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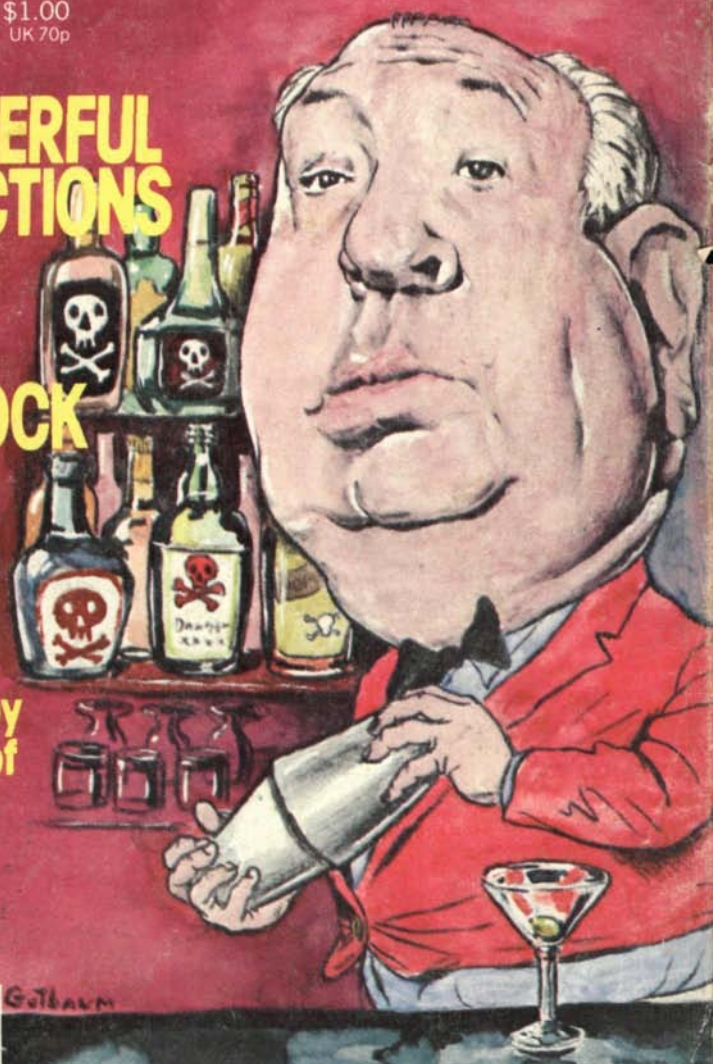

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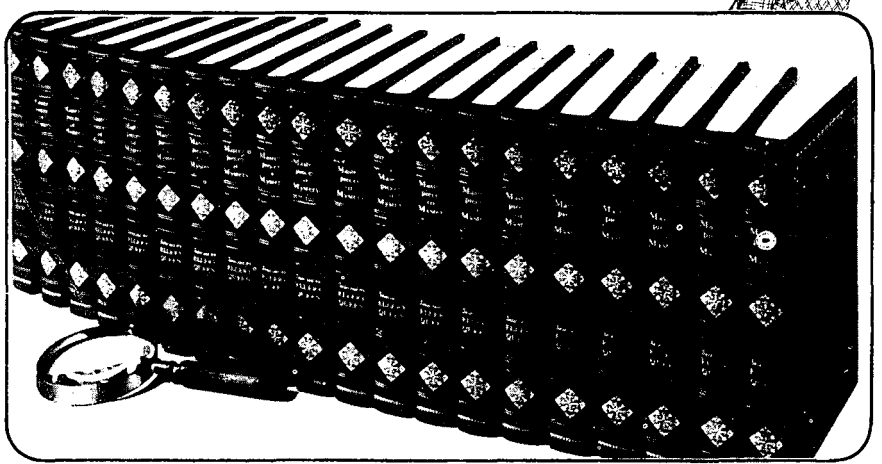

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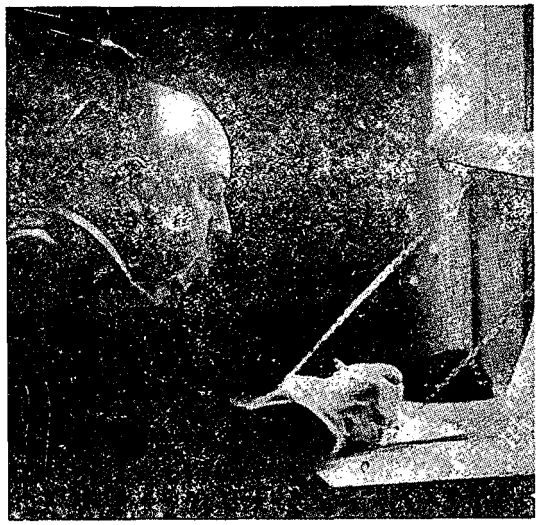

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NOVELETTE

SHORT STORIES

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April 1979

Dear Reader:

This month's issue is full of trials from beginning to end. In "The Trial of Judge Axminster," William Bankier gives us the chance to judge for ourselves what can go on in chambers, while in "Trial by Fury" the authors describe a mock trial that would make any schoolteacher shudder.

A trial often follows upon a murder, but first there's a time of "Waiting for the Coroner," as in Gary Brandner's story by that title. And though trials often lead to imprisonment, convicts do escape (see Jeffry Scott's "You Might Have Been My Son"). The criminals in Dennis O'Neil's "The Enemies of the Prodigal" might be said to be beyond the law. A deputy sheriff serves as judge and jury in Jack Ritchie's "Stakeout." Barry N. Malzberg's "The Senator" could be said to advocate doing away with the legal system altogether. Gil Brewer's "The Closed Room" deals with the trials of married life. And John Lutz immortalizes the trying circumstances of modern air travel in "Discount Fare."

But however guilty all 12 stories this month might make you feel about putting reading before spring cleaning, you'll find it no trial reading them.

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They had been born shy and life had done nothing to change them . . .

THE TRIAL OF JUDGE AXMINSTER

by WILLIAM BANKIER

Judge Horatio Axminster, known as Axeman back in the days when you could pronounce a fitting sentence, before the book had become so heavy it was no fun throwing it at people, this elderly overweight judge was looking forward to his scheduled obscenity case, the case of the State versus Odman and Xavier. Yes, it was a good day to be going to work.

He was counting on the Prosecution accompanying its evidence with

a bit of film; he could imagine the projector whirring away in the darkened courtroom, could see in his mind's eye the grainy images on the screen. He hoped the Xavier woman would be wearing a short skirt. Her attorney would have advised her to dress modestly but in Axminster's fantasy she owned nothing but sluttish clothes and her figure would make a nun's habit look obscene.

"Will you be home for supper?" the preoccupied jurist's wife asked as she helped him with his coat. She held one sleeve pinioned behind the shoulder; the old trick had been working for years, making him look foolish and contributing to his chronic back pain.

"Going to the club after the session," Axminster said, revolving slowly in the dusty vestibule like a gargoyle on a music box. "I'll probably spend the night there." He was afraid to tell his wife the whole truth about his activities outside home and courtroom for fear she would leave him and he would have to hire a housekeeper. In this, as in most of his opinions, the judge was wrong. Had he told the lady he was going to visit Sawndra the Zambian Masseuse and that he enjoyed falling asleep afterward, his wife would probably have liked him better.

"Have a good day then," she said, squeezing the door shut against his faltering heels and heading for the telephone to ring Basil and tell him it would be O.K. for this evening.

The sound you now hear is the grinding of gears as the Earth goes into reverse and spins off some 365 counterrevolutions, sun rising in the west and setting in the east, chickens going crazy as they suck up eggs, everybody getting a little younger, and all for the purpose of flashing back to one year ago when Rollie Odman and Julie Xavier had yet to stage the performance that would land them in Judge Axminster's courtroom.

They were just a couple of amateur thespians than, members of the Merchant's Dramatic Society, nervously rehearsing for the production of a romantic melodrama. Rollie was a shipping clerk for a firm that repaired drafting tables, and Julie sold notebooks and licorice whips in a variety store. Julie had a body like a slender boy. She had copper hair and a bland face interrupted by heavy lips. Rollie was a shambler with one low shoulder and a resemblance to Chester Morris and Steve McQueen; his eyes were as small as McQueen's and his hair was slicked and parted high like Morris's.

Like all members of the dramatic society, Julie and Rollie had very

little talent. Nor had they any experience; they had joined the club because they were seeking companionship. Membership filled a gap for them since rehearsals occupied two lonely evenings a week. But it made less sense to Moe Corker, who had to direct them.

"Face this way when you say your lines, honey," Corker would yell from the back row of the church hall as Julie did one of her scenes with Rollie. "The audience will be out here." Later he would call to Rollie: "Put your hands on her, my boy—this is the love scene. Somehow you two are going to have to touch each other." Once he ran onto the stage and took hold of Julie Xavier and kissed her to show Rollie how it ought to be done, but she was a mannequin in his arms and Corker was reminded of a friend of his back in New York who worked as a window dresser and did terrible things with store dummies. It struck Corker as unfair that this incorrigible man was still surviving in Manhattan while he himself, who wanted nothing more than to drink all the world's whiskey in one morning, had been reduced to earning a living in the boondocks as a postal sorter. And directing plays for this platoon of zombies. They called him "Corker the New Yorker."

So his demonstration of how to kiss Julie Xavier was a failure and the young pair continued to drift through rehearsals like servants at a garden party, stiff and silent and quite unobtrusive. "It's pathetic," Corker told his stage manager in the bar late one night. "We'll have to strip the wallpaper off the set. The pattern is too exciting—it'll kill their performances."

Not that the young players could help it. They had been born shy and life had done nothing to change them. Julie's father used to stand just inside the front hall of their apartment with the door fractionally ajar, waiting for her to come home from a date. When he heard footsteps, he would give them a minute, then fling open the door, charge into the vestibule, and give the young man a thunderous piece of his mind before he could escape down the stairs.

As for Rollie, his father was as demonstrative as Julie's was violent. Mr. Odman would follow his son's car to Lovers' Lane, riding on a motorbike. When the young couple were discreetly parked, he would coast up beside them, dismount and enter the car, thrust Rollie aside and take hold of the startled girl, shouting: "*This* is how it's done!"

But if the stage lovers lacked talent or sophistication or experience, they were not without a sense of responsibility which they shared

during rehearsal breaks over mugs of tepid coffee. Rollie would say: "We're going to have to get that kiss organized pretty soon."

"Yes," Julie would agree. Then she would add the magic incantation spoken by actors ever since the first extrovert raised a laugh by painting his face and doing a funny walk on the flat ground above the cave. "It'll be all right on the night," she would say.

And it *was* all right. Better than all right. When the play finally opened, the audience was bored throughout Act One and only came alive when a klieg light fell and smashed on the stage, winging an actress who was playing a dowager duchess role. She was a game stager and carried on, limping on her bruised foot, but the characterization could not survive the obscenities she ad-libbed when that chunk of metal came at her.

Between the acts, the audience went next door to a saloon and the idea of not coming back was suggested and almost adopted. But then they reconsidered; they had spent fifty cents for their seats, after all, and who could say—perhaps another spontaneous disaster would take place, like the set catching fire or the director running on stage to punch a bad actor in the stomach. So they all trooped back for the Act Two curtain and a good thing too. Because if the play had closed halfway through opening night, then Judge Horatio Axminster, one year later, would not have received his richly deserved comeuppance.

Julie was sitting on the rented settee behind the closed curtains, listening to the grumble of the audience coming back into the hall. Rollie was lurking in the wings, waiting to make his entrance. They were both terrified because the dreaded kiss would have to be performed within seconds of his appearance on stage and they had never done it at rehearsal, despite the appeals of Corker the New Yorker. They had lied to their director, told him they were getting in some practice on their own and not to worry, it would be all right on the night. But how could it be all right when the phenomenon of their lips touching was as untested as the first contact, years ago, of lunar module on lunar surface?

From a space between two flats, Rollie looked at Julie in her costume. She was supposed to be an English maiden of the last century and her floor-length dress was all froth and lace and her pink gloves reached almost to her shoulders. His own outfit was a rented suit that might have been converted from a cast-iron stove, pipes and all, with

brass rivets down the front. Julie saw him, gave him a glassy smile, and made fingers at him just above her lap. He bowed soberly in return and his bowler hat fell off. The curtains opened.

There are differing accounts as to what happened next. One thing is certain; the myth that the girl was nude on the couch and that the boy came on stage in only his shoes and sox is a gross exaggeration. What happened was that Rollie entered on cue and Julie rose to meet him. They faced each other and spoke the lines of text that would precede their embrace.

"Is your father at home?"

"No. He was called away to the country."

"And your mother?"

"She is not well. She has taken to her bed."

"Then you mean—"

"Yes. We are alone."

He stepped forward and took her in his arms and she turned her face up to his and their lips, through blind chance, came together in perfect accord. They kissed. It was a long slow kiss. It began almost as an afterthought. Then it took hold and their lips parted with a faint gasp—did it come from her? from him?—which was clearly audible across the rows of people sitting spellbound in utter silence.

The sound effects that followed were never explained; no such effects had been laid on by Corker. Yet as the kiss continued it was as if the hall was compressed to the size of an intimate room which was filled with the crash of waves pounding on a beach, while a giant stallion battered the boards of its corral and a mighty rocket spewed flame and rose majestically to climax in a brilliant explosion, showering a stream of cascading sparks across the sky.

"Oh, God, Rollie, God! Oh, God, yes, yes, oh don't, oh yes, yes!" Together they fell across the settee.

Moe Corker, watching from the wings, had the presence of mind to crank the curtains shut as quickly as they would go. The audience, sensing they had just witnessed something akin to the Creation, made sounds indicating that unless the curtains were immediately reopened they would have them down and reduce them to their original threads.

Corker confronted his young hero and heroine. "What's with you two?"

"I'm sorry," Rollie said. He was looking sheepish. "It was my fault."

"No, it was me. I don't know what happened." Julie smoothed her dress and patted her hair. Some of the flush was leaving her cheeks and she was looking cool and distant as before.

"O.K., let's start again." The director went back to the wings. "Let's just do the play the way she was wrote."

As the curtains opened, hesitantly this time it seemed, the audience composed themselves and watched with breathing suspended as the girl sat erect on the settee, her skirt demurely tucked around her ankles, one escaped ringlet of damp hair dangling beside her forehead. The boy entered, walking stiffly, fists clenched at his sides. She rose and faced him.

"Is your father—?" he began but she was in his arms and they were devouring each other and, "Oh, God, yes, yes, Rollie, please, yes—" and they sank not to the settee this time but to the bare stage, slowly, gracefully, faces turning this way and that to test the variety of the discovery they had made together.

Curtain. Bedlam.

In the audience that night was a certain Mr. Sophfrosh whose attendance was dictated solely because he owed a great deal of money to the invisible benefactor of the Merchant's Dramatic Society. Therefore he felt it wise that he show the flag at each of the Society's productions so that he could rave coherently about the show when he was called in to discuss the renegotiation of his loan.

Mr. Sophfrosh was himself connected with show business in that he ran a small drinking establishment featuring entertainment of a sort. His club was now reduced to topless waitresses, but at one time it had aspired to the theatrical. A curtain used to rise to reveal a small stage above the bar where a wire cage could be seen containing a girl clothed in feathers. She preened and plucked while a concealed phonograph played a warped recording of a dismal blues and the act ended with the bird ready for the oven, so to speak. But she was a sullen girl, given to answering the comments of the customers drinking below her, and the act soon lost all credibility.

Now she had become one of the serving wenches—and happier for it—but Sophfrosh had never lost touch with his dream of having some sort of theatrical magic taking place a couple of times a night on his tiny stage. He wanted something earthy but with a little class, something as original as sin itself. And lo, in the dingy hall occupied by this

very ordinary dramatic society, it was being offered to him in the dawning romance of two emotionally deprived amateurs.

Flashback nearly finished. Mr. Sophfrosh waited until the hall was cleared—the play never did get going again—and then approached Rollie in the deserted men's dressing room from which the other players had fled. He congratulated the young performer and said he wanted to have something to do with his acting career from that moment on.

"It's over and done with," Rollie said. "Mr. Corker says we made him a laughing stock. He aspires to never seeing us again."

"Then Mr. Corker doesn't know his aspirations from his elbow. How would you and the little lady like to star in a two-character dramatization every night of the week at my theater-bar?" And Mr. Sophfrosh went on to explain what he had in mind. When Rollie only frowned, the impresario quoted the fee he would pay, which was scale and a half in that town. Still the shy young man was not persuaded; Julie Xavier had become something of value in his life and he did not like the idea of performing with her in front of a crowd of paying customers. Having tasted the fruit, he was interested in getting into the orchard when nobody else was around. Sophfrosh could say nothing to change the boy's mind and had to go away disappointed.

He was not to be the only one. When Rollie dated his co-star the next evening, he found her eager to go out with him but stone-cold dead in the market when it came to making love.

"Don't," she said, lifting his hand from her knee as if he had placed there a cold fried egg.

"But darling, it's so nice."

"It isn't right."

"How can you say that after the delight we shared onstage?"

"That was different. That was in the play."

And there was no persuading her otherwise. Night after night, Rollie courted the stubborn girl, at a drive-in movie, in the back row of a flea-pit cinema, on a bench in the darkest corner of the park. Nothing doing. What she objected to was the very condition her lover was seeking—privacy. To her it meant sneaking out of sight, behaving furtively, doing something they were ashamed of and wanted to conceal from the world.

It took two weeks of this frustration before Rollie Odman arrived at

the obvious conclusion. He took from his wallet the telephone number Mr. Sophfrosh had printed on a ten-dollar bill and rang the impresario in his office upstairs over his club. He identified himself and then asked: "Is that proposition still open?"

"We never close," said Mr. Sophfrosh.

"Then I'll be around with Miss Xavier this evening," Rollie said. "In costume."

And so began the brief but spectacular career of Rollie O and Julie X, as they were billed in garish poster paint outside the club. Rollie was surprised at how easy it was to persuade his partner to go along. He showed up at her room carrying her frilly dress and his iron suit, both rescued from the dramatic society's wardrobe, and she warmed to the project immediately. This was all right, this was theater—a romantic dialogue conducted on a stage in a darkened house with a spotlight and background music for dramatic effect and a paying audience out front. She even knew her lines, the framework of the scene which would be, like the best of modern drama, improvisational. "Oh, yes, yes, wait, yes," etc.

The act was a success, but its run was short. Drawn by rumors of people having fun, the Law visited the club, closed it down, and provided Rollie and Julie with a free ride to jail and ultimately a visit to the courtroom of Judge Horatio Axminster.

While the trial flowed sluggishly to its foregone conclusion, the judge's wife was having her own little argument with Basil. Remember him?

"But what do you want the photographs *for?*" she said. She was feeling chilly in garter belt and black stockings. Feeling a bit of a fool as well.

"For myself." Basil was busy with tripod and camera and automatic shutter. "Pictures turn me on. Pictures of you and me will drive me crazy. Especially with you in that gear."

"But can't we just keep making love like before? Wasn't that good enough?"

"It was incredible. But incredible is only a starting point. You'll see."

Mrs. Axminster sipped her drink and crossed her legs. At least the photoflood lights warmed her bare skin, but she was experiencing a

tremor of apprehension. This affair with Basil which had begun so well when he picked her up at the supermarket now seemed to be drifting in a direction she could not comprehend.

She said in a weary voice: "I just wish we could be with each other like normal people."

The timer began to buzz and Basil's sock feet approached with hurried steps. "Come on," he said. "We've got only seconds before it snaps."

When Basil left after midnight, taking his equipment with him, she made a promise to herself never to see the kinky rascal again. But she didn't really mean it. He had brought excitement to her life and she knew that she would be ready to go anywhere with him and do anything he asked.

Next morning, Mr. Sophfrosh arrived at Judge Axminster's chambers without an appointment. Convincing the woman outside that his business was urgent and confidential, he walked right into the venerable jurist's presence and showed him the photographs. They were the porniest prints the old man had ever seen (and he had quite a selection in his desk drawer). They all featured his wife, sometimes with her face partially obscured but, taken as a group, very recognizable indeed.

"I could send you to jail forever," Axminster said. "Blackmailing a judge."

"Yes," Sophfrosh agreed. "But my bartender, Basil—we're looking at Basil's back in this one—has the negatives as well as prints in stamped sealed envelopes addressed to certain of our less-scrupulous journalists. So unless you want to bring yourself down—"

The old man growled like a comic-strip villain. He actually said: "Arrrgh!"

"Besides," Sophfrosh added, "why should judges be exempt from blackmail? Fair is fair."

The result of all this was that the celebrated trial of Rollie O and Julie X ended in their being convicted, as expected, of taking part in a lewd public performance. The surprise was their sentence; Judge Axminster fined them fifty dollars and sent them away without even a word of his famous lecture on decency.

Next day, the judge stepped down from the bench and tendered his resignation. He declared himself unfit to serve the community, and the community was quick to agree. His retirement had a beneficial effect

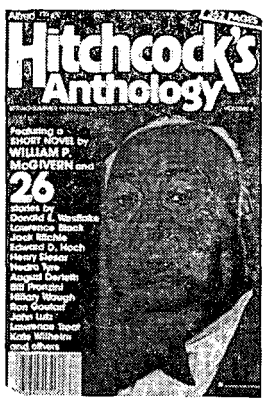
on city life. It was as if they advanced overnight from the Victorian era to the present; their seamy side continued to exist but they were able to live with it and even derive a little bit of not-too-dangerous pleasure from it.

Rollie and Julie still perform their inspired romantic encounter at Mr. Sophfrosh's club every night of the week except Mondays, when the place is dark. On that evening, they go to the film of Julie's choice and when Rollie puts a hand on her knee she lifts it as if it had died and fallen from the sky, and she whispers "Do-on't" in two syllables.

There is a supporting act on the program these days. They are billed as Basil and the Duchess and they get a lot of reaction from the segment of the audience who lean to older women. "The Simone Signoret crowd," Mr. Sophfrosh says, dating himself a little.

