them about last week," Orleans urged.

"A few days before Christmas I met with Sergio to conclude our largest deal yet. We avoided seeing each other as much as possible, of course, only meeting two or three times a year when there was a shipment to be delivered. This time I phoned him as usual and he met me at the Rio Yacht Club near Sugar Loaf. I gave him the packages of smuggled art work—sixteen small pieces in all—but then he said he couldn't pay me till the following day. I was upset because he'd never done that before, but he pleaded that his brother was getting suspicious and he hadn't been able to take the money out of the store account. He promised to meet me at the Yacht Club the next day, but he never showed up. I went to the store but only Luiz was there."

"Exactly when was this?"

"Two days before Christmas. I kept searching for him all day and night, and the next day I even confronted Luiz in the shop. He told me his brother was missing."

Marcus Orleans nodded and turned to Simon. "It seems obvious now

that Juan here tracked down Sergio and murdered him for welching on the deal. He hasn't confessed that yet, but he will."

Juan Mira lifted his head; and there was a fleeting look of fright in his eyes. "I did not find him. I did not kill him."

Orleans signaled to a guard and the prisoner was led away. Simon leaned back in his chair and asked, "You're convinced this man is the murderer?"

"It seems more than likely, doesn't it?"

"Sergio had the smuggled art work. Someone might have killed him for it."

"Or Juan Mira might be lying about not receiving the money," the detective pointed out. "He might have received payment and then killed Sergio himself, to take back the art treasures."

"But we come back to one unanswerable question," Simon said. "Why was the body embalmed and wrapped as a mummy? If Mira killed him—or even if one of your infamous police death squads carried out his execution—the body would have been left in a ditch somewhere. A great deal of trouble and risk went into having it embalmed."

But Orleans seemed unconcerned. "Mira will talk, and when he does we will have the answers."

Simon Ark nodded, but I could see he was unconvinced.

As we walked along the streets of Rio, Simon asked, "What do you think about it, my friend?"

"About as you do, I guess. A simple falling out between criminals, complicated only by the circumstances under which the body was found. Has Orleans determined the cause of death yet?"

"He told me it was poison, but they're running further tests on some tissues they removed from the body."

Ahead of us we could see office workers dumping old files and computer printout sheets from the windows of buildings, joining them with an occasional roll of toilet paper. It was what one might have expected on Wall Street during the era of the ticker-tape parades, only here there was no parade. It was merely New Year's Eve, and the workers were following some old Rio tradition.

Simon watched the papers floating down around us and seemed to remember that other New Year's Eve tradition about which we'd heard. "We will go to the beach tonight," he decided, "and search for

Bamba Yin."

"You think Sergio's death may have been a sacrificial killing after all?"

"We will see."

When night came the wide beach at Copacabana was already crowded with spiritists come to worship. They'd erected colorful cabalistic banners and strung lines of fluttering pennants back and forth above the sands. "It looks a bit like a gas station back home," I remarked to Simon as we lingered at the edge of the crowd.

"It is a religion to them," he said. "Their homage to Yemanja, the sea goddess."

As darkness fell, thousands of candles were lit all along the beach. Each little grouping was in a particular shape—a cross, or a circle surrounding some gifts to Yemanja, or a magical sign of African origins. As we moved carefully past the groups it seemed as if all the religions of the world might be mingling and merging here on the sands of a Rio beach.

"Be careful not to disturb them," Simon warned as we moved past a particularly colorful display with candlelight reflecting off an array of champagne and beer bottles.

"Do they come here to drink this?" I wondered.

"Those are gifts too. Yemanja must be lured from the sea."

We came upon a large group of worshipers circling a statue of Yemanja, once again in her flowing blue gown. And I remembered Rosetta Costa's remarkable resemblance to the portraits.

"Here!" Simon said, gripping my arm. Ahead, in the darkness lit only by the glow of a thousand candles stuck into the sand, I saw a familiar figure. It was the lawyer who had summoned us, Felix Brighter, deep in conversation with an elderly cigar-smoking woman. As soon as he saw us, Brighter broke off and came over to greet us.

"Quite a spectacle, isn't it?" he said. "There must be a thousand people in this section of the beach."

"I didn't expect to find you here," Simon told him.

"Why not? My client's body was found nearby. Like yourself, I feel these cult members may know something."

"And the one to whom you were speaking?"

"Bamba Yin, a legend among these people."

Simon nodded. "And the one I seek as well." He took a few steps

across the sand to reach her before she could move away. As she turned her hugeness toward us I saw her face clearly for the first time. It was as ugly as the face of Yemanja was beautiful.

"Do you wish a reading, stranger?" she asked Simon.

"I wish what my friend Felix Brighter wishes—information regarding the death of Sergio Costa."

The old woman cackled, and the flickering candlelight danced around us. "Why should I tell you anything?" she asked.

"Father Rudolph told me you could help."

"The priest?" She fell back a step as if we had struck her.

"Was Sergio's death meant as a sacrifice to Yemanja?"

"That is for Yemanja to say. I know nothing."

"Then why was Brighter speaking with you just now?"

"He desires knowledge of the future, as does everyone else. He pays me to tell him of his future."

"He came to you as a fortune teller?" Simon asked.

I could see what she wanted even if Simon couldn't. I slipped a folded bill into her hand. "Tell us of the past, old lady. Tell us of Sergio Costa's death."

She accepted the money readily enough, but before she could speak there was a commotion down the beach. I turned to see what was going on but there was only a tide of worshipers running toward the water, leaving their candles flickering in the sand.

Felix Brighter appeared again at our side. "They are preparing for midnight when they will surge into the surf with their gifts for the goddess."

"No," Simon said. "It is something more."

Behind us a native boy was beating on drums. There was chanting and wild dancing and a feeling of madness all around us.

"Yemanja! *Yemanja!*"

And then we saw her, caught by the glow of a thousand candles, coming out of the surf like the goddess she was.

Yemanja, ruler of the sea.

"No!" Simon shouted, rushing forward before I could stop him. "No! Go back! You're in great danger!"

But his words did not carry above the chanting of her worshipers. Yemanja came on, through the surf, gowned in flowing blue and crowned with stars. It was a portrait come to life, and even as I re-

alized it must be Rosetta Costa I heard the sound of a single shot cut through the chanting and the screaming. The goddess staggered, and a blossom of blood seemed to burst from her. She sank to her knees in the water, spreading her arms in supplication.

"There's your murderer!" Simon Ark shouted. "Stop him!"

Then I was splashing through the waves after the running figure, aware of movement all around me, intent only on closing the gap between us.

I was almost upon him when at the last moment he turned, and I was staring again into the dead face of Sergio Costa at the morgue. I faltered at that vision, and his pistol came up again and I saw death as clearly as I ever had.

And then the detective Orleans was on him, tackling him in the surf. The gun went off, sending its bullet toward the moon, and I hurried to help Orleans hold him down.

"Simon!" I shouted. "It's Sergio Costa! He's not dead after all!"

But Simon Ark merely bent and stripped the moustache from the killer's upper lip. "Sergio is dead. This is Luiz who, like Cain, has slain his brother."

"She may live," Marcos Orleans told us later at his office in the federal building. "The doctors give her a better-than-even chance."

"That's what I can't figure out," I said, turning to Simon. "Why would he risk everything to take that shot at her?"

"Because, my friend, he had made one mistake that Rosetta of all people could discover. But I should start at the beginning."

"With the embalming? Why did he do that? To shift suspicion to the spiritists?"

"Not primarily, though that became a secondary factor. No, he had the most practical of reasons for having his brother's body embalmed—to hide the time of death. You see, I believe Sergio was murdered up to a week before he disappeared."

"But that's impossible!" I protested. "He was seen at the shop! That man Mira met him at the yacht club!"

"Exactly. And we've already established that the moustache is the main difference in the appearance of Sergio and Luiz. Don't you see? Luiz poisoned his brother some time during the week before Christmas and took his place wearing a false moustache as he did tonight. We

know they were never together in the shop so it was easy to work the substitution there. He found some undertaker who didn't ask questions about embalming the body, and then hid it at his home until after Christmas."

"But why?" I asked. "What was his motive?"

"He wanted the shipment of pre-Columbian art that Mira was smuggling in. I suppose somehow Luiz learned of his brother's illegal activities. He decided to kill him, and in such a way that Luiz himself could profit from the crime. Mira would be cheated out of payment for his smuggled goods, and the already dead Sergio would be blamed."

"Mira didn't realize the man he met was Luiz and not Sergio?"

"They kept away from each other, remember, and met only two or three times a year. It was probably the phone call from Mira that triggered the whole crime. Luiz answered it, pretending to be his brother, and learned about the meeting. That's when he decided to kill Sergio and take his place. He put Mira off for a day on payment and then announced his brother's sudden disappearance. You see, Sergio had to disappear before Christmas because he always visited the children on Christmas and either they or his former wife would have surely seen through Luiz's disguise."

"And the mummy?"

"Luiz couldn't have the police find Sergio's body and announce he'd been dead a week because then Mira would have realized what really happened. But once Luiz had his brother's embalmed body he decided to wrap it as a mummy and throw it in the ocean. That way it might seem a sacrifice to the gods, and the fact of the embalming would be only one more bizarre part of it."

Marcos Orleans stirred in his chair. "Why did he try to kill Rosetta tonight?"

"He remembered his one mistake. Sergio always sent the children Christmas cards a few days before the holiday. Rosetta had already commented on their absence this year, and he feared she might realize that her former husband died earlier than everyone thought. He put on the false moustache to disguise himself tonight and tried to kill her when she came out of the sea as Yemanja, hoping her death would be linked to the spiritists too."

Orleans nodded. "You are a wise man, Simon Ark. How did you know all this?"

"The missing Christmas cards, the strong resemblance between the brothers, the fact that poison could be most easily administered by someone living in the same house as the victim, and, lastly, a small oversight that Luiz made. He told Juan Mira that Sergio was missing on Christmas Eve, but he told us it was Christmas morning before he realized something was wrong."

When we left, Simon suggested we stroll along the beach. The litter was still there from the night before—candle stubs peeking from the sand, champagne bottles unclaimed by the goddess but emptied by others, cigar butts discarded by ugly old women.

"There's Felix Brighter," I said, pointing toward a lone figure by the water.

"Yes," Simon said.

Brighter turned in the sand as we approached. "You solved it, didn't you?" he said, almost bitterly.

"Yes."

"But for the federal police, not for me."

Simon nodded. "You brought me down here to find the art works, didn't you? As Sergio's lawyer, you knew about his involvement with Mira. And when he was killed you wanted those smuggled art treasures for yourself."

"You knew that?"

"Not until last night," Simon said. "I found Bamba Yin after the shooting and strolled with her here on the beach. That was the future you wanted to buy—the location of that final shipment."

"She didn't know."

"Of course not. Her spirit world is made up of other truths. You wasted your money asking her."

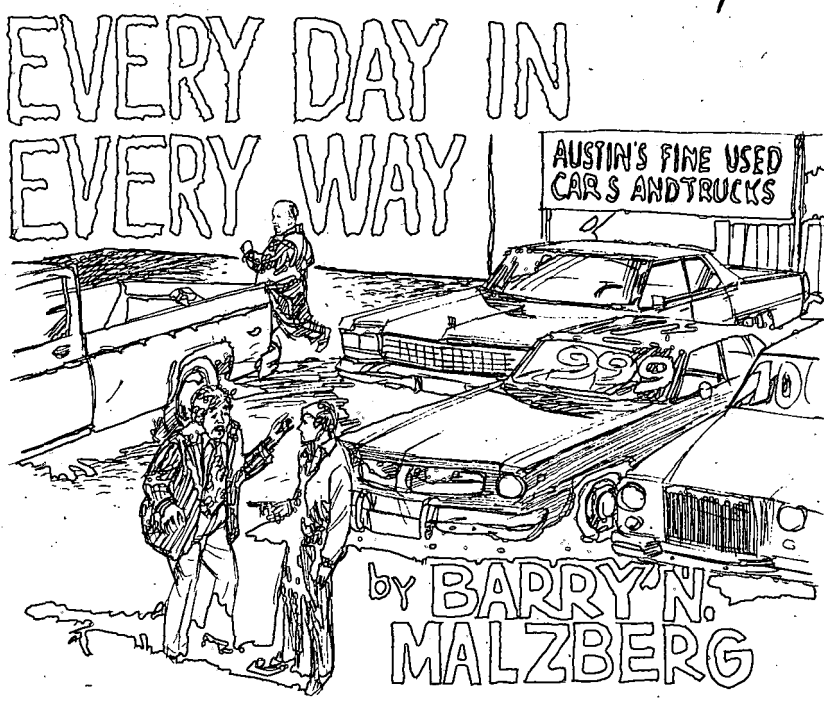
"But you knew, Simon?"

"I could guess. Those pre-Columbian items are no doubt in Luiz's display cases right now, marked with price tags like his regular stock, waiting for the right buyer from America."

Felix Brighter sighed. "And the police will be there first. There's nothing more for me."

"It is a new year, my friend. A time for resolutions and new beginnings. Put aside your dark thoughts and walk back to the hotel with us. I believe there is just time for a farewell drink before we catch the plane back to New York."

Some criminals are more straightforward than others . . .



I go by foot to Austin's Fine Used Cars & Trucks on Route 46 and show the obese Austin himself the .38 Smith & Wesson. "I will take the '73 robin's-egg-blue Sedan de Ville in the second row there," I say, pointing, "and you can also fill a bag with five thousand dollars in small bills. You'd best put dealer's plates on. I want to observe all the traffic and highway regulations of the state of New Jersey."

"This is ridiculous," the obese Austin says. His face is impacted with

terror or perhaps it is merely impending loss. "You are committing armed robbery. You are taking a car and money at gunpoint. That's a very serious crime."

"Don't temporize," I say briskly. "Don't delay. Everything is a crime. This is a criminal civilization; we all break the statutes every day in every way. You, for instance, have been selling defective cars at exorbitant prices from this location for seven years. You have sold cars with faulty transmissions, cracked engine blocks, broken cylinder heads, and worn brakes. You have willingly sent hundreds to potential disaster, speeded them on their way with lies, and pointed to your 'as is' bills-of-sale if they return, laughing in their faces. Also, I have more than a suspicion that you do not turn over the sales tax you collect to the government. I have kept tabs on you, Austin, and your criminality is greater than mine. I have the decency, you see, to commit robbery in plain sight. This is no metaphor, this is the truth. Now get those dealer plates on and start passing over the money or I will put a very neat hole in your forehead. These are serious times, this is a serious act, and there is no time for conversation."

Panting, Austin does as I request, reaching to the shelf for dealer's plates, reaching into his copious pockets for bills, talking all the time. He doesn't seem to understand the point of my act, but I can't blame him—armed robbery is more traumatic than simple consumer fraud. I follow him to the Sedan de Ville and watch him hinge the plates front and rear. The lot is vacant and traffic on Forty-six at this hour is very sparse. A less greedy man would have closed up shop and left for home hours ago but not for nothing does Austin take his own sobriquet, *Deal-A-Minute Austin*, to heart.

"There," he says, backing away at last, his eyes gleaming with rage. "I hope you don't get far. You won't get far—this baby's turbo-hydramatic is about gone and I did a rough patching on the drive shaft. There isn't five hundred miles there without major repair. The body and paint are in good condition but the car isn't worth a damned thing. You'd be better off, if you need a transportation car, with that 1970 Impala over there, the red convertible. It's rusted out on the bottom but at least the engine and transmission are solid; there's twenty thousand miles in that car without even an oil change. You listen to me—"

"You see what I mean?" I say sadly. I hold the gun on him, check

his right pocket, and find a stray hundred-dollar bill clinging to the fabric like a lost child. "The truth is not in you, Austin," I say, "and the truth is the very thing that might make you free. If you're going to be a crook, be a straightforward crook. Come to terms with all that ambivalence and self-hatred that makes you eat so compulsively."

He stares at me astonished as I open the left front door and prepare to seat myself. "What the hell," he says. "Are you Robin Hood or something?"

"Not at all. I'm just trying to make a living. I'll keep whatever I can get my hands on. Don't call the police for fifteen minutes," I say. "Actually it's to your advantage to let me get away. You can get triple what the car cost you from the insurance and claim ten times the loss in cash. You'll look back on this and thank me, Austin."

He stares at me glumly. I start the Cadillac, not without difficulty with the carburetor, and back out gracefully, stalling only twice. I crunch out of Austin's Fine Used Cars & Trucks and onto Forty-six singing. The collision of truth and circumstance has always made me ecstatic.

After a while I think I might try some accompaniment on the radio, one of the easy-listening stations, but the radio, of course, is broken. The brakes rasp unpleasantly even at the most cautious application. Nonetheless, my euphoria is unabated. I am pleased to have taken some direct action at last. There are limits to metaphysical despair after which one must act or die, or so says, at least, the immortal Immanuel Kant.

Considering further the criminal mind, its alleys and corridors, the dull streaking light of its rationalizations, I drive the Cadillac 75 miles west and alight at an International Wonder Waffles in eastern Pennsylvania. It is midnight, quite late for a franchise to be open, but like the obese Austin, Wonder Waffles showeth no mercy. "Adulterated food, chemical additives, rat pellets in the meat, the exploitation of high school and college youth for less than minimum wages, ruthless union-busting, mindless public relations with clowns and visits to the handicapped to mask the exploitation. The corporate conglomerate machinery of this country is seen at its ugliest in *pseudo-gemeinschaft,*" I conclude and offer the cashier a fine view of the Smith & Wesson while otherwise, behind her, the desultory midnight activities of Won-

der Waffles go on. "Give me all your money," I say. "Everything in the till."

The cashier regards me with round and somewhat kindly eyes. "You're crazy," she says. "You have to be crazy."

"I wish I were," I say. "Unfortunately I am not. I'm merely administering the truth."

"Are you some kind of a preacher or something?"

"No, I'm an armed robber. Give me all the money."

"I never knew an armed robber to make a speech like that."

"I have a college degree," I say mindlessly. "I am also the author of certain published works in obscure literary magazines and did a stint as an employee of a cultural commission before I ran out of money and patience. This gun is absolutely functional. Don't force me to use it."

She fumbles in the drawer and comes up with two handfuls of money, which hang from her palms like fresh vegetables. "There isn't that much," she says. "Receipts are less than you'd think and the route manager comes in twice a day to pick up the cash. They control you very tightly if you're a wholly owned franchise, which we are."

"I sympathize," I say. "Put the money in a bag. I need to keep both hands free for the gun. I won't be distracted."

She produces a bag from underneath the register and deftly pushes the money within. I have the intimation that the franchise book has a procedure for armed robbery as inflexible as for hamburger condiments. "That was very interesting what you said," the cashier says, "I mean the rat pellets and all, and conglomeration. Do you think this really is a dishonest business?"

"One of the greatest," I say, "one of the real greats." I take the bag. "I am merely showing you the real face of Wonder Waffles, which Wonder Waffles would hide from the world. Outright confiscation."

"You certainly are serious, aren't you?" she says. "Something like Robin Hood."

"A discredited myth," I say for the second time that day. "I keep for myself; I facilitate the transfer of goods in only a single direction." I move without haste toward the door. "I'm not rationalizing my crimes, you see. I simply happen to be desperate."

"I know what you mean," she says. "The conditions here aren't what you would think and there are no benefits at all. I could tell you stories—"

"Please don't," I say. "I've heard them all, in college and at the foundation." I move through the doors and into the Sedan de Ville, which I start without haste and drive back to Route 80 without panic. Red warning lights flash ominously but the fan belts appear secure and, grumbling, the Cadillac moves to 55 with the air of a car providing me with one last gift.

I maintain a legal speed of 55 miles an hour—there are certain sanctions within which even existentialists must operate—all the way back on Eighty to where it intersects with Ninety-five and on Ninety-five itself I cut back to 50. Troopers everywhere. The New Jersey Turnpike South leads me with stately ease to the Baltimore-Washington Expressway just past the Chesapeake Memorial Bridge. At a franchised stop I have the car filled with gasoline and replace a badly worn front tire, paying with a flourish. Restored by two cups of Wonder Waffles coffee, I return to the car and drive it further south, where in due course I land in the very seat of government. I park the car at a discreet distance from my true destination, take a bus to the Capitol Building, and after inquiries post myself in the Senate Office Building.

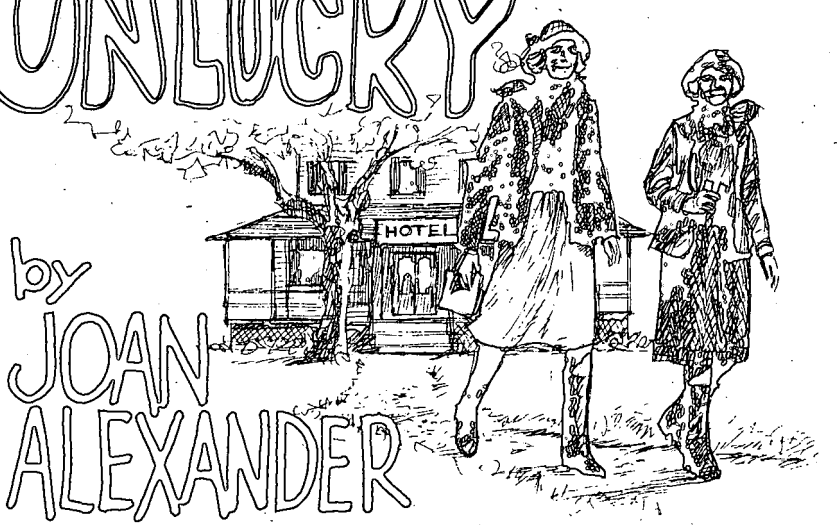
I am merely waiting to do to the senator directly what he is doing to all of us less directly, I point out to the security forces when they arrive. I am merely attempting to convert a metaphor into a reality, to deal with circumstances in a direct and circumspect fashion. The security forces, however, are having none of this.

"Used car lots are one thing," they say to me, "and Wonder Waffles are another, and possibly, just possibly, metaphysics are a third, but when you start dealing with power that is something entirely different. We keep careful tabs on people like you and always, *always*, you start off one way and end up another, exceed your limits—there's no end to what you want, is there?" And so on and so forth *ad infinitum* as we used to say in the Department of Speech & Communication.

They take me away from there, having confiscated the gun and having confiscated the money but leaving me (very thoughtfully as matters will probably turn out) several fresh napkins from Wonder Waffles with dancing clowns and singing bears with which I can wipe my fevered forehead as I try to figure out who I can call, how I can raise bail, and, if I do raise bail, exactly where in this world there will ever be another place for me.

Clara felt like a prisoner until she met Lavender . . .

GREEN IS UNLUCKY



by JOAN ALEXANDER

Clara arrived at the hotel without much hope or anticipation of pleasure, carrying her shabby suitcase, with her round little hat perched on her head of grey hair. She had picked the hotel at random when Mildred had insisted that she must make herself scarce while alterations were being made to their house. As Mildred was paying for these so-called improvements Clara had very little choice, and unlike her friend, who had a host of convenient relatives and friends, she had

nowhere in particular to go.

Mildred was in no mood to advise her either. She was going off to Scotland to stay with some grand and—to Clara—rather mysteriously enigmatic friends called Aird, which apparently entailed throwing every garment she possessed out onto the bed where they lay like so many sad rags waiting for the next Jumble Sale. They quite obviously wouldn't do, and Mildred, taking Clara with her to watch, went off to Guildford to replenish her wardrobe from top to bottom.

Observing Mildred sparkling with sequins, or almost dancing before the mirror in chiffon, or striding up and down in tweeds, Clara thought rather sadly that the legacy Mildred had recently inherited from a deliberately cultivated aunt had neither improved nor enhanced her personality. On the contrary, she had become increasingly loud and predatory. Though Clara, innately modest and unassuming, had expected nothing from it except perhaps some improvement in their standard of living, she did find it rather galling to act as audience to Mildred, who was preening and strutting like a peacock. What was more hurtful, not the smallest gift came Clara's way—not so much as a pocket handkerchief or even a key ring.

Mildred made it perfectly clear to Clara that the hotel, which had a smudged and indistinct photograph in the guidebook but had appealed because of the spreading cedar in the foreground, was in the depths of Devon, where one could wear out one's oldest clothes with a clear conscience.

Piling the boxes one after another into the trunk of the new Lancia, Mildred had commented in her newly acquired, hectoring, petulant voice that she was tired of dreary chores and that when she had proceeded from Scotland on a slow tour south she would advertise for a maid.

"A maid?" To Clara's innocent ears it sounded like a line from a Victorian novel. Didn't most people have *au pairs* these days—some foreign girl who left when she became pregnant, or a temporary cook who found fault with everything, especially the cooking equipment? But a maid? The term did not seem to bear any relation to the 1970s.

"A lady's maid," said Mildred, scraping the curb as she drove off with more panache than skill.

"But what will she do?" Clara visualized Mildred getting up late to be dressed and bathed by her lady's maid, or sending her out on little

errands for a yard of ribbon or lace. As for herself, she supposed she would go on as usual—doing the garden, washing the car, and dusting the rooms when their daily help, Mrs. Evans, had her day off. She loathed cooking, but then so did Mildred, and it had been Clara's lot from the beginning to consider her friend's wishes. It went all the way back to the time during the war when Mildred had been a few weeks' senior in the A.T.S. and therefore felt entitled to give orders. And now, of course, there was the money. This had cemented their situation for life.

"She will do everything," replied Mildred, raising Clara's hopes. "With Mrs. Evans' help."

And she drove off for Scotland the next morning, causing the gravel on the drive to scrunch and moan like a live thing.

Before she took the bus to catch her train to Devon, Clara carefully raked over the furrowed tracks.

Clara was glad to observe that her bedroom window looked out onto the cedar tree, though she had not requested it in her letter, fearing that a front room would be more expensive. Otherwise the hotel and her bedroom were very much as she had expected. It was shabby, quiet to the point where the rustle of a newspaper would cause embarrassment, and the smell of overcooked cabbage did nothing to raise her appetite. She had seen a scattering of old people crouching in chairs as she climbed the stairs, and noticed there was a TV room off the hall. There was a hand-basin in her room, but the other conveniences were at some distance down the passage. The faded woman who had shown her to her room appeared to be owner, receptionist, and general bottle-washer.

Clara had long experience in making the best of things. She unpacked her modest garments, including Wellington boots for the moors and several scarves, and her *Reader's Digest Book of Birds*, and placed her binoculars on the windowsill. At least there was no one here to prevent her indulging in her greatest passion, bird watching.

The evening meal, served punctually at seven o'clock, was no pleasant surprise, but at least she did not have to prepare it or wash up afterwards. When she dared to raise her eyes from her plate, grey heads nodded benignly at her and she pecked her head forward in acknowledgment. She had her bird book beside her plate, but it was too big

for the small table and to her consternation it fell off several times.

When the dining room had emptied she decided to go straight to bed. She was tired, and besides she could not face being accosted by some well-meaning old toady on her first evening. The days stretched before her like a thousand nights instead of the fortnight she had booked. Stiff-backed she hurried up the stairs.

"Excuse me, but may I have the impertinence to ask if you have the room overlooking the front?" The voice was soft, melodious, and very kind, but out of habit Clara recoiled, like a wood louse which has been discovered under a log. She literally curled up physically and mentally as she looked down the stairs at the upturned face.

The speaker was a woman of about fifty with smooth, white, unlined skin. She was elegantly dressed, but her eyes were the most remarkable thing about her. Looking into their brilliant green depths, Clara straightened her back and found herself smiling.

"Yes. I look out onto the cedar."

"You must forgive my curiosity, but I couldn't help noticing your book at dinner, and as I'm almost certain I saw some gold-crests in that tree this morning I thought it might interest you to look out for them. They're probably nesting."

Clara came slowly down the stairs and said with breathless solemnity, "Are you a bird watcher too?"

The woman laughed. Her teeth were very white and even. "I most certainly am. That's why I'm here. There's an estuary not far away which is marvelous for waders."

"Would you like to come to my room to look for the gold-crests?"

The woman glanced at her little gold watch. "You're tired, I expect—but if I may come after breakfast tomorrow morning I'd love the chance of seeing them. My room, unfortunately, looks out over the back garden. I'd better introduce myself. My name is Lavender Shirley. I'm a widow and I live in London."

"Clara Twigg, and I live near Guildford. I'm a spinster." Solemnly they shook hands, having put their lives into a nutshell.

Eleven days later, as they picnicked by a small brown stream under willows which dappled them all over with lancet shapes like small knives, Clara said to Lavender Shirley, "To think I was afraid the time would drag. It's gone like a flash. Only two more days—I can scarcely

bear it."

"Why don't you come stay with me in London? We could go up there together." Even when she smoked a cigarette through her small shagreen holder, Lavender did it with consummate grace. She bestows even the smallest act with quality, Clara thought.

"Mildred wouldn't like it. She hates my not being at home when she's there."

"Why don't I come and stay with you then?" Her voice was lazy, but she was watching Clara closely.

"Until we get this maid, I'm afraid Mildred will be rather unsettled. In her present mood, having a visitor without a maid would be unthinkable."

She had told Lavender everything about her life, keeping nothing back, not even its endless dullness, dwelling with renewed bewilderment on the disapproval caused by her and Mildred's setting up house together—the sly innuendoes, the horrid inferences. Artlessly she had explained, "Of course I didn't know what people meant at first. You see, I'm such a fool, and it's so utterly innocent."

Lavender's eyes widened, then she stretched out and squeezed Clara's hand. "People love to think the worst. One simply has to learn to live above it—otherwise life would become intolerable. If you and Mildred are perfectly happy, that's all that matters."

Clara looked at Lavender's strong chin and steady brow. *She* had never known meek dependence. She had been gloriously, rapturously married to a man who would go to the ends of the earth for her, and even his sudden and unexpected death had been especially hallowed, leaving her protected and loved to the end. Clara wanted to keep her a friend for always, but she knew that in two days Lavender would slip from her like the trout smoothing its way through the brackish water at their feet.

"So I've got to wait for this grand maid?" Lavender's eyes were tenderly mocking.

"I'm afraid so, at least while Mildred is suffering from this sudden *folie de grandeur!*"

"Then I'd better come *as* the maid." It was a throwaway line which went curving over their heads like the cigarette she flicked from her fingers.

A few minutes later they were kneeling facing each other, staring

into each other's eyes like two conspiratorial schoolgirls. Lavender's eyebrows were raised quizzically, her eyes full of merriment, while Clara gazed at her, giggling nervously, her mouth slightly open like that of a landed fish.

"I'll come as the maid," Lavender said firmly. They both began to laugh aloud joyously, and that settled it.

"There's one called Lavender Shirley who might be a possibility." Clara, knowing the color had rushed to her face, held up a lump of sugar and squinted at it to see how far it had melted. Mildred was casting one letter after another onto the floor by the breakfast table. She was not easy to please, and people who demanded a whole day off a week, a weekend every month, the use of a car and a television, were not to be considered. Clara had recognized Lavender's distinctive handwriting and anxiously wondered how she had presented herself. She hadn't long to wait.

"This woman," said Mildred in a superior tone that made Clara flinch, "does not seem to mind about time off. She has her own car and enjoys a peaceful country life. She is a Cordon Bleu cook and is willing to turn her hand to anything, including car-washing and gardening." She folded the letter carefully from Clara's sight, her eyes distant and calculating. "She sounds like a treasure. I shall write to her."

She'll make a slave of her, Clara thought. She only mentioned the cars and gardening because of me. Guiltily she began to gather up the discarded letters.

When Lavender arrived a week later in her white Mini, Mildred swept her into the drawing-room for the interview. Clara, a disregarded shadow hovering in the hall, was nevertheless invigorated and their voices, mild and continuous—so unlike Mildred's recent tones—filled her with hope. She had longed to rush forward impulsively to welcome Lavender, who was almost unrecognizable in modest white and navy blue with sensible shoes, but caution enveloped her. She returned to the kitchen, where she was making pâté for the deep-freeze, and waited in suspense until Mildred shouted her name.

Lavender squeezed her hand hard—too hard for Clara, who wondered in panic whether Mildred's sharp eyes would notice. The current of sympathy from the hand in hers was like an electric shock.

"My companion," Mildred said grandly, "Clara Twigg." Clara had never been called a companion before; she had thought of herself as a friend. Her surname sounded, in Mildred's grating tones, as if she had been snapped off some tree in a careless moment. "Mrs. Shirley is prepared to come to us immediately, so I've suggested next Tuesday as convenient. I'm afraid the workmen are still in the house, Mrs. Shirley—promises mean nothing these days, it appears—they should have been finished weeks ago."

"I can help clear up the mess." Lavender smiled, noting the dark hall with its long drop cloth leading from the staircase to the front door covered with footprints and plaster. She went out to the Mini flanked by a majestic triumphant Mildred and an anxious taut-nerved Clara, and climbed in. "Tuesday, then." Her eyes slid briefly toward Clara, then she slipped the car into gear and was off.

The two women were silent, Mildred's eyes following the car along the drive until it turned out of the gates as if she were assessing Lavender's driving. She nodded her head in complacent satisfaction, then she took Clara's arm in her strong bony fingers.

"She's rather the lady—but, let's face it, they often work much harder than the so-called working class."

Mrs. Evans made it patently clear that she had more than enough to do, so it was Clara who had to get Lavender's room ready. She did it with loving care, placing a beautiful vase of late tulips on the dressing table as a finishing touch.

Since her inheritance had made her oblivious of telephone bills Mildred spent hours contacting her willing and frequently unwilling friends, leaving Clara very much on her own and able to add books she knew her friend would enjoy as well as the latest magazines Mildred had discarded after a perfunctory glance. Lavender's was not by any means the best room but it looked out onto the converted stable yard where occasionally an owl hooted and the doors were left open so the swallows could nest in the barn. This, Clara thought, would make up for a great deal.

Lavender had been warned in Clara's anxious and humble letters of her exact position, and her replies, picked up at the post office, since Clara did not dare receive them at the house, reassured Clara that Lavender would do nothing to make her life more intolerable, nor pro-

voke Mildred's jealousy. They would have more than enough time together, she was sure, as Mildred flung herself increasingly into her flighty new life.

In her long and rather impassioned letters to Lavender, Clara had to confess that Mildred's riches had not changed her way of living as much as they had both hoped. A middle-aged, taciturn single woman, however well-endowed with this world's goods, was not in constant demand. From personal experience, Mildred was wont to suspect the nieces and nephews and the close and distant cousins who were suddenly anxious to invite her to visit. She dropped their invitations on the floor like so much confetti and said they were after her money. Clara tried to convince her otherwise, only to receive the assurance that so long as her loyalty went unquestioned Clara herself might be a beneficiary.

"But you will outlive me, Mildred dear," Clara said, praying it would be true. She found living under the threat of wealth almost as painful as the idea of death in her so-called prime.

"We must lure Mildred away from suspicion," Lavender had written. "Once she trusts me, we may be able to have little treats together."

"She really is a treasure," remarked Mildred after Lavender had been with them for a week, and then, to eradicate the complacent look from Clara's face, added, "I only hope it lasts."

"Of course it will last." Clara was so vehement that Mildred studied her friend's face, illuminated by the fiendish light of a late-night thriller on television, with amusement. "I mean, I don't see why she would suddenly change."

"I do find it a bit odd that she does her work in those high-heeled shoes," she said, adding, "She was very conservatively dressed when I interviewed her, but the clothes she wears now are hardly those of someone needing work."

"But she always wears an overall," Clara said, though she was suffering from feelings of neglect. Lavender avoided her, passing her with averted head. She spent precious time ingratiating herself with Mildred, asking instructions, recommending delicacies she could make for her. She spent hours making cakes as light as feathers, decorated with spiderweb latticework, icing the color of melting snow, mouth-watering puddings with cream rosettes blossoming into leaves and ferns.

"You will make us fat," Mildred demurred, eating with delight.

"You could never be fat."

Lavender's hand trailed lightly across the back of Clara's chair as she carried the dishes away.

"When I come back from Devon we must do some entertaining," Mildred said.

"Devon?" It was the first Clara had heard of it.

"I'm going to stay with my cousins at Tiverton." Mildred covered a yawn with her clenched fist. "They keep writing, poor old things! At least *they* are too old to have ulterior motives."

She struck, with this sudden information, at an unguarded moment. She watched the joy tremble over Clara's thin features, her overlarge eyes glisten, and added, "It's quite close to that awful place you stayed earlier this year."

Clara waited for the Lancia to disappear and then dropped her frantically waving hand. Returning to the house, she traced Lavender's whereabouts from the sound of the vacuum cleaner. She went up to the landing and Lavender immediately switched off the machine.

"She's gone," said Clara, smiling. They both burst out laughing as if she had said something extremely funny. Lavender picked up the vacuum, dusters, and polishes and said firmly, "No more work for a week. We'll have a picnic today and every day she's away. I'll spend a whole day cleaning when she's expected back. I must admit, my dear, being maid to your friend is no sinecure."

"Do you regret it?"

"Not as long as I'm on the right side of her. She could be very rough if she took against me. As it happens I think she's beginning to trust me, don't you?"