Tourists visiting the city like to attend the club for the variety and originality of its entertainment. At some time during their visit, most of them notice the magisterial old gentleman who sits alone at a rear table, never removing his coat and hat. Some even purchase the photographs he sells, but they are always disappointed. The show is better.

THIS MAY SCARE YOU STIFF



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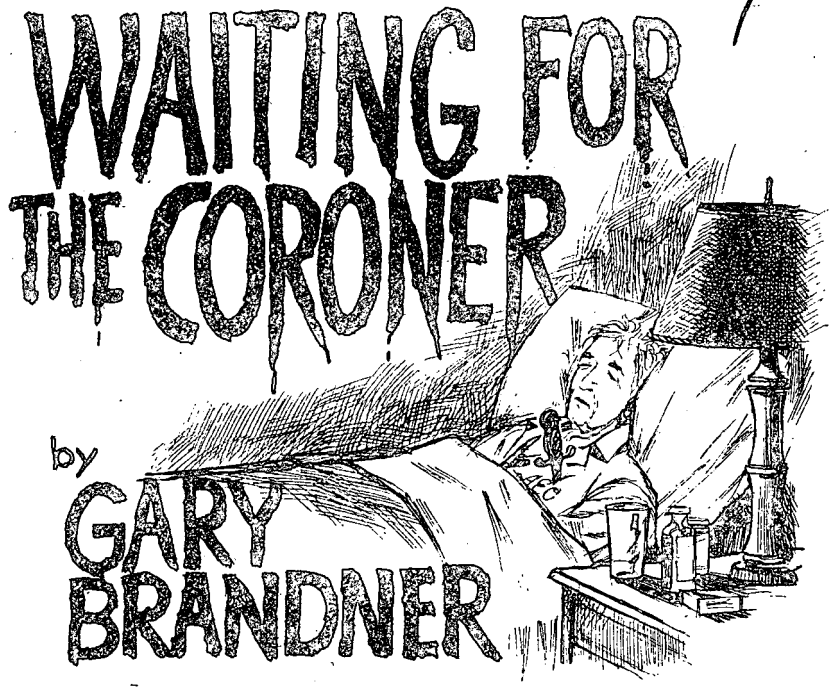
WAITING FOR THE CORONER

by GARY BRANDNER



I lay on my back in my bed with the covers pulled up to the pale-blue monogram on my eggshell silk pajamas. From the very center of the monogram the hilt of an oriental dagger pointed toward the ceiling. I was dead as a trout.

It was almost time for Nurse Bundy to waddle in with my morning medicine. I knew she wouldn't be late. It always gave her pleasure to jerk me out of a restful sleep so she could pour some horrid concoction

down my feverish throat. Well, this morning there would be a surprise for Nurse Bundy and for everyone else in the house.

Right on schedule she pushed through the door, a bulging tub of suet with fat arms and legs and a mean little face. I thought how fitting it would be if she had a coronary when she saw the knife in me and fell writhing to the floor. It was too much to hope for.

She came over to the bed and set the morning's concoction down on the night table. As she started to take up the glass that had held last night's potion she caught sight of the knife. The color drained out of her grapefruit cheeks. She drew in air through her tiny mouth and let out quite a commendable scream. She dropped the glass, spun around, and thundered out of the room like a rhino in full retreat.

I stayed where I was—I had little choice—and waited for Bundy to bring the others. Soon I heard voices in the hall outside my door.

Son-in-law Paul's nasal tenor: "Calm down, Miss Bundy, I can't make any sense out of what you're saying."

Nurse Bundy's blubbery soprano: "It's Mr. Ogilvie—on the bed. He's—he's—"

Daughter Wendy's vacuous contralto: "Do you mean something's happened to Daddy?"

Dear Wendy, flesh of my flesh, with a typical flash of insight.

"Well, we'd better go in and see." A note of hope from the sterling son-in-law.

Into my room they trooped—dark-browed Paul, whose good looks were tempered by his habitual pout, graceful Wendy in her new Dior negligee, and the blimp.

Wendy and Paul approached my bed while Nurse Bundy remained prudently in the background. The handsome couple gazed down at me.

"What is it, Paul?" My beloved daughter had used up her quota of insights for the day.

"Your father's been stabbed." My observant son-in-law. He knew a man with a knife in his chest when he saw one.

"Who could have done such a thing?"

No one volunteered an answer. The rhino started to cry into a wad of Kleenex.

"Miss Bundy, stop that sniveling."

Stout fellow, Paul. No time for sentimental nonsense just because the patriarch has been done to death.

"I'm sorry, sir, it's just—well, his face looks so awful."

Well, excuse *me,* Nurse Bundy. I should have used my dying moments to arrange my features into some more pleasing expression. A gentle smile, say, with a twinkle of benevolence in one fishy eye.

"Could we at least close his eyes, Paul?"

Wendy was not without esthetic sense.

"I don't think we should touch him until the police get here."

"The police?"

I don't know who else my daughter expected to summon. The plumber?

"I'll go downstairs and call them," Paul offered.

"I'll go with you," Wendy volunteered quickly.

"*I* don't have to stay up here, do I? With *him*?"

"No, Miss Bundy, you can come down with us and wait for the police."

They left me alone with evident relief. It didn't matter. I wasn't going anywhere.

In about half an hour footsteps approached in the hall. The door opened and the members of my household filed in with a rumpled man whose grey eyes flicked over everything in a professional manner.

"This is where we found him, Inspector."

Inspector. It had a nice ring. Better than Sergeant, or Officer. I approved of the baggy tweed suit he wore and, especially, the magnificent sandy moustache.

"Mm-hmm," he said. "Aah."

A thoughtful man. He leaned over me and peered at the knife in my chest.

"Do any of you recognize the weapon?"

Wendy spoke up, a bright student.

"It was one of a pair of oriental daggers. The other is still there on the wall plaque."

"Aah. Hmmm."

A reflective man. I figured him for a pipe smoker.

"Do you mind if I light my pipe?"

I knew it.

"No, go right ahead." Tolerant Wendy.

While the Inspector set fire to a bowl of strong tobacco, there was a

series of throat-clearing coughs at the door. "Nobody answered the bell downstairs so I came on up."

My friend and partner, bless his skinny frame, had never let closed doors keep him out.

"Who are you?" asked the Inspector.

"My name is Oscar Hanratty."

"He's my father's partner," Wendy supplied.

"Who are *you*?"

"I'm Inspector Grubb."

"Inspector? Is something wrong?" Oscar followed their gaze over to me on the bed. "Good Lord! Is he—is he—?"

"He's dead."

No cloying euphemisms for Inspector Grubb.

"But who? Why—?"

"All in good time. First I think we can narrow down the *when*. We know Mr. Ogilvie died some time after he took his evening medicine and before seven this morning when the nurse here came in to wake him. It *was* last night's medicine in the empty glass there, was it not?"

"Yes, sir. I gave it to him at eight o'clock. I was about to take the glass away this morning when I saw that—that thing sticking in his chest."

The look on her face, I recalled, had almost made it worthwhile.

Paul leaned over me, studying the wound. "What does the *E* stand for?"

"What are you talking about?" my daughter asked.

"The *E* in the monogram *AEO*. I didn't know the old man had a middle name."

"It was Ervin. Arnold Ervin Ogilvie. Daddy didn't like it so he never used it."

I wished they would get on with it. I had no way of knowing how long I would be allowed to stay, and it would be nice to see my murder solved before I had to leave.

"Damned shame," Oscar said. "Well, if no one minds I'll be pushing along. I only stopped by to get Arnold's signature on some papers. Obviously he won't be signing anything now, poor devil. Couldn't somebody close his eyes?"

Good old Oscar. I was touched by his grief.

"Just one minute, Mr. Hanratty."

I was liking the Inspector better and better.

"Yes?"

"You said you had some papers to be signed."

"That's right. Nothing important, really. Nothing I can't take care of at the office. I just thought that since I was coming this way I'd bring them along."

Oscar never did know when to shut up.

"Where are they?"

"Where are what?"

"The papers. I see you're carrying no briefcase or folder of any kind. The papers are in your pocket perhaps?"

"Uh—er—oh, yes, that's right. In my pocket."

"May I see them, please?"

Oscar went through a bad pantomime of patting his pockets. "Well, now, that was stupid of me. I—uh—*thought* I had them right here. I must have left them in the car. Or back at the office."

Oscar never could lie for sour owl droppings, not even when he was telling me how our investments were in trouble while he siphoned off the profits. In another couple of days I would have had the proof to nail him.

"There aren't any papers, are there, Mr. Hanratty?" The Inspector fixed him with the unblinking eye of the law.

"I—I don't know what you mean."

"I think you do, sir. Your real reason for coming here this morning was to establish the idea that you expected to find Mr. Ogilvie alive. In fact, you knew full well he was dead. You knew because sometime last night you slipped into the house the way you did just now, came up here to his room, took the dagger from the wall, and plunged it into his chest."

I knew that with a moustache like his, Inspector Grubb was going to be all right.

"I want a lawyer." They were Oscar's first intelligent words since he walked in.

Wendy touched the Inspector's tweedy sleeve in admiration. Even Paul left off his inventory of my belongings to give him a grudging nod.

"Only doing my job, Ma'am."

For a moment I feared he was going to start being modest a bit too soon.

Nurse Bundy gathered her flab and started toward the bed. "I might as well get things cleaned up in here. I'll start with these bottles and the dirty glass."

"Not so fast, Nurse."

I would have applauded had it not been for advanced rigor mortis.

"Sir?"

"I'd like all of you to take a close look at the dagger protruding from the late Mr. Ogilvie."

They obeyed, and for one last time I was surrounded by beloved friends and family.

"Do any of you see anything odd?"

They all looked at the knife, then at each other, then at the Inspector. Four pairs of eyes empty of all intelligence.

The Inspector spoke to my son-in-law. "It was you, sir, who called my attention to it."

"To what?" Paul's eyes shifted guiltily.

"The monogram on Mr. Ogilvie's pajamas. A stab wound in that location should have bled profusely, thoroughly obscuring a pale-blue monogram on white silk."

The color, as I noted, was eggshell, but it was no time for nit-picking.

"What does it mean, Inspector?"

Leave it to Wendy to ask the incisive question.

"It means that when Oscar Hanratty plunged the dagger into your father's chest, he was already dead."

For a moment the room was so still you could have heard my heart beat, had I not been dead.

Nurse Bundy was the first to speak. "I really should clear away these things."

"I can understand your impatience," said the Inspector in clipped tones. "Because in that glass, unless I miss my guess, we will find traces of a deadly fast-acting poison."

Foul-tasting stuff too, I could have told him.

Wendy and Paul turned to stare at the tub of lard in white.

"Nurse Bundy—you?"

"But why?"

Bundy's pinched little mouth twisted into a sneer. "He deserved it, the old miser. For more than a year I've taken care of him, and not

even a mention do I get in his will. Yes, I found the will. I also found the tin box he kept hidden away filled with cash."

Paul's ears seemed to swivel forward.

"Box of cash? Wendy, do you know anything about a box of cash?"

"No. What box of cash, Nurse Bundy?"

I posthumously urged the old lard bucket to keep her mouth shut for once.

"Find it yourself," she told them.

Nobody, as they say, can be all bad.

The Inspector took charge then. "I think we can all go downstairs now and I'll take your statements while we wait for the coroner."

Luckily, it was time for me to leave. Waiting for the coroner did not sound like much fun. My last regret was that I could not recover the power of speech long enough to thank them all for the most entertaining morning of my life.

Maybe I ought to rephrase that.

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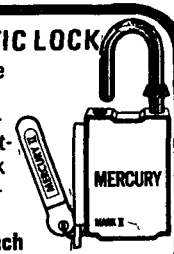

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Mordecai didn't depend only on disguise . . .

THE CASE OF THE CURIOUS CLOTHING

by STEPHEN WASYLYK

Captain Lightfoot brushed off the lapels of his Pierre Cardin jacket, straightened his Countess Mara tie, adjusted his Bill Blass spectacles, and growled, "What seems to be the trouble, Reese? You've had three days to solve the Oliver Martini murder but you're still floundering around like a middle-aged single at a disco. It seems to me that the case presents little difficulty. There were only four people in the room at the time, and one of them has to be guilty."

Reese stared at the tips of his Gucci loafers. "It isn't that simple, Chief. Every one of those people hated Martini and they're all happy he's dead, so not one will cooperate—they're all shielding each other."

"Then arrest them for obstructing justice."

"I hinted at that. They just laughed at me."

"I see." Lightfoot thought for a moment. "Have you considered having Dr. Freudlich compose a psychological profile of each of them?"

"It's one of the first things I thought of." Reese pulled a folded sheet from his pocket and handed it to Lightfoot. "This is what the good doctor gave me before he disappeared into the night wearing his London Fog raincoat and his Irish tweed hat."

Lightfoot held up the paper. Spelled out clearly above a scrawled signature were the words: ALLE SIND VERUCKT. ZAHLEN $1000, BITTE.

Lightfoot sighed. "Another one of those Xerox copies Freudlich submits every time we ask him to analyze someone. Doesn't he ever take the time to check them out?"

"Never, Chief. He says the whole world is crazy, so why bother? Besides, he's too busy trying to get his name into the *Guinness Book of World Records.*"

"What is he working on?"

"The longest distance for a paper airplane tossed from the fifth floor into a north wind."

"That Freudlich," said Lightfoot. "Sometimes I wish he weren't the Mayor's brother-in-law. Those fees of his always wreck my budget so badly that I can hardly scare up the money to attend the Police Chiefs' Annual Convention."

He leaned forward. "Let's just review what you have. Martini had given a dinner party for four of his legal clients—Grantham Codesco, the entrepreneur, otherwise known as the King of the Instant Sticky-bun; Morningstar Gilhooley, author of the latest self-help best seller, *How To Admit You're a Ding-Dong and Love It;* Marcel Quickknife, the eminent plastic surgeon; and Chingo Brasshead, this week's top rock-music superstar.

"They were all at the dinner table when Martini suddenly plunged face down into his roast duck in orange sauce. They laughed uproariously because they thought it was one of his droll antics, but when they finished their dessert and he still hadn't moved they suspected something was wrong. Dr. Quickknife examined him and found he was dead."

Reese nodded. "When I arrived, I immediately detected the odor of bitter almonds on his lips and in his white-wine glass. Well, I realized *that* bouquet was a trifle peculiar even for an unpretentious little vintage, and one of his friends must have slipped him a touch of something. When I suggested rat poison, they laughed. Very appropriate, they said."

Lightfoot shook his head. "We can't have those people scoffing at the law. Are you sure you can't pin it on any of them?"

"I don't see how. We fingerprinted everything in the room, analyzed the food, and even ran the dust from the Oleg Cassini rug through the spectroscope. The guilty party left no clues."

"I see. Then it's obvious we must call for assistance."

Reese's tone was injured. "I don't see how you can say that, Chief."

"No reflection on your ability, Reese. It's simply that the man I'm thinking of has a positively uncanny way of solving these problems. Sherlock Holmes was the first consulting detective—called in when ordinary men were baffled. Well, such genius comes along only once in a century.

"We are lucky to have the only one in existence today right here in our city. I'm sure he'll be happy to help."

Reese's eyes were puzzled. "I can't imagine who you mean."

Lightfoot smiled. "I refer to Mordecai Mullen, the world's foremost detective."

"Good heavens! I thought he was dead!"

"The price of becoming a legend in one's own lifetime. He's generally available these days only to the highest level of law-enforcement officials of the government. You may be sure when you read of the apprehension of an eminent national political figure for a particular piece of skullduggery that Mordecai Mullen is responsible. As a matter of fact, his role has been kept secret, but a reliable source informed me that Mordecai played a major part in a recent scandal involving certain well-known people I need not name."

Reese stared. "You can't mean Water—"

Lightfoot held up a cautionary forefinger. "Don't say it! It simply isn't spoken of! Of course, in view of the daily revelations in the newspapers, it's obvious that Mordecai has been very busy in Washington lately. I only hope he has the time for us. Since he is a close friend of mine, I'll call and ask him to help."

He picked up the telephone receiver and dialed what seemed to be an endless string of numbers, smiling at Reese. "Toll-free."

He listened and then said, "This is Krongold Lightfoot, Mordecai. How are you?" His voice rose frantically. "No, this isn't a crank call, Mordecai! Don't hang up! I'm Krongold Lightfoot! We met several years ago during the Case of the Scotch-Plaid Pantyhose. I'm sure you remember."

Reese heard a loud voice bubbling from the earpiece.

Lightfoot's face acquired a pained expression. "You're mistaken, Mordecai. I did *not* deliberately run you down with my Edsel. I told you it was an accident and I'm sorry your back still hurts. But I have a problem here I'm sure will intrigue you. A man named Oliver Martini—"

He broke off and listened to the loud voice, then he nodded. "Of course, Mr. Mullen. Yes, Mr. Mullen. To be sure, Mr. Mullen. Certainly there will be a fee, Mr. Mullen, even if I have to pay you personally. What's that? I certainly *do* have that much money. I can always mortgage my home if necessary. The Policemen's Retirement Fund gives us a very low interest rate. You know me, Mr. Mullen, I'll do anything to bring a criminal to justice . . . Stupid? Of course I'm not stupid. Let me point out to you that if I were stupid I wouldn't have had enough sense to call on the world's greatest living detective. Well, of course you are, Mordecai. Everyone knows that. What's that? I'm not just saying it, Mordecai. There's no question that you stand alone, far above anyone else, the perfect embodiment of all those elusive qualities necessary in a good detective, enhanced by your encyclopedic knowledge and inherent wisdom. A limousine? I'll be happy to send a limousine to pick you up, and Lieutenant Reese will be honored to drive. Where should he meet you?"

Lightfoot listened, jotting on a notepad. "Right, Mordecai. We'll do exactly as you say."

He hung up and handed the paper to Reese. "Borrow the Mayor's Cadillac, if he hasn't rented it for the day to that nephew of his, the funeral director. In exactly one hour be at the lake in the park by the statue of Venus, the one the kids write witty sayings all over with their spray cans. He'll meet you there."

"Why there?"

"Why there? Why there?" asked Lightfoot impatiently. "Because no

one knows where Mordecai lives, and because genius is always eccentric, that's why. Now get going. He wants me to gather the suspects together at the murder scene. Pick him up and give him a rundown on those four people on the way to Martini's apartment."

Reese had been parked at the statue for no more than five minutes when a man sporting a sagging black moustache and wearing gleaming black boots, a flowing black cape, and a wide-brimmed black hat with a flat crown, leaped out of the underbrush. For a moment, Reese expected him to draw a flashing sword and carve the letter "Z" in the air.

"Are you Mordecai Mullen?" he asked.

"Quiet, you fool," hissed the man. "You'll ruin my disguise. How do you like it?"

"Very debonair," said Reese.

"Once worn by Douglas Fairbanks, Junior," said Mullen proudly. He tiptoed around the Cadillac, peering inside the wheel wells and under the car.

"May I ask what you're looking for?" asked Reese.

"Plastic explosive. A man can't be too careful."

"But this is the Mayor's car."

"All the more reason." Mordecai jerked the door open and climbed inside. "Hurry! They're gaining on me!"

Reese slid behind the wheel and set the car in motion. "If you'll excuse me, Mr. Mullen, why do you need that disguise?"

"Because they're all after me, you fool. Do you think the world's greatest detective can walk around with impunity after being responsible for the apprehension of hundreds of desperate criminals? I tell you, boy, mine is a dangerous business. They dog me night and day." He peered through the rear window. "I haven't been able to leave the house as myself for years."

"You mean you *always* wear a disguise?"

"Of course, you idiot. Would you want me to make it easy for them? How can they kill me if they don't know what I look like?"

"I didn't think of that," said Reese.

"Of course you didn't. And don't tell me that all they have to do is invade my home. I assure you that is virtually impossible but, even if it should be accomplished, they won't find me inside because I don't live there anyway. I'm far too clever for them. Pull over, boy!"

Reese eased to the curb. Mullen watched as a laboring subcompact with a woman at the wheel passed and turned into a supermarket parking lot.

"There! You see!" said Mullen excitedly. "There goes one of them now!"

"Excuse me, but I believe that was just a housewife out to do her shopping," said Reese.

"What do *you* know?" sneered Mullen. "Do you think they'd send out an evil-looking man wearing dark sunglasses? I tell you that was Transie Warlock, one of the world's most efficient hit men, who likes to dress as a woman while on assignment—which is why he's never been apprehended. Drive on!"

By the time they reached Martini's apartment house, Reese had evaded two more suspected killers—a young man on a motorcycle that Mullen suspected of being Harvard Ollie, who was working his way through law school as a part-time hit man, and an elderly overweight woman on an adult tricycle that Mullen recognized as Dementia Peppergrass, wanted in fourteen countries as an assassin specializing in terminating weary espionage operatives.

Reese slid the car to the curb, leaped out, and held the door for Mullen, who swept across the sidewalk grandly, one arm holding his cloak across his face so that only his eyes showed. The bored doorman, who had seen all types enter and leave, yanked open the door in time to create a collision between Mullen and a young blonde woman wearing a man's battered felt hat, a shapeless old tweed coat, Gloria Vanderbilt jeans, and a Gucci handbag.

Mullen swept his cloak before him and bowed grandly. "I beg your pardon."

The young woman thrust her head forward. "What did you say?" she asked suspiciously.

"I said 'I beg your pardon,' " said Mullen loudly.

The young woman frowned. "Did you just get off the boat or something? Get lost." She walked to a cab, her hips swaying.

"She could have been one of your hit people in disguise," said Reese sarcastically.

"You have a great deal to learn, my boy," said Mullen mildly. "It's obvious that she's merely a go-go dancer."

Reese pushed the button for the elevator. "How can you be so sure of that?"

"Her entire carriage suggests the gracefulness and body control of a trained *danseuse*. She's also hard of hearing, which is unusual in one so young. Put them together and what do you have?"

Reese touched the floor button. "A slightly deaf dancer."