"Oh, yes—she relies on you!"

But Mildred's sudden decision to visit her Devon cousins had unsettled Clara. She had an uneasy feeling that it was more than a spoiled woman's whim. And yet, when she thought about it, what difference could it make? She would put it from her mind and not spoil the blessed peace and quiet she would have with Lavender.

The days that followed slipped away like wheels on a well-oiled track. The picnics were exquisite. Fresh flowers appeared in her room every day. Clara felt as if she were being cared for as she had never

been since she was a child. It was as if she had become someone of extreme importance, and the feeling was like elixir and quite went to her head. Their bird watching took her to places she had not realized were so close at hand. During her life with Mildred there had always been the garden to beckon her, condemning her to feelings of neglect and guilt.

I've never really lived until now, she thought.

By the end of the week they were more determined than ever to make their home together.

"But how shall I break it to Mildred?" Clara said.

"She has all her friends and relations. It's not as if you're abandoning her to loneliness. It's not so much an act of heartlessness as of self-preservation."

When Clara was with Lavender she felt strong and uplifted. It was only in the dead of night that she felt the nightmare emerge, the tiny trembling creature that was her true self. When the day came for Mildred's return she did not know how to compose her manner or her expression.

Lavender laughed at her fears. "You'll soon be away from all this," she said blithely, arranging yellow roses in a vase.

But how shall I tell her? Clara agonized to herself, balling a handkerchief in her nervous hands. She kept listening at the open window for the car in the drive. When she heard it she ran to the sofa as if she had been stung and settled herself in the corner, trying to look as if she had been there all afternoon.

Lavender went out to help with the luggage. Clara snatched up the tapestry she had been working for years and frowned down at the fawn wool in her needle. She looked up with a simulated expression of surprise as Mildred came in.

"Well, Clara, I must say! Don't you welcome your old friend back? Or has having a *maid* quite gone to your head?" Her harsh voice was like a whiplash. Clara rose to her feet and embraced Mildred awkwardly. She was aware of some strange exotic scent, quite unsuited to Mildred.

"Ring for tea," said Mildred, slumping on the sofa and crossing her legs.

"I'll go and ask Lavender for it." They had never rung the bell for

anything, had always called through the green baize door in the friendliest manner.

"You'll do nothing of the sort! Ring the bell. I want to talk to you." She patted the sofa cushion beside her. Clara pressed the bell beside the fireplace and was surprised to hear it buzzing loudly through the house. Perched on the edge of the sofa, she could feel one extension of her personality sensing Lavender's resentment to the bell while she grafted what remained of her attention onto Mildred. She eyed her old friend warily and was not reassured. She appeared ebullient, like someone who has just passed a difficult examination or has a particularly juicy piece of gossip to pass on.

"Well!" she said. "*They're* finished!"

"They?" Her attention wandered. Would Lavender realize the bell was for tea?

"My Devon cousins! I was so bored. They talked farming from morning to night, and what a bad time they were going through about money. They made no attempt to entertain me—had no friends in. There was just this dull monotony of sheep baaing and cows mooing. South African sherry was all they had to offer, literally thrusting their poverty down my throat! All I can say is that they most certainly won't benefit from me. If they had made the slightest effort I might have helped them, but now they'll get nothing!" She sprang to her feet and rang the bell insistently. At that precise moment Lavender entered with a beautifully laid silver tray, the whole array sending off sparks of light and reflecting different facets of the room on their gleaming surfaces. Mildred gave it one glance and said, "I should like some buttered toast. I've been starved for a week."

"Certainly." Lavender went to the door. Mildred lifted the teapot lid and sniffed loudly. "And bring a small pot of China tea. I got used to it in Devon—it was the only decent thing they had." Clara noticed Lavender's back stiffen as she went out without another word.

"But you've always hated China tea." Clara looked at Mildred with as much astonishment as if she had suddenly grown a long black beard.

"Then you can drink it," said Mildred, helping herself to a homemade eclair.

"But I don't like it either." Clara felt addled, as if her mind was muffled by a soft coating of cotton wool. She poured herself a cup of tea but when she lifted it to her lips her hand trembled so that it spilled

over into the saucer.

When Lavender brought the toast and China tea Mildred waited for her to place it on the tray, then said, "I should like dinner at seven o'clock sharp. I've had a very long and tiring drive."

Lavender looked at her watch and said evenly, "I'm roasting a joint. I'm terribly sorry, but it couldn't possibly be done in time."

Mildred waved her hand airily. "Then make a cheese soufflé and we'll have the joint another time. You might unpack my suitcase, Lavender, and put my laundry into the machine. Then turn down my bed. I'll hit the hay soon after dinner."

Clara said quickly, "I'll do your unpacking, Mildred—I'm sure Lavender won't have time to do everything."

Mildred put a restraining hand on her arm, her nails making marks on Clara's soft skin. "You'll do nothing of the sort, my dear. I want to hear what you've been up to while I've been away." Still grasping Clara's arm as Lavender left the room, Mildred turned to look out of the window. "That herbaceous border looks as if it could do with a good weeding. I would have thought the weather had been ideal for it."

"I've been concentrating on the rose garden." Clara looked at the vase of yellow roses Lavender had set on the piano that had inspired her lie. But she was not good at lying and could not think what she should have been doing—spraying, digging in fertilizer, or merely cutting off dead blooms.

"Well, we must inspect your handiwork after dinner," said Mildred lightly, filling Clara with the kind of dread she had not experienced since her school days.

"But you're tired, dear—you can look at it tomorrow." She would creep out and garden all night if necessary.

"Not too tired for a little saunter." Mildred stared at a cigarette stub in an ashtray on the coffee table. Violently she stretched out and flung it into the fireplace. "Unless you've had visitors, Lavender has been smoking in this room. I must speak to her about it."

The soufflé, light as thistledown, was served with a green salad at seven o'clock sharp, followed by homemade ice cream and treacle tart. Mildred, complaining of toothache, said she would prefer cheese and celery.

"You're getting greedy," she added to Clara, watching her as she

tried to eat enough for the two of them.

"I think one eats more when one hasn't cooked it," Clara replied.

"It wouldn't suit you to be fat." Mildred got up and rang for coffee. As if she had been waiting on the other side of the door, Lavender produced it immediately.

"She's so quick and good," Clara commented timidly.

"She wears too much jewelry for a servant," said Mildred. "I must speak to her about that too."

"But only a bracelet and a watch—and a ring. She would naturally wear her wedding ring."

"I'm not speaking of her wedding ring—in any case, it's vulgar for a servant to wear jewelry." She meant for a servant to wear better jewelry than hers. "And those high-heeled shoes. She can't do housework properly in shoes like that."

"But you didn't complain before."

"Going away has opened my eyes to certain discrepancies I had not noticed," Mildred said darkly. "I shall simply point them out to her. She'll understand, she's not stupid. If one can't tell one's employee when one is displeased I'd like to know whom one *can* tell. Come, we'll go and inspect the rose garden."

They stepped through the French windows. The soft air floated over them, but none of the peace of the evening touched Clara in her panic at what faults Mildred might find at the garden.

"You have not been overworking." Mildred took a dead rose in her fingers and twisted it savagely.

"I've been—I've been rather tired lately."

Mildred looked at her sharply.

"You look very brown—but not, apparently, from gardening. Perhaps you need a holiday. I would come with you this time. We should get away."

"But you've just come back from a holiday—" Clara was flustered, fluttering like a butterfly that had touched a web with the tips of its wings and become increasingly entangled.

"That food? That uncomfortable house? That was no holiday!"

They moved back toward the house, past the wild garden where the cow-parsley brushed against Clara's dress as she tried to increase the distance between them. She jumped when a blackbird flew out suddenly from the long grass. Oh God, let Lavender be in bed by now,

she prayed, imagining new indignities Mildred could inflict on her friend.

But Lavender was brushing the last crumbs from the dining-room table. Mildred passed through the drawing room and her heavy shoes echoed on the parquet floor along the passage.

"I'm off to bed, Lavender," she said. "I should like breakfast at six-thirty. I have a great deal to do tomorrow—the garden seems very neglected. Good night." When Lavender lifted her head from her task she gave Clara a ghost of a smile.

"I think Lavender looks very tired," said Clara, carrying the lemonade Mildred had ordered to where she lay on a deck chair under the mulberry tree.

"She hasn't complained." Mildred watched Clara place the drink by her side on the grass, slopping it over onto the tray. "Why didn't you let Lavender bring that out? You're always so clumsy."

Clara's stolen words with Lavender as the latter made chutney in the kitchen had filled her with a trembling confusion. Her misery for her friend had gone beyond accountable bounds, and she wondered at Mildred's facility in finding so many tasks for her. There seemed to be no end to her expectations. She found fault with everything, picking on Lavender constantly, and never had a kind word for her no matter how splendidly a job was done. Now she ignored the lemonade and began to leaf through the travel brochures in her lap.

"I thought we would go to Greece for a month—that should set you up nicely." She selected a brochure and handed it to Clara.

"Greece? For a month?" Clara's lips moved stiffly and Mildred looked at her shattered face with amusement.

"I've booked a flight for next week. That should give you enough time to get a few things together."

In desperation Clara eventually wrote a note and pushed it under Lavender's bedroom door.

> "Dear," she wrote, "Mildred is planning to go to Greece for a whole month with me. We leave Heathrow next week, on Thursday evening. What am I to do? Shall we leave now? Please help me to decide."

Later, fetching her trunk from the tool shed, she found La-

vender's answer, written in such miniscule writing that she had to take it out into the bright sunlight to read it.

> "Don't worry. Find an excuse next Thursday to go to the ladies' room by the refreshment lounge and I will meet you there. When your flight is called, M. is sure to go without you rather than miss her plane. This will give us time to settle our plans before she returns."

Her composure in the face of disaster astonished Clara. Nothing appeared to cause Lavender the slightest consternation.

Mildred took Clara into Guildford to buy some summer dresses. Clara did not even unfold them before packing since she did not visualize wearing them. They were to go by train up to London, where a hired car would take them to Heathrow. From the house they would drive in the Lancia to the station, where the local garage man would pick up the car for servicing.

From a brief word or two, Clara knew that Lavender intended to leave in her Mini as soon as they left and drive straight to the airport. Nevertheless, sitting by Mildred, she thought it seemed more natural to exclaim, "Why, I haven't said goodbye to Lavender!" She began to climb out but Mildred pulled her back.

"Don't be silly—I'll go. You'll take hours finding her. I've told her to get on with cleaning the windows. I shan't be a moment."

In two seconds she was through the front door.

Out of Clara's sight she carefully took off her shoes and placed them inside the entrance. Very quietly she climbed the stairs, avoiding the creaks. She could hear Lavender humming in her back bedroom, where Mildred had suggested she start on the windows.

The humming stopped as Lavender leaned out as far as she dared, listening for the sound of the Lancia driving away. She was wearing her green summer coat, and her gloves, handbag, emerald ring, and umbrella lay on a table. She was too preoccupied to notice Mildred behind her. Her feet were half out of her elegant shoes, and it was the easiest thing in the world for Mildred to seize her ankles and topple her over the window ledge. She didn't even have time to scream before her neck broke on the smooth round cobbles.

Throughout the journey to Heathrow, Clara was filled with pity bor-

dering on remorse for Mildred. She seemed overexcited and unnaturally gay at the prospect of their holiday. She talked too much, the words spilling out of her like running water, giving Clara a maddening headache and destroying her ability to think clearly. Mercifully, Mildred didn't seem to notice her silence or to expect any answer.

Clara was gratified and a little surprised at the ease with which she was able to visit the ladies' room on her own. Mildred said she preferred to stay with the luggage, and sat down firmly on a suitcase, shaking out a newspaper before her face.

"Just to take an aspirin," Clara said faintly, embroidering.

"You might give me one." Mildred swallowed three without water, grimacing painfully, and then returned to the headlines with what appeared to Clara to be blind eyes.

Clara waited in the rest room in an agony of guilt and apprehension for a Lavender who never came. When their flight was called for the final time, Mildred appeared and led her gently but firmly to the boarding gate.

Clara didn't say a word as the aircraft took off, nor while they toyed with the tasteless food on the plastic trays. She put her head back at last and closed her eyes, visions of Lavender—hurt somehow, caught in heavy traffic or without petrol—haunting her mind.

Beside her, Mildred thought first of the registration book she had tracked down at the Devon hotel, where Clara had signed in only a day after Mrs. Lavender Shirley, then of the emerald ring back on Lavender's bedtable. It had reminded her of the weed-infested surface of the Sargasso Sea. Almost vulgar in size, it was as green and brilliant as—as young grass? Caribbean water? The Greek isles? No, none of these fitted, and she stared out the window, puzzling it out as if it were a question of momentous importance.

And then she smiled. Why, of course. It was absurd that it hadn't come to her before. It was as green as the dead woman's eyes.

Dan Moorhead was a soft touch for damsels in distress . . .

A MATTER OF MORALITY

by LAWRENCE TREAT

At heart, Chief Dan Moorhead of Morgan County was a romantic. Beneath his rather lavish, stock-brokerish exterior he dreamed of damsels beautiful who floated into his orbit and entrusted their lives and fortunes to his keeping.

Arabella Tunis didn't exactly float. More accurately she flounced, like a newly crowned Miss America making her first TV appearance. But despite her business card, which described her as an attorney at law,

she was definitely a damsel in distress and she entrusted her career and her whole future to the good offices of Dan Moorhead.

She began with a disarming smile and a request. "I know you're a busy man and I shouldn't bother you," she said, "but I wonder whether you could help me."

"How?" Dan asked. "What can I do for you?"

"Do you remember that accident two years ago when Andrew McIntosh was killed?"

"He ran into a tree," Dan said. "It was one of those complicated things I get into with Chief Wharton over in LePage County. The road, Route Eighteen, starts here in Morgan, then curves over into LePage, and for the next eight miles it wigwags in and out of two states. There's one stretch where it's in both counties at the same time, depending on which side of the road you're traveling."

"That," Arabella said, "is the point. Mr. McIntosh died without a will, and the intestacy laws of the two states are different. If he died in LePage, then his natural issue are heirs and inherit equally with legitimate offspring. But if he died in Morgan, his sole heirs are his legitimate progeny."

"It's too late for me to do anything about that," Dan remarked.

"Of course." Arabella put on her glasses as if she suddenly realized she should try to look more like an attorney and less like a Botticelli masterpiece. The effect was the opposite, at least on Dan.

"I know," she continued. "But I'd like to see the reports that were made out at the time."

"They're in the files somewhere," Dan said. "But to the best of my recollection, the coroner certified death as resulting from natural causes, so the Morgan County police had no further responsibility in the matter."

"I'd appreciate seeing the file," Arabella said. "I was told that some photographs were taken at the time, and I'd like a look at them."

"Sure," Dan said. "You might find something."

"Thank you," Arabella said. "And if I find anything, can I get copies?"

"Just leave word where you're staying and what you want," Dan said, "and I'll send it over."

"I knew you would," Arabella said, and took off her glasses. Her eyes were large, grey, and grateful.

About the same time, Chief Willy Wharton of LePage had a less beautiful visitor. Attorney Horace W. Grausen, of Grausen, Graysen, and Gruessome, was as dry and sour as an unripe lemon, and considerably less juicy.

"Wharton," he said, in a tone of voice that practically accused Willy of malfeasance, misfeasance, and nonfeasance, all in the same act. "Wrote you a letter last week. Got no answer."

"About Andrew McIntosh?" Willy said, expanding his chest well into the forties, just to keep in practice. "I was out of town for a few days and didn't have time to answer."

"Nobody else in this office able to read and write?" Grausen snarled.

Willy set his lips firmly. "Nope," he said. "Not so good at it myself either."

Grausen's frown added half a dozen wrinkles to his dry, cracked skin. "I came all the way here and have to hear you talk like a fool," he said. "Still, I'm here, so, first off, did some danged woman attorney come and make eyes at you?"

"What do you want?" Willy asked.

"The report on McIntosh. He hit a tree in LePage County and the coroner made a report. What was it?"

"Coroner said he died," Willy said, telling himself that, since he wasn't permitted to scoop Grausen up with one hand and toss him out of the office, the next best thing was to needle him a little. "Had to be dead before they could bury him," he went on. "That's the law of the land. Anything else you want to know?"

"I want to know where he died. Got the report?"

"Public property," Willy said. "Look it up."

That evening he met Dan at the Right Side Bar & Grill as usual, and over their first glass of beer, they discussed the McIntosh business.

"The coroner's report says he died at the wheel of his car," Willy said, "and I guess that settles it."

"Was there an autopsy?" Dan asked.

"There should have been one, but old Doc Rawley was pretty sloppy about some things. He could have made up his mind that McIntosh must have died of natural causes, otherwise he'd have avoided the accident. On the other hand, Rawley might have made a complete autopsy and not bothered to put anything down in writing. He was get-

ting kind of old and neglectful, but now he's dead we can't check up. So what's all the fuss about?"

"About a million dollars," Dan said. "Arabella found a picture in the files. It showed skid marks on the Morgan section of the road just before where the accident happened. You get skid marks when you apply brakes, and you can't apply them once you're dead. So McIntosh was alive when he hit the tree in LePage."

"Have you got the picture?" Willy asked.

Dan took it out of an envelope and handed it to Willy. He studied the photograph and ran a finger along the skid marks, as if he was trying to rub them out. Then he touched the official stamp of the official photographer.

"Seem O.K. to you?" Willy asked.

"The stamp? Sure."

"What about the picture itself?"

"I've been too busy to look at it. I sent Arabella a copy and brought this one along with me."

"Look it over," Willy said.

Dan held it up to the light, but a shadow loomed over the picture.

Grausen, standing above the two men, glowered like a compulsive dyspeptic.

"You two in cahoots?" he said. "The Attorney General's going to hear about this. And you!" He pointed a twisted, bony finger at Dan. "Conspiracy to obstruct justice. You and that Tunis woman are up to no good. I'm going to get her disbarred. Ought not to have women attorneys in the first place. Females, apes, blithering idiots, all of them—what's the system of justice coming to?" He wheeled, muttering to himself as he shuffled out.

"Nice guy," Dan said.

"And what about this Arabella?"

Dan repeated his comment, but his tone of voice changed. "A nice girl," he said. "I think." And he proceeded to examine the picture.

Presently he let out a low whistle. "The accident happened around one P.M. in July, didn't it?" Willy nodded, and his grin highlighted the crags and pinnacles of his face. By contrast, the planes of Dan's bubbly cheeks reflected the light pleasantly, almost softly. He lowered his voice.

"You don't get those long shadows in the middle of July," he said. "It looks more like now." He consulted his calendar watch. "October fourth."