Mullen sighed. "I would suggest you become an accountant. You'll never be successful as a detective. A ballerina who's hard of hearing could hardly be expected to perform properly to the delicate strains of a flute. However, there's one type of music that's generally played so loudly it has achieved a certain scientific notoriety for its gradual destruction of the human eardrum. I speak of rock music. And what kind of dancer performs to rock music to the extent that she would become slightly deaf?"

"She could be a disco devotee," said Reese defensively.

"Everyone knows disco music destroys the brain, not the eardrums," said Mullen pityingly. "As an interesting sidelight, it's rumored that certain intelligence operatives captured by the KGB have been placed in a locked room and subjected to several hours of repetitive hard rock at high volume in an effort to destroy their will to resist—a modern version of the Chinese water torture. However, the experiment has always proved a failure when conducted on Americans."

"Why?"

"They grew accustomed to it long ago. As a matter of fact, the experiment was self-defeating. When released, the prisoners were so deaf they could no longer hear the questions."

They stepped from the elevator. Reese opened the door of Martini's luxurious apartment and stepped past a patrolman who was leaning against the wall, fast asleep.

Lightfoot met them in the foyer. "You must be Mordecai."

"Who else would I be, you fool?" asked Mullen.

"Forgive me, Mordecai, but the last time we met you were disguised as an Eskimo hunter."

"Ah, yes," said Mullen. "One of the costumes from *The Call of the Wild.*" He leveled an accusing finger at Lightfoot. "My back still hurts, you know."

Lightfoot sighed. "I explained about that. It was a simple accident. I told you my insurance company would compensate you."

"I haven't received a cent."

"Well, it's only been fifteen years, Mordecai. These claims take time to settle. But I assure you the company is reliable. They've just paid for an accident I had in 1942. Of course, they were sorry they had to raise my rates—but that's the way it goes. Now the suspects are waiting for you in the study. I thought you might want to have them take the same positions at the dining-room table they occupied on the night of the murder."

"Not necessary," said Mullen. "I alone will examine the dining room, and then I'll interview the suspects."

Lightfoot held a door open. "Through here. Nothing's been removed or altered. We'll wait for you in the study."

When the door closed, Reese cleared his throat. "I hate to say it, but this guy is really bonkers, Captain. I mean, he's left the world behind and is out in orbit somewhere. Are you sure this nut is the world's greatest living detective?"

Lightfoot smiled. "You must realize that genius has its privileges. Did you expect the man to act like one of us? I tell you, he'll solve this case in ten minutes."

"Why the movie getups? Today he's Zorro, last time he was an Eskimo. What's that all about?"

"Mordecai has always had a penchant for disguises. When the major studios ran into financial difficulty with the advent of television, he bought out the wardrobe departments of several of them. Saved himself a bundle, and he has enough disguises to last for a hundred years."

"And no one knows what he really looks like?"

"Not as Mordecai Mullen, the world's foremost detective. Think of it—the next Roman galley slave you see may be Mordecai Mullen. On the other hand, he could just be a galley slave." Lightfoot frowned. "Then again he could be a galley slave pretending to be Mordecai Mullen—or even a disgruntled union member protesting working conditions."

He sighed. "Now do you see the wisdom of Mordecai's disguises? Let's go into the study."

The four suspects were seated on a huge sofa. Grantham Codesco was tall and slender with greying temples, the image of a successful businessman. Dr. Quickknife was a small man with a narrow face.

Morningstar Gilhooley was a short woman, a bit overweight, with dark hair and restless eyes. Chingo Brasshead, one leg draped over the arm of the sofa, was thin to the point of emaciation, his blond hair hanging to his shoulders. Codesco and Quickknife were dressed in expensive designer-suits accessorized with great care, collars and ties precise, while Brasshead wore a blue-velvet sweatshirt studded with rhinestones, and torn and faded jeans. Morningstar Gilhooley sported the latest in Paris creations—a mattress cover slit in the center, slid over her head, and gathered at the waist with a piece of frayed clothesline. A pair of Mongolian shepherd's boots encased her feet.

Mullen strode into the study, his cape flowing behind him. He stopped and stared at the four on the sofa.

"Who's this dude?" asked Brasshead lazily.

"The world's foremost living detective," said Lightfoot. "He's going to find out which of you murdered Oliver Martini."

"You gotta be jokin', man," said Brasshead. "This turkey looks like he should be floggin' peasants somewhere."

The other three suspects roared with laughter.

Mullen raised an imperious hand. They fell silent.

"I know which of you did it," he said. "Actually, it was no problem at all. The murderer's appearance gave him away immediately."

"I don't understand," said Lightfoot.

"Murder is the ultimate antisocial act," Mullen explained. "It indicates a deep-seated insecurity and resentment of society and of the role the murderer is forced to play—a resentment that is always reflected in his attitude and mode of dress, both of which are impossible to conceal from the trained observer. All that's necessary is to find the person who exhibits such a rebellious attitude in speech or garb, and you have the person who thought nothing of poisoning Oliver Martini."

He pointed toward the sofa. "Look at these four people. Who among them exhibits a defiance of the accepted norm, a flaunting of the standards of good taste, a refusal to go along with his peers?"

"I get it," said Lightfoot. He motioned to Reese. "Arrest Chingo Brasshead."

"Are you crazy, man?" screamed Chingo. "I didn't kill Martini!"

"Mr. Brasshead is correct," said Mullen. "He did *not* kill Martini."

"But you said—" Lightfoot protested.

"In view of his profession, Mr. Brasshead dresses and speaks prop-

erly," Mullen explained. "There is nothing unusual about him."

"You got it," said Brasshead. "Ain't nobody more together than me."

"If he appeared in a suit and tie, that would be suspicious. It would indicate a defiance of his peers and an inability to conform to his station in life." Mullen paced, then whirled suddenly, his cape flaring, and pointed an accusing finger toward the sofa.

"You!" he snapped. "*You* killed Oliver Martini!"

Dr. Quickknife shrank, his face white. "You can't prove that."

"Of course I can," said Mullen. "Your bones turn to jelly and the blood drains from your face because you *know* I can. You've confused the police but you can't fool me.

"The first clue is the way Martini died. Mr. Codesco is a purveyor of fine foods. It would be positively abhorrent for him to use poison. Every fiber of his being would protest against giving someone something that did not taste as delicious as he could make it."

"Absolutely correct, sir," said Codesco. "I applaud your perspicacity."

Reese nudged Lightfoot and muttered, "Obviously Mullen never tasted one of Codesco's Instant Sticky-buns."

"As for Miss Gilhooley," continued Mullen, "she, like all writers, is a person of immeasurable charm, fiery passion, extreme tenderness, deep humility, and infinite understanding. Such a person would be incapable of poisoning another. She has too much love for her fellow man."

Morningstar Gilhooley batted her eyelashes at Mullen. "That's so true," she murmured.

Reese nudged Lightfoot again. "Especially the part about love for her fellow man," he said under his breath.

Mullen bowed toward Morningstar Gilhooley. "You might shoot Mr. Martini in a fit of pique. Without rancor, of course—an action that would be quite understandable."

"Thank you," smiled Miss Gilhooley.

"And now for Mr. Brasshead," said Mullen. "We have here a musician—in spite of the opinion held in some quarters that rock music is not music at all, but the cry of a generation lost in the wilderness. He is a creative type on a par with the lovely Miss Gilhooley. The man simply has too much *joie de vivre* to cold-bloodedly slip poison into another man's wine."

"You got it together, man," said Brasshead admiringly. "I think I might just write a song about you."

"That leaves only you, Doctor," said Mullen. "Aside from being the only person with ready access to poison, you alone exhibit the characteristics and the personality of a murderer." He snapped his fingers. "Come, man. The game's up. Confess."

"Never!" said Dr. Quickknife. "You can't prove it!"

Mullen sighed. "You're forcing me to tell them how I know. You sit there confident that I, a trained observer, haven't noticed. I assure you that I have."

He leaned forward and whispered in Quickknife's ear.

The doctor's face became even paler. His lips quivered. "You wouldn't be so cruel."

"Confess, or I'll tell them all," said Mullen sternly.

The doctor sagged. "You fiend," he sobbed. He extended his trembling wrists toward Lightfoot. "I confess. Take me away. I'll tell you everything."

Reese awakened the sleeping patrolman, turned Quickknife over to him, and hurried back.

Lightfoot had ushered the other suspects out of the room, leaving the three detectives alone.

"That was absolutely magnificent, Mordecai," he said in awe. "You must tell me how you knew."

Mullen smiled mysteriously. "Someday, perhaps." His smile disappeared. "My bill must be paid first."

"Just mail it to me," said Lightfoot. "I'll make an application for a mortgage loan immediately."

"Good," Mullen snapped. "At least this time you didn't have the opportunity to run me down with your car. Now this young man must take me wherever I wish to go, as agreed."

"Of course. Where would you like him to drop you off?"

"Los Angeles."

Lightfoot stared. "But that's three thousand miles away! We only borrowed the Mayor's car for an hour."

"Too bad," said Mullen. "An agreement is an agreement. The Mayor can ride the subway."

Lightfoot grew pale. "Do you know what you're saying? The Mayor? The *subway?* No politician has set foot down there in ten years!"

Mullen held up a hand. "Don't beg. I'm not known as a merciful man." He stalked out. Reese followed.

In the car, Reese said, "If we're really driving to California, I'll have to stop at a service station and fill the tank."

"We're not going to California, my boy," said Mullen. "That was just a ploy to confuse anyone who might be eavesdropping. I want you to head into the center of the city and find the heaviest traffic."

"Why?"

"One cannot be followed for long in heavy traffic."

Reese drove a few blocks before he said, "I'd really like to know how you knew the doctor was guilty."

Mullen sighed. "It was simple. You saw him. What was he wearing?"

"A suit, a shirt, tie, socks, shoes. Nothing out of the ordinary."

"I regret my suggestion that you should take up accounting. You might, with sufficient training, make a good car-wash attendant. I will explain it to you. The man was wearing a tailor-made suit in the latest fashion that must have cost five hundred dollars or more. The shirt was at least a hundred, and twenty-five would be a bargain price for his tie. The shoes, of course, were specially made by an Italian bootmaker. The man was compelled to defy convention, to display his individuality, to protest being poured into a mold—yet he didn't have enough courage to stand up to the sneers of his peers by appearing in anything except garments prescribed by the dictates of fashion for a man in his position."

Reese tugged at his Givenchy shirt collar and straightened his matching tie. "I can't understand that. A man should wear what he pleases, not what's fashionable or popular."

"True," said Mullen, "but he didn't have your strength of will and independence. So he defied convention by wearing Oleander socks."

Reese frowned at him in the mirror. "Oleander socks?"

"They were quite popular a generation ago but have long since fallen out of fashion favor. Since they're out of style, they're sold only in discount stores for sixty-five cents a pair. When a man with a five-hundred-dollar suit wears sixty-five-cent socks, obviously he's suffering from a deep psychological trauma."

"But how could you tell? If I remember correctly, his socks were without any distinguishing marks. They were simply socks."

"It was clear to the observant eye. Oleander socks are crafted on individual hand looms in the native cottages of the Outer Oleander Islands, colored only with native dyes steeped from the local wildflowers. In addition to the subtle tonal variations, the dyes contain a very high alcoholic content, so the natives imbibe freely as they merrily weave the superb fabric. That combined with the creative individuality of the weavers explains why Oleander socks are so distinctive."

"I didn't notice anything distinctive at all," said Reese stubbornly.

Mullen sighed. "I would expect that. But the unique, centuries-old method of manufacture assures the authenticity of that world-famous slogan for socks crafted in the Oleander Islands—*no two are alike!*"

Reese stopped for a red traffic light. "You mean his socks didn't match?"

"Exactly—which is why Oleander socks fell from favor. Housewives and laundry workers throughout the nation went mad trying to pair them up. It brought about a mass rebellion that sounded the death knell of fashion individuality."

Mullen suddenly thrust open the door, stepped out, tripped on his cloak, fell flat on his face, dusted himself off with dignity, and, with his false moustache hanging crookedly, the world's greatest living detective majestically disappeared into the mass of humanity pushing and jostling toward unknown destinations.

The May issue of *Alfred Hitchcock's Mystery Magazine* will be on sale April 19.

A pistol would be a problem at airport security . . .

THE SENATOR

by Barry N. Malzberg

Brooding doesn't help. Letters to the editor won't do the trick. The ballot box certainly isn't the answer, the Senator continues, since they're all the same anyway. No, sir, the Senator says in his thin wavering voice. No, *sir*. The only action available to a citizen now if he wants to change the system is outright murder. Not that I want to advocate overthrow of the government, he chuckles—I used to work for it, you know. Not that I find violent means anything other than

reprehensible. Repre*hen*sible, the Senator says, chewing and spitting tobacco. Still, what you going to do, son? Sit back and just take this the rest of your life? Let them take away your American *rights?*

Got to make an example of at least one of them, he concludes. Got to take real action.

I have to agree. The Senator drops in on me now and then and we have a private conversation. He is retired, of course. He briefly represented an unimportant midwestern state (he is vague on this) some years ago. Then he quit in the chamber, announcing he was fed up with big government. All told, he might have served four months. "It taught me this, though, son," the Senator says cheerfully (he is transparent, I can see right through him), "every single thing you read about them in those papers is *nothing* to the way they are. They are worse. You couldn't buy the experience."

The Senator makes do on a small pension. He lives downtown in a furnished room (he won't tell me the address) and drops in occasionally, always making sure the coast is clear. He is afraid of publicity and so am I. The Senator, childless, lost his wife many years ago, he says, and drifted into the undersea of urban life. Rudderless, he hung out in bars, grills, brokerages, and the like. We met in a bar, as a matter of fact, and our friendship was, as they say, a natural. For him there is a sympathetic ear whenever he wants one. For me it is the honor of knowing a United States Senator, however obscure.

And the Senator has taught me a lot about government. He has confirmed my feelings, so to speak.

"Can't do nothing *no*how," he says. "'Less you take a gun and give them a message." Sadly I concur. This last dialogue seems to have cinched matters. My own theories have reached sad fruition, thanks to the counsel of the Senator. I do not really *want* to be an assassin but then if the voice of the people will ever be heard again in the land it might as well be mine. I nod grimly and stand to prepare for the journey south.

"Sure wish I could come with you," the Senator says when I have finished packing, tucked the pistol away, and made shuttle reservations. "It would be real nice to see the Capitol again. Of course," he says, his eyes saddening, "I'm an old man and travel isn't what it used to be for me. I don't get around too much. Matter of fact, you're the only person I see at all nowadays. Still, I'd give it a try if—"

"Don't think of it," I say. "I wouldn't consider it. Your health, your heart, your life are too important. You just stay here and wait for me."

"Besides, I don't talk to anyone else, son. I'll be thinking of you, be with you every minute in spirit, you know."

"Of course," I say. "I'll send them a message, all right."

"I sure would *like* to be down there," the Senator says wistfully. He trembles in recollection and waves before my eyes, seems to vanish, then reappears. Truly translucent, my senator. "Ah, cherry-blossom time," he says.

"I'll do it for you," I say earnestly. "For *you*."

The Senator winks. "You're tickling me," he says. "Nice young fellow like you, you don't want a senator, you want a nice little girl, nice little wife—"

"No, I don't," I say. I have always had trouble getting along with people. The embarrassing truth to tell, until the Senator came into my life some months ago, I had no friends at all. "Who could compare a girl to a senator?"

"You're too kind," he says. I say goodbye warmly, gripping his old hands, then to avoid sentimental overflow I move quickly to the door, down the stairs, into the street, and toward the bus station.

The pistol will be a problem at airport security. I toss it into a sewer, happy to have remembered this in time. Interception would be ghastly and I have problems getting along with people. Onward. Check-in, skycaps, boarding pass, etc. In due course and routinely I find myself in the capital. I procure another point forty-five in one of the shops at the outskirts. The availability of cheap weaponry in the republic is wonderful; everything that the Senator says about the situation is right, but we sure can get our hands on guns. Yes, sir. I take a taxi to the visitors' gallery, wait in line, and eventually am admitted to an excellent front-row seat. Visibility is high, position is just perfect.

I fondle the pistol inside my belt.

It is almost as if I can hear the Senator murmuring as I say, "Which one should I take? That young woman from New England?"

"Oh, no," the Senator says. I know I must be imagining his voice here but it is still fine to hear it. "The cities are the worst. Take the fat man from New York."

"How about that tall fool in the corner?"

"Midwesterner. You'd better take care of the city slicker."

"Right," I say. "Right, right." I respect his judgment even though I'm merely imagining his voice now. I wouldn't override even his imagined voice for an instant. It is he, after all, who has given color and hope to my life. Accordingly, I remove the pistol. I focus.

And do the necessary.

It is an excellent shot and has instant results. There is much commotion on the floor.

I arise with superb calm, holding the pistol loosely. There is stateliness in my stride as I move toward one of the doors. Guards are there, of course, to clap enormous hands upon me and bring me to the floor. I submit to their indignities. "You've done very well, son," I think I hear the Senator say. "That was well placed."

"Thanks," I say to him modestly as I am yanked upright. The guards pin me against a wall and produce handcuffs. And then I *do* see the Senator.

He must have taken a later flight. He stands behind the guards, beaming, his old features suffused with pleasure.

"Why?" one of the guards asks me as they drag me to the door. "Why did you do it?"

"You'll have to ask him," I say, pointing at the Senator. "He can answer far better than I."

"He? Who?"

"The Senator."

"Senator?" the guard says. The others are staring at me. "What senator?"

I look toward the Senator himself, but his eyes have suddenly gone dull and hard. "Sorry, son," he says, "but I refuse to take any questions. I have nothing to do with any of this."

Then he vanishes.

Politicians!

You can't trust a one.

He was never even there at all.

The break was carefully planned . . .

YOU MIGHT HAVE BEEN MY SON

by JEFFRY SCOTT

"Distance lends enchantment to the view," Mardyke quoted. Even under intense nervous strain his tone was wry and whimsical.

A mile or more off and a hundred feet below them, Kineside Prison defaced the moor, a drab and sprawling slum of grimy stone, purplish brick, and somber slate that seemed to have wandered away from and lost its decaying city.

Carey, the killer, didn't bother to reply. His phlegmy coughs had

subsided, but he remained doubled over, sweat dripping off his hair, panting with all the anguished speed and regularity of a steam engine tackling a long upgrade.

Silver, the little Cockney, raised himself on his elbows, as much at ease on the sheep-cropped turf as he would have been on a sultan's couch. "You don't run bad for a con man," he remarked pleasantly.

"An agile mind in a healthy body," Mardyke agreed. "And the word is entrepreneur, if you don't mind, lad." One did not like fellow prison inmates—they were by definition losers—but Tony Mardyke had a certain rapport with Silver.

"You'd do better to save your bloody breath, the pair of you." Carey had evidently regained his own. "Chattering away like apple women with that siren sure to start up any minute."

Silver's boyish face fell and he scrambled up. Mardyke remained posed against the boulder. "Three minutes," he corrected incisively. "Giving us no more than a quarter of an hour to run the four miles to the main road and stand any chance of getting clear."

Carey cursed vilely, spittle flying along with the ugly words. Silver gestured to him to shut up. "What're you trying to tell us, Mr. Mardyke—sir?" The respect was only half jesting.

Mardyke's smile widened and he nodded approvingly. "Well done, Eric. *Your* mother didn't raise a fool. The thing is, we vanished over the skyline about ninety seconds ago. What do you imagine is happening at this moment?"

The youth rubbed his nose. "Cap'n Bligh will be back at the nick by now, howling blue murder. You tipped him off his horse a treat, but he was only winded. I looked back once, and he was running too—the other direction from us."

Carey had lumbered a few paces down the track, but now he returned, his eyes rolling dangerously. "The rest of the screws was herding the lads together, makin' sure they didn't cut and run as well. So now what?"

Silver's punk-rock crop seemed to rise like a bird's crest in his excitement. "Blimey! Double back, you mean? Go where they don't expect us?"

"Something like that," Mardyke agreed. The boy was *very* sharp. Too sharp, perhaps.

Carey rumbled dubiously. "All very well, but then what? Say we

hole up in the bushes near the nick. They'll search both sides of the cordon, never you fear, and keep it up for days—while we starve and die of thirst. Don't think it hasn't been tried, Mastermind."

"Then it hasn't been done right." Mardyke was brisk. "Now then—I used to be what's known as an officer and a gentleman. Let's see how much I can remember of fieldcraft. Flat on our bellies when we recross the skyline. Well apart and slide on your bellies, pushing with your feet for as long as the downslope allows it."

Suddenly he wasn't there among the boulders. Carey shook his head. "Damn that for a tale! I'm off!"

Silver touched his arm. "Listen, when they—if they catch you—say we went on ahead, must've got a lift. Fair enough?"

He didn't wait for an answer, but flung himself down on the grass and started writhing in Mardyke's wake.

Five days later, Anthony St. John Mardyke and Eric Gordon Silver were in London, and still at liberty.

Sergeant Gridley gasped in surprise and almost dropped the mug. The superintendent's office had been deserted for weeks, it was a quiet night at Morley Row police station, and he had been intent on slurping his hot chocolate and then stealing half-an-hour's on-duty sleep.

"Sorry, sir—I didn't know you were here."

The Super, red-eyed and wary, relaxed a trifle after whirling around. "Just getting something out of my desk, Ted. Slacking off, were you?"

Gridley blushed and managed a feeble chuckle. "Got me bang to rights, sir. I'm not making free of your room, mind."

"No, just making free of it," the Super observed drily. "Never mind—I did the same thing years ago. Go on, sit down and drink your cocoa. I'll be away in a moment."

His eyes narrowed. Gridley was one of his protégés, and the detective-sergeant clearly wanted to say something. The Super sighed, checked his watch, and rested a hip on the corner of the desk. "Spit it out, Ted. Something's bugging you. You'd never make a villain—you're too transparent—so don't give me the old 'moody'. Tell uncle, eh?"

Sergeant Gridley stared at his cocoa mug with all the interest due an *objet d'art*. "I wish you were back here, sir, that's all. Things—" He cleared his throat. "I've never been disloyal, Skipper, you know that. But things aren't right."

"You'd better shut that door." The Super studied his face. "Not right? Personally or professionally?"

Gridley grinned lopsidedly. "It comes to the same thing with me, sir. I'm a workaholic. Oh, sure, I grab a spot of shuteye when I can, but it's owed me—I'm here all hours." He took a sip of cocoa. "We never did hear why you left, Skipper."

Then he hurried on, for his superior's expression was grimly unhelpful. "Anyway, you're missed, sir. Take this Silver business—you remember Eric Silver, vicious little sod if ever there was one. Well, he's been adrift from Kineside and on the run for the best part of a fortnight. And this patch is Silver's manor. He won't stay away."

"So?"

Sergeant Gridley shrugged miserably. "Well, we've got his place under surveillance—Smith and Potter by day, Henderson and Raikes by night. Now, I was on a day off last week, right? And I walked into the Dun Cow a mile from Eric Silver's house—and there were Smith and Potter, large as life, punishing the lager. It wouldn't have happened in your time, sir. The place is getting terrible. Smith and Potter, they're good blokes. If *they've* started slipping, it's a bad sign."

Dapper in his trenchcoat and mirror-polished brogues, the Super pondered. Mistaking his silence, Gridley said, "I'd only mention this to you, sir. Between ourselves. Everybody takes liberties, I can understand that. But Silver's a menace to society. Before your time, he was. Blinded a security guard in that bullion raid. Ammonia wasn't certain enough for Eric Silver—he chucked acid in the chap's eyes."

The Super nodded impatiently. "I get your point, Ted. It so happens I've done my homework on Silver, and he *is* a menace, in more ways than one. But if you're trying to sneak behind Inspector Childs's back and say he can't run this nick—"

Gridley made a protesting sound. "Never in the world, sir. I gave Potter and Smith a tongue-lashing and sent them back to keep observation. Maybe it was an isolated incident. Mr. Childs is O.K., he's just not—" His voice trailed off.

The Super laughed. "Not such a cunning bugger as me, is that it? Cheer up, Ted—I may be back one day. Meanwhile, give Inspector Childs all the support you can. I'm late for an appointment. Don't make sticky rings on my desk top. See you around!"

Unknowingly, the sergeant echoed convict Carey, who had been re-

captured less than an hour after breaking away from the moorland working party. "That's all very well," he grumbled. "But it's not catching Eric Silver."

Eric Silver had no truck with cocoa, and was gulping a vodka martini. Feet up on the windowsill, he stared out at the amber and white lights glittering in the black-velvet jewel box of Hyde Park.

"Treat that stuff with some respect," Mardyke warned. He had been watching the TV news and was rubbing his hands in satisfaction. "Not a word about us for days. It's almost time."

Silver let the empty glass fall. It rolled on the carpet and his fingertips brushed the deep pile as he played with the swivel armchair. "I'm sick of this," he said flatly. "I want to get moving."

"And so you shall, laddie." Mardyke gave him a sideways glance as he cut the end of a cigar. "Lucky I had this service flat on a long lease, eh?"

Silver stood up, a little drunk and more than a little aggressive. "O.K., you're Numero Uno, Tony. Real Napoleon of crime." Defiantly he kicked the glass away, prowled to the cocktail cabinet, and found and filled another.

Mardyke sighed, indenting a line on his forehead with a thumbnail. "I know, I know—you want to go home and see your Mum. Too risky, dear boy. Asking for it. The police would be waiting."

He saw Silver's smirking face reflected in the window and whirled to face him. "And you, you idiot—you went back there! Today, when I had to go to the bank!"

Eric Silver burst out laughing. "Yeah, to the bank, in your flaming disguise. Gawd, if you knew how you looked in that wig."

Mardyke frowned. "Don't change the subject. You went back, you—"

Silver covered much space in a little time. "Don't call me an idiot, darlin'. Not twice. Listen, mate, I was *born* in that street. I know it like a fish knows water. There might've been law around, but if there was they never saw me. In and out, easy as kiss me hand—no trouble."

Mardyke trotted to the window and peered sidelong at the pavement fifty feet below. "It *looks* clear," he conceded grudgingly. "But it was an insane risk, laddie."

"Stop whining away about it then. This time next week we'll be in South America, right?"

Sensitive to nuance, Mardyke swung away from the window. "You don't believe that," he murmured with an air of surprise. "My dear boy, but for me you'd have walked straight into the arms of the police a dozen times over. Why on earth would I trick you right at the end?"

It became manifest that Silver wasn't in the slightest degree drunk, or even fuddled. "Because you're a con man," he retorted icily. "Just tell me this: why'd you help me get away?"

Mardyke took the glass from the youth's grasp. "Now *I* need this." He gulped and the level in the tumbler sank by half. "Not from friendship, I assure you. I had to think quickly and think on my feet when the chance presented itself. Bligh's horse getting restive, the other officers on the far side of the drainage ditch—you could wait years for anything as promising."

"Granted. But why take us—me and Carey?"

Mardyke pulled a face. "With Carey there was no choice. If the brute wasn't for me he was against me, so I didn't argue. And you—you're fit, and quick in every sense of the word. A potential ally. It was as simple as that."

He toyed with the glass. "And I played it right. Turning my ankle the fourth day—if you hadn't helped me over that ploughland in the dark I'd have been forced to give up. And one good turn really does deserve another. Therefore you're my house guest."

Silver shrugged. "Maybe you're telling the truth, but I doubt it." His eyes were hard. "I did the bullion job, remember, and the safe-deposits up West. You're no fool, Mardyke. You read the papers after I was sent down. You know they never recovered the stuff."

Mardyke snapped his fingers. "Of course! Before we make the clean break, you'll pick up your money. And you think I—"

"Too right, mate." Silver patted his jacket pocket. "I could see to you with my bare hands, but just to be sure I picked up some insurance when I went home." His right hand emerged, balancing a small self-loading pistol across the palm.

The older man shook his head defeatedly, and when Silver put the pistol away he moved to the couch and shoved it to one side. With his nail file he lifted one then another parquet tile, to reveal a cavity. He withdrew a leather bag and threw it to Silver. "Read it and weep."

Inspecting the curiously unimpressive nodules of what might have been gravel, Silver was at a loss. "Diamonds?" he queried.

"Uncut diamonds—worth more than every sordid little bit of thuggery you've ever mounted," Mardyke confirmed. "I'll say this once, Eric, and don't you ever repeat it. If you sneer at me I'll do my best to kill you one day. But the fact is that if my son had been spared he'd be about your age. I'd like you to have one more chance, for good or evil. Because you're young—because if my boy had lived he might have been in trouble and needed a friend."

Embarrassed, Silver jeered at him. "Silly old fool. For all you know I could take your diamonds and leave you here with your throat cut!"

Mardyke was twinkling again, back on form. "Not as long as I'm the only one who knows the captain who'll smuggle us out—not to mention the name of the ship, and the port of embarkation. You're sharp, laddie, but you'll never beat me at chess."

Silver didn't laugh and his boyish face was like a mask. "Chess isn't my game, squire. Sudden death is though. I'll be watching you."

Long after they'd gone to bed, Mardyke heard Eric Silver get up and go out. He had only to slip into his shoes and collect his topcoat and he was ready to follow.

Silver moved easily, whistling through his teeth, relishing the raw dankness of fog in his nostrils and its gauzy presence beading his eyelashes. He hadn't been bragging—he could navigate these streets blindfold. A rank privet hedge brushed the back of his hand and he could just make out the dead-monster bulk of a broken motorcycle tossed atop a burnt-out car. This was the vacant site on the corner, putting him only a few strides from home.

Not tonight though. He grinned hungrily, feeling tense and intensely alive. No, not tonight. Cut across the vacant site and he'd be in Avelings Reach, those tarted-up Georgian cottages by the wharf.

Eric Silver licked his lips. Carrie, he thought—Carrie, you greedy old cow, tonight's the night. She'd been his probation officer when he was sixteen years old. Carrie—an awkward, whinnying product of the better schools, full of ideals about social justice and equality, brimming with certainties about the crippling effect of environment on underprivileged youth.

Caroline—he'd forgotten her surname. It didn't matter. Dear old

Carrie had been the laughing-stock of all the young tearaways. But the precocious Silver had eyed her well-muscled legs, her generous hips, and her full figure with appreciation. And the best of it was, Silver mused on one level of his brain, nobody had ever suspected that they were lovers. He'd never been one to kiss—or anything else—and tell. Carrie, for obvious reasons, was just as discreet.

Every villain needs a safe house, and Carrie had unknowingly maintained Silver's for years. He'd leave her sated and shamed in the darkness before retrieving that big canvas hold-all from the tabletop-sized garden behind her cottage.

Lust for sex and money blinded him far more effectively than the night. He was negotiating the final yards of derelict ground when a piece of the gloom became solid, embracing him. Silver squealed in sheer, primitive, childish terror and his captor shook with amusement, a vibration communicated in the bear hug.

"Thought you'd sneak in while it was dark, eh? The minute that fog came up I said to myself, 'Our Eric will be paying us a visit.' Never could stay away from dear old Mum, could you?" Sergeant Gridley fumbled for the handcuffs.

Silver went berserk, enraged by the injustice of it, the complacent wrongness of the fat pig who'd collared him. The copper had been watching Silver's home—the last place Silver had been making for.

Exploding, Silver kicked out at Gridley and, as the detective staggered back, wrenched at his pocket for the gun.

A blurred shape, desperate and snarling, hurtled past Silver, knocking him off balance. Speedy and powerful as a panther, Mardyke smashed a fist into the side of Sergeant Gridley's jaw.

The policeman went down soundlessly save for a sob of expelled air, his head striking the cinders and the thin grass with a sickening sound. Mardyke spared him no attention.

He was shaking Silver. "You stupid brute! Walking into a foregone trap and then trying to shoot your way out! A shot at night in the middle of the city? Why not bang a drum and ask them to come for you?"

Silver wriggled free and grinned at the older man, unabashed. "Flip me, you've got a punch, Tony! Talk about Ali!"

Mardyke sucked his knuckles, spat sideways, and said sourly, "Can we go now? Or don't you *want* to get away?"

Silver made his decision between one heartbeat and the next.

"Right. But first I got to pick up my bankroll. Keep an eye on the copper. I'll be right back."

No time to pay Carrie a proper visit now. He scaled the garden wall and wrenched boards from the long trough he'd built so many summers before as a flower box.

Hold-all under his arm, he dropped into the alley. He was changing his mind again. Mardyke had saved him sure enough, and more than once. All the same Silver might not be able to get out of the country—but then he'd never been one for travel. . .

Impact and pain were related, but Eric Silver could not detect the difference between them and their timing.

Soft-footed, Mardyke had trailed him, waited, and pounced. The blow dazed him, the pressure on joint and nerve paralyzing his right arm until Mardyke removed the automatic. Silver swore through a blur of agony and tears. All that stuff about the diamonds had made him forget that a real crook always has an appetite for more.

Sergeant Gridley was sitting up in bed. The doctors' fears of a concussion had proved groundless. Now he was resting comfortably.

The Super wagged a finger at him. "When Silver raided that safe deposit, he took more than money—though he never realized it at the time. There were—er—documents among one set of the banknotes, highly embarrassing to certain parties who wanted them recovered for what they said were reasons of national security." The Super had a highly mobile eyebrow capable of independent movement, and he elevated it meaningly.

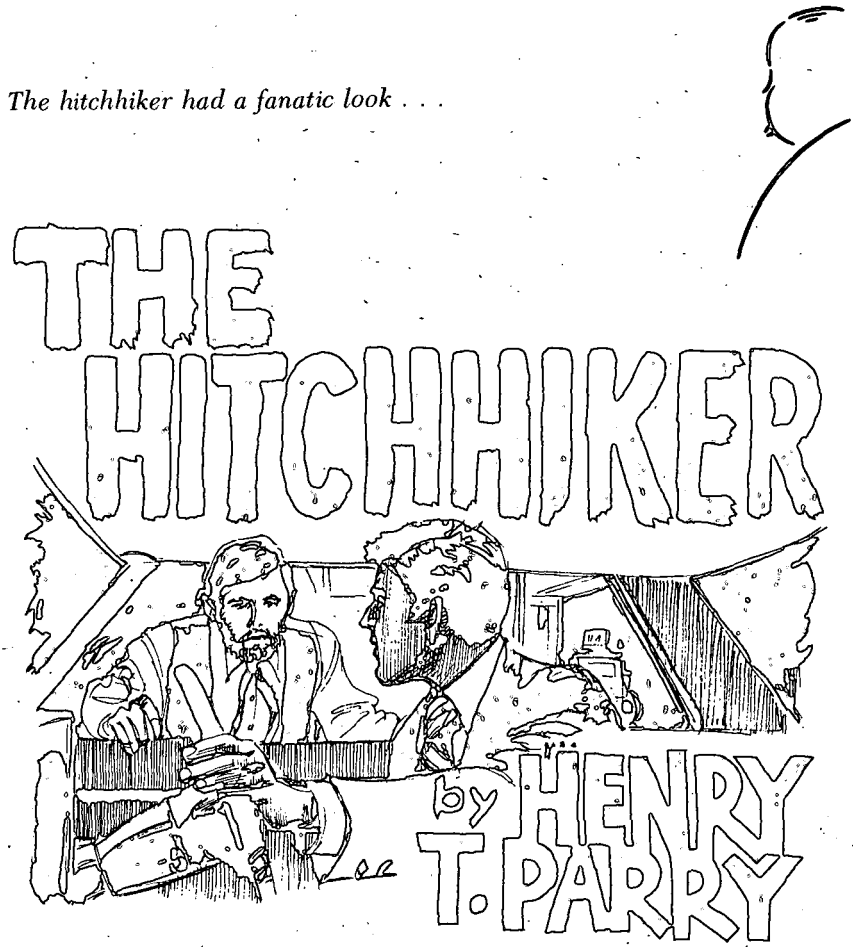
"Now then—they couldn't just put it to Silver and make a deal. They were terrified that if he got a sniff of the significance of those papers he'd get word out to his cronies, and the next thing anyone knew they'd be on sale to Moscow or used for blackmail."

Gridley's face became warm. "That's why the surveillance was so sloppy. Silver was being given ample room to lead us to his stash."

The Super smiled thinly as he nodded. "They worked a very ancient ploy on the abominable Eric. They put him next to a Judas goat he'd never seen before in his life, and gave him every encouragement and opportunity to escape from prison. The rest is history."

There was a long and not entirely comfortable silence. "I'm really sorry about clobbering you, Ted," said Superintendent Mardyke.

The hitchhiker had a fanatic look . . .



He was at the door when the tear gas in the moneybag exploded. Holding the other two bags under his arm, he kicked the fuming sack across the bank floor and fired once at the teller who had booby-trapped him. The teller smiled apologetically, slipped beneath the counter, and died in a litter of small bills and deposit slips. The gunman walked out calmly as the bank filled with tear gas.

The filling-station attendant in the streaming poncho fled back to shelter. Hartsill started the engine and was about to move out onto the highway when he heard a rapping on the right front window. Rolling it down, he saw a bearded man in his mid-thirties hunched against the rain, his clothing old-fashioned—fake old-fashioned, Hartsill guessed, in the mode of certain country-and-western singers, reminding him of the hotel clerks and bartenders in the old western movies. His straight-lipped mouth was that of a man who had endured all the injustice he intended to and, together with his pinched cheeks, it gave him a look that bordered between determination and fanaticism.

"I would appreciate it if you would give me a ride, mister."

The request was made in a matter-of-fact fashion as though he did not expect to be denied a neighborly courtesy. Hartsill was about to refuse, but the stranger's tacit assumption that his request would be granted seemed to be coupled with an undefinable threat. The glaring lights over the pumps isolated the two of them in the misty night. The highway at midnight was empty except for the occasional rig that blatted its way west. Hartsill's right front door was unlocked.

He was aware he didn't know how to refuse, as if refusal would violate some custom of the country dating back to pioneer days. Before he answered, he slid his hand down to his half boot resting on the accelerator and touched the five-shot special tucked away in its ankle holster. It occurred to him that the hitchhiker's dress afforded a measure of protection. It was unlikely that anyone so conspicuously dressed would risk being identified with any unlawful activity.

"Glad to oblige you," he heard himself saying, suggestibly slipping into the stranger's style of speech.

The hitchhiker climbed into the car and sat leaning forward, barely touching the back of the seat, an old-fashioned satchel perched on his knee. The tip of the middle finger of his left hand, Hartsill noticed, was missing. Hartsill drove slowly to the highway's edge and, checking both mirrors and finding only darkness, pushed down his booted foot and sent the car hurtling onto the road.

"My name is Howard," the hitchhiker said. "Sometimes they call me Dingus."

It figures, Hartsill thought. Dingus Howard and his Bluegrass Jug Band.

"What do you do, mister?" the hitchhiker asked. "If you care to tell me."

"I work for a data-processing company. They got these new automatic banking machines. I go around and give instructions to the bank people on how to use them, and I fix them when they break down."

"They got machines in banks now?"

"They got machines everywhere now—er—Dingus."

"What about the people who hand out the money?"

"They're still around, but there are going to be fewer and fewer tellers, and I suppose someday there won't be any people in banks. That you can see anyway. You won't even go to a bank. You'll do everything from the office or from home."

The hitchhiker pondered.

"I reckon a man like you," he said, "traveling around from bank to bank, would get to know a lot about their layout—when they're full of people, the best way to get away from there, all that?"

Startled, Hartsill turned a hard gaze at the hitchhiker, who sat erect in the seat, almost in a horseman's posture, staring into the darkness that receded in front of the headlights.

"He might know," he went on, "what days there was more money on hand than usual, it seems to me."

"Oh, I suppose so," Hartsill answered with simulated casualness, reaching for the radio switch. "Let's see what's on the news."

"Police in the western part of the state are undertaking a dragnet operation tonight after the holdup killing by a lone gunman this afternoon of Vincent Griffin, a teller at the Citizens' First Bank of Gallatin. Mr. Griffin leaves a wife and three children. A stolen car which may have been used in the holdup is being traced by police. It is believed—"

Hartsill reached to switch off the radio but the hitchhiker seized his hand and ordered him, "Don't touch it! I want to hear."

Hartsill turned toward his passenger in surprised resentment, but his protest died at the sight of the long barrel of a handgun protruding from the V-like opening made by the partially opened jaws of the hitchhiker's satchel. He couldn't be sure if the stranger was using the gun to enforce his demand or whether in opening the bag he had revealed the weapon unintentionally.

The man seemed unconcerned by Hartsill's angry reaction, as if he considered it a matter to be dealt with when the more pressing issue of the news broadcast was settled. No further details of the robbery

were broadcast and after a few minutes the station signed off.

"I guess I'm getting a little tetchy," the hitchhiker said, "but it don't seem ever to change. I remember once—"

His voice was lost in the roar of a tractor trailer that pulled up behind them, its lights blinking in signal, its air brakes hissing in testy bursts as if the driver were restraining his monster from crushing the fragile car under its eighteen wheels.

Hartsill knew the truck driver expected him to scurry out of his lane to permit the rig to roar past, ten miles over the speed limit, without changing lanes. Grimly he hung in his lane, staying below the speed limit because of the rain. He hated every truck on the road and the lobbies that protected their arrogant tactics. The trucker gave up and changed lanes, whipping the end of the trailer back into Hartsill's lane to clear the front of the car by a few contemptuous feet.

The hitchhiker noted Hartsill's resistance with grim approval but remained silent. Ahead of them the red reflectors on the truck's rear wall diminished in the rain.

The roadblock was skillfully placed at a point where the highway emerged from a long underpass. Patrol cars stood on both sides of the highway, their dome lights gyrating hysterically, and vague unmarked vans, threatening in their anonymity, waited by the guard rail. The truck that had bulled by Hartsill had been cleared to pass as Hartsill stopped beside the waiting troopers.

"Your license, please. Where did you get on the highway and at what time?"

A second trooper, his slicker glistening with rain, stood silently at the right of the car, his flashlight scanning the back seat. Neither of them seemed to notice the hitchhiker, who sat with one hand deep in the open satchel.

"Would you open the car trunk, please, sir?"

Hartsill climbed out into the rain and unlocked the trunk to reveal the spare tire and jack, his traveling bag, and a pile of manila envelopes marked "Operating Instructions." The trooper opened four or five of the envelopes at random and checked their contents briefly. Hartsill knew this was his opportunity to whisper to the trooper that his companion was armed and showed more than a casual interest in bank robberies. But he said nothing.

"Would you open your bag, sir?"

Hartsill unfolded his suitcase to display the usual requirements for a few nights on the road. The trooper swung his flashlight around the interior of the trunk, then knelt and examined the chassis of the car before he thanked Hartsill and indicated he could proceed.

"You guys are pretty thorough. What are you looking for?"

"Just routine, sir. You can pull out now."

"Some kind of drug bust, maybe?"

"Maybe."

They were back on the highway, the speedometer just under fifty-five, a wary silence between them. A truck that had been waiting behind them at the roadblock came up, tailgating, trying to force Hartsill to speed up or get out of the lane. Hartsill noted that this trucker's technique was to edge as close to the rear of Hartsill's car as he dared, then throw in his clutch and gun his engine, giving the impression of bearing down at full speed but actually slowing the forward movement slightly. Hartsill obstinately held his speed to fifty-five and stayed in the lane.

"Back there," the hitchhiker said, apparently unmindful of the behemoth that thundered behind them, "that was your chance, wasn't it?"

"What do you mean?" Hartsill had been dividing his attention between the road and the rear-view mirror.

"You could've told those law officers back there about me. But you didn't. Now why would that be, I wonder?"

"What would I tell them? That I picked up a hitchhiker at a gas station?"

"Yeah, you could've told them that. A hitchhiker who was interested in the news about the holdup at the Citizens' First Bank. A hitchhiker who carries a gun."

The truck loomed over the rear of the car, its engine racing, the lights signaling its intention to pass.

"You try to give a guy a break. You find him standing in the rain—"

"You sure it was me you were trying to help, mister? You heard the news. It said one man held up the Citizens' First in Gallatin. Maybe you picked me up because you figured they might not be looking for two men if only one pulled the job."