"And Arabella gave you the picture," Willy said. "Do you still think she's a nice girl?"

"She said she got it from the files," Dan said. "If she did, who put it there?"

"And if she didn't get it from the files and merely told you that she did?"

"That," Dan said, getting up, "is an interesting idea and I'd like to discuss it with her."

Driving to the hotel, he wondered what he was getting into. A girl presents a picture of the road where an accident occurred two years before. She makes no representations concerning it. Later on, he discovers that the photograph was not taken at the time of the accident. Whether or not she knew this, whether or not she manufactured the photograph, was not only something of which he was ignorant but something he was unlikely to be able to prove. Nevertheless . . .

As he entered the lobby of the hotel, he heard voices from upstairs, voices pitched high in some kind of ruckus. Then little George Dilling, the night clerk, came tripping down the broad stairs of the old-fashioned building, saw Dan, and rushed over and grabbed him.

"Chief!" he exclaimed breathlessly. "Upstairs—take care of it—robbery, rape—maybe murder—I don't know what to do!"

Dan detached the little man from his arm. "Georgie," he said, "get back to your job and let me handle this."

"But the hotel—the scandal—"

Dan, at the foot of the stairs, heard yelling, and high above the other shouts, he made out Arabella's loud wail. "Look at him! He hasn't denied it—just look!"

Dan reached the upper floor, strode down the corridor, elbowed three or four people aside, and entered a room. Arabella, with her hair mussed up and her blouse torn all the way down one side, was holding the ends together while she shouted at Grausen, who had his hands in his pockets and seemed almost bemused, as if waiting for the torrent to end so that he could have his say.

When she saw Dan, Arabella flung herself at him. She wound herself

around him and began weeping. Dan let her weep. "What the hell happened?" he demanded.

"Nothing," Grausen said. "I wanted to have a conference and—"

"Conference!" Arabella screamed. "He broke in, he assaulted me, and he tried to steal evidence."

"What evidence?" Dan asked, and then he spotted the torn picture and stooped down to pick it up. He turned and walked toward the people at the door. "Break it up," he said. "Get back to your rooms. I'll take care of this." He closed the door and addressed Grausen. "Well? What happened?"

"We're on opposite sides of the case," Grausen said.

"Opposite?" Arabella said. "He's harassing me! He followed me all the way from Pennsylvania. He was afraid I'd get proof of what really happened. And now that I have it, he tried to steal it."

"Fiddlesticks!" Grausen said. "Rubbish! I'm not stupid enough to commit larceny. But you take a young chippie like her, just out of law school and trying to be an attorney. Maybe she is, but I tried to point out the law to her, and what happens? Frame-ups, hysteria. No logic. All emotion. Everything mixed up. Female attorneys? Save me from them!"

"You assaulted me!" Arabella stormed, "and don't you deny it!"

Grausen spluttered, and the faint suggestion of a blush colored his wrinkles. "Never got that far," he said to Dan. Then he turned to Arabella. "What's wrong with you anyhow? Scared of men? Running away when I walk into your room? Ninny, poltroon—you know what you're going to be? A spinster!" And, bristling with righteous indignation, he wheeled, marched to the door, opened it, and went out.

As the door slammed behind him, Arabella smiled. "The old goat!" she said.

Dan looked her over. "You went and tore your blouse," he said. "Put something else on, and then let's talk about that picture that you tried to get away with."

"You think there's something wrong with it?" she asked.

Dan didn't answer. He watched her walk over to the closet, take a robe from a hook, and slip the garment over her shoulders. Then she perched herself on the bed.

"Well?" she said grumpily.

Dan took a chair, swung it around, and straddled it, sitting the wrong

way round, with his hands resting on the back.

"Arabella," he said, "I'll tell you what you did. You took that picture yourself and you got somebody, I think it was Charlie Ames, to sneak into the photo lab and swipe the official seal, then you went and stamped it on the picture. You pretended you found it in my files. But, Arabella, the sun was almost vertical when the accident happened. Take a look at this picture."

She put her glasses on and studied the photo. "I never thought of that," she said. "I wonder who took the picture, and why they put it in your files."

"Manufacturing false evidence and knowingly presenting it to a police officer or magistrate or any other official is a Class D misdemeanor in Morgan County. If you get convicted and have that on your record, you could get disbarred."

"What about LePage County?" she asked.

"Probably a felony, and certainly ought to be."

"Well, I didn't present it," she said. "I found it."

"How'd you get hold of the seal?" Dan asked.

"Oh—is there a seal on it? I didn't notice."

"I wouldn't have much trouble getting Charlie to admit he took it and used it without authorization," Dan said. "A kid like that, just starting out—I'd get him to confess in no time at all. Now you wouldn't want to be responsible for getting Charlie into that kind of trouble, would you?"

"Why don't you just arrest me and get it over with?" Arabella said.

"You'll keep," Dan replied. "But maybe you'd like to tell me all about it right now."

"About what?" she said.

Dan merely thumped his fingers on the back of the chair and kept gazing steadily at her. She stood it for a few seconds before she gave a slight shiver and looked away.

"Don't do that," she said. Dan didn't move and didn't speak. "You have imagination and a good mind," she said, "but I think you're cruel and I'm afraid to tell you things."

"Try me," said Dan.

She thought it over carefully. "You're guessing," she said. "You have no grounds on which to accuse me, but you could make an awful lot of trouble for Charlie. Tell me, are you on Grausen's side?"

"I'm not on anybody's side."

"My—er—I mean Mr. McIntosh," she said, "was a wealthy man, and a very fair one. He made a will a few years ago and the two people who signed it as witnesses are willing to so attest, but they didn't read the will and nobody has been able to find it."

"You think it was destroyed?"

"By his children, who are greedy, spoilt little animals and want all the money they can get hold of. On the other hand, Mr. McIntosh was in love with a very wonderful woman and they had one child. But since his wife refused to divorce him, he couldn't marry again and so the child was illegitimate. But he loved her very much and she him, and he supported her and paid for her education."

"All the way through law school?" Dan guessed.

Arabella gulped and removed her glasses. "I wouldn't know."

"So if your father died in LePage, you get half the estate. If he died in Morgan, you get nothing. And those skid marks would show that he was alive in Morgan. Right?"

"Why do you think he was my father?"

"Because you almost said so, and then covered up. Because you said nice things about him and about your mother. You referred to the child as *she*. And besides all that, attorneys don't usually characterize their clients, they're trained not to."

Arabella pulled her robe tighter around her shoulders, reached out for the torn photograph, and put on her glasses to study it. "I see what you mean," she said. "If you promise not to do anything to Charlie—"

"Let me put it all together," Dan said. "You probably asked Grausen in here to show him the picture and try for some kind of understanding. Did he spot the picture as a fake?"

"He grabbed it," she said. "He tried to take it away from me."

"Then you had this bright idea of claiming he assaulted you, and you screamed. To your surprise, he kind of liked the idea of being accused."

"He practically admitted the assault, and in front of witnesses."

"Do you want to prefer charges?"

Arabella shook her head. "I'd rather find some other way."

"About this will that you say disappeared—what's your evidence that it ever existed?"

"The affidavits of the two witnesses to it. But the McIntoshes have a

lot of money. They hired a prestigious firm—Grausen's, that is—and what chance do I have? I shouldn't have done that about the picture, Grausen could have me disbarred, but it's all so unfair." She took her glasses off again, and her eyes had a frank, appealing look that stirred Dan's heart.

"I guess I don't need the money that badly," she said. "And all I ever expected to do with the picture was to scare him a little so that he'd be willing to make some kind of arrangement. I know my father wanted me to have something—he wouldn't cut me off so completely."

"What was he doing in this area when he had the accident?"

"He had a house in East Weston. He used to spend summers there."

"That's LePage," Dan said thoughtfully. "Exactly where is this place?"

"On Mathers Lane, off Powder House Road."

"Have you been there lately?"

"No. What for?"

"Just an idea. You may be a pretty good lawyer, and I hope you are, but you're not much of an investigator."

Arabella gave a wry little smile. "I'm not a very good actress either, am I?"

Next day, a lot of strange things happened to Grausen, of Grausen, Graysen, and Gruessome. He was questioned by a Morgan County police officer about possible assault charges and the attempted destruction of putative evidence—to wit, one photograph—and he was requested not to leave the jurisdiction until the matter was cleared up. He received a parking ticket, and when he went to pay it he was hit with a second ticket for parking in front of police headquarters. He protested, and was immediately threatened with arrest for disorderly conduct. To calm himself down, he had two cocktails before lunch and a bottle of wine with it.

While he was trying to walk it off, he was stopped by a uniformed cop who warned him that intoxication on a public thoroughfare was a misdemeanor and could subject him to a fine of fifty dollars. As a result of his series of misadventures, he returned to his hotel and slept or brooded for most of the afternoon. After a solitary dinner, he was handed a message to meet Moorhead and Wharton at the Right Side

Bar & Grill. There, he sat down and ordered a glass of ginger ale while he waited. "Indigestion," he explained to the waitress. "I've had a difficult day."

By contrast, Willy Wharton had a fruitful day. It started at 6:00 A.M. with a phone call from Dan. As a result, Willy climbed out of a warm bed while Katie was only half awake. He kissed her lightly and went into the kitchen, where he had a slice of bread and a cup of instant coffee.

He made up for it at 7:30 in Mrs. Patrick McLaughlin's kitchen. He stalked in and almost scraped his head against the low ceiling.

"I'm Chief Wharton," he said. Then, judging her correctly, he said, "They call me Willy, and I understand you were the best cook Andrew McIntosh ever had."

"A sweetheart of a man," she said, reacting to Willy's flattery. "And if you want proof of my cooking, sit down on this fine day. I'm making breakfast for my man and myself."

"He was McIntosh's gardener?" Willy said.

"As good a gardener as I am a cook, and if you want evidence of how he grows things step outside and see for yourself."

"I'm too comfortable here," Willy said. "And while I'm getting a whiff of that fine breakfast of yours, I'd like to ask you and Mr. McLaughlin a few questions about McIntosh."

"Bless the man," Mrs. McLaughlin said, "even if he was a Scotsman. He had a hard life, with a wife like an old wreck of a tree that won't fall over and die, and three children that grew up wanting his money and not much else. And I'm told they got it."

"Not yet," Willy said, "which is why I'm here. Because he wrote a will that you might know something about. It would probably take a good deal of their money away and give it to the daughter who really loved him."

"I'm told she's a jewel of a girl," Mrs. McLaughlin said. "And if we can help—"

At that point Pat McLaughlin arrived and joined the conversation. "If I hear rightly," he said, "and if Mr. McIntosh did write a will, I can tell you where to look. In a cast-iron safe that he used to keep in his cubbyhole of an office where he went whenever Mrs. McIntosh was too much for him. And she usually was, and would have been for any

man who wasn't a saint. Which Mr. McIntosh, bless him, wasn't. Nor should any of us be."

"And the safe is there now?" Willy said hopefully.

"Ah," Pat said, "it was carted away these two years ago. Those brats tried to get into it and wanted me to pry it open or blow it open, which I wouldn't do even if they cast the black mark of Judas on my innocent soul."

"Where did they cart it to?" Willy demanded.

"Ask Benny Seeman. He's in the business."

"And you'll swear to all this?" asked Willy.

"I'll swear to anything that's true, and if it's going to help this colleen of Mr. McIntosh, I'll swear it twice over."

"All I want," Willy said, "is an affidavit, which I'll draw up as soon as I have some of that breakfast in me."

By mid-morning Willy had a third affidavit from Benny Seeman to the effect that he'd carted a safe to the dump and unloaded it there.

At ten Willy was conferring with Charlie Bacon, the dump master, who presented a problem.

"A safe brought here two years ago?" he said. "Under the new law, I have to bury everything within twenty-four hours."

"Then you can unbury it, if you remember in what part of the dump you put it."

"In the southwest corner, but it's maybe ten feet under."

"No sweat with a tractor."

"And who'll pay me?" Charlie demanded.

Willy coughed and turned away. "I'll see what the state can do about it."

"That's all you can promise?"

"Charlie," Willy said, "this is more than a routine job for me. It's personal. Now you wouldn't want to make an enemy of me, would you?"

"If you put it that way, it's duress."

"Right," Willy said. "But it's a word you'll leave out of the affidavit."

Which Charlie did. The affidavit merely stated that one Charles Bacon, dump master in the town of East Weston, LePage County, had unearthed a certain iron safe which he identified as the same one that had been brought to the dump by one Benny Seeman, and that the

safe, badly rusted, had been pried open by Chief William Wharton, who had appropriated the contents, including a certain piece of paper marked with Charles Bacon's initials for identification.

Willy handed the affidavits to Horace W. Grausen at the Right Side Bar & Grill that evening, along with a yellowed sheet of paper in not-too-good condition. The scrawled handwriting on the paper read, "I, Andrew McIntosh, want my natural daughter, Arabella, to get one half of my estate, and the rest of my children can divide up the other half. This is my will." It was signed "Andrew McIntosh."

"I found it in the safe," Willy said, tapping the sheet of paper, "and the dump master and me, we both initialed it so that there can be no question as to its origin. Look it over and you can make a copy of it if you want, but the original stays in my custody until a court of law subpoenas it."

Grausen examined it carefully. "How do I know that this is a genuine holograph will?" he asked.

"You don't," Willy said, "and there are a lot of other things you don't know. One of them is whether the coroner was mentally competent at the time he made his findings, and there are people who think he wasn't. Another thing you don't know is why the McIntosh children had the safe carted away and buried without opening it, and whether the rumor of a holograph will had anything to do with that fact. And I think you'd better see the McLaughlins and decide what kind of an impression they'll make in court, if it comes to that. Because they have a pretty good idea of what went on in that family."

"Bastards," Grausen said, "ought not to have the same rights as respectable offspring."

"For that remark," Willy said quietly, "you're liable to sleep in the LePage County jail tonight."

"On what charge?" Grausen demanded.

Willy bared his teeth in a wide grin, but the grin was not pleasant. "For lusting," he said. "I looked up an 1817 statute that's still on the books and that's the word it uses. Lusting."

"The language is archaic," Grausen said, "and no court would enforce the statute."

"You'll find that out one way or the other after you get out of jail. Now wouldn't you rather settle this whole thing now than find yourself

arrested, and the Pennsylvania Bar Association notified? What will people think of you if you're accused of lusting?"

Grausen sipped his ginger ale without pleasure. "What do you mean settle?" he asked.

"A document that you and Attorney Tunis might draw up and execute right now in the way of a financial agreement," Willy said. "Dan and I will be here until midnight, when the place closes."

"I'll see if I can find her," Grausen said.

Dan pointed. "She's in that corner booth over there, wearing her glasses."

Arabella and Grausen came over to the police table an hour or so later. Apparently there had been a certain grudging meeting of the minds, and Dan and Willy witnessed the signatures. Grausen, muttering under his breath, stalked out, but Arabella lingered.

"I didn't even ask for a full half," she said. "I don't know what made him so willing to settle."

"He had a change of heart," said Willy. "Those things happen."

"I don't know how to thank you," she began.

Willy interrupted. "Don't," he said. "We're police. We just get facts. It so happens that this time they helped you out."

"But I know my father's signature," Arabella said. "May I see that paper you have? The holograph?"

"No," Willy said, and tore it up slowly into small irregular bits, which he put into the ashtray. "There are times," he said, "when you have to fight fire with fire." And he lit a match.

The three of them watched the shreds of paper burn into an insubstantial black ash. It was a long while before any of them spoke, and then they talked about other things.

It's impossible to ignore the troubles when you live in Belfast . . .

SPOTTING AGENT

by EDWARD WELLEN

Rhona stooped behind the counter for a tag and failed to see the quiet man come in on the same ring of the bell over the door the previous customer went out on. That was how Sean Flanagan happened to be in the dry-cleaning establishment unseen when Rhona found the newspaper cutting in the previous customer's shirt pocket.

She straightened, still not seeing the man, and called out to Rory, who was hand-ironing silks in the back. "The fellow who just left car-

ries a cutting about Monday's big bank robbery."

Rory's answer came with a sigh of steam. "So?"

"So why would a law-abiding citizen, especially a citizen with the look of a man who's put a little by in the bank, and insurance covering his deposit in any case, take that much interest in the robbery? Unless he was in on the robbery? Should we—?"

"That's none of our business, Rhona. We're here to work on the laundry."

"But—"

"We have our job to do and that's an end on it."

Rhona shrugged, unconvinced but obedient, and turned, blanching as she saw the man standing not three feet away.

He looked grave, then his face broke into a smile that warmed Rhona and set her heart going again.

In the few weeks since she and Rory had opened the place, she had come to know Sean Flanagan as a decent fellow. He had the sort of looks and bearing that appealed to her and she did not wish him to think ill of her. And it seemed clear from the look he gave her that he did not.

"I'm glad to know, Miss, it's not informers you are," he said.

Rory came out at the man's voice. He had stripped to undershirt and trousers in the moist heat, and Rhona blushed for the torn and sweaty undershirt that showed his grizzled chest growth. He wiped his palms along his trousers and nodded a greeting at the man. Sean nodded back.

Rhona gestured. "My father. Dad, this is Mr. Sean Flanagan." Taking each other's measure, the men shook hands, Sean shifting his bundle of laundry to his other arm for the rite.

Sean turned grave again, stood hesitant for a moment, then leaned into speech. "I couldn't help overhearing about the cutting. I'd mind my own business, but I'd not like to see you hurt. It's well you're not going to the polis about it this time, but he may tempt you with more of the same."

Rory frowned. "How do you mean, hurt?"

Still holding his parcel of dirty laundry under one arm, Sean reached for the cutting. "If I may, Miss."

Rhona let him take it. He scanned both sides. His face bloomed in what must have been a rare rage: he met the stares of Rory and Rhona.

"I thought as much. It's an old trick, and one you, not being long in business, might not know. The man's a rogue—though not the sort of rogue the cutting would lead you to believe. I've seen him about. He's no bank robber. He hangs about on the fringe of the Docks turning a dirty penny when he can. He knew you'd find the cutting and think what you've been thinking. He's hoping that when he calls for his shirts you'll have the polis on hand to jump out and slam him against the wall. Then he can sue you for false arrest."

He handed the cutting back to Rhona. "Here, Miss. Turn the cutting over. See the item on the other side?"

"Why, it's about the races."

Sean gave a forced smile. "Yes. And I'll wager the man will have on him a betting coupon for one of those races to show that and not the bank robbery was his reason for saving the cutting."

Rhona watched Rory stiffen. He nodded without smiling. "Thank you, Mr. Flanagan."

Sean smiled his nice smile. "That's my father. I'm Sean."

Rory neither nodded nor smiled. "Thank you for your advice."