"How can you possibly connect me with that?"

"This."

The hitchhiker turned down the sun visor above the windshield on the driver's side, extracted a card, and held it up in the glare of the truck's headlights that flooded the car's interior.

"You want me to read it to you, mister? It says, 'Thank you for shopping at the County Shopping Center.' And underneath there's a list of the places that do business there. And what do you think the first name is, right at the head of the list?"

"Look, fella, I'm going to pull over right here and you can get out."

" 'Citizens' First Bank,' it says. It looks like somebody had this car near that bank sometime or other. A bank where a man was killed today. A man with a wife and three children."

Hartsill reached for his cigarettes, lying on the shelf below the windshield, intending to drop them. When he straightened up from retrieving them, his hand would hold the five-shot special. As he reached, the truck pulled out from behind and roared past with a palpable sideways blast of air.

Hartsill gripped the wheel and shifted his foot from the accelerator to the brake, knowing the trucker would whip the trailer back into his lane with an intimidating swing that would barely clear his front end. He braked slightly to improve the truck's chances of missing him. The truck lurched over into his lane, its stoplights suddenly flaring as the driver momentarily touched his brakes to give an added lesson in terror.

Frightened, Hartsill braked harder and his cigarettes slid to the floor. In a reflex action he bent to pick them up and when he straightened up he found his passenger gripping the wheel with his left hand and his left foot pushing the accelerator to the floor. "Stop it!" he cried. "Are you crazy? You'll kill us!"

The car leaped forward and slid under the body of the trailer, below the line of license plates. The lower edge of the back wall of the trailer sheared off the top of the smaller vehicle. The gas from the ruptured fuel line sprayed on the hot engine block and the car exploded into flame. The tall back of the trailer tilted just before the rig jackknifed. The wedged mass of the two vehicles overturned and screeched to a blazing halt. In the car trunk, the spare tire that had been sawed in half, with the cuts cunningly masked, ignited as the temperature rose.

The bills that were stuffed inside the spare in neat banded bundles were reduced to a costly paper ash without ever bursting into flame.

The hitchhiker climbed the guard rail where a man waited with the bridles of two horses in his hand. The two mounted and, after watching the blazing vehicles for several minutes, shook their mounts into a walk and rode away on the dirt road toward the low rainy hills.

"Where do you figure the next job will be, Dingus?"

"How should I know? Don't worry, we'll get told. Ain't we always been?"

"But how long do you figure we got to do this? Doing in people the law can't get. I wait for hours in the rain with these here horses while—"

"You know what your sentence was, Frank. Same as mine. Forever."

Back on the highway the terrified trucker had leaped from his cab and fled across the concrete lanes to safety. He watched the flames soaring over the twisted metal, their brightness lighting up the historical marker that stood at the edge of the highway.

"Entering Clay County," it read, "birthplace of the outlaws, Frank and Jesse James."

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AHMM49

They met once a month, always on the third Saturday . . .

TOUPAINE'S LAST TRICK

S. S. RAFFERTY

The hackie guided the bay horse to the curb and brought the closed brougham to an abrupt, swaying halt. He turned and looked down at the passenger door apprehensively and then smiled in relief when it opened and a man in a top hat and opera cape emerged into the sunlight of a summer afternoon.

Reaching down to take the coins from the passenger's gloved hand, he chuckled. "Danged if I didn't expect you to have disappeared in

there, Mr. Toupaine. You did that trick onect, didn't you?"

"Many times," Toupaine said, leaning jauntily on his walking stick. He knew the hackie was referring to the Fourth of July stunt where he had been bound and gagged and locked in a public hansom that rode in the parade before thousands of spectators from Battery Park to Herald Square. When the Mayor unlocked the cab at the end of the route, Toupaine the Great was gone, of course.

But he had actually done this particular act forty times, the best being in Paris seven years ago, on Bastille Day in '95. That was most memorable because he had not only effected the escape from the cab, but topped it off by turning up in a locked cell at Sûreté Headquarters. And not just a cell on the upper level. No, Toupaine the Great was found lazing in an ancient *cul de basse-fosse*. The only key to the subterranean lockup was held by a chief inspector who, like the rest of Paris, was astounded by the feat. One conservative newspaper had accused him of *sorcellerie*.

Toupaine handed the hackie an extra two bits as a gratuity and watched the cab rattle and clop off into the heat of Third Avenue. Before him, at the corner of Seventy-ninth Street, was a saloon with loungers in front and working men within, busily drinking up their wages. Toupaine entered and walked briskly to the rear of the barroom toward a rickety stairway. He stopped for a moment and the barkeep nodded to him from behind the taps. At the barkeep's sign, Toupaine quickly ascended the stairs and entered a small room, bolting the door securely behind him. The lock was the best available. He knew locks well.

He had done the transformation so many times that it now took only minutes. The opera cape and top hat were placed on a bare table; the dark-blue serge suit was taken off, inverted, and donned again as a dull-grey herringbone. A plaid cap was taken from an inside pocket of the cape along with a stage moustache. In six minutes, a rather plain-looking moustached man was walking out of the saloon and heading north.

If one tried to pick the worst location for a barber shop in the city, it would have to be Eighty-fourth Street between Third and Second Avenues, for the block received little foot traffic, and the working class that packed the surrounding tenements took care of their own tonsorial needs. But poor location or not, a barber shop was there—striped pole, two chairs, no waiting. The hand-lettered sign on the window said:

LAZLO TREVILLION, MEN'S GROOMING. Toupaine was surprised, even mildly shocked, to find a customer being shaved in the first chair.

"You're next, sir," the lone barber said, pointing to one of the wire-backed chairs in a row along the side wall. "Just five minutes is all."

It was more like fifteen, because the customer wasn't satisfied with his left cheek. Toupaine impatiently busied himself with a copy of *Harper's Weekly*. The presence of the magazine irritated him almost as much as the finicky customer. He had told Lazlo time and time again not to keep intellectual reading matter around. Of course, Lazlo had a point. How could he be expected to sit waiting all day and read trash?

"Thank you," the barber finally said to the departing customer, who had been bay-rummed and brushed. "All right, sir," he said to Toupaine, "you're next."

Toupaine climbed into the barber chair and allowed himself to be draped with the grey-and-white-striped cloth.

"Those don't belong to real customers, do they?" Toupaine said, indicating the rows of monogrammed shaving mugs on an open shelf to the right of the large mirror.

"Why not?" Trevillion asked. "I *am* a barber. I went to barber college and all. I have a license from the city and all."

Toupaine let him grumble. All underground men grumbled, and who could blame them? It was a lonely life. Toupaine often wondered if all underground men secretly hated the escape artists they worked for. They were an indispensable part of the act, yet they knew none of the glory. Most of them had only one function: they attended all stunts, and if something went wrong they were to rush out of the audience, acting as panic-stricken bystanders, and save the artists' lives. They were essential in tricks where the artists were buried in coffins or submerged in water. Because they had lives and job identities not connected in any way with the artists' lives and were never seen in their company, the panic-stricken act of interrupting the trick—and, of course, averting disaster—would be believed by the press. Toupaine called it built-in integrity.

Trevillion, however, was more than an underground man. He was a master at creating illusions. For fifteen years, since he and Toupaine had met in a circus in Prague, he had designed all of the master's stunts. To Toupaine, he was an artist in his own right. To the rest of the world, he was an uptown barber who took a lot of vacations.

They met once a month, always on the third Saturday. As far as the barkeep at the saloon was concerned, the man who used his upstairs room had a secret mistress in the area. It was the only part of the arrangement that Cessely, Toupaine's wife, didn't like. She didn't want anyone thinking that her husband was unfaithful, even if it was only an illusion. She, of course, knew of Trevillion's existence, for they had all started together back in Prague when she had been a fledgling aerialist with her father's troupe. Her marriage to Toupaine had freed her from a life above dingy tanbark for the luxurious existence of being wed to "The Greatest Escape Artist Since the Beginning of the Universe."

Trevillion stopped grumbling and smiled at Toupaine. "I bought the mugs second-hand, to dress the place up."

Toupaine said, "Good idea." Then, when Trevillion started to click his scissors, the artist frowned at him. It was another of the underground man's little jokes. Toupaine didn't trust him to cut his hair. Trevillion shrugged and merely toyed with Toupaine's hair with a comb.

"You were five seconds over in the straitjacket escape last week, you know," he said.

"Cessely sent the damn thing to a commercial laundry and it shrunk. I didn't know about it until I was about to go on stage."

"You see? Details! Suppose that had been a buried-alive routine? Five seconds would have done you in."

"That's why you're there, isn't it? Besides, I've got the breath control down to one hour, ten minutes, and twenty seconds."

Trevillion looked at him incredulously and stopped snipping the scissors.

"I mean it, Lazlo. I did it seven times this month in the cedar chest at the hotel. Cessely timed me."

"That's remarkable. A world record, and just in time, because I have the Hippodrome problem solved."

Toupaine sat up in the chair. He had been worried about the three-week run at one of the largest theaters in New York. It was a huge house, requiring a hit act to fill all the seats night after night.

"A buried-alive stunt? But they'd want me to break my own record every night."

"It has nothing to do with records, Master. Just listen. . ."

Trevillion's reference to Toupaine as "Master" was bittersweet be-

tween them. Back in Prague, they had studied with an Indian fakir who had taught them both many things. But it was Toupaine who had mastered the breath control. He could fill his lungs with air and be sealed in an airtight box, existing by exhaling slight puffs, one puff every twelve seconds, the seconds timed by someone outside the box—too much concentration was required to time oneself. Now, with the announcement of the cedar-chest record, he had it down to a puff every fourteen seconds.

Trevillion explained the Hippodrome idea to an attentive Toupaine. "We won't go for a record until the last night of the engagement. That will be the finale. The secret to the success of this stunt is in its staging. Have you noticed how the Egyptian fad is catching on? Well, we shall capitalize on it. You will be the Resurrected Pharaoh."

Toupaine's eyes sparkled. "Of course! A pyramid painted on the backdrop. Turkish music for the musicians. They handcuff me and lock me in an airtight sarcophagus. Excellent!"

"Terrible! Trite, in fact," Trevillion said with disgust. "The backdrop and the music are all right, but we need something more dramatic."

"So?"

"All right, you have decided to listen, I see. First, we have a complete burial scene on stage. Steaming cauldrons, torches, and such. You are borne in on a bier, and the company mummifies you. Not really, of course, but they wrap you in bandages to look like a mummy. Then you are buried in a pit of desert sand, say six feet deep."

"Ah, I like the sand. It will form an air pocket."

"No, anyone could see through that. We will have the sand tamped down by people from the audience. But the bandages will be wrapped over your head in such a way as to create the air pocket."

"Good. Good. Go on, Lazlo."

"Now you are buried. But that's just another entombment act—you need something more, something death-defying. That's where the cobras come in."

Toupaine grimaced. He didn't like animal acts.

Trevillion went on quickly to dispel the look. "Two live cobras are placed on top of the sand, and a glass box is placed over them. Think of it, Master! The audience is watching a man buried alive, and even if he survives the time limit he still has to get past the cobras to be saved."

"Well, and how *do* I get past the cobras?"

"They won't be poisonous. They'll have their venom sacs milked before each performance and their fangs flushed as well. There will be no danger whatsoever."

"I would add to it," Toupaine said. "To improve it, I should be handcuffed."

"The Egyptians didn't have handcuffs."

"Well, they must have had shackles or fetters of some kind to keep rambunctious slaves subdued. I'll research it. I'll be the Bound Pharaoh, condemned to live mummification by Isis. That's the spark."

"I think it's overdoing it."

"Lazlo." Toupaine's tone became stern and fatherly, although they were the same age. "That's why I am the artist and you are the underground man. We have our niche, only I fill mine with flair. Now, I want to be sure of continuity. Did they have cobras in Egypt? Why not asps? Cleopatra was killed by asps. Maybe we could use scorpions."

"Cleopatra committed suicide, and that's what you would be doing with scorpions on the sand above you. They burrow and can't be milked, and you could be bitten. Asps, by the way, *are* cobras."

"This act would be expensive," Toupaine said.

"And lucrative," Trevillion countered. "You could tour for years."

"I suspect you dreamed this up to get out of the barber business, Lazlo."

"No, Toupaine. Quite honestly, I like the barber trade. There's one more thing—the publicity."

"I'll handle the publicity," Toupaine said firmly.

"Of course. Just a suggestion though. Why not get Lloyd's of London to insure you for, say, a million dollars? It would make headlines, don't you think?"

"At fantastic rates."

"Build it into the Hippodrome contract."

"It's a possibility. I'll think about it."

"Fine. Would you like some demitasse? I have the pot on back in the apartment."

"No, thank you, Lazlo. It's too hot, and my stomach has been acting up lately. Why don't you get yourself suitable living quarters instead of living in one room in back of the shop? God knows you have the money."

"I have to stay in character, don't I? How's Cessely?"

"She's fine. She—" He stopped short as a man opened the street door and poked his head in.

"How long for a shave and a trim, doc?"

"A few minutes." Trevillion combed Toupaine's hair back into its usual style. "I'm almost through with this gentleman."

"You're on," the new customer said, taking a seat and undoing his starched collar.

"There you are, sir." Lazlo flicked the drape from Toupaine. "That's two bits, sir."

"You're getting expensive." Toupaine dug into his pocket for money.

"A man has to live, sir."

When Toupaine had left the shop, the new customer commented, "I see you do that newfangled singeing, but a plain clip and snip for me. Not too much off the sides." He added, "If that fella that just left is a regular, you ought to get rid of him. The cheapskate didn't even leave you a tip. I'm in sales myself. Hardware. I got a motto: If a customer don't respect you, get rid of him."

"I'm thinking about it," Trevillion said.

Later that day, surrounded by the early-supper crowd at Rector's, Toupaine was reading the three-page handwritten report that the small bald-headed man had given to him. His name was Amos Groton, and he ate his clams on the half shell with impeccable table manners. Somehow, Toupaine had thought a private detective would be a boor. When he had read the document, folded it, and placed it in his inside purse pocket, he found Groton smiling at him.

"I only wish all my inquiries had happy solutions like this one. I mean no offense, sir, for I can understand your suspicions. Madame Toupaine is a beautiful woman and an open target for bounders." He chuckled and shook his head, the candlelight bouncing off its buffed skin. "These ladies are a caution these days, I can tell you. Imagine creating a mystery out of disappearing from time to time, when all she was doing was getting her hair singed. Not that I would approve of my missus doing it but—well, you people are so continental."

Toupaine waited while the waiter refilled his champagne glass. That done, he sipped and then spoke. "This shop is on Eighty-fourth Street?"

"Yes, as the report says. Say, you drink this stuff every night?"

Toupaine nodded and Groton went on. "Mighty good, but too rich for my blood. The fellow's name is Trevillion. Isn't it just like our naughty girls? None of the respectable ladies' hairdressers will do hair singeing, so they find out somebody uptown who will." He sighed puckishly. "The ladies will have their little secrets."

Toupaine was staring into his glass as Groton spoke. So, he thought, he was right about the breath count when he practiced in the cedar chest. He hadn't set a record at all. He had challenged Cessely the first time when she told him he had gained a full second. He'd even had the stopwatch checked by a Swiss watchmaker over on Fifth Avenue. So he was actually off now by eight seconds—eight deadly seconds. He fingered the wine glass. It was in the Baccarat style, the kind they used at the Casino at Monte. That was where they had drunk their parting toast fifteen years before—Cessely, Lazlo, and himself.

"To success," they had said in unison, like characters out of Dumas. Although Lazlo always inquired after Cessely during Toupaine's monthly visits to the shop, his wife never mentioned their old friend.

"Now I wouldn't be worth my salt as a detective," Groton went on, "if I didn't broach the indelicate aspects, Mr. Toupaine. Let me say that there is nothing in your wife's actions to suggest a liaison with anyone—ah, any man, I mean. In fact, the only man she has ever been in company with is this barber. He's a pretty good barber too. I went in there for a trim myself, just to get a look at the place. And you won't find it as a charge on my expenses either, because I needed a haircut anyway—although you wouldn't think it from this skin head of mine. That's the way Amos Groton operates." He picked up his glass and toasted. "Here's to a happy ending. I wish all my cases were as simple as this."

There were twelve people involved in Toupaine's act. Each had his own assignment. None of the regulars, however, would deal with the cobras and a new man, a South American named Roderico, was hired for the purpose. He proved exceptionally adept at the milking and flushing of the serpents' fangs. He even demonstrated how harmless they became by putting a live chicken in their cage. The bird was struck but did not die.

Despite his large entourage, Toupaine did not employ a publicist.

This he handled himself, and he did it with an uncanny cleverness. He had the sand imported from Egypt with great fanfare. "It was dug from the base of the mysterious Sphinx and carried across the sea," the newspapers quoted Toupaine, "to take part in the most death-defying feat of our time."

The cleverness of it was that transporting the sand eventually cost him nothing, for the public clamored to buy small cloth bags filled with the genuine Egyptian sand at twenty-five cents each. When interest in the sand waned, Toupaine invited the press to view the cobras. He even had Roderico demonstrate their deadliness by sacrificing two chickens to their unmilked fangs. The ensuing accounts in the daily columns were hair-raising. Toupaine saved the million-dollar policy with Lloyd's for last. For even that esteemed underwriter of great risks was a bit hesitant at first—in fact, they flatly refused to participate. Toupaine turned this to his advantage by announcing that he was "performing a feat so dangerous that even the venerable Lloyd's of London was afraid to participate." To save face, Lloyd's relented, but charged exorbitant premiums.

Two days before the show was to open, Toupaine emerged from the cedar chest in his hotel suite.

"Oh, darling," Cessely said, showing him the stopwatch, "one hour, ten minutes, and twenty-nine seconds. That's marvelous!"

"Yes, the concentration is working well."

She put the stopwatch on the end table and sat down on the satin divan. "I do wish you'd try it under the sand just once though. It's certainly going to be different."

"No, my dear, it would take the thrill out of it for me. There has to be some element of the unknown or I wouldn't have the right motivation. It's the artist in me."

"Artist or not, I don't want to end up a million-dollar widow, my pet."

"Why not? You'd be beautiful in black."

She stamped her foot impatiently. "Stop that kind of talk! It gives me a *frisson*, and you know it!"

"Yes, my dear. I'm sorry," Toupaine said.

He had never joked about death before and he didn't want to make her suspicious. . .

The crowds in front of the Hippodrome were the largest in memory—so large that the police had to form a human barricade to make way for those lucky enough to have tickets. It was strictly a white-tie audience. Lazlo Trevillion looked a bit out of place in the expensive loge seats that fronted just two feet from the stage apron.

The orchestra struck up an exotic tune as the curtains rose. Trevillion had to hand it to Toupaine. The set was magnificent, a bone-chilling reproduction of an Egyptian burial chamber. Four muscular men dressed as Pharaoh's slaves stood, arms akimbo, between steaming cauldrons. The sand tank sat ominously at center stage.

From his seat, Trevillion could see Cessely sitting in the opposite loge. She was like a jewel to him, a precious gem of a woman who had finally realized she was not meant to live with an egomaniac, a man so obsessed with his own celebrity that he had no time for love or tenderness.

When Trevillion had conceived the plan weeks before, he thought he would have to wait until the last night of the Hippodrome run for his revenge for years of obscurity and loneliness. He had lived a phantom's life—with no friends and no real relationships. He had existed to insure only one thing—that the man he hated should live. And now, ironically, he would be the instrument of Toupaine's destruction. And he wouldn't have to wait until the last night. With characteristic bravado, Toupaine had announced to reporters that he would set a world record on opening night. He would stay buried for one hour, ten minutes, and twenty-nine seconds.

The idiot, Trevillion thought. His real endurance was still only one hour, ten minutes, and fifteen seconds, but Cessely had convinced him that he had surpassed himself. In that fool's paradise of fourteen seconds, his life would slip away in short puffs. The world would say he had gone too far, and his beautiful, wealthy widow would retire to Europe. Shortly afterwards there would be a barber business for sale, if anyone were crazy enough to buy it.

He looked over at Cessely again, and hoped she would keep her nerve. She would, because she hated her husband and loved only him.

The wrapping of the mummy kept the audience in rapt attention, but the burial sequence was overly suspenseful. The tamping of the sand was gruesomely comic, with each of the six men from the audience devoting himself to the task.

But the cobras were the hit of the show. One woman screamed and fainted as the serpents were dumped onto the sand covering Toupaine. Trevillion half suspected she had been hired for the part. He wouldn't put it past Toupaine, "the Master." There was nothing Trevillion wouldn't put past him. That was why he and Cessely had decided that he should play the part of the underground man to the end. Toupaine might have told someone of his "savior's" existence. So at the end of one hour, ten minutes, and twenty-two seconds Lazlo Trevillion would at last serve his function. As a panic-stricken member of the audience, he would leap to the stage, smash the glass box, and attempt to rescue a man who had been dead for seven seconds. The cobras were no danger, for Cessely would have witnessed the milking and flushing. When it was all over and he had survived, it would come out that Toupaine the Great had been a fake. The underground man would emerge and the star would go underground forever.

The tension in the theater built steadily with the help of the skillfully orchestrated music. Some hooligans who had managed to get third-balcony seats sent up a counting chant. The large clock at stage right showed one hour, ten minutes, and fifteen seconds. "*Fifteen,*" they shouted. "*Sixteen, seventeen—*" They were probably hired too.

Trevillion thought of his employer, buried beneath the sand. He wouldn't panic. Not Toupaine. That was the secret of all escape artists. Never panic. Concentrate. Concentrate. Toupaine the Great had faith in his ability. He would wait for the signal, the two taps on the glass given by one of the slaves, before he pushed himself up from the sand and grasped the harmless cobras in each hand. It would be a triumphant finale. But it would never happen.

"*Eighteen, nineteen—*" The second balcony took up the chant. Trevillion shot a last glance at Cessely and leaped to his feet.