Sean flushed. "Not that you need it, I know, sir. But I had to speak, even at the risk of seeming to be something of an informer myself."

Rhona gave a sidewise glance at Rory and lifted her chin. "Not a bit of it, Sean. You did the right thing. Me dad's overtouchy on the score of minding his own business."

Rory, with a look at Rhona, muttered, "Time I went back to it," and took himself to the rear and the making of busy noises.

Rhona rested her elbow on the counter and her chin on the heel of her hand. "Rhona's the forward of my name."

Sean grinned and the grin did wicked things to Rhona's heart. "Rhona. Ah, but that's sweet on the tongue." He rested his own elbow on the counter and brought his face near hers. "Tell us, Rhona, do you have a liking for the films?"

Rhona arched an eyebrow. "Are you heading towards asking me out?"

"That I am. Are you free to go?"

Rhona wondered. That was a question she had not faced till now. Her duty lay here, with Rory. But she had her life to live and hours of her own. "That I am."

"Grand. Then I'll be seeing you, Rhona, on Thursday after work, if

that suits you."

"That suits me."

Sean passed Rhona his bundle, their hands overlapping briefly with lingering warmth. The bell rang as he opened the door and closed it after him. Sean smiled, catching Rhona's gaze following him through the window crisscrossed with tape. Rhona smiled back. Sean settled his cloth cap in salute and braced himself anew for the frisking by the British checkpoint at the end of the street, which was out of her sight but never out of her thoughts.

The reminder that this was bloody Belfast made Rhona's smile fade. Her gaze fell to the bundles on the counter. It had been a busy day and it had a while to go yet. But in spite of all she found herself humming a lighthearted tune.

Her singing, following the silence after the bell, must have told Rory their customer had left. He called out irritably. "Where are the garments, Rhona?"

"Coming!" She exaggerated the lilt of her response to irritate him further. But she winced guiltily when she stepped in back of the partition and saw him sweating away.

His tongue at the corner of his mouth, he took out a stubborn stain with a deft touch of spotting agent. The washing vat clicked off and Rhona grew aware that it had been whirring wearily. Rory lifted the great lid, removed a mass of damp laundry, and dumped it on a tray for the drier.

Rhona made a drop of tea for Rory and herself. "Take a break, Dad."

"Just a minute. I'd like to finish the batch first. And don't be giving me 'Dad.' You know it's only I'm grey before me time."

Rhona grinned. "Do you tell that to your kids?"

Rory, pouring fresh solvent in the dry-cleaning machine—he held that clothes could only be as clean as the solvent used in the last rinse—let that pass.

Rhona grew mischievously serious. "What about your missus?"

"What about her?"

"Does she still not know you're in the company all day of another woman?"

"I don't think of you as a woman."

"Thanks."

"That's what you liberated women have been asking for, isn't it?"

"Not exactly."

"No? Then I guess I'm dim, but I confess it's all beyond me."

"Good. That's part of our strategy, keeping you men off balance."

"Ah, it's terrible hard on a man you are. As if I hadn't enough on me mind. They have us here for a purpose, you know."

Rhona's face stiffened. "I know. Drink your tea."

He sipped his tea and grimaced, but swallowed it, dregs and all. "What's the hour?"

Rhona glanced at her wristwatch. "Getting there. I'll shut up shop."

She set the card with the establishment's hours in the window, locked up, pulled the blind on the door, and rejoined Rory behind the partition just in time for the news.

Rory was walking away from the wireless and did not turn to face her. Rhona read his reaction in the hang of his arms and the droop of his head.

The news was given with false breathlessness—an announcer's voice listening to itself. At 6:30 A.M. Provisional I.R.A. terrorists had hijacked a vehicle at the junction of Cormac Street and Eliza Street in the Markets area of Belfast, packed it with explosives, and set it off at 9:15 in the Bridge–High Street area. At 11:15 Loyalist terrorists had exploded a bomb outside a Catholic-owned pub in Short Street in the Docks area. In both blasts, casualties had been heavy and the innocent, as usual, had paid the highest price. Gelignite has no conscience.

"That's enough of that." Rhona switched the voice off with such force that for a moment she thought she had broken the knob.

Rory turned and their eyes met in sad and silent agreement. With set jaws, both returned to work.

Rhona flicked a switch and a blower began clearing the place of moist heat, making it safe to bring the salt prisms into play. Meanwhile, they sorted and examined the garments that had come in during the afternoon.

Rory made a small select pile. "We'll just give these shirts of that shady customer with the cutting in the pocket a closer look. Ah, and here's Mr. Flanagan's things." He searched the jacket. "Nothing in his pockets." He held the weave up to the light, seeking deposits in the fiber. "Good honest soil. Looks like a clean-living man, your fellow."

"He's not my fellow."

"Not yet. No layabout, at any rate. A plasterer, I'd say. Wait,

here's a smear. Paint, most likely. Better take a look at it all the same." He added it to a separate pile of clothes and gathered up all of them.

Rory and Rhona passed behind the racks of drying suits and let down a folding shelf. To this hidden workbench they had bolted an infra-red spectrophotometer.

Rhona reached for Sean's jacket first. Good taste in both color and goods. She smiled, feeling his warmth.

Smiling too, Rory pointed out a speck.

Rhona hummed lightly as she scraped a few micrograms' worth from Sean's jacket, mulled the particles with a petroleum-based grease in a micromortar, and transferred the paste to the salt windows of the sample cell. She switched on the spectrophotometer. Her humming stopped. Infra-red absorption spectra of the speck showed bands distinctive as fingerprints.

Gelignite.

She did not feel Rory's hand on her shoulder. Nor did she feel its release as Rory left to put a call through on the direct line to Intelligence, keeping his voice low to spare her. She grew aware of the murmur, picking Sean's name out of it, and asked herself, Why does it have to be him? And knew it was part of the larger question, Why does it have to be?

Strange things can happen on back country roads . . .

THE HANGING TREE

by JACK RITCHIE

Captain Robertson had sent Ralph and me to Green Bay to quiz a likely murder suspect in custody there; however, our trip proved unprofitable.

Rather than take the monotonous intrastate highway for our return journey, we consulted our map and elected to drive the scenic back roads.

Late in the afternoon, as we were traveling through a forest corridor,

)ur motor began losing power and then stopped entirely.

Ralph let the car coast onto the shoulder of the road, where he tried o restart it. The motor turned over, but refused to catch.

After a while, we got out of the car, raised the hood, and studied the notor.

"What are we looking for, Ralph?"

He rubbed his neck. "Damned if I know. I took woodworking in ıigh school."

We poked and pressed various things and then got hopefully back nto the car. It still refused to start.

Ralph gave up. "We're running down the battery. We'll just have to it here until somebody gives one of us a lift to the nearest garage."

We waited more than an hour, but not a single car passed, either)oming or going. It was beginning to get dark.

"Ralph," I said, "I just noticed a driveway about a hundred yards head. Maybe there's a house at the end of it and we can get to use a)hone."

Ralph put the glove-compartment flashlight into his pocket and we ;ot out of the car—and found that the driveway was actually a rather ıarrow country road.

I peered into the distance. "There seems to be a hamlet of sorts head."

After five minutes of walking, we reached the first building.

"By Jove," I said, "that's a one-room schoolhouse! I didn't think here were any still in operation in this state."

Ralph regarded it without undue interest. "I don't think this one is ;ither. The windows are black with dirt."

I yielded. "Perhaps you're right. However, that does present us with ın anomaly. The schoolhouse appears to be unused and yet there is not)ne blade of grass in the school yard, which indicates heavy traffic."

"The kids are probably bused to school somewhere else," Ralph said. 'But that doesn't mean they don't still use the school yard as a play-;round when they come back." Then he frowned. "What the hell is hat?"

"What the hell is what?"

He pointed to a thick rope dangling from the limb of a huge oak ree, its end featuring a rather impressive hangman's noose.

"There must be some logical explanation," I said. "We'll have to re-

member to ask."

We continued walking. A number of the buildings in the hamlet appeared to be deserted and falling into ruin. Occasionally we saw a dim light behind the curtains in some of the windows.

Ralph had been looking at the roofs. "Not one TV antenna in the town."

"It probably has cable TV."

At the end of the street, as though welcoming us, stood a fair-sized two-story structure that appeared to be an inn.

Ralph still looked about as we talked. "Where are the people? The kids who trample the grass in the yard of a school they don't use and play with hangmen's nooses? I haven't seen a soul since we came here."

"They're peeking at us."

"Peeking?"

"Yes. From behind their curtains. If you use your peripheral vision, you'll notice movement as we pass."

Ralph flexed his peripheral vision. "You're right, Henry. They're hiding in their houses and peeking at us. Why are they doing that, Henry?"

"We're strangers in town, Ralph. People in hamlets always peek at strangers."

"Another thing," Ralph said. "I haven't seen a single car—moving or standing still."

We arrived at the two-story building, walked up the wide wooden steps, and entered the building.

The place was rather inadequately lit by several oil or kerosene lanterns suspended from ceiling chains.

A tall thin individual of indeterminate age stood behind the hotel desk. He allowed his mouth a thin smile as we approached him.

"Is there a garage in town?" I asked.

"Garage?" The desk clerk seemed to think that over for a moment. "No, there's no garage in this village."

Ralph looked about. "I'd like to use your phone."

"We don't have a phone."

Ralph frowned. "This is a hotel, but you don't have a phone?"

"No one in town has a phone."

Ralph looked at me as though it were all my fault. "Great! We're

stranded in the middle of nowhere and we pick a town without telephones. We might as well hike back to the car and wait for somebody to come along."

"It's nearly dark now," the desk clerk said. "And it's very unlikely that any other car will use that road tonight."

"Ralph," I said, "We might as well stay here for the night and go back to the car in the morning. There's no need for us to be uncomfortable. And remember that the department pays our expenses."

The desk clerk turned the register. I considered the steel-nibbed pen and the inkstand for a moment and decided to use my ballpoint. I wrote on the first line of the blank page: *Det/Sgt Henry J. Turnbuckle, MPD.*

The clerk watched me write. "MPD? Is that some kind of a title or decoration?"

I smiled modestly. "Milwaukee Police Department."

Ralph signed in too.

"Two singles or a double?" the desk clerk asked.

"I don't suppose you have TV?" Ralph asked without much hope.

"No, sir. No TV."

"In that case make it a double. Henry and I will talk to each other for entertainment."

The desk clerk handed over a tagged key. "Your room is Number 21."

There appeared to be a small empty dining room to one side. "Do you serve meals?" I asked.

The desk clerk smiled again. "Yes."

Ralph and I went into the dining room and seated ourselves.

He looked around. "What kind of a place is this?"

I chuckled. "Does the decor puzzle you?"

"What's decor?"

"The decor of this establishment. The theme. Don't you see, Ralph, they've recreated the atmosphere of a bygone day—the lamps, the pen and inkstand, the clothing the desk clerk is wearing. The theme of this hotel is the year 1847."

"What makes you zero in on 1847?"

"The calendar behind the clerk's desk. The month is October 1847."

Ralph was not impressed. "They're not doing much business. We're the only ones here. Where's the menu?"

"In the old days most small hotels didn't have printed menus. You ate what they cooked."

The desk clerk had disappeared, but now he returned with two large steins of beer, evidently on the house. He put them on the table. "Supper will be ready in twenty minutes. We're having roast beef." He was about to leave again.

"Just one second," Ralph said. "When we came into town, we noticed a rope with a noose hanging from a tree in the school yard."

The desk clerk's eyes flickered. "Yes, sir. That's the hanging tree. That's where the witch was hanged."

"What witch?" Ralph asked.

"Rebecca Winthrop. She was hanged by the neck until she was dead. In the year 1847."

I nodded. "To be precise, on October twenty-ninth, 1847?"

"That's correct, sir."

I smiled. "And on every October twenty-ninth the town puts a rope up there to commemorate the event?"

"Yes, sir."

Ralph watched him depart. "That's one hell of a coincidence. Today just happens to be October twenty-ninth."

"Ralph, there's no coincidence involved at all. If we had come here on October the first, he would have told us that the witch was hanged on October first, 1847. And if we'd come here on June tenth, he would have said that she was hanged on June tenth."

Ralph sighed. "Well, at least they've settled on the year." He looked past me and seemed to stiffen slightly. I turned to see what was drawing his attention and saw a woman standing in the doorway.

She wore a plain full gown that reached from a high lace collar to the floor. I imagine this must have been the height of fashion in 1847. She was probably the hotel hostess, I thought.

She came forward. "I trust that everything is satisfactory?" Her eyes were green.

"Fine," I said. "We've just been tantalized by your hanging tree and your witch. Could you provide us with a little more information?"

She smiled slowly. "Of course. This inn was built by Joseph Winthrop in the early 1840s. It was one of the overnight stopping places on the coach road between Green Bay and Milwaukee. The inn prospered and this hamlet grew around it. In 1847, Joseph, who was a bachelor,

decided to go back to his native New England to look for a wife. He returned with Rebecca. A month later, he died delirious and raving and this place became hers."

Her eyes seemed to gleam a bit. "Unexplained things began happening in the village—mysterious fires, pets disappearing, and children having spells. They would go into fits and trances and speak in strange tongues. It was rumored that sometimes guests at the hotel would simply disappear. No one could remember seeing them leave. The townspeople began to be afraid of meeting Rebecca's eyes and some thought she could cast spells.

"The misfortunes and fears grew until on the night of October twenty-nine, 1847, they reached a head and the townspeople gathered in front of this hotel. At ten in the evening they stormed up to the second floor where Rebecca had her room. They dragged her down the stairs to the school yard where they put a rope around her neck. They allowed her some last words, hoping that she would admit to being a witch and ask forgiveness from Heaven."

Ralph was wide-eyed. "Did she?"

"No. But before she died, she placed a curse on the town. Every year, on the anniversary of her death, someone in the village must be hanged by the villagers themselves until there was but one villager left and then he must hang himself."

Ralph blinked. "How many people were there in this village at the time?"

"Ninety-three."

He did some figuring and seemed relieved. "Well, *if* this curse really worked the last villager would have hung himself in 1940."

I smiled. "Someone *in* the village? Not someone *of* the village? An unfortunate loophole, from her point of view, but one upon which the villagers seized?"

Her eyes flashed for a moment. "Yes, they did."

I turned back to Ralph. "In other words, the annual victim does not have to be a *bona fide* resident. The villagers could meet their annual quota with some transient. Some guest from this very hotel, perhaps. Though I imagine there were times when there were no strangers in town and the villagers were forced to feed upon themselves?"

"Yes," she said. "There were times."

Ralph stared at the lace around her throat. "How many people live

in this village now?"

"Thirty-eight."

"All right," Ralph said. "Just *suppose* this curse really worked. Why didn't the people here get up and leave? Why wait to get hanged?"

I smiled. "Ralph, you understand nothing at all about curses. When a town is cursed, nobody can leave. There's something like a force field around it."

Our hostess nodded faintly. "I must leave you now."

When she was gone, the erstwhile desk clerk, now our waiter, brought us our meal.

Ralph detained him. "Where do your kids go to school? I mean, they're bused out of town, aren't they? Past the force—" He reddened slightly. "They do get past the town limits, don't they?"

"There are no children here any more," the waiter said. "They all grew up."

"Who was that woman who was here just a moment ago?" I asked.

He didn't look at me. "I saw no woman."

When he left us, Ralph drained his mug of beer and looked as though he wanted another. I pushed my stein toward him. "Take mine, Ralph. I'm allergic to beer."

The meal was quite tasty, though plain, but Ralph merely picked at his food.

When we finished, I rose. "I doubt if there's very much doing in a town of thirty-eight people after dark. We might as well turn in early."

I stopped at a window and peered out at the moonlit night. "I can see the schoolhouse yard from here. It looks as though there are two nooses hanging from the tree now. Probably a flaw in the window-pane creates that illusion."

Ralph looked and rubbed the back of his neck. He looked around as though to make certain we were alone, then he stepped behind the clerk's desk and took one of several keys from hook Number 28.

"Ralph," I said, "what are you doing?"

"Changing rooms," he said. "I'm superstitious about the number twenty-one."

When we entered room Number 28, Ralph was forced to use his flashlight until we could get one of the table lamps going. Then he locked the door and ran the bolt.

He took off his suit coat and sat down on a wooden rocking chair. He began rocking thoughtfully as he stared at the door.

I looked for something to read. I expected to find a Bible in the top drawer of the dresser, but there was none. I opened other drawers and discovered a leather-bound volume of John Milton's *Paradise Lost.*

I made myself comfortable near the lantern and glanced at Ralph. He had removed his shoes and appeared to have dropped off to sleep.

I read for some time before I became aware of the sounds of many voices outside the building. I went to the window, but could see nothing except the forest to the rear of the structure.

The voices were apparently coming from the front of the hotel. I listened. Yes, they were getting definitely louder. There were angry shouts and even curses. There seemed to be quite a mob.

I glanced at my watch. It was almost ten.

I shook Ralph. "Ralph, you won't want to miss any of this," I said. But he slept like someone drugged.

The mob began tramping up the hall stairs.

I went to the door, ran back the bolt, and turned the knob before I realized the door was locked. I went back to Ralph and searched his coat. Where the devil had he put the key?

Somewhere down the hall I now heard the sounds of a door being broken down.

I knelt to the keyhole, trying to see through, but it appeared to be blocked. Damn it, I thought, I'm missing everything.

Entirely frustrated, I listened to the crowd milling around in the corridor.

After a few moments more, there seemed to be a general movement for the stairs and the sound of feet marching down.

The sounds diminished, moved to the outside of the building, and gradually faded away.

I went to the window again, but of course I could see nothing from there. If only Ralph and I had taken the room to which we were assigned, we undoubtedly would have had a perfect view of all the proceedings.

I sighed and tried to wake Ralph once more, but I was unsuccessful. Rather than have him spend the night in the rocking chair, I used a fireman's carry to get him to his bed, where he lay, dead to the world.

I read a bit more of *Paradise Lost* and then went to sleep myself.

I woke at eight the next morning. It was daylight but quite foggy outside. One could hardly see more than a dozen feet beyond the window.

Ralph finally opened his eyes. Then they widened. He whipped out his service revolver and stared wildly at the door to our room.

Clearly he had awakened from some nightmare. "Ralph," I said, "snap out of it."

He seemed to be quite groggy, but he slowly pulled himself together. He stared at the window. "It's daylight," he said in a tone that indicated surprise at seeing it.

"Yes, it's morning," I said. "And you missed everything. As a matter of fact, so did I."

"What did I miss?"