"Help! Help that man before he dies!" He made the stage in one bound. One of the slaves made a move toward him, but he was prepared for it and sidestepped him.

He grabbed one of the scimitars that rested decoratively at the base of the glass case, raised it high over his head, and smashed the container. He caught the first cobra full in the fang with the blade. The second snake caught him on the upper left arm and then fell beneath the slash of steel. Trevillion dropped the sword and dug deep into the sand with his hands.

It felt like jagged glass pricking his hand, and then the whole hand burned. The searing feeling surged up his arm, and Trevillion's throat started to constrict. Before he fell breathlessly in numbness and nausea and the deadly blueness of cyanosis, he saw it crawling out of the scooped-up sand—a scorpion, its hind stinger making a sickening noise, like scissors twittering.

Prostrate on the stage, the venom now coursing through his body, he vaguely heard the screams and pandemonium of the crowd, and then Toupaine's voice saying, "My God, the fool!"

Two days after what the newspapers termed "an unfortunate fit of panic," the New York Police Department barred Toupaine from performing his act again within the city limits.

"It wasn't your fault, Roderico, that the snakes were still toxic," Toupaine told the cobra keeper after the reporters had left the hotel suite. "It's just as well that the mummy bandages were made of leather, however. If the snakes had fanged *me*, I would still have been safe. It's too bad that fellow was so caught up in the suspense of it all. Some people just can't realize it's an illusion."

"Why were you stamping your foot when you got out of the sand, Master? I thought you had been bitten."

"I'd seen a spider. I don't like bugs. Stepping on them gives me pleasure. Ah, here is Mr. Groton. That will be all, Roderico."

"Good evening to you, Mr. Toupaine," Groton said, extending his hand. "It's a shame they shut down your performance. You probably would have set a new record."

"My dear Mr. Groton, I must confess that records don't impress me. I could do one hour and eleven minutes four years ago. It's one of the tricks of the trade."

"Still, you lose your livelihood, Mr. Toupaine."

"In New York yes, but elsewhere no. There's a world waiting out there for thrills, Mr. Groton. That's why I asked you here today. An escape artist must sooner or later have a man to keep an eye on things for him and—ah, Cessely darling, come in and meet Mr. Groton. He's a detective and has admirable qualities for an underground man. You see, Mr. Groton, an illusionist must rely on the people around him. Cessely, my dear girl, I would prefer to milk and sugar my own tea. Or, better still, why don't *you* do it for us, Mr. Groton?"

This was the fifth prison break in six months . . .

STAKEOUT

by JACK RITCHIE

At eight-thirty that evening, the phone rang.

I lowered my newspaper. "If that's the sheriff, tell him I'm not home. You don't know where I could possibly be."

My wife, Norma, regarded me with those narrow green eyes. "How could I lie like that? You're here." She picked up the phone, listened, and then smiled. "He's here."

I sighed as I accepted the receiver. "Yes?"

"There's work tonight," Sheriff Hollister said briskly. "I just got word there's been another break at the state prison."

I reflected wearily that we seemed to have a rather leaky prison. This was the fifth break in six months.

Hollister continued. "Somebody by the name of Buck O'Brien. He's dangerous, he's armed—and he's a murderer."

"Sheriff," I said, "I've been thinking about the technicalities of this thing. I don't believe it's legal to deputize me over the phone."

"Now, Franklin," he soothed. "If it'll make you feel any better, I'll deputize you in person when you get here to pick up your badge."

"Why is it always me? Aren't there any other people in this town?"

"Franklin, you know as well as I do that this is a bedroom community. Everybody works in the city and leaves at six-thirty in the morning. Could you really expect me to deputize doctors and lawyers and important people like that and have them show up late and tired for work? No, I've got to rely on the native local citizenry. The ones who were born and stuck here and work in our town. The ones I can trust. The ones who know the country backroads."

When I hung up, my wife handed me the black lunch bucket. Inside, I would find a thermos of coffee, two liver-sausage sandwiches, an apple, and possibly a Twinkie.

I put the bucket and my twelve-gauge shotgun into the car and drove the three blocks to the sheriff's office on the corner of First and Main. The other three corners were occupied by our bank, Oliver's Service Station, and the post office. I am the postmaster and the town's sole Federal employee.

As I expected, I found Oliver in the sheriff's office too, his deputy's badge pinned slightly askew on his oversized jacket. And, of course, Vernon Murphy, who runs the hardware store.

The four of us, including Sheriff Hollister, had gone to grade school together when we still had our grade school in town. And later we had all been bused to the consolidated high school in Maple River. Hollister and Vernon had been on the football team. Oliver and I had not.

Hollister was in quite good spirits, as he always seemed to be on occasions like this. He showed us some pictures. "Buck O'Brien is five foot ten, thirty-two years old, medium build, and has black hair. He broke out this afternoon, so there's a good chance he's still somewhere in the vicinity. The state cops have got roadblocks on all the main and

secondary roads and they're depending on us to help where we can. Franklin, you and Oliver take the Tamarack Road and set up your roadblock just past the swamp. Vernon and I will take care of the Harrison Ridge trunk."

Oliver was clearly as unhappy as I. "Nobody ever uses the Tamarack Road any more."

Hollister nearly agreed. "But we can't afford to overlook anything, Oliver."

Oliver still protested. "Why do we always get the Tamarack Road? The mosquitoes out there are murder this time of year. If they're as bad as the last time, I've got a good mind to quit this whole business and go right back home."

Hollister smiled pacifyingly. "Well, now, we can't have you doing that, Oliver." He thought it over. "All right, you and Franklin take Harrison Ridge. Vernon and I will cover Tamarack."

Oliver and I got into my car and drove out to the Harrison Ridge Road. At the top of Munson's Hill, I pulled off to the side of the road and parked under a tree. There was a full moon, the night was still, and we had a clear view of the road down ahead for half a mile. The countryside was mostly scrub pine and infertile sandy land. The nearest farmhouse was more than a mile behind us.

Oliver yawned. "Here it is nine o'clock at night and you park your car under a tree. Afraid the moonlight will fade the color?"

"Just habit, I guess. People park under trees whenever they get the chance. Day or night."

I turned on the car radio and found some country music, the lesser of other evils. I kept the volume low.

Oliver was resigned. "It's going to be like all the other times. We're going to sit here and nobody will come along. We'll get stiff and chilled and our stomachs will get acidy and we'll stagger through our day's work tomorrow."

"Maybe our luck will change."

We were silent for a while and then Oliver said, "On the other hand, maybe I don't particularly want our luck to change. I mean just suppose we did run into this O'Brien? What would we do?"

"Take him into custody."

"But suppose he doesn't want to be taken into custody? And O'Brien

is dangerous—a murderer, and armed. Suppose he decided not to be captured?"

I gave the matter some thought and realized that I had always been rather relieved when our stakeouts had passed without a challenge. "We'll cross that bridge when we come to it, Oliver."

The time passed slowly, as usual. We ate our sandwiches, not because we were hungry, but because it was something to do. My lunch bucket contained no Twinkie.

It was about one in the morning and Oliver was dozing when I saw something moving far down the moonlit road. I nudged Oliver awake.

He blinked. "What?"

"Down the road. There's somebody heading our way. On foot."

Oliver peered and affirmed. "I see him now. I wonder who it could be? Probably somebody out shining deer." He kept watching the approaching figure. "Do we have the authority to arrest him for shining? Or are we just an *ad hoc* posse after O'Brien?"

"He's not using a flashlight," I said. "If he's got one."

We let the dark figure approach to within perhaps a hundred yards before I spoke. "Well, let's get out and do our job and find out who he is." My mouth felt dry. "You're probably right, though. Just somebody out for deer."

Oliver got out of one side of the car and I the other. We left the darkness of the tree and stepped into the middle of the road, our shotguns in our hands.

The figure ahead saw us and stopped.

I could see now that he was carrying a long-barreled weapon of some kind.

It moved swiftly to his shoulder and there came one flash and then another. We heard the sounds of the shots and the whistle of bullets.

Oliver and I reacted instinctively. We both fired.

The man ahead grunted, staggered to the shoulder of the road, and fell.

Oliver and I endured fifteen seconds of shocked silence, then we moved forward cautiously. When we reached the fallen man, I switched on my flashlight.

The man was dead, a rifle still clutched in one hand. He appeared to be of medium height and build, was in his thirties, and had black hair.

Oliver cleared his throat. "It's O'Brien."

We examined the corpse more carefully. The man wore what appeared to be fatigues of a twill material and there was a number stenciled over his left breast pocket. A plain billed cap lay beside him.

"What do we do now?" Oliver asked. "Take the body into town?"

"Don't touch a thing, Oliver," I said. "I'll go get the sheriff and you stay here and guard the body."

"I'm not staying here alone with no body," Oliver said firmly.

I, in turn, had no such intention either. I spoke for both of us. "This body isn't going anywhere. And nobody's going to steal it. Why can't we just leave it where it is and both of us go looking for the sheriff? I mean, it's on the shoulder of the road, so there's no danger some car will come along and run over it."

Oliver quickly agreed and we returned to our car. We would have to go through town to reach the Tamarack Road.

At First and Main, Oliver touched my arm. "Hold it. The sheriff's car is parked behind his office. I guess he came back to town."

We parked and went to the door of the building. It proved to be locked. There was a night light, but the office appeared to be empty.

"Nobody there," Oliver said. "And Hollister never walks home. He always takes the patrol car with him."

We mulled over the dilemma and then I said, "I don't think we should just stand here and wait. No telling where he is or when he's coming back. We'd better get to a phone and call the State Police."

Oliver's home was just behind his service station. We jaywalked across the road, in no danger of being run over by the traffic, the next of which would likely be Wally Schroeder's milk tanker coming through town at 4:30 A.M.

We turned up the walk of Oliver's house.

He frowned. "I see a light behind the drapes of our bedroom window. I wonder why Elizabeth's up. She's not sick, I hope."

We were about to pass the ground-floor window when Oliver stopped cold. I did too and we stared through the slit of light coming from the point where the drapes had failed to meet.

We had found the sheriff. Also Oliver's wife, Elizabeth. They were both hale and well and in the pink. Quite.

Oliver stood petrified, his mouth open.

I took him by the arm and gently led him away. We walked back to our car and got inside. I sat there, wondering what was to be done next.

How did one handle a situation like this? Rush in and confront them? Oliver was still mute and stunned, incapable of any action, if action were indeed called for.

I sighed. Poor Oliver. Suppose something like that had happened to me? Suppose Norma—

Two thoughts collided in my mind. First, how did it happen that Norma had that lunch bucket so ready and packed, including the fresh hot coffee? She had handed the bucket to me the moment I put down the phone.

And second, where the hell was Vernon Murphy? Out there on the Tamarack road maintaining a road block alone?

I turned the ignition key and drove toward my house. I parked a hundred yards short, leaving the catatonic Oliver seated where he was, and walked the rest of the way.

The windows of my house were dark. All of them. Norma must certainly be asleep.

I tried the front doorknob. The door was unlocked. Usually Norma insists upon locking the doors when she expects to be home alone.

I slipped inside and tiptoed through the darkness up the stairs to our bedroom door. No light edged from underneath it. I felt a sense of relief—and a wave of guilt over my suspicions—and was about to leave as I had come when I heard the voices.

I leaned toward the door and listened.

I would recognize Vernon's voice anywhere. And certainly my wife's. And I did.

I straightened. Enraged, of course, but also with a feeling of helplessness. Again I asked myself, what does one do in a situation like this? Rush in and confront the two of them? And what would be the result of that? Fisticuffs? I was not at all optimistic about the results. Vernon outweighed me by at least thirty pounds.

But was that what really stopped me from breaking into the bedroom? No. It was embarrassment. The embarrassment of having an unfaithful wife, the embarrassment of having the world learn about her infidelity, and the final, crushing embarrassment of suddenly realizing that—

My face flushed fiercely. Oliver and I had been sent out to establish roadblocks on at least a dozen occasions during the past six months. Had the fleeing prisoners and various other criminals whom we had been assigned to intercept ever existed at all?

Certainly O'Brien had been corporeal enough, but what about the others? Now that I remembered, Hollister had never had any pictures to show us before. He had just given us vague descriptions. O'Brien had been the sole exception.

Yes, Oliver and I had faithfully and doltishly spent long mosquito-bitten nights on isolated roads while back in town the sheriff and Vernon Murphy—

I returned to the car, utterly stunned. Oliver still sat on the passenger side, perhaps not even aware I had been away.

What now? I found myself driving and eventually back on the Harrison Ridge Road. I returned to the spot where O'Brien had died and parked under the tree again. Oliver and I stared out at the night, each suffering his own thoughts.

Dawn was slow in coming, but when it arrived so did the sheriff's patrol car.

Hollister sat at the wheel, Vernon beside him. They both looked a bit worn but content.

"Well, Franklin," Hollister said, "I guess we can call it a night. Looks like another dry run."

"No," I said. "Not a dry run. Not this time." I pointed ahead to the weedy grass on the shoulder of the road where O'Brien's body lay.

Hollister saw it. He and Vernon got out of their car and investigated. I followed, with Oliver, perhaps a bit recovered, behind me.

Hollister touched the body with the toe of his boot. "Well, I'll be damned. The two of you weren't out here for nothing after all." He glanced covertly at Vernon and they shared a secret chuckle.

Color swept into Oliver's face and he was definitely alive again. And he moved.

He wrenched the rifle out of O'Brien's dead hand, pointed it at the sheriff, and fired.

Hollister dropped to the road, astonishment on his face, and then quite dead.

"Now, now, Oliver," I said, but he had started a trend. I found myself removing the rifle from his hands and bolting another cartridge

into the chamber. I pointed the weapon at Vernon Murphy and fired.

He fell beside the sheriff, also unquestionably dead.

Oliver looked puzzled. "Why did you shoot Vernon?"

"I had to."

"Oh?" said Oliver, suddenly understanding. "You too?"

I used my handkerchief to wipe our fingerprints from O'Brien's rifle. Then I returned it to O'Brien's hands, making certain there would be an abundance of his fingerprints on the weapon.

"This is the way it happened, Oliver," I said. "Hollister and Vernon came up to relieve us, and at that moment O'Brien chose to come down the road. There was shooting. The sheriff and Vernon were killed by O'Brien, and we in turn shot down the fugitive."

Oliver looked down at the bodies, rather satisfied. "Yes, that's the way it happened." He looked thoughtful. "But somehow it still seems incomplete. Our wives, I mean. Should we go back home and—?"

"Not now, Oliver. That would be too much for one day. We'll wait about six months and then we'll take care of one of them. And six months later the other. I think we'll want to get away with it, so we must be clever, and we must also provide each other with alibis. If they're needed."

Oliver smiled eagerly. "Which one goes first?"

We tossed a coin.

Norma. Around Christmas would be nice, I thought.

We drove off in search of a phone to call the State Police.

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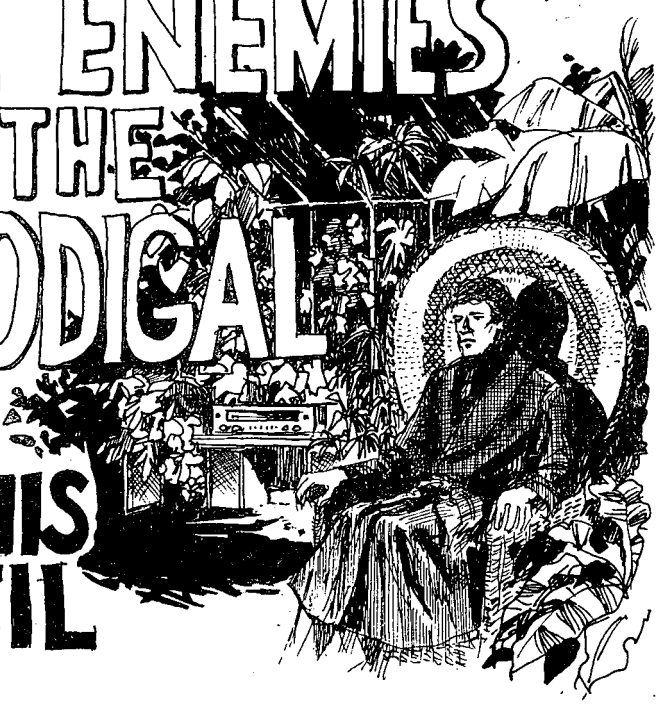
Nobody local had seen Everett Feeley for twenty years . . .

THE ENEMIES OF THE PRODIGAL

by DENNIS O'NEIL



Although I am by profession a life saver, not a life taker, I have assumed the executioner's role, more by default than design, because I know the identity of Everett Feeley's murderer. But I'm not sure the culprit can be punished. Slain, burned, eradicated—yes. But punished? I can't say. Neither can I explain the reason, the motive. The motive bothers me most of all. The motive frightens me.

I saw the beginning through my office window—saw the strange

trucks roll onto our main thoroughfare from the direction of Interstate 70 at ten of a sunny October morning just about a year ago and proceed toward the south end of town. Shiny new trucks, the stickers on their windshields indicating they were from St. Louis.

At noon I went over to Knopp's Tavern for my usual midday glass of beer—my patients would mistrust a dry sawbones as much as they would a drunk—and as I entered I heard Milton Schickel say, "We oughta kill the sonofabitch."

Milton was hunched behind a corner table, and his glare could have boiled the alcohol from the double shot of bourbon he cupped between his large cracked palms.

"You mad at the politicians again, Milt?" I asked, joining him. "Haven't you heard? We elected a Republican this time."

"That bastard Feeley."

For a moment I didn't understand. I thought he was referring to our town, named Feeley after the thoroughly unregenerate renegade who founded it immediately after the Civil War. Then I realized Milton was talking about the renegade's great-grandson.

"You mean Everett? Is he back?"

Nobody local had seen Everett Feeley for twenty years. Rumor was he'd taken a degree abroad and was being a jet-setter somewhere in France, partying with film stars and Greek millionaires and such.

"I mean that bastard and, no, he ain't back, and I swear I'll shoot him if he does come," Milton said.

"What's he done?"

"Stole the food from our mouths is what."

I questioned him and, aided by the other noonday regulars, Milton explained. The St. Louis trucks had brought a load of carpenters and gardeners and painters and sundry miscellaneous craftsmen from the city, and at that minute they were at work on the Feeley mansion at our southernmost boundary. Milton was furious. He was an electrician and, like most of our labor, he had been hard hit by the recession. He had passed the entire summer without cause to unlock his toolbox.

"The sonofabitch brings in outsiders," Milton grumbled, "and we ain't got money for our kids' shoes."

I listened to him rant and watched him swill the booze I knew was changing his liver into something the consistency of an old inner tube. When he was finished I drained my glass, muttered some soothing

words, and stepped out into the sunshine. Not having any business until two, I decided to have a look and walked over to the Feeley place.

It is a monument to hideous taste, a twenty-room accumulation of clashing architectural styles—colonial pillars, New Orleans galleries, New England cupolas. It stands on a bluff overlooking the river road where passing motorists can't help but see and shudder. The St. Louis people were busy. A crew of denim-clad men wielding mammoth clippers had already removed the thicket of weeds and multiflora roses that had partially hidden the monstrosity since I'd been a boy. A second crew was sandblasting grime from the walls and a third was slapping white paint on the latticework. At the rear, near the gazebo, a fourth group was erecting some kind of steel framework. The Feeley ancestral digs were not only being refurbished, they were being augmented.

Within a week, the people from St. Louis departed, leaving the mansion clean and presumably repaired, though no less ugly, and with an addition guaranteed to administer the *coup de grâce* to any reasonable aesthetic sense—the steel framework had become a glittering glass greenhouse.

The plants, one of my patients reported to me, arrived by rented trucks from Kansas City. There was enough vegetable life to fill the greenhouse to three-quarters of its capacity.

I figured all this activity had been an overture, and we were waiting for the star.

He arrived without fanfare. Returning from attending a field hand with a crushed pelvis, I saw a limousine parked in the Feeley driveway. Curious, I braked my car and watched the two figures emerge and begin climbing the front steps. A uniformed chauffeur lugging a pair of heavy suitcases was followed by a squat, grey-haired man wearing a suit of fabric that gleamed even in the twilight—the prodigal, the playboy, the cosmopolite Everett Feeley, without a doubt. End of overture.

The next morning, as I was breakfasting, my phone rang. A deep cultured voice replied to my greeting and said, "Doctor, I'm Everett Feeley. Can you call at my residence this evening?"

"No reason why not," I said. "Seven o'clock O.K.?"

"Fine. I'll expect you in the greenhouse at seven."

I couldn't resist adding, "My fee for house calls is six dollars—for those able to pay."

"I'll manage," he replied coldly.

I admit I spent the day feeling like the class acne champ bound for a date with the homecoming queen. The Feeleys were the closest thing to an aristocracy in the county, and we ordinary folks are always awed by aristocracy.

The awe did not diminish as I turned into Feeley's driveway. The only light in the house came from the greenhouse, silhouetting weird, alien plant shapes against the panes. As I approached it I heard solemn, dirgelike music—cellos and woodwinds *lentamente*. I realized I was tiptoeing, clutching my bag fiercely, and I felt angry with myself. How idiotic to be intimidated by a scene from a bad gothic novel.

The door swung wide and I was, at last, face to face with the Feeley scion.

"Doctor?"

"Yes—and you must be Everett Feeley."

He nodded and led me inside. He was wearing an ankle-length dressing gown of rich purple silk—a king's robe—and thick rimless spectacles. I paused and glanced around. The interior of the greenhouse was a maze of shelves bearing potted plants of every conceivable shape and hue. I didn't recognize any of them except for a large Missouri fern like those I'd seen in the woods on hunting trips. It was a monster of a plant, with dark green slabs of leaves, towering over the tiny effete specimens in the neighboring pots.

A Telefunken tape deck bristling with knobs and VU meters stood in the center of an oblong space between the tables. Its wires trailed to massive quadraphonic speakers hung at intervals along the steel joists: this was the source of the dirge, a good five thousand dollars' worth of toy. Behind the tape deck was a walnut cabinet full of ten-inch tape spools.

I felt suddenly oppressed by the groaning music, the sticky humidity, and the smell of earth, humus, and decay.

Feeley sat in a wicker throne near the fern and motioned me to an identical one. "Doctor, I've asked you here because I need medical attention," he said.

"What's the problem?"

"Eight months ago I suffered a massive coronary occlusion—"

"A heart attack?" I interrupted. I'm not impressed by a layman's use of medical terminology.

"Yes—exactly. I was physically dead for three minutes. They revived me with open-heart massage and implanted a battery-operated pacemaker in my chest."

"Way out of my league. I'll give you the name of a heart specialist in St. Louis."

"Probably the same specialist I'm already seeing. No, the pacemaker is no concern of yours. I merely want you to check on my general health and report any other irregularities."

"That I can handle. Take off your robe."

He undressed and I examined him. He probably drank too much and he definitely took in too many carbohydrates, but he did get plenty of exercise—handball, swimming, calisthenics. If I hadn't seen the jagged scar on his upper torso and heard with my stethoscope the unnaturally regular, metronomic thud of his heart I'd have pronounced him remarkably fit for a fifty-year-old *bon vivant*, and I told him so.

"Thank you," he said, slipping back into his robe. He produced a check from his pocket and gave it to me.

I raised my brows in surprise. "This is for twenty-five dollars."

"That's *my* fee for a house call. May I expect you next week, same time?"

I folded the check and said, "Sure."

The weekly visits became a regular, profitable part of my routine and, gossip being the wampum of small Ozark towns, *I* became the grand oracle of Knopp's Tavern, though a rather uninformed oracle.

"How's his furniture, Doc?" they asked me.

"I can't say. I never get past the greenhouse."

"He got any servants?"

"None I've seen."

"Is he a churchgoer?"

I shrugged.

"How's he act to you—snooty?"

"He's pleasant enough. A bit distant. I don't expect he'll invite me to go fishing with him."

"You notice any changes in him?"

"No, not particularly."

This last wasn't exactly true. Everett Feeley was growing healthier and ruddier, the Missouri air apparently a tonic to him. His plants seemed to thrive too. The potted flowers' colors were eye-stingingly vivid and the fern loomed from floor to ceiling, its topmost leaves bent under their own weight as though bowing politely, the lower stalk wide as a whetstone.

By the first snow my hours at Feeley's were more than just a payday to me. I no longer experienced that vaguely hostile sense of oppression. Rather, the warm, brilliant jungle inside the greenhouse had become a refuge from icy winds, sprains, whooping cough, pneumonia, and plain hypochondria. I prolonged my examinations. And I learned to chat inconsequentially with Feeley.

"You'll outlive all of us," I once said as I concluded my poking and thumping.

"That's a grim prognostication."

"Figure of speech. Seriously, I do have a suggestion. Call it a prescription."

"What's that?"

"Heavy dose of the milk of human kindness. Mingle with your neighbors. Be more friendly. Your only ailment is loneliness."

"I'm not lonely. I'm quite content. I have"—he gestured to his miniature forest—"my friends."

As if in reply, the leaves stirred in some imperceptible breeze.

"And," he added, "my hobby."

He pointed to a gadget set on a low bench beside the fern. It was a flat table with lined graph paper on rollers stretching from side to side. Spidery aluminum arms tipped with styluses rested on the paper.

"Isn't that some kind of a lie detector?"

"One-third of a lie detector. Actually, it's a galvanic response meter. In humans, it measures the flow of electricity in the skin. I use it in my experiments."

I sighed. "All right, I'm ignorant and I'm a gossip. Answer me this, and I have to warn you that anything you say tonight will be the talk of Knopp's tomorrow. What the hell are you talking about? *What* experiments?"

He chuckled, a trifle condescendingly. "I was wondering how long you'd be able to contain your curiosity. Sit down, Doctor."

I did.

"Have you ever heard of Sir Jagadis C. Bose?" he asked.

"No."

"He was an Indian botanist and physicist, a monumental genius. Imagine a combination of Mendel and Michelangelo and you'd be close. In 1904, he demonstrated to the Royal Society in London that the vegetable kingdom is alive—alive in the same way human beings are. He proved that plants respond to stimuli, undergo physiological changes identical to those in animal tissue. Later experimenters found evidence that plants can actually communicate with one another."

"That's hard to swallow," I said.

"Would you care for a demonstration?"

He reached out to the gadget, clipped a wire lead to the stem of a cluster of crimson blossoms labeled *Clivia Miniatia*, and flicked a toggle switch. The paper began moving and the styluses marked a purple line across the grids.

"Watch this," Feeley said.

He plucked a butane cigarette lighter from a tray of assorted tools at his feet, snapped the wheel, and held the small flame near the *Clivia Miniatia*'s blossoms. The styluses twitched, forming waves.

"Reaction to heat?" I asked. "Sort of a reverse phototropism?"

Faintly sarcastic, like a superior wizard, Feeley said, "I'm happy you remember your sophomore biology class, Doctor. But no, not reverse phototropism, if there is such a phenomenon—this reaction is fear."

I raised my palms placatingly and said, "O.K., fear. Can you demonstrate the communication you mentioned?"

Feeley moved the flame to the fern and the styluses jerked violently, transforming the waves into jagged peaks.

"Satisfied, Doctor?"

"Let me get this straight—the fern communicated its fear to the smaller plant?"

"Precisely. Bose's disciples proved that vegetable matter can generate electrical fields. These apparently serve as carriers for messages—or at least emotions."

"Like radio."

"Yes." His voice deepened and his soft wide fingers absently caressed the lighter. "Can you understand the implications? The attempts by humans to speak with dolphins are nothing. Nothing. Dolphins have

brains and nervous systems. Compared to these"—he waved to the flowers and the fern—"they're almost human. Once we establish a common language with plants, we'll comprehend nature and its secrets in a way we can't dream of."

He sank back into his wicker throne, seemingly exhausted. For a moment there was no sound except for the bass rumble of a Mahler piece from the tape.

"Is the music part of your experiments?"

"It keeps them calm and receptive."

I had no more to say, partially because his performance with the lighter was the niftiest parlor trick I'd seen in years, and partially because I detected a touch of fanaticism in his speech, and I was uncomfortable with it. He sounded a bit like a late-show monster maker. Life shouldn't imitate that kind of art. I bade him goodnight and left.

I haven't said it was the season to be jolly, have I? It was. Christmas week, and no greeting-card landscape could have been lovelier than the one we inhabited. The hills were soft and rolling under the snow, the conifers topped with white, the distant Ozarks misty and splendid. It was an easy week for me. Our people tend to stay home during the holidays, and consequently have less opportunity to do themselves harm. I only had two patients all day on Christmas Eve—the Calicot boy with an upsurge of his asthma, and poor Milton Schickel, drunk as Good King Wenceslaus, found wandering in a drainage ditch with a bloody scalp.

So I arrived at Feeley's early. I hadn't called him; our relations were easy and it seemed unnecessary. His driveway was mirror-slick with ice and impossible for my aged Chevy to negotiate. I parked on the street and trudged up the slope, the bite of cold at my ankles making me wish I'd invested in boots, the hoot of wind in the eaves mingling with the soft muffled sound of the taped music and the louder crackle of ice in the branches. His house had no Christmas decorations. I wasn't surprised.

I reached the greenhouse, tapped on a frosted pane, and got no response. I tried the knob. The door swung inward noiselessly and I saw Everett Feeley standing in front of the fern, hands clasped tightly at his waist, head upraised, eyes squeezed shut, lips parted in a peaceful smile. Joan of Arc hearing her voices might have looked like that.

I was rigid with embarrassment, as if I'd intruded on something intensely private. I crept out, drove back to town, and telephoned Feeley to mouth a lie about being stuck with an emergency. He assured me he understood.

I never mentioned the incident to him. Maybe I would have, eventually, if he'd lived.

In the spring, Feeley declared a truce with the townsfolk. He started patronizing our merchants, and he advertised in the *Clarion* for a cleaning woman. Liz Singleton replied and he hired her, and whatever tolerance his neighbors might have begun feeling for him was instantly abolished.

To be blunt, Liz was considered trash. She was the natural child of Jake Slinkard's sister, who had died in Kansas City when Liz was eleven under circumstances Jake didn't care to discuss. Jake had legally adopted her and he must have regretted his generosity a hundred times. At thirteen she was suspended from the parish school. At fourteen, she was running around with men in their twenties who should have known better. At sixteen, she ran away to New York and returned a year later with a case of hepatitis and mild amphetamine addiction. Modern medicine—meaning me—cured her, and she promptly got in trouble with a hill farmer and had to be rescued from what was evidently a classic case of aggravated lechery. Few of us blamed the farmer.

"Poor Jake," a woman patient of mine said. "Well, at least the little snip's saving him some time in Purgatory."

This was the unwholesome girl Feeley chose to serve him in lieu of a dozen worthy matrons, to everyone's disapproval. She continued serving him throughout the summer and into the fall. I'd glimpse her flitting about the yard, scrubbing the gallery, or sitting in the gazebo. She inevitably ignored my greetings. Her demeanor suggested the aloofness of a shabby gypsy queen.

Everett Feeley seemed reluctant to discuss her, which I didn't mind in the least. Liz existed in our collective consciousness like a shameful, half-forgotten sin, not as a subject for idle conversation.

However, in other matters, Feeley was growing positively amiable. He wasn't salesman-friendly, but he did chat pleasantly about the crops, the political situation, and the effect of the recently built lead

refinery on the local economy. He often referred to his travels and joked about his wastrel youth and even his involvement with Sir Jagadis Bose's studies, with no hint of the fanaticism I'd observed earlier.

"How *are* the experiments?" I asked him.

"At a standstill. I'm afraid I've gone as far as I can without a proper scientific background. I suppose I'll either publish my findings or pass them on to qualified parties."

I'd been expecting this last confession. For weeks I'd noticed evidence of neglect in the greenhouse—clippers and trowels strewn carelessly about, pots untended, a few flowers wilted, a yellow tinge at the tip of the fern's leaves. I'd speculated idly whether Feeley was enmeshed in a May-December romance with Liz, and had dismissed the notion as absurd.

I shouldn't have. In early November, Feeley broke custom and ushered me from the greenhouse into the parlor, a square high-ceilinged room that belied the garishness of the mansion's exterior, full of dark wood and Impressionist watercolors, dominated by a wide fireplace of native stone—Everett's taste, not his ancestors'.

Liz was waiting in a leather-cushioned chair.

"I'd like you to examine her," Feeley said, and went into the hall.

A freshman medical student stoned on amyl nitrate could have diagnosed Liz's condition without lifting an instrument. I performed the routine, *pro forma*, closed my bag, and summoned Feeley.

"She's pregnant. Seven or eight weeks."

"Of course," he said.

"I can arrange for residence with the Little Sisters of the Poor in Columbia until term," I said.

"I'd rather she stayed with me," Feeley said. "Unless she objects."

"Whatever you say," Liz murmured tonelessly.

"Can you recommend a lawyer?" Feeley asked me. "Somebody in the area. I want to change my will as soon as possible."

"Can do." I scribbled a name and address on a card and watched him tuck it into his wallet.

"Make an appointment with the obstetrician in Germantown," I said as I was leaving. "Meanwhile, I'll check in with you tomorrow."

During the drive to my house, I marveled at the complexity of humans and at my own obtuseness. . .

The telephone awakened me at two in the morning. I hoped it wasn't a highway accident, and it wasn't.

"Doctor?" It took me a moment to recognize Liz's voice.

"Uh-huh. Speaking."

"Can you hurry? Everett's sick."

Pulling on pants and jacket, I stumbled into the chill November night and followed the fat orange moon to Feeley's. The greenhouse was ablaze with light, casting the mansion into bas-relief against the blue-black sky.

Liz was slumped in the wicker throne, nervously twisting a pink ribbon at the throat of her old-fashioned flannel nightgown, staring down at her lover. He lay twisted on the floor amid shattered crockery and dirt and flowers, his right hand clutching an overturned bench, his fingers resting on the styluses of his lie-detector gadget, his left arm embracing the toppled fern. I turned him over gently and touched his wrist, then opened his dressing gown and pressed my ear to the scar on his chest. No pulse, no heartbeat.

In the stillness, I suddenly heard a hissing sound. The amber indicator bulb on the tape deck was glowing, the spools spinning silently.

"Phone Germantown for an ambulance," I snapped at Liz. "And call Sheriff Olbrick."

I pushed and pummeled and massaged, but I knew I was only satisfying my professional conscience. Dead is dead.

I instructed the Germantown resident to ship the body to Feeley's specialist in St. Louis. The kind of autopsy indicated, demanding electronic as well as medical expertise, was beyond the abilities of a simple country G.P.

Two days later, the specialist called. "It was heart failure," he said.

"Do you have any idea of the cause?"

"The pacemaker quit on him."

"Is that common?"

"No, but it's not unheard of. Except that we tested the thing, and it's working perfectly. Has he done any traveling lately? Taken any airplane trips?"

"Not to my knowledge. Why?"

"Sometimes those magnetic gimmicks they use to search for concealed weapons interfere with pacemakers. It was just a thought."

"I'm sorry I can't help."

"We can't win 'em all, eh, Doctor?"

"That's the truth. I appreciate the information."

"My pleasure."

Although it was a bit early, I locked up and crossed the street to Knopp's. The noontime regulars were in their places and I was struck with their resemblance to the mechanical figures on Swiss clocks. I accepted a beer from Mac and lowered myself into my chair.

"You get any word on Everett Feeley?" Mac asked.

"He had a machine in his chest, a pump that was keeping him alive, and it broke."

"Son of a gun."

Far gone in drink, Milton Schickel muttered, "She killed him."

"You mean the Singleton girl?" Mac asked.

"That's a powerful statement, Milt," I said.

"She run away, didn't she?" he asked.

This was news to me. "Did she?"

"Way I hear," Mac said, "Jake shipped her off to relatives. I reckon he's afraid of the scandal."

"He oughta be," Milton yelled, pounding his fist on the table, " 'cause she *killed* him!"

"Why, Milt?" Mac asked from behind the bar. "Wasn't hardly in her best interest."

True, I reflected. Everett hadn't had the time to change his will.

"He come back and—" Milton stared into his glass, seeking wisdom in the liquor. "He come back, and he *still* ain't one of us."

"Neither is she," Mac said.

"More'n him," Milton grumbled.

"That would seem to be the only possible motive," I said, draining my beer and getting up.

I wasn't exactly sure what Milton meant. A psychiatrist might say he was projecting, seeing his own feeling in someone else—in Liz. Projecting or not, though, he had given me an idea. A ridiculous idea, but one in keeping with the whole absurd situation. And one capable of being tested.

I walked to the Feeley mansion reflecting on that absurdity. This almost legendary wastrel returns to his home a horticulturist, takes as his consort a teenaged drug casualty, and then dies for no apparent

reason. It was a tragedy written by a farceur. It wanted a rational explanation, some semblance of cause and effect, which I thought I could provide, though at the risk of heightening the absurdity. And if my notion proved to be right it would have to remain my secret. To reveal it would be to jeopardize my reputation for sanity.

The greenhouse looked as though it had been abandoned for a decade. Sunlight slanting through the dirty panes looked grey, and the plants themselves seemed fossilized. I put a tape on the machine and listened to it hiss until I was satisfied there would be no music. Within an hour I'd tried the rest of the recordings, with the same result. A number of things would erase those tapes, but I couldn't doubt that what did was a powerful electromagnetic field—powerful enough to cause a twitch in a galvanic response meter, and powerful enough to interfere with an electrical pacemaker.

I remembered Everett Feeley saying, "Once we can speak to these, we can grasp the meaning of nature."

I sat in the wicker throne and stared at the silent presences surrounding me. I knew how they had done it now. What bothered me was why. Revenge? Blind striking out at the man who was neglecting them? Were they jealous of that pathetic girl? Or did Milton Schickel guess it? Did the plants share the townspeople's resentment of the prodigal? That would be discouraging, to realize plants were just as stupid and petty as humans. Or did they have some mysterious motive of their own I couldn't begin to understand? I would have liked to believe that was so, but I didn't—and they couldn't plead their case.

I arose and got a pair of shears from the bench. They had committed a human crime and they would have to accept a human punishment—whatever their reasons. I turned to the fern. It was the ringleader, so it would have to die first.

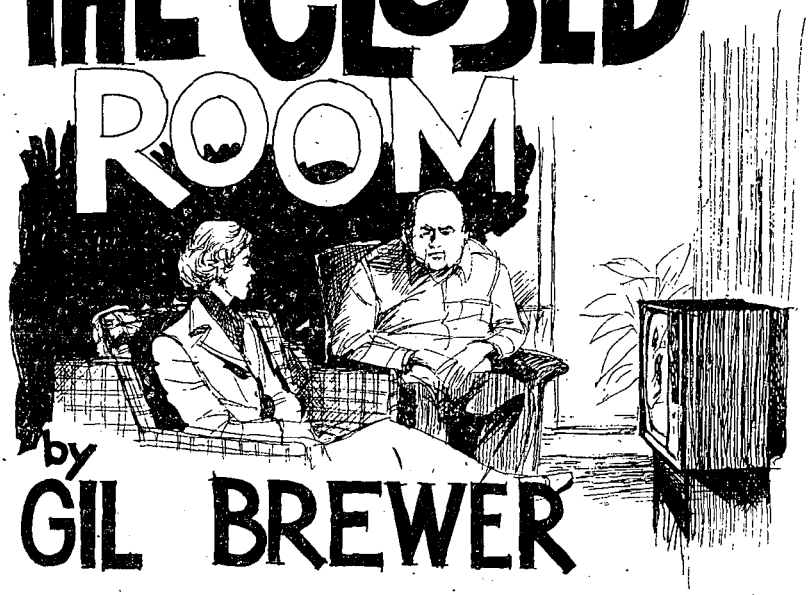
Judge, jury, and executioner, I methodically cut the fern to pieces. Then I attacked the smaller plants, cutting and dumping and kicking them. At the end I was panting and whimpering, trembling with fatigue, overwhelmed by a sense of futility.

We can grasp the meaning of nature, Feeley had said. How sad. How terrible.

Going home, I shrank away from every tree, each menacing blade of grass.

Harvey had to find out what went on behind that closed door . . .

THE CLOSED ROOM



by GIL BREWER

I did not really notice any perceptible change in Elsa until we had been married for thirty years. True, we had always had our ups and downs, bickering occasionally and sometimes actually shouting over some trivial matter. Nothing big ever instigated our storms, but in the thirtieth year I noticed a change. My awareness of my wife's argumentative side occurred at about the same time the Black Hat Prowler was seen in our section of the city—the south side, by the bay.

So much was going on in our home between Elsa and me, what with her irascibility and the mystery of the closed room, that I didn't give much thought to the Black Hat Prowler, even though he struck right down the block from us, tying up the occupants of the house he entered nocturnally with his master keys—he was said to be able to open any lock—and stripping the place bare.

The neighbors of some victims thought they saw him near a big black truck parked nearby that later rushed off into the night. From what the police could determine, the fellow was extremely tall and wore a long cloak and a wide-brimmed black hat. He was very careless in how he treated his victims—sometimes threatening them with a knife, sometimes half choking them.

The broad black hat and cloak made me think of The Shadow, from the exciting days of my adolescence, but of course Lamont Cranston was on the side of the law. Nevertheless, there was a similarity.

But, as I say, these crimes did not concern me much. My problem was with Elsa and what was happening to our—up till then—comparatively smooth marriage.

Well, perhaps our love wasn't as strong as it once had been. But we needed each other—at least, I needed Elsa. And I tried to explain to her that she needed me, that we shouldn't continue these frantic outbursts that were apt to strike any time of the day or night. We were only hurting each other.

I did my utmost to keep her calm and to let her know that I sympathized with her eccentricities, even when I didn't. A good example was the closed room.

"But, darling," I told her, "you must realize this is as much my house as it is yours. I don't begrudge you a separate room of your own. You can do anything you wish—"

"Then there's an end to it!" she stated emphatically.

It was evening. We were seated in the living room, staring at the TV with the sound off.

I had just turned it off, intending to try once more to get to the bottom of the matter in a peaceable manner.

"Elsa—"

"Harvey."

"Don't do this to me."

"I'm not doing anything. You started this, and it's ending up the

same as always. You're not considering my blood pressure. I have to stay calm. I've taken a tranquilizer and now I'll have to take another."

"I'm sorry," I apologized.

"Well, why did you bring it up?" she retorted.

I looked across at her. She was seated in the red contour chair, the one I'd recently purchased for her, hoping it would appease her a little. She looked just as good as ever to me. She wore a pantsuit of some silver material. She was still slim, and her hair, frosted with grey, added to her appeal. But her strong-willed determination showed in the cast of her jaw. Her red lips were a touch taut too. I didn't like that.

I knew that I didn't look half as good as she did. I was heavy, my jowls had sagged, and I was nearly bald. But whenever I mentioned any of this to her, she only laughed and told me I was handsome.

How could she expect me to believe I was handsome? I knew better—though there was little I could do about it. I'd tried dieting and it hadn't worked. Altogether, I thought, it was only by pure chance that I was Elsa's husband. But I *was* her husband, so why did she treat me this way?

"I'm only trying to say—" I ventured.

She cut me off sharply. "I *know* what you're trying to say."

"But, Elsa, it's been three months now. My curiosity is at a breaking point. What can you expect?"

"I expect you to go along with my whims, Harvey. It's none of your business, and, in any case, what's mine is mine."

"Now what's *that* supposed to mean?"

"You know very well."

I was confounded. She was always doing this to me, talking in riddles. "How can I know?" My tone was a bit loud and she opened her eyes wider at me, the red lips tightening a fraction. She could beat me in argument, I knew. She would begin to shout and though I'd get angry enough to strike her I never would.

If a *man* treated me like that, I'd demolish him.

"It's none of your business, Harvey. I've told you that, time and time again."

I cleared my throat.

"You're simply picking on the room to start something again. That's all you want lately."

"That's not true!"

"It *is* true!"