"The reenactment of the original hanging," I said. "Or possibly the mock lynching of one of the villagers. I didn't see any of it myself, but it sounded terrific. The mob stormed up the stairs, broke down a door, and undoubtedly carried a victim to the hanging tree, where, if we had been able to watch, we would have seen him or her very realistically strung up."

Ralph closed his eyes for a moment. Then he found his shoes, shook the hotel key out of one of them, and put them on. He slipped into his jacket, unlocked the door, and peered out. "All right," he said, "let's get the hell out of here."

Down the corridor, I saw a splintered door hanging ajar on one hinge. "Yes, sir, it must have been quite a show."

Ralph seemed in a hurry to leave. When we reached the lobby, the desk was unattended. As a matter of fact, the hotel gave the impression of being entirely deserted. "Hallo!" I called. "Hallo?"

"Shut up, Henry," Ralph said. "We don't want to wake anybody."

"But we can't leave without paying."

He headed for the front door. "They know we're from MPD. Let them send the bill."

I checked the hotel register for a moment and then joined Ralph in the fog outside.

I chuckled. "I'll bet we find an effigy dangling from the hanging tree. I wonder if it will be the witch or one of the townspeople."

Ralph frowned. "They'll be waiting in the fog. They expect us to go back the way we came."

"Ralph," I said, "what are you babbling about?"

He looked up at the hazy sun. "It's morning and the sun rises in the east and the road is east of this damn town." He took my arm and we walked toward what he had so cleverly deduced was the east.

We had traversed perhaps a hundred yards when suddenly we were in another world. The sun shone bright and it was a beautiful clear morning.

I looked back into a solid patch of fog. I could see neither the hotel nor the town. "Lousy town planning," I said. "They built the place in a low-lying pocket. I'll bet they get lots of fog every morning until the sun burns it off."

Ralph found a lane leading through the woods and we eventually reached the road. I saw our car still parked on the shoulder, half a mile or so away.

Ralph insisted upon walking rapidly and I was a bit winded by the time we reached the car and got in.

Ralph put the key into the ignition.

"Ralph," I said, "if it didn't start last night, it's not going to start this morning."

The motor caught immediately and Ralph pulled away from the shoulder, tires spurting gravel.

He drove rather fast and he didn't slow down until the car reached a county highway. "So you think the people in that town reenacted a hanging just for our benefit? That broken door was to room Number twenty-one, wasn't it? The one we were supposed to occupy?"

"No, Ralph. It was Number twenty-five."

Ralph frowned. "It wasn't twenty-one?" He drove silently for a while. "The villagers staged the whole thing? They busted down an expensive door just for the entertainment of *two* guests?"

"They probably buy their doors wholesale. Or at least they're seconds. And when you're scheduled to put on a performance, you don't cancel it just because you have a limited audience. The show must go on. Besides, we weren't the only guests. There were two others."

Ralph blinked. "Two others?"

"Yes. I checked the hotel register when we left and two other people registered after we did. They must have arrived after we went up to our room. A Mr. and Mrs. John Smith." I smiled. "They could disappear from the face of this earth and nobody would ever know what

their real names were."

Ralph slowed the car abruptly and made a U-turn.

"Ralph, what are you doing?"

"Going back."

"But why?"

"Because now I'm a cop first and scared second. So they decided it would be easier to take Mr. and Mrs. John Smith than two policemen, one of whom didn't drink his beer."

What was he mumbling about now?

We reached the forest road again and Ralph slowed the car, his eyes searching the roadside. Finally he stopped. "The road's gone. The whole damn road *and* the town."

I looked about. "I think we've probably got the wrong road."

"No," Ralph said. "We haven't got the wrong road. Everything should be here, but it isn't. And I don't think I'll ever find it again."

He made his second U-turn of the morning and we drove back the way we'd come.

I chuckled again. "*Mr. and Mrs. John Smith.* Really, Ralph, some people have no imagination."

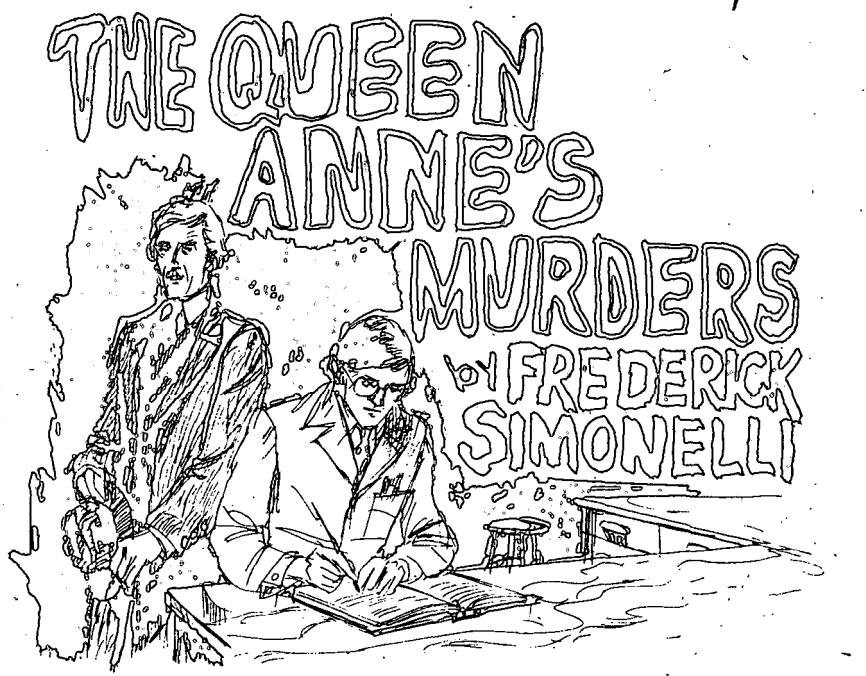
Ralph took his eyes off the road. "Henry."

"Yes?"

Then he sighed. "Nothing, Henry. Nothing."

We got to Milwaukee well before noon.

The year was 1893, the place Queen Anne's Medical College . . .



It was barely light as we turned the last bend in the road and sighted the stark grey-stone turrets of Queen Anne's Medical College. The seven weathered buildings, set in a semicircle around a cobbled courtyard, rose sharply against the barren landscape. I suppose the sameness of the place, after thirty years, should not have surprised me. To an institution which dates its founding to the earliest days of medical science in the British Isles that period is certainly not a significant span

of time.

My return to Queen Anne's was prompted by a disturbing and rather mysterious letter I'd received from my old friend and classmate, Dr. Thomas Applegate. In it he implored me to journey at once to Queen Anne's, informing no one of my visit. Revealing no further details, he assured me of the gravity of his request. I had not seen Applegate since 1884—nearly a decade—when he left his private practice in London to accept a professorship at the college, but I knew him well enough to assume his summons was no light matter.

After making the necessary arrangements for a young colleague to attend my patients, I boarded the afternoon train to Falkmouth. The last few miles of the journey, by coach from the rail terminal to the campus, were the most tiring. The roads are rutted and desolate and the countryside's bleakness offers no comfort. The coach left me at the main building, the tallest and most impressive of the old stone structures. I proceeded to the faculty office, hoping to catch Applegate before he left for the evening. The secretary's station was manned by a stern-faced matron who viewed my approach with an unfriendly stare.

"These offices are closed for the evening," she said as soon as I was within earshot. I handed her my calling card, flicking the cardboard crisply between my thumb and forefinger—GIDEON SHARP, M.D., R.O.S.

"I am here to see Dr. Applegate. Announce me, if you please."

Her visage changed at the mention of Applegate's name. She seemed quite upset and answered in an uncertain fashion.

"I'm afraid—Doctor, it—Dr. Applegate is gone."

"Gone? You mean gone for the day?"

"No, sir. He's—*gone*."

"My good woman—" the exchange played poorly on my temper "—when you say 'gone' in that manner you lead me to assume a degree of finality you may not really intend to convey."

"Perhaps Dr. Graham can help you."

"I should hope so."

I followed the woman a short distance down a darkened corridor. She tapped at an office door and entered without waiting for a response, closing the door behind her. In a short while she opened the door to me and returned to her station. I entered and stood at a large desk facing the seated occupant of the office. He had my card in his

hand.

"My name is Jarvis Graham. Please, sit." He didn't stand to welcome me and didn't offer his hand. "Dr. Sharp, is it?" he said, looking again at my card.

"Yes. I'm here to see Dr. Applegate. To be honest, Dr. Graham, I've had a long journey and am quite tired. If you would be good enough to direct me to Dr. Applegate I'd be most grateful."

"Can't."

"I beg your pardon?"

"Dr. Applegate is missing. Frankly, I think he's dead." The impact of those chilling words and Graham's flippant manner with them left me speechless. "He disappeared the night before last," Graham continued. "He was working in the pathology lab and when he didn't return home by nine, his daughter sent her husband to look for him."

"Yes. Jennifer, isn't it?" I remembered her as a beautiful child, living with her father in London.

"That's right. Jennifer Applegate Winton. Her husband is James Winton, bursar here at Queen Anne's. Applegate lives with them just off the grounds."

I nodded for Graham to continue.

"In any event, young Winton didn't find Applegate in the lab or anywhere on the grounds. No one had seen him leave. He was just gone. Disappeared. When Applegate didn't show up at home by midnight Winton called me. I am the chairman of the department," Graham added in anticipation of my question, "and they thought perhaps I'd know where he was. I called the police. They've been very thorough, but they have come up with nothing."

"Did Winton find anything unusual in the lab? Any sign of a struggle?"

"No struggle. The only thing left behind were Applegate's eyeglasses. Since he was nearly blind without them it's unlikely he'd purposely have left them there, or simply forgotten them."

"Don't you think, Dr. Graham, that your assumption of Applegate's death might be premature? There are many possible—"

"I'm afraid there's more. We had a murder on campus five days ago. It's unsolved as yet, but the police suspect a connection between that murder and Applegate's disappearance."

"A murder!" Five days ago would place the murder on the day be-

fore Applegate wrote to me.

"Our stew tender. An old man named Claude Hanks."

The stew tender, for the uninitiated, is the hireling at a medical college given the grisly task of preserving the cadavers used for instruction and research. Deep in the bowels of the main building, below the pathology lab, is a large room used exclusively to house an open oak vat in which the cadavers are stored. The vat is sealed from the inside with tar, measures a full fifteen feet in diameter, and stands to a height of six feet. The vat is filled with a murky brine solution which acts as a decay retardant and preserves the cadavers quite well. At an institution of Queen Anne's size several cadavers are used daily and the vat generally holds no less than a full week's supply of corpses. A narrow catwalk around the circumference of the vat enables the stew tender to snare the desired corpse with a long grappling hook.

After a very short time in the brine-solution a cadaver's skin takes on a dark-grey, almost black color. The stew tender closely monitors the changes in shade since rapid darkening indicates advanced putrefaction and suggests immediate use of that corpse. He must keep the vat filled to a designated level to assure a proper concentration of saline in the brine solution. It is a gruesome job. The stench, as one would imagine, is overpowering.

"He was bludgeoned to death," Graham explained. "One of the students found him in his cottage."

"What leads the police to suspect a connection between the stew tender's murder—Hanks, was it?"

"Hanks."

"—Between Hanks' murder and Applegate's disappearance?"

"Only the fact, Dr. Sharp, that murders and disappearances both are rather uncommon here at Queen Anne's. Occurring so close together leads one to assume a connection. Wouldn't you agree?"

I wasn't about to commit to that point just yet. I rose and extended my hand to Graham. "I won't impose on your time any longer. You've been most kind."

Graham saw me to the door. "You will need a place to stay tonight, Dr. Sharp. Might I suggest the Boar's Head Inn on the Post Road? The accommodations there are most acceptable and the morning coach back to Falkmouth stops right at the door. I'd be happy to have my driver take you there if you like."

"How kind. Yes, thank you. But—" I faced Graham in the still outer office. The lights in the corridor were dimmed and the matron gone. "—I won't be taking the morning coach to Falkmouth. I don't believe I'm quite ready to leave yet."

"Oh?"

"I came to see Applegate."

"You may have a considerable wait, Doctor."

"Let's hope not, Dr. Graham. Let's hope not."

The inn to which Graham's driver brought me was very comfortable. The following morning I set out on foot for the Winton home to see Applegate's daughter, Jennifer. I was well rested and well fed and enjoyed the prospect of a brisk walk.

Since it was still early, barely eight o'clock, I decided to return to the campus prior to visiting the Wintons. Many questions remained unanswered and I felt this a good time to begin reducing their number.

My first stop was the pathology lab, the last place Applegate was known to have been. The printed schedule outside the door showed the morning's first lab class not due until nine, so I would have adequate time to look around. As I entered the lab, I saw that the only occupant was a thin young man, no more than thirty, with wire-rim spectacles riding low on the bridge of his nose and an extraordinarily unkempt thick shock of sandy brown hair. He was entering numbers in a ledger, which he closed as I approached. He was seated on a high perch stool at one of the marble-topped tables which lined the far wall. He made no attempt to greet me—rather he eyed my presence with detached curiosity, much as one would a specimen under glass.

"Good morning!"

He did not respond.

"My name is Gideon Sharp." I looked around the room. "I say, things do change in thirty years, don't they?"

Nothing. I was beginning to feel a bit awkward. "I took my degree here," I said. "Class of 1863."

Still nothing. "You don't mind if I look around, do you?"

"Should I?"

"I suppose not," I laughed, "but some men are very particular about what they consider their domain."

The man shrugged and returned to his ledger. "I'm not one of them."

I walked around for a short while, noted nothing unusual, and was about to leave when Dr. Graham entered the lab. I was in the far corner of the room, hidden from view by several racks of test tubes and assorted equipment.

"Bloom!"

The young man looked up. His contempt for Graham was poorly concealed. "I have nothing further to say to you, Graham."

"But I'm not through with you, Dr. Bloom." Graham's face was fast turning a deep red and his whole frame shook with anger. "You will never, you hear me—never—hold tenure here as long as I'm chairman of this department."

"Why don't we let the Board of Governors judge my competence? The Chancellor has approved my request for a hearing and—"

"And you went behind my back to get it!"

"What did you expect?" Bloom's voice rose sharply. "Was I to sit here and let you sweep me away like so much garbage? I have a right to be heard, Graham!"

"Have no illusions, Bloom." Graham had brought himself under control. "You will have your hearing, and then we will be done with it. Following the hearing I will do everything in my power to see that your contract is not renewed. I want you out."

Bloom sat silent, chalk-faced. Graham turned for the door. He stopped and faced the younger man once more. His voice was low and taunting. "If it weren't for Applegate's interference you would have been gone from here a year ago."

"Applegate!" The color returned to the younger man's face. He was off the stool and halfway across the room in three long strides. "I don't need Applegate to look out for me. If Applegate had any guts he would have stood up to you on his own behalf. And *he* would be chairman now instead of you. No, Graham, don't you worry. I'll look out after myself."

Graham started to respond but instead turned abruptly and left the lab, slamming the door loudly behind him.

Bloom walked back to his table and kicked the stool, sending it crashing against the wall.

"Are we prone to violence, Doctor?"

"What the—?" Bloom spun around, startled. "I—I'd forgotten you were here. That was a bit of a show we put on for you, wasn't it?"

"Quite."

"He's a bloody idiot!"

I put up my hand before Bloom could set himself off again. "I've really had enough of that for now, Dr. Bloom. What I'd really like is some information on Applegate."

"Applegate?"

"I am a friend of his. And very disturbed over his unexplained absence."

"There isn't much I can tell you. Two nights ago Dr. Applegate came into the lab just as I was about to leave. He said he was going to work here for a while. We chatted a bit and I left. Along about midnight I received word from Graham asking if I'd seen Applegate. It seems Applegate hadn't returned home. I only live a short way from here, in the staff residence, so I came over. The police were here when I arrived and I told them just what I've told you. The last I saw him he was working right over there." Bloom pointed toward one of the lab tables. "I haven't seen him since."

"Was there any indication of what Applegate had been working on? Specimens? Notes?"

Bloom shook his head. "No. Only his glasses. Here—" Bloom walked over to the table Applegate had used. "—and his fountain pen. I remember noting it odd that Applegate had left his fountain pen uncapped. He must have forgotten it. There was a note tablet, but no writing on it. That was all."

"I see." Bloom and I walked toward the lab door. "Was any of the lab equipment out? Had anything been used?"

"Not that I could tell. Everything was put away just as I'd left it."

"Well, thank you, Doctor. Perhaps we'll be seeing each other again."

I left as the first wave of students entered the lab for the nine o'clock class. I took the stairs down to the first floor and out the rear exit of the building. It was a short walk across the east quadrangle to the Winton home, a walk I'm sure Applegate took many times. And one, I was becoming increasingly convinced, he had not taken that fateful night. Once on the rear steps I was less sure of my directions than I'd supposed. A workman was removing several dead rose bushes at the base of the steps, to the right.

"I say, you there. Can you direct me to the Winton home?"

"Sure can, Cap'n." The man seemed eager for any excuse to interrupt his labor. He spat a stream of brown tobacco juice on the walk, not a foot from where I stood, and carefully repacked the wad of tobacco in his mouth. "See that there spire through the trees to me left?"

"Yes?"

"Ya folla this path, keepin' that spire in sight. When ya get through the rear gate ya'll be back on the Post Road. Winton house is the fir's'n on ya right. Got it?"

"I believe so. Thank you."

"Don' mention it."

My curiosity drew me to the plants he had removed. All quite dead. Everything in an area about five feet square. "What seems to have happened here? It doesn't look like blight, or insects." I examined the dried leaves. Indeed it looked like no plant disease with which I was familiar.

"Damned if I know, Cap'n. They was fine when I trimmed 'em two days ago."

"I certainly hope it isn't another strain of that dreadful asian beetle. I lost all the roses around my home to them two years ago."

"Ain't no bug. Flowers is fine. It'sa roots tha's dead."

"Well, whatever it is I certainly hope you keep it here. We don't need it in Derbyshire!"

"Now we wouldn't wanna send it to Darby-shire, would we, Cap'n?"

"Yes, well—thank you."

A second brownish glob of tobacco-laced spittle fell only inches short of my heel as I proceeded on my way down the path.

The Winton house, a fine old gabled structure, was set back a distance from the road and was surrounded by a shoulder-high iron picket fence. The main gate was unlocked. I approached the front door, eagerly anticipating some resolution of the mystery shrouding my friend's disappearance. Once on the porch I could hear voices through the opened sitting-room window. I knocked.

The door was opened by a young woman, barely twenty, with high cheekbones, a fine aquiline nose, and delicate features. She was slender and her hair fell full about her shoulders and shone a silken gold in the early-morning sunlight. Her eyes captured me immediately. They

were large and expressive, crystalline blue in color. Applegate's eyes. I had found his daughter, Jennifer.

"Yes?" she asked in a soft voice.

"Mrs. Winton?"

"I am Mrs. Winton." She studied me carefully and seemed almost able to place me. "Are you—?"

"Dr. Sharp. Gideon Sharp."

"Why, yes, Dr. Sharp! Do come in." She stepped aside for me to enter. "It has been so long!"

"Thank you, my dear. It has indeed been a long time! I came to see your father and am most troubled at the disturbing news of his disappearance. I wanted to offer any help I could."

"Jennifer?" A young man entered the hall from the sitting room. "Who is it?"

"Dr. Sharp, may I present my husband, Mr. Winton. James, this is Dr. Sharp, a dear friend of father's."

Winton and I shook hands and exchanged greetings. He matched his wife's good looks but towered over her, over both of us. He was a burly broad-shouldered man with a square jaw and darting, intelligent eyes. Winton closed the front door and showed me to the sitting room.

"Please join us, Doctor. My father-in-law would have been so pleased you could come."

In the sitting room, perched uncomfortably on a delicate straight-back chair, was a short, stout, balding man with a thick brushlike moustache.

"Inspector Dawson, this is Dr. Sharp, a friend of my father-in-law." Dawson and I exchanged pleasantries. "Please, gentlemen, do sit down."

"Tell me, Dr. Sharp," asked Dawson, "what brings you here at this time?"

"As Mr. Winton mentioned, I am a friend of Dr. Applegate. A very old friend." I hesitated and decided not to reveal Applegate's letter just yet. "As a matter of fact, we attended Queen Anne's together. My visit was to be purely social. Naturally, I was shocked at the situation I found and wish to help in any way I can."

"Naturally."

"I am staying at the inn in town and will stay as long as need be."

"How did you learn of Applegate's disappearance?"

"Upon my arrival last night I went directly to the college to look for Thomas. Instead, I spoke to a Dr. Graham and he told me the entire story."

"Dr. Sharp." Mrs. Winton's voice was so soft it drew one closer to her when she spoke. "We insist you stay here with us. We have so much room."

"How generous of you, my dear. But I couldn't think of imposing."

"Please, Doctor. It is no imposition at all. Is it, James?"

"Why, no. Certainly, do stay."

"Well, then. I accept your most gracious offer. Thank you."

"I'm certain we will find father." Tears formed in the young woman's eyes and ran down her cheeks. "Then you will see him after all." She managed a weak smile.

Inspector Dawson tugged at the end of his moustache, a nervous gesture. "I really should be going now," he said, rising and taking his hat from the table. "Mrs. Winton, rest assured I will report the first lead directly to you."

"Thank you, Inspector. For all you are doing."

"Inspector." I stopped Dawson at the doorway. "Perhaps I can help in your investigation."

"I think not, Dr. Sharp. This is police business."

"But you may find a medical background quite useful. Besides, I have a stake in this. Thomas Applegate was my friend."

"Was?"

I looked around before speaking freely, assuring myself that the Wintons were at a distance. "I believe Applegate is dead. And I want to help find his murderer."

Dawson stood, looking intently at me for several seconds. "Very well, Sharp. Be at my office in an hour and we'll be on with it."

After helping me gather my things at the inn and seeing me settled in the guest room of his home, James Winton offered to drop me off at the police station for my eleven o'clock appointment with Inspector Dawson. Winton himself was headed for the college. Work was accumulating that needed his attention.

"How long have you been associated with Queen Anne's, Mr. Winton?"

"I was a medical student here four years ago. I couldn't make the

grade, I'm afraid, and was discharged."

"I'm sorry."

"You needn't be. I went back to London and attended business school for a year. When the bursar's position became vacant I applied and, with Dr. Applegate's help, was offered the job. That was almost three years ago."

"Had you known Mrs. Winton during your earlier stay at Queen Anne's?"

"Not very well. Jennifer and I really got to know each other during my first year back. We were married two years ago. Well, Doctor, here we are." Winton drew the carriage to a stop at the entrance to the police station. "We dine at seven. I hope you will join us, although I don't expect to have much of an appetite."

"And why is that, Mr. Winton?"

"Our stew tender met a very tragic end last week and a replacement for that position is not easy to find. The property under his care is too valuable an investment for Queen Anne's to allow spoilage. I've recruited several older students to assist me, but I'm afraid the responsibility is largely mine."

"How dreadful!"

"In any case, your company would be most welcome during our evening meal. May we count on it?"

"Most assuredly, Mr. Winton. At seven."

The constable at the front desk directed me to Inspector Dawson's second-floor office. My extended hand was only inches from the knob when the door flew open with a force sufficient to drive me back to the edge of the stairs. A bull of a man, nearly as wide as he was tall, exploded through the doorway and brushed past me with not even a nod of recognition in my direction. He had a fleshy face with large pink jowls and a full white moustache that matched the fringe of white hair encircling his bald head. His face flushed crimson and he blew out his blubbery cheeks like a puff-fish while taking the stairs to the main floor with an agility surprising for his bulk.

"I see you've met Sir Andrew," Inspector Dawson said from the open doorway. A half smile played on his lips as he reached for my arm and eased me away from the wall I'd sought in refuge.

"Have I?"

"Sir Andrew Trowbridge, Chancellor of Queen Anne's. Come in Sharp." Dawson's office was small and cluttered, but there was a methodical array to the clutter. "I'm afraid Sir Andrew was a bit perturbed at my inquiries concerning his son, and Sir Andrew is not a man to keep his displeasure to himself."

"Is Sir Andrew's son of interest to us in the Applegate case?"

Dawson grinned at my use of the word "us" to stake my interest in the case. I grinned back. "Just routine, Sharp. Adam Trowbridge is a student at Queen Anne's. I should say *was* a student at Queen Anne's. He was discharged at the end of classes last semester. Applegate had a good deal to do with it. It seems young Adam was more interested in the nurses than in his studies. Applegate refused to matriculate him. There were some harsh words between them at the time. Several witnesses heard the boy threaten Applegate, but none seem to give the incident much credence. Besides, it would have made more sense for him to have made good his threats while the anger flashed rather than to have waited almost seven months. But—" Dawson leaned far back in his swivel chair into an almost prone position "—I wanted to check it out nonetheless."

"Did you find anything of interest?"

"Not really. Adam had a good explanation for his whereabouts the night of Applegate's disappearance. It seems he was—ah, shall we say, entertaining that evening. Fortunately for him, he is not a solitary lover. There were several other young people at the gathering. Their stories corroborate his perfectly. I don't think Adam Trowbridge is our man."

"Then you do agree that poor Applegate is dead?"

"It seems the most likely explanation at this point, yes. Of course, we are still a long way from any meaningful answers. All we have is concurrence on a feeling—a hunch, if you will. There is still the matter of Applegate's body. If your friend was killed in the lab, the disposition of his body would not have been an easy task. One could hardly traipse across campus with a corpse, even at a medical school. I'm afraid, Dr. Sharp, we have nothing. Not even enough to state that a crime was committed at all."

"We do have our work cut out for us then, don't we?"

At my suggestion, the first stop we made was at the small cottage of

ıe late stew tender, Claude Hanks.

"My men and I have been through here with absolute thoroughness, harp. I can't imagine anything of importance that might have escaped s." Dawson was impatient with my close scrutiny of the contents of Ianks' pitiful home.

"Just a fresh perspective, Inspector." The small dwelling was little ıore than a hovel—two rooms and a porch. One room was obviously a ·edroom, the other a sitting room. The open hearth in the sitting oom, and a plank table in the corner, made it also something of a itchen. Both rooms were cluttered with useless items of various vinage and description. "Our man Hanks was obviously a collector. Toally undiscriminating."

"Junk! I don't see the point—"

"Now, Inspector, one man's junk is another man's treasure. Besides—" I pulled back a curtain, revealing floor-to-ceiling shelves. Jpon the shelves were hundreds of glass mason jars, each containing a quantity of unrelated items. "—My first premise is that some connection might well exist between Hanks' murder and Applegate's disapıearance. Is that an acceptable premise?"

"Yes."

"Then anything we find here would aid us in solving both mysteries, vouldn't you say?" I took each jar down and examined its contents.

"But we've already been through this. You're not going to find anything in those jars, Sharp. I've been through them myself. Here. Bottle caps, hundreds of them; bolts, every size and shape; nails, mostly ıent; flints—I believe there are three jars of those—enough to fire all ıf London; pieces of chalk, stubs mostly—"

"What have we here?"

"Braces of some kind." Dawson's patience was all but gone. "Rusted ıraces—"

I opened the jar and spilled the contents out onto the plank table. At east three score pieces of four-inch-long, thin iron rods, bowed in an ırc shape with a turned-in hook at each end, clattered across the table. Some were very rusted, others less so.

"No, my dear Dawson, not just braces. These are known in the fuıeral profession as *mors dentis*. They are used to clamp the upper and ower jaws of deceased persons prior to public view. They fit like so." hooked a brace around my thumb and brought my other hand up to

simulate a human jaw and caught the opposing thumb on the opposite hook. "A very useful item. Without it the natural *rigor mortis* would give the corpse an appearance of screaming. Very disconcerting to the mourners, wouldn't you say?"

Dawson took the brace from my hand and examined it.

"Hmm. Bloody morbid of him to keep them, I'd say."

"Inspector, aren't you missing a rather interesting question. Where did Hanks get them?"

"For God's sake, Sharp, the man was a *stew tender!*" Dawson threw the brace back onto the table with the others.

"That doesn't answer it at all. Corpses used at any medical college are purchased from hospitals, from among indigents who die there without means or family, and by contractual arrangement with individuals prior to their demise. The college pays an agreed-upon sum—a tidy sum I might add—and when the individual dies his remains become the property of the college. In neither instance is the deceased prepared for waking. It would be of no use. They are not shaved, nor even cleaned up much. And they certainly wouldn't be fitted with one of these."

"Then how—?"

"That, Inspector Dawson, is our first question of substance. How?"

I wrapped two of the braces in a linen handkerchief and placed them in my coat pocket. We reexamined the rest of the contents of Hanks' home and took a turn around the grounds. A small outbuilding, in an advanced state of disrepair, housed an old flat-bed wagon and a few tools.

"Did Hanks' duties at Queen Anne's include gardening, Inspector?"

"No, I don't believe so. Why?"

"Well, look here—" My attention was drawn to several garden implements in the corner of the shed "—There are two—no, three—long-handled spades, a pickax, a hand hatchet. It doesn't appear that Hanks maintained a vegetable garden, or did much work around here, so why the tools? He doesn't have a great quantity of valuable possessions. He lived a rather spartan existence, and yet—" I bent down and gathered a clump of soil from one of the spades. "—he has tools worth five or six pounds. Curious." I put the soil sample in a second linen handkerchief and placed it carefully in another pocket.

"Hanks was a collector."

"Yes. Perhaps it's nothing. At this point we seem to be garnering

more questions than answers anyway."

Our work at Hanks' cottage was finished and we proceeded to an inspection, with Dawson's reluctant agreement, of Hanks' place of work. During my years at Queen Anne's I had only been down to the stew room two or three times. It is a place one avoids, if possible. I sympathized with Dawson's obvious discomfort at what was, for him, the second visit in a week.

It is amazing how much floods back to one from memories long consciously forgotten. As we descended the winding metal stairway to the stew room I recalled vividly my prior visits there so long ago. A large metal door, at the base of the stairs, led to the room. We found the gas lamps and quickly lit those nearest us. Poor Dawson shuddered and drew closer to me. It was a forbidding place, with the deadly chill of a wine cellar. It had an uneven dirt floor and bare stone walls covered with a slimy green moss. Dampness hung in the air. And the smell. The smell of death clung to the room, cold and heavy. The rats that reigned in the darkness scampered away as light from the gas lamps filled the room, but you could hear them, you could feel them, breathing and waiting in the darkened cracks and corners for the light to recede so they could once more claim their domain. It was mainly because of the rats that the stew vat had to be built to a height of at least six feet.

"Dear God, Sharp! What more can we see here?"

"Just a few moments, Inspector. I want to get the feel of the place again. It has been a while." The distinct sound of footsteps on the metal stairs halted my words. They were still a distance from the door when a voice echoed through the hall.

"Mr. Winton? Are you down there, sir?"

"No. It is Dr. Sharp and Inspector Dawson," I replied. Two young men, students I assumed, entered.

"Your light gave us a start for a moment, sir! We're not all that keen about coming down here to begin with and when we saw the light and heard voices—"

"I can understand your reluctance, son." It was obvious that Dawson felt better having company, particularly company that shared his uneasiness. "I am Inspector Dawson. This is Dr. Sharp. We are investigating Mr. Hanks' murder and were just about to leave."

"Poor Hanks," the older of the two young men said, "he was an odd bird, but nice enough."

"And right now I'm mournin' him like a father," said the younger of the pair as he looked at the stew vat. "I'd give a crown sterling to see his grizzled old face right here so I could get back to my books." The students laughed nervously.

"I take it you are the volunteers Mr. Winton mentioned to me. It's nice of you to help out," I said.

"Come on, Henry, give me a hand here," the older boy said, drawing the movable stairs and platform to the vat's edge. "The sooner we're done with it the sooner we can get out of here."

"Here, we can all lend a hand." I motioned for Dawson to help with the heavy rigging. "What have you got there?"

The older boy paged through a requisition from the bursar's office. "I need a male for Dr. Fairchild's class, a male for the pathology lab, and a female for Dr. Hammond's lecture class."

We laid out three canvas shrouds from the rack in the corner and carefully arranged the straps under each one. The older boy mounted the stairs with the long grappling hook and snared the first cadaver.

"Here's the first male, Henry." He drew the cadaver over the side of the vat with the hook and placed the hoist strap around its torso. He gently lowered the corpse down the side of the vat where the younger boy swung it into the shroud. The younger boy loosened the hoist strap and drew the sides of the shroud around the cadaver. By the time he had wrapped, sealed, and tagged it, a second corpse dangled over the side for the second shroud. In a matter of minutes the three cadavers lay neatly wrapped and tagged.

The older boy came down the stairs and took a large bucket from a shelf on the wall. He filled it with water from a small pump and climbed the stairs again and emptied the water into the vat. He repeated the process until the level of liquid in the vat was the same as before we had removed the cadavers.

"Yes," I muttered to myself, "the level of liquid would rise and fall depending on the number of cadavers in the vat."

"What's that, Sharp?"

"Nothing. Nothing, Dawson. I'm just thinking out loud."

The boys moved the platform back to its mooring along the wall and started up the stairs with the first cadaver. Dawson and I followed

them up and helped a bit, since the winding stairs made carrying the dead weight very difficult. We were winded by the time we reached the first floor and placed it on the cart in the hall.

"Well, boys," Dawson said, "I think Sharp and I are a little too old for this sort of thing. We'll leave you to your work and be about ours." He seemed relieved to be out of the stew room and eager to be on his way.

We headed down the long corridor to the main entrance and were about to leave when the matronly secretary I'd encountered the previous night came running toward us from the area of the faculty offices. She was very agitated.

"Inspector! Inspector Dawson! Come quickly—he's killing him! Hurry!"

"Who is killing whom, Miss Crane?" Dawson grabbed the woman's arms and shook her.

"Dr. Bloom. He's killing Dr. Graham. Please hurry!"

We left the woman in the hall and hurried into Graham's office. As we turned the corner, we could hear the crashing sounds of a violent struggle from Graham's inner office. I was the first into the room and saw Bloom, or at least his back, hunched over the prone form of Dr. Graham, striking his face with his fist. I lunged across the desk and grabbed his bloodied fist in mid-air as it arched widely to deal another blow to the man pinned beneath him. As I yanked back on him, Dawson tore his other hand loose from Graham's throat.

"Bloom! For God's sake, let go!"

As we pulled him from Graham, he thrashed wildly in an attempt to get back at Graham. "Let me go! Get away from me! I'll kill you, Graham. Do you hear me, Graham?"

Dawson pulled Bloom's left hand fully behind his back and lifted him off Dr. Graham. I hung onto his fist and tried, more than anything else, to keep him from plunging it into my own face. As we dragged him back, Bloom lashed out in one last mad lunge with his foot and caught Graham squarely in the side. Graham moaned and rolled over. Blood fell in clots from his nose, which looked broken, and he coughed and gagged and held his side. He was in great pain and barely conscious.

Bloom showed no sign of subduing. Dawson yanked his arm farther up against his back and I feared he'd break it. He drew his right arm

across Bloom's throat and lifted him in that manner out of striking distance of Graham. He slammed Bloom hard into the chair next to the door and when the young madman tried to surge forward again, Dawson sent his fist smashing into his midsection. Bloom crumpled to the floor, gasping for breath. Dawson sent Miss Crane, who was watching with horror from the doorway, to call the station for additional officers.

I went to Graham. He was in bad shape. His nose was indeed broken and he had lost a great deal of blood. He had vicious lacerations about his head and face and appeared to be having trouble breathing. I suspected several broken ribs. I made him as comfortable as I could and cleared the blood and mucous from his throat lest he asphyxiate as he dropped off into unconsciousness.

Within minutes we had him to the surgery on the second floor and he was coming around. He appeared to be out of danger but would be a long time healing.

By the time I returned to the first floor Bloom had been taken away and Dawson was questioning Miss Crane.

"And what did Dr. Bloom say to Dr. Graham?"

"I couldn't really tell, Inspector. The door was closed. When they raised their voices I heard Dr. Bloom scream something about destroying records. Dr. Graham kept shouting at him to get out. Dr. Bloom was insane! He is usually such a quiet man. I've never seen him like this."

I entered the office and sat in a large chair by the window. I needed a moment to catch my breath.

"Are you all right, Sharp?"

"Yes, I'll be fine."

Dawson turned back to the woman. "You can go now, Miss Crane. Why don't you go home and try to calm down. A constable will be by tomorrow to take a formal statement. I think we have enough now."

Miss Crane nodded. She looked pale and frightened as she approached me. "Dr. Sharp? Is Dr. Graham—is he?" I stood and took her hands in mine. They were like ice.

"He is going to recover, Miss Crane. He is out of danger and resting now. Why don't you take Inspector Dawson's advice and get some rest yourself?"

"Yes." She dabbed at her wet eyes with a handkerchief. "Thank you, Doctor."

Dawson and I were alone.

"What do you make of it, Inspector?"

"From what I can gather, it seems that Graham was out to get Bloom fired."

"Yes, I know that."

"How?"

"I was in the pathology lab this morning when Bloom and Graham had a go at it. A little less violently, of course, but they were headed in that direction. Graham was firm about not granting Bloom tenure. Bloom went over Graham's head to the Chancellor and was granted a hearing. Graham didn't like that and threatened to see Bloom discharged."

"Can he do that? I mean, without a hearing?"

"Until a man has tenure he is at the mercy of his department's chairman. To answer your question: yes, he could. And from what I saw this morning, Graham disliked Bloom enough to do it. Of course, the fact that Bloom requested and was granted a hearing by the Chancellor on his petition for tenure somewhat limited Graham's options."

"In what way?"

"Well, Graham can't dismiss an instructor while the matter of tenure is pending before the Chancellor and the Academic Review Committee. However, should the committee reject the petition Bloom would be fair game for any action Graham chose to take."

"And if the committee acted favorably on the petition and granted Bloom tenure?"

"Then Bloom would be out of Graham's reach. Once a man is granted tenure he can only be dismissed by a vote of the faculty senate. And that's not likely to happen. The academic ranks close quite securely around those admitted to its lofty company."

"So this hearing was vitally important to both of them."

"What do you make of this business of 'destroying records'?" I asked.

"As near as I can tell, Bloom was working on a research project that would impress the committee and he accused Graham of destroying the results. It's pretty sketchy. Miss Crane didn't catch the entire conversation and Bloom wasn't all that coherent. How long do you suppose it will be before we can talk to Graham?"

"He should be well enough by tomorrow."

"I'll be back here first thing to question him then." Dawson started

for the door. "Sharp, I want to thank you for pitching in like you did."

"I'm glad I was here to help, Inspector—although I will admit I'm not anxious for further practice in mastering the physical side of your craft." Dawson smiled for the first time since I'd met him. "But—"

"Yes?"

"I would like to accompany you tomorrow when you talk to Graham. I'm caught up in the thing and want to see it through."

Dawson hesitated for a moment. "I suppose it will be all right. But only as a spectator from here in!"

"I wouldn't have it any other way."

Dawson smiled again. "I'll stop by the Wintons' for you in the morning. May I drop you there now? I pass it on my way."

"Thank you, no. The walk will do my nerves good. See you tomorrow, Dawson."

After dinner Jennifer Winton retired early. Her husband invited me to his study for a cigar and a nightcap. We discussed the altercation between Bloom and Graham. It seems that, according to Winton, Bloom was an unfriendly sort, disliked by most of the faculty at the college. Winton described him as a "disagreeable little man" and hinted that Bloom's attack on Graham might have revealed a side of Bloom that few people had seen, a side that might prove crucial in solving his father-in-law's disappearance.

I could not, however, dismiss the connection I felt existed between Hanks' murder and our search for Applegate.

"Tell me, Winton, how well did you know Hanks?"

"Hanks? The stew tender? Not well at all. Few people did. He kept to himself and didn't have any family that I know of."

"Friends?"

"None."

"But as the bursar you must have had more contact with him than anyone else. I mean, you must have conferred at least to see that he took possession of the correct number of cadavers before you released payment."

"Well, yes, that was a point of contact. But hardly the basis for a friendship."

Winton seemed intruded upon by my questions. I swallowed the last of my brandy and stood. Winton rose with me and opened the door. "I

will enjoy my sleep tonight," I said. "Good night, Mr. Winton."

"Good night, Dr. Sharp. May I drive you anywhere tomorrow morning? I'll be leaving for Queen Anne's rather early, but I'd be happy to leave you off."

"Thanks just the same, but Inspector Dawson will be by to pick me up in the morning. I'm going to join him in a more thorough questioning of Dr. Graham."

"Very well. Please give my best to Dr. Graham. Good night."

I was halfway up the stairway when Winton spoke again. "Do you suppose, Dr. Sharp, that the unfortunate incident this afternoon was not Dr. Bloom's first surrender to violent impulses?"

"That thought had crossed my mind, Mr. Winton. And Inspector Dawson's as well, I suspect."

Graham's swollen face was a purpled mass of welts and bruises. The blows had shattered several teeth and the jagged stubs protruded hideously through his cracked and shredded lips. Three broken ribs and a broken nose made his breathing difficult. He was not a pretty sight but, frankly, he was fortunate to be alive.

Inspector Dawson took an official statement on the incident and even that small exertion caused Graham a great deal of pain. A Dr. Claremont from the Queen Anne's staff administered an opiate to ease his discomfort. When Graham appeared able to speak again, I questioned him about Bloom's charge that Graham destroyed the results of research Bloom had been conducting.

Graham shook his head from side to side. "No—" his voice was thick and raspy "—no, I did not! He's mad! I don't even know what they were working on."

"They?"

"Bloom and Applegate."

"Applegate? You mean Bloom and Thomas were working on a joint research project?"

Graham nodded. A choking cough cut off his reply. He was bringing up blood and dark sputum mixed with a deep brown bile. Dr. Claremont rushed to his side. "Gentlemen," he said, "Dr. Graham is a very sick man. No more questions, please."

"Of course, Dr. Claremont," I said, ashamed that my involvement with the case had so blinded my medical judgment. I took Dawson's

arm and led him from the room.

"Did you know that Bloom and Applegate were working together on a project?" I asked him when we were out of the room.

"I found out about it this morning from Bloom." Dawson smiled smugly and lit a cigar. "It seems he didn't think it was important enough to mention before. Now, doesn't it seem strange to you, Sharp, that the last man to see Applegate alive was also working with him on some project? The last *place* he saw Applegate alive was in his own lab, and yet he claims to have been totally in the dark about what Applegate was doing there."

"Are you suggesting that Bloom killed Applegate in a dispute over the work they were doing together?"

Dawson spread his pudgy fingers, pointing to each in turn with every point he made.

"One, Bloom has a violent temper; two, he was under pressure to produce some impressive work to keep his job; three, he admits *now* to having been working with Applegate on some project that seems pretty important to him; four, he didn't mention that project when we were trying to determine the reason for Applegate's presence in the lab the last night he was seen; and five, he was the last person known to have seen Dr. Applegate."

"That's all pretty circumstantial, Dawson." I was far less convinced than the Inspector seemed to be.

"Look here, Sharp." Dawson was impatient with my skepticism. "Bloom was desperate for some results to impress the Chancellor. He wanted to take more credit than he was entitled to for whatever he and Applegate were working on. Applegate refused to go along—professional ethics and all that—so Bloom flew into one of his rages and killed him. He then cleaned up the lab, disposed of the body, and went to bed. He had all the time he needed to alter the records of Applegate's work to make his own participation seem greater than it was. Graham wanted him out in the worst way, so he destroyed the records. That pushed our volatile doctor over the brink and he bloody near beat Graham to death."

"But what about Hanks? Aren't you forgetting your poor late stew tender? Did Bloom kill him too? And if so, why?"

"That's where we got thrown off the track in the first place!" Dawson obviously felt he had the package neatly wrapped. "Hanks' murder had

nothing to do with Applegate's disappearance. All along we assumed it did and were looking for a connection that didn't exist. Poor Hanks just went and got himself killed at a very coincidental time."

"Really, Inspector!"

"They are separate crimes—we will deal with them separately." Dawson was angered by my skepticism. "I believe we have Dr. Applegate's murderer in custody. As soon as we tie up the loose ends on this one, we will turn our attention back to the Hanks case."

"You don't have one shred of evidence against Bloom that will stand in court. You probably couldn't even get a bill of indictment from a grand jury at this point."

Dawson dismissed my objections. "Bloom will crack once he's confronted. I've seen it before. He's a violent man, but not a criminal by nature. He will confess, believe me."

"And what about Applegate's corpse? Without it you have no case and if Bloom doesn't crack you may never have one."

Dawson led the way from the building without answering. He was exhibiting more bravado than the facts he had would justify. He balked at my request to interview Bloom but relented once I convinced him that it was not my intention to disprove his theory, but to strengthen it if it proved to be sound.

Like most men whose uncontrolled passions, rather than basic inclinations, lead them to prison, Bloom appeared frightened and shrunken in his cell. He sat on a backless chair in the darkest corner of the gloomy cubicle. The light in the cell was poor but I could tell Bloom needed a shave, and sleep.

"I've just been to see Graham." I held a match to his cigarette. "That was a frightful beating you gave him."

"Will he die?"

"I don't believe so. But his recovery will be slow."

Bloom rubbed his eyes and stood, moving fully into what light came through the small window. He spoke softly. "I don't know how I could have—I mean, he's a dreadful man, dreadful—"

"Yesterday you meant to kill him."

"Oh, yes. Yes. Very much so." Bloom became more animated. "And I would have if you and Dawson hadn't stopped me. This position means a great deal to me. I don't have money or family or a lucrative

practice to fall back on. I need this position and Graham knew my research would justify my application for tenure. How could he just destroy all that work? How could he?"

"Are you certain he did?"

"I'm certain he dislikes me enough to do anything. Anything at all."

"What about Applegate? Dawson thinks you killed him, you know."

Bloom's jaw dropped and he literally fell back onto the chair. "What?"

"What did happen that last night in the lab?"

"Just precisely what I told you. And what I told Dawson. Nothing. Applegate came in as I was cleaning up and said he wanted to do some work. We chatted a minute or two and I left. That was the last time I saw him."

"You were working on a project together. You must have had some idea of what he was about."

"No. That's not exactly accurate. We had *started* on a project together. Applegate was very helpful to me. He wanted to see me stay. We hadn't really gotten very far when something caught his attention. I don't know what it was. He became very secretive about it. We weren't very long into our work together, only a week or two, when he turned it over completely to me. He seemed totally engrossed in his new project. He didn't volunteer any information concerning it to me and I didn't think it my place to question him. That was at least three weeks before his disappearance."

"Your specialty is pathology, isn't it?"

"That's right."

"What were you and Applegate working on originally, the work you completed alone?"

"I really don't see—"

"Please!"

"Well, as you know this is a coal-producing region. Most of the men in this area work in the mines. We'd found an unusual concentration of accumulated coal dust in the soft tissue of those who'd died of consumption. We were attempting to document a consistent enough pattern to prove a definitive correlation. But I don't see—"

"Bear with me just a moment longer, Bloom. Where, on the cadaver, are the highest concentrations of coal dust found?"

"As I said, in the soft tissue, mostly in the gums and soft palate. You

see, as the coal dust is ingested it works its way through the blood stream and collects in the soft tissue of the mouth. We found substantial evidence that the presence of coal dust in those tissues is a sure indication of similar infection of the lungs, which, as you know, results in death from respiratory failure—consumption. Such a correlation, if we could prove it beyond question, would be a great aid in an early diagnosis and could save many lives. Really, Sharp, I don't see what this has to do with Applegate's disappearance."

"It may be the key, Dr. Bloom." I rose to leave. There was much yet to do.

"Wait, Dr. Sharp." Bloom gripped my arm. "I didn't kill Applegate. You must believe me."

"What I believe at this juncture, Dr. Bloom, is of little consequence. If you didn't kill him, you've given me the key to who may have." I freed my arm from his grasp. "And if you did, you've just committed yourself to the gallows."

It was nearly four o'clock by the time Dawson and I arrived at the third of the four cemeteries on my list.

"Sharp, I'm just about out of patience. What *are* we looking for? Sharp!"

I was off the carriage and rummaging around the tombstones before Dawson caught up with me.

"Here. It's here." I dropped to my knees and withdrew the linen handkerchief from my pocket, the one in which I had wrapped a clod of soil from Hanks' tool shed. "Look here, Dawson." The Inspector bent toward me. "A perfect match. A very unusual reddish-brown clay. Unlike the soil about Queen Anne's. Or any of the other cemeteries we've visited."

Dawson looked closely at the soil I held up to him and then nudged the freshly turned grave at his feet. "So it is." He started to walk away. "But what does it prove? I'd be pleased if you would not involve me in your nature studies." As he walked back to the carriage, he carefully avoided stepping on any of the graves.

I leaned against a tombstone and lit my pipe. "You needn't be so careful about not treading on the graves, Inspector," I called after him. "They are quite empty."

Dawson stopped in mid-stride and turned back to me.

"Actually—" I looked around at the dates on the tombstones in the immediate vicinity. "—I'd be surprised if any of them were occupied."

"But—"

"There's no time to explain now, Dawson," I said and hurried the Inspector into the carriage. "There is much yet to do. First—and be sure you follow my instructions precisely—send a man over to Queen Anne's with word to Sir Andrew Trowbridge that you have solved the mystery. Tell him you know who murdered Hanks and, regrettably, who murdered Applegate as well."

"Look here, Sharp! I—"

"Instruct the constable to have Trowbridge assemble his entire staff in the pathology lab at nine o'clock. Now, it is crucial that all persons summoned understand this afternoon that the murderer will be confronted at nine this evening. Send a second constable to the Winton home. I am sure they will wish to be present as well. Meanwhile, you can send for some men and confirm what I've told you about these graves. They are, I assure you, empty."

Dawson seemed shaken by my certainty. He made notes on my instructions and we reviewed them in every detail.

"One last thing, Dawson. Meet me this evening at eight o'clock in the stew room."

"The stew room!"

"I'm afraid so. At eight. And I will deliver your murderer."

It was only a few minutes past seven when I heard the footsteps on the stairs. I had been waiting, crouched in the damp darkness of the stew room, for a little more than fifteen minutes. The man, Thomas Applegate's murderer, carried a lantern into the room. He lit one other wall lantern from it and set the first against the slimy vat. He removed a shroud from the rack and laid it out on the dirt floor. Moving the portable stairs to the vat was not difficult for a man of his strength. He took the grappling hook, climbed the stairs, stood on the narrow catwalk, and peered into the murky water where he had hidden the body of my friend. He scraped the bottom of the vat with the hook, intent on finding the rope which held the corpse anchored to the bottom with a weight.

I stepped out of the shadows and quietly climbed the stairs behind him. He heard my final step and turned with a start.

"Don't let me stop you, Mr. Winton. Poor Thomas certainly should be brought up, don't you think?"

"Sharp! How—?"

"Now, Winton, let's go back down peacefully." I moved toward him and held out my hand to take the grappling hook. "It's all over now. Inspector Dawson will—"

"No!" Winton shrieked, retreating along the narrow walkway until he was well out of reach. "How did you know?"

"The roses, Winton. They told me where Applegate was."

"What roses?"

"After you killed Thomas you had to dispose of his body but you couldn't very well carry him across campus." I edged closer to Winton, hoping to pull the lethal hook from his hand. "So you deposited him here. Of course, you had to weigh him down. It wouldn't do to have him just bobbing around with the others." I inched closer. "But his mass, and that of whatever you used to anchor him to the bottom, raised the level of brine in the vat to a noticeable degree. So you siphoned some off and dumped the liquid out the back door, into the rose bushes. The brine naturally killed the plants in the immediate area. From the roots up."

"Stay back, Sharp! I'm warning you!" Winton swung the hook out at me. I backed up a few steps, out of range.

"You and Hanks must have had a neat little business going." I took one of the mouth braces I'd found at Hanks' place from my pocket and held it up for Winton to see. "Hanks robbed the graves and you falsified the payments to the hospitals. I suppose you were making far more than your salary from this side trade. Did Hanks get too greedy? Did he want a bigger share? Is that why you killed him?" I started again towards Winton slowly. Carefully.

"And Applegate? The project he was involved in with Bloom led him to discover traces of lead on the gums and soft palate of the cadavers he was working on. Traces from these." I tossed the brace in Winton's direction. He batted it away with the grappling hook. "Thomas knew, at that point, that the cadavers at Queen Anne's were not purchased from the usual sources. They were robbed from their graves!"

Winton lunged again. I barely avoided the sharp edge of the hook this time. He moved toward me, around the rim of the stew vat. It was I who now backed carefully away. I had little hope of overpowering the

bigger, younger man. I could only stall for time.

"Thomas knew Hanks had to be involved, and I suppose he hope you weren't as well—although such a scheme would hardly be possibl without the bursar's complicity. When Hanks was murdered, Thoma was sure. That's when he wrote to me, asking me to come and se him."

Winton moved closer.

"That night in the lab he confronted you with his evidence. Yo killed him, destroyed his notes, and deposited him here. However, yo weren't sure how much Bloom knew, so you had to steal his researcl notes as well. It was very convenient when Bloom placed the blame fo that theft on Graham and nearly killed him, wasn't it?"

Winton moved more quickly toward me. Backing away at a quicke pace, my heel caught on the catwalk grate. I barely held myself fron plummeting over the edge. My stumble brought Winton bounding around to within striking distance.

I raised my hands to ward off the blow. Winton held the lethal hool above his head for just an instant. He was expressionless. At that mo ment I believed I would soon join my old friend in the cold dark wa ters of the vat.

I didn't hear the shot, so intent was I on my own moment of death but I saw the bullet hit Winton's chest. He was dead instantly. Hi arms crossed his chest in a last spasm just before he toppled into the murky water.

Dawson took the stairs two at a time and retrieved the hook from where it had fallen. He thrashed the hook in the water, hoping to snare the body, but it slipped silently below the surface.

For a long moment we saw nothing, then Winton's corpse bobbed upward, breaking the black calm. It rolled and settled, eyes staring vacantly, and joined its fellows.

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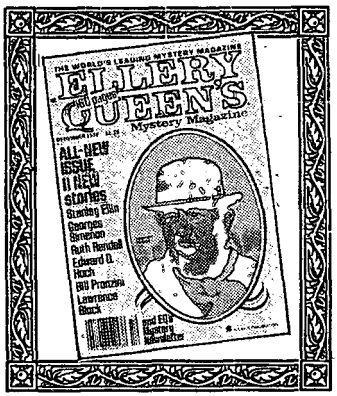

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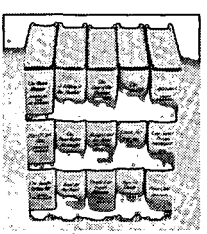

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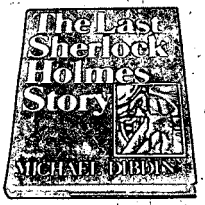

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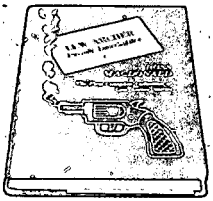

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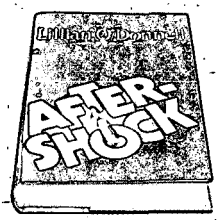

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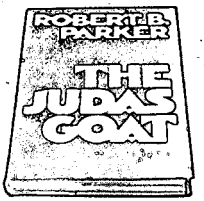

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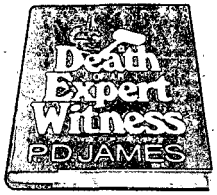

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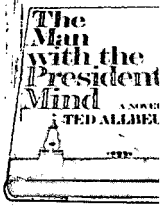

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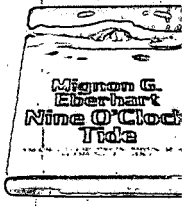

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