"All right." I stared at the floor. I looked up at the colorful images on the TV screen, but they were so innocuous—a boy and girl kissing, or some long-haired waif molting over a guitar—never anything exciting any more. It only increased my insecurity with Elsa, and thus my anger. "You sit there," I said. "You're so—so damned complacent."

"I'm not complacent at all. Not at all! How can you say that to me?"

"What did you mean by what's yours is yours?"

"Didn't *I* buy this house?"

"Yes, but—" She had, as a matter of fact. We had both owned homes when we married, and had decided to live in hers and sell mine because hers was roomier.

"Then I've got a right to do as I wish with it. To do as *I* wish," she repeated. "If I want to keep a room closed to you, I'll do it. It's none of your business."

Wallow in that, Harvey Atwater. You think you can bring her around now?

I said, "Elsa, you don't understand. I'd simply like to know what's so private in that room. Why do you keep it locked? Why won't you let me take a look inside? Just one look, honey. I won't even go inside if that's what you want. You've got to understand—my curiosity's burning me up. Three months with that room locked, barred to my entrance. What if I did that to you?"

"You wouldn't."

"No, of course I wouldn't. Then why—"

"Oh, for God's sake!" She slipped off the chair and stood up, smoothing the silver pants over her hips, straightening the jacket. "I wasn't going to tell you until tomorrow, but now's as good a time as any. Besides, this will only lead into another crazy argument. There's no telling what it could lead to."

"What do you mean you weren't going to tell me till tomorrow?"

"Well, it's what's got your dander up."

"What's *that* mean?"

"The room, silly. It's a surprise. I was saving it for you for tomorrow night, because I was going to that party at Helen Kershaw's. But I'll run over to Marjorie's tonight instead."

Our daughter Marjorie lived on the north side of town.

"I still don't understand, Elsa."

"The room. It's a surprise for you. Something I've been working on especially for you. You're so self-centered, Harvey. I've had to put up with all this nonsensical arguing for three months now, all because of that room. You've shown what kind of man you are."

I frowned. "But, Elsa—you can't blame me. A surprise, you say—"

"Yes, just for you. And you're to have it all to yourself. I don't want to be here." She glanced at her watch. "It's seven forty-five. At eight fifteen you can go into the room. It's unlocked now, but you've got to promise you won't go in till eight fifteen. Promise?"

"Yes, of course. But—"

"I don't want to hear about it, Harvey."

"It's just that you've kept it from me for so long, Elsa. And we've fought so. The room's been at the bottom of everything."

"You're so right. Now don't say anything else or I'll change my mind."

"But why can't you stay here? Why can't we both go into the room?"

"That wouldn't work. Besides, I told Marjorie I'd see her some time today, and now's as good a time as any. She'll think I'm not coming. It's a wonder she hasn't called."

I felt a great sense of relief, but I was still pent-up inside, because now there was the promise of something else. She had a surprise for me. All this time, for three months, she'd been working on it.

"I'll never be able to wait till eight fifteen."

"You've got to, Harvey. You've got to promise you won't enter that room until a quarter after eight."

"All right—if it means that much."

She watched me. "Yes. It means that much." She hesitated. "Harvey?"

"What?" I got up from my chair.

"Oh, nothing. I'm going now. Remember—eight fifteen."

I couldn't help feeling rather excited. "Is it something I've always wanted?"

"Well, let's say it's something you've been looking for rather avidly lately."

"You're a puzzle, Elsa."

In the hall, I helped her on with her coat. She picked up her purse and moved to the door.

"Oh," I said. "Elsa—for goodness' sake, keep the car doors locked. You've got to remember the Black Hat Prowler. I wouldn't want anything to happen to you. Especially now—I mean, now that we've come to an agreement and all."

"I was sure that was what you meant, Harvey."

She was gone. I stood there. She had not smiled. This troubled me, but then we *had* come to some sort of settlement. I was actually going to know what was in the closed room. And if things worked out the way I expected there would be no more arguments. We would be as we had been before all this trouble.

Ten minutes later I was pacing the hall. It was five minutes to eight. For three months I had passed that closed door, that room, wondering what she was doing in there. Countless times I had tried the knob only to find it securely locked. I had questioned her over and over and it had always given rise to furious argument. But now it would all be settled. We would be all right again.

A surprise, she had said. . .

I blamed myself now. Everything was my fault. I experienced a painful sense of remorse and guilt. I had actually cursed her silently, pictured myself smashing her face. And all the time she had been planning something for me—a surprise. Something I'd wanted for some time.

I knew I couldn't wait. What did it matter? I could look now—it didn't have to be precisely at 8:15. And anyway, Elsa would never know.

I stopped in front of the door. The hall light gleamed on the oak panels, on the brass of the knob and the latch.

What if she had been teasing me? What if the door were still locked?

I tried the knob. The door clicked open.

I don't know what came over me, what prevented me from swinging the door wide, but I didn't. Perhaps it was because I wanted to prolong the happiness of looking forward to my surprise. I inched the door open, reached inside, and flipped on the light switch. The room blossomed with light. I could still see nothing—just a bare room. It had always been a bare room. We hadn't even used it for a storeroom. The garage had always sufficed for that.

I pushed the door open a bit more, overcome with sudden eager-

ness. And I'll never know what made me poke my head in between the door and the jamb for a look into the room, but it was lucky I did.

Three paces from the partially open door was a table with a metal rack on it. On the rack, pointed directly at the opening door, was a double-barreled shotgun. A sturdy length of twine ran through a diabolical Rube Goldberg series of pulleys and weights with one end fastened to the trigger of the shotgun, the other end to the door. If I'd opened the door another inch I'd have had my head blown off.

The shock was terrible. I couldn't move.

Elsa had planned my death—and at the same time she had planned her own perfect alibi. She would have been at our daughter Marjorie's when I was killed. She would return, disassemble the rack, the pulleys, and the shotgun, and hide them. Then she would call the police and blame it on the Black Hat Prowler.

It was all so pat.

I was stricken. She wanted me dead.

Instinctively, I backed into the hall, closing the door again. I was disconcerted; the revelation was almost too much to bear. Had I really seen that terrible contraption in the room?

I didn't get a chance to look again. I heard the front door open and slam against the wall.

"Harvey! Harvey!"

It was Elsa. I glanced at my watch. It was only a minute after eight. In a flash I decided what I would do. If I didn't appear, she would come to the room and open the door—

I thought I heard something from the back of the house, over her voice calling, "Harvey! Harvey, where are you—oh, God!"

She came running down the hall as I dodged into our bedroom, peering out through the crack between the door and the doorframe. She wanted me dead—well, I'd turn the tables. I was in a wild state of excitement, and my brain was fuzzed with fury. She would get hers. She would get what she'd arranged for me.

"Harvey! Oh, Harvey—please don't let it be true—"

What was she saying?

She ran directly to the door, grabbed the knob, and twisted it, her face pale.

I burst out into the hall. "Elsa—*don't open that door!*"

I leaped at her, caught her about the waist, and we stumbled down

the hall toward the living room. She was gasping, gripping my arms with tense fingers.

"Oh, Elsa—how could you want me dead?"

"Harvey, I—"

She didn't get a chance to finish saying whatever she had in mind, because there in the living room, staring at us with glinting eyes, was the Black Hat Prowler.

"Don't move," he ordered in a hoarse whisper. He held a big black automatic in his right hand and a coil of rope was slung over his shoulder. He looked like something out of a horror magazine. He stepped toward us and I could hear his harsh breathing. Elsa shrank against me, trembling.

He bound us, placing us on the couch. Then he stood there, his eyes narrowed and black. "I'll only ask once," he whispered. There must have been something wrong with his throat. "If you don't tell me the truth, you're goners." He took a long-bladed knife from beneath the flapping black cloak. "I'll slit both your throats—understand?"

"What do you want?" My throat was tight with fear.

"Where do you keep your money—your valuables?"

Elsa's voice was clear and true and she sounded as if she could never lie. "Down the hall—" she said bravely. "First door on the right."

"If you're lying you'll regret it."

"It's the truth," Elsa said simply.

He whirled and the black cloak swirled about him, the hat shadowing his angular features.

He pounded down the hall. Almost immediately there was a tremendous explosion.

We finally managed to work loose from the bonds, and we hid the rope. Then we went in there. He was lying sprawled blackly on the floor.

We dismantled the table, rack, shotgun, and pulleys, and put them all away in the closet except for the shotgun.

"I'll say I surprised him," I said.

"Fine," Elsa said, and gave me a tiny smile. "I'll phone the police now. We shouldn't wait too long, because somebody might have heard the gun go off."

She phoned the police, then we stood waiting.

"Elsa?" I said hesitantly.

"Yes?" She wouldn't look at me.

"You came back before eight fifteen."

"Yes."

"But we both had the same thought of killing each other. We're both monsters, Elsa."

"Yes. We know what we are now, Harvey. We've truly come to terms."

"Yes."

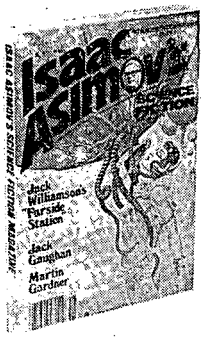
"I think we won't argue any more now. And I think—I think maybe I love you a little still."

I held her close and kissed her forehead.

"Does everybody go through this?" I asked.

Elsa looked back toward the room, the door open now. "I wonder."

Now Monthly



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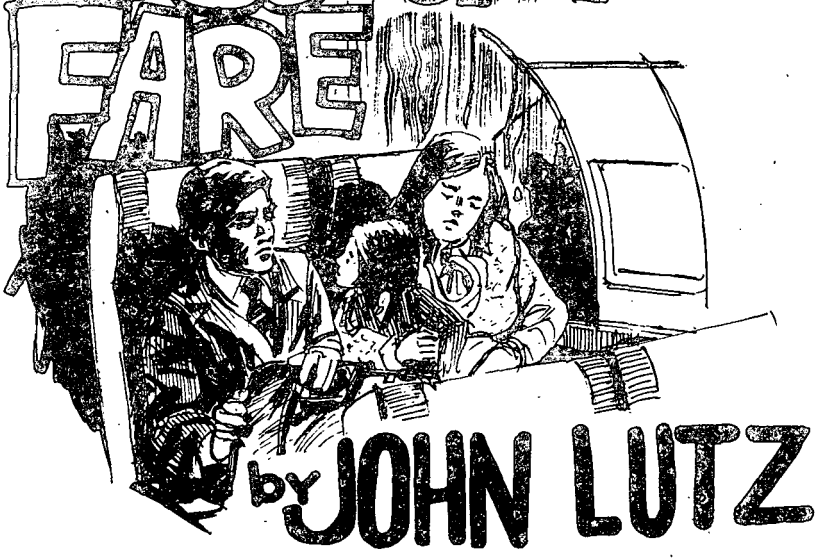
Milner had Small World Airways' Cheap-Chargers Six-City discount ticket . . .

DISCOUNT FARE



by JOHN LUTZ

Milner hurried through the bustling terminal building, clutching his scuffed brown two-suiter suitcase. Around him fellow travelers were striding purposefully in the same direction, some of them carrying attaché cases or carry-on garment bags. A nasal voice on the airport's public-address system droned in the background announcing departing and arriving flights.

As Milner approached the Small World Airways reservation counter,

he was glad to see that there was only a short line. The trip to New York on business had come up unexpectedly, and his secretary had phoned for his reservation. He had only to pick up his boarding pass, check his luggage, and walk to the departure gate on the lower concourse.

The line moved quickly, and when Milner reached the counter a blue-vested SWA reservations clerk smiled prettily at him. He smiled back and told her his name and that he had a reservation.

After punching some buttons and scanning the screen of a small grey computer, the girl glanced up at him, no longer smiling.

"This line is for full-fare passengers, sir. I'm afraid you'll have to join that line." She pointed to a long line at the other end of the counter.

"Don't I have a full-fare ticket? My secretary made the reservation."

"You have our Small World Airways Cheap-Chargers Six-City discount ticket, sir."

"Well, couldn't I—"

"I'm sorry, sir, it's too late to change your reservation. The flight leaves in twenty minutes."

A small man with a sharply receding hairline and mild blue eyes, Milner knew from experience that he wasn't the persuasive type. Besides, there was no time to argue. He nodded to the girl and joined the longer line.

Milner found himself standing behind a heavy-set woman carrying a child of about three. The child—Milner couldn't be sure of its sex—glared over the woman's shoulder at him with absolute hostility.

Ten minutes later, when Milner was halfway to the counter, the child spat at him. Milner backed up a step and looked around to see if anyone else had witnessed this extraordinary breach of etiquette. When he turned back he found that a large man carrying a black sample case had crowded into line ahead of him. Milner cursed silently but said nothing.

Finally he reached the counter. A squat woman with acne and a huge nose soberly filled out his boarding pass.

"I have one suitcase to check," Milner told her.

"Discount-fare passengers must carry on luggage under twenty-four by seven by twenty inches," she informed him, squinting over the counter at his suitcase.

"I've never measured—"

"You'll have to carry that one on with you, sir." She handed him his boarding pass.

"But I've always checked this suitcase."

"Gate twenty-nine," she said.

An elbow jabbed into Milner's ribs and he was forced aside. He lifted his suitcase and began walking toward the gate.

When he reached the departure gate, he was surprised to see that there were few people in line waiting to board the plane. He handed his boarding pass to the attendant to process. He was not asked for a seat preference. Careful to avoid the fat woman with the hateful child, he joined the line several passengers behind her.

When they boarded the plane, Milner saw that the first-class and full-fare passengers had already boarded and were drinking complimentary cocktails. The plane was going to be full. A sign proclaimed that the rear of the plane was where discount-fare passengers were to sit. There was a mild scramble for seats. Milner found himself beside the fat woman with the malevolent child.

"I'm sorry," she said as the child kicked Milner. "He's a problem, Damon is. Probably always will be."

"I hope not," Milner told her, and fastened his seat belt.

His suitcase wouldn't quite fit beneath the seat, and when he pointed this out to a stewardess she informed him that he would have to hold it on his lap.

"I thought that was against safety regulations," Milner said.

"The regulations have been waived for discount-fare passengers, sir," she said, hurrying off.

It would only be for a few hours, Milner assured himself, squeezing the heavy suitcase onto his lap, then he would be off the plane and in the comparatively courteous atmosphere of a New York taxi. The plane took off smoothly. A small clenched fist began to beat on Milner's suitcase as if it were a drum.

Shortly after they reached cruising altitude, the stewardesses began rolling their service tray along the aisle as they handed out SWA lunches and beverages. Milner watched the two attractive women bend gracefully and smile, not once spilling a drop of coffee or soda.

By the time they reached the tail section, the plane was flying through rough air. Milner could feel every bump against the firm upholstery as his body was compressed by the heavy suitcase.

A stewardess handed him a watercress sandwich and a bag of cheese snacks. This didn't look at all like the food served to the full-fare passengers.

"I'll have a cup of coffee," Milner told the stewardess.

She poured it dutifully and handed Milner the scalding paper cup. "That will be one dollar."

Milner looked up at her in surprise, balancing the lunch and the hot cup on his suitcase. "I thought meals were complimentary."

"They are, sir, but not the beverages—for discount-fare passengers."

Milner contorted himself beneath his burden and extracted a dollar from his wallet.

When the stewardess had gone, he looked at his meal. At least the lettuce in the sandwich was fresh. He'd skipped lunch, so he was hungry enough to settle for anything. He peered closely. There was a small bear-shaped cookie floating in his coffee. As he watched, the hot liquid disintegrated it.

Milner ate the sandwich and cheese snacks but skipped the coffee. Next to him a tiny voice began to complain about the missing cookie.

When they'd been airborne for over an hour, the captain's voice came over the speaker system announcing that they would soon put down in Pittsburgh and that the weather there was fine.

Pittsburgh? Milner was going to New York! He began signaling frantically for the stewardess, who was adjusting the seat of a full-fare passenger. Pinned as he was in his own seat, Milner waved both arms and a leg violently until the stewardess glanced in his direction. A moustached man across the aisle shook his head and pretended to read a paperback novel, obviously disdainful of Milner.

When the petite blonde stewardess arrived, Milner asked why they were landing in Pittsburgh.

She arched elongated penciled eyebrows. "Why, it's our destination, sir."

"But I'm going to New York. My ticket says New York!"

She produced an SWA smile. "Yes, sir. But there's a two-hour layover in Pittsburgh."

"My ticket doesn't say that!"

"It must, sir."

Shifting the weight of his suitcase, Milner withdrew his ticket and examined it. The stewardess was right.

"Full-fare passengers are booked on the through flight to New York, sir. All discount-fare passengers change planes at Pittsburgh."

"But I don't *want* to stop at Pittsburgh!"

She looked at him oddly—"I'm sorry, sir"—and moved smartly up the aisle.

"I have to be in New York before three o'clock," Milner said to the woman beside him. "On business."

She nodded unconcernedly. The child in her lap glared at Milner.

The plane flew through a sharp downdraft and the tail section lurched crazily, its motion exaggerated by its distance from the wings. Milner had forgotten about his coffee. The now-icy liquid spilled over his suitcase and down onto his pants. He was wearing a new suit, and the coffee would stain unless he could dilute it with water. Milner reached beneath the sopping suitcase and worked to unbuckle his seat belt. He attempted to smile at the woman but couldn't. "Pardon me," he said, "I have to go to the rest room."

She stared ahead as if he'd suggested something vulgar.

When his seat belt was unbuckled, he tried to swivel in his seat so he could stand, and in the process drove a corner of the suitcase into Damon's chubby side. Finally upright in the aisle, Milner bent forward to apologize. That was when Damon grabbed a ballpoint pen from Milner's pocket and plunged it into Milner's left ear.

Milner retrieved his pen and, his hand clamped to his wounded ear, he teetered to the rear of the plane.

Inside the cold, confining rest room, he forgot about toweling the stain from his pants. The ringing in his horribly aching ear was maddening, causing him occasionally to shudder.

Pittsburgh! He didn't want to go to Pittsburgh!

Methodically, hardly conscious of what he was doing, he unwrapped several of the small bars of soap and held them under the water until they'd soaked and welded into one another. Then, with fingers possessed, he began to mold them into the form of a gun.

When the gun was finished he let it dry to firmness, then slipped it into his suit-coat pocket. If he covered it with a handkerchief it would seem real enough.

He left the rest room and made his way toward the blonde stewardess, who was standing near the door to the pilot's compartment. A few of the full-fare passengers glanced at him as he went by.

"This is a gun," he said softly to the stewardess. He saw her eyes widen, fooled by the carefully molded contour beneath the white handkerchief. "Into the pilot's compartment," he commanded.

"What is this?" the pilot asked as they entered. He'd been reading a news magazine while occasionally checking the automatic pilot. "Regulations forbid anyone unauthorized in the cockpit."

"He's got a gun," the stewardess whispered.

The copilot, who had been idly toying with an unlighted cigarette, glanced around quickly and began to stand.

"Steady, Harry," the pilot said. Harry settled back down in his seat. "What do you want?" the pilot asked.

The ringing in Milner's ear was almost gone now, but it was of higher pitch. "We're going where I say."

"Cuba?"

"New York. And not Newark Airport. La Guardia. It costs a fortune to take a cab from Newark."

"But you have a connecting flight to New York from Pittsburgh," the stewardess said impatiently.

"Change course," Milner told the pilot, who nodded resignedly.

The plane banked sharply and began its turn.

The stewardess stumbled into Milner and the copilot stood up and grabbed at the gun. As the two men struggled, the soap flew out from between them onto the floor beneath the copilot's seat. The stewardess and the pilot scrambled for it. The stewardess found it, straightened, and tried to point it at Milner, but it slipped from her grasp.

"It's not a real gun!" the pilot cried, and, standing, he struck Milner with his fist. Milner sank to the cockpit floor and pretended to be unconscious.

"The controls!" the copilot said in alarm. "We're losing altitude!"

"There's no cause for concern," the pilot said. "I can set us down." The smooth tailoring of his uniform lent confidence.

There was a hurried conference between the pilot, copilot, and stewardess and Milner could hear the passengers in a turmoil on the other side of the closed door. The stewardess went out to calm them.

"We're having mechanical difficulties," she said in an almost-cheerful voice, "but don't worry. Our captain is going to land the plane in the Monongahela River."

"I'll put her down so gently you'll hardly know it," the pilot broke in over the speaker system.

There was near-panic among the passengers as they felt the plane descend. Seizing the moment, Milner crept from the pilot's compartment and lost himself among the frightened passengers. Then suddenly, as smoothly as the pilot had promised, the plane was down. There had been only an unexpected series of jolts.

"Don't be alarmed," the pilot advised the passengers. "The aircraft will float long enough for everyone to disembark through the emergency exits." Indeed, passengers were already disembarking as Milner felt the cold waters of the Monongahela lap at his shins.

Making himself as inconspicuous as possible, he stood and got into line for what was so far a remarkably calm and orderly deplaning. Once away from the plane, he would make his escape and somehow try to make amends for his temporary madness.

The blonde stewardess was standing alongside the nearest emergency door, directing people as they left the plane. The cold water was now above Milner's knees.

He reached the door. The stewardess had a bump on her forehead and her eyes were slightly glazed. She was in mild shock, Milner imagined, and didn't recognize him when she moved him aside with her arm and said, "Full-fare passengers deplane first in emergency procedures, sir." As the water rose, people rushed quickly past Milner and out the door.

"Full-fare passengers deplane first," the stewardess repeated as the water rose faster.

When the water was nearly to Milner's neck, "Full-fare passengers first," the stewardess announced for the final time, and she swam out the door with a flick of her shapely ankles.

Milner tried to protest, but the icy water reached his mouth, his nose, and swirled over his head.

As the aircraft settled nose up on the bottom of the Monongahela River, Milner's body sank slowly to the rear of the plane.

The seniors had an old score to settle . . .

TRIAL BY FURY

by CARYL BRAHMS and NED SHERRIN

The lengthening shadows had reached the shrubbery that surrounded St. Jude's, an obscure school contained in a Victorian Gothic country house in the South West of England—its only extravagant gesture the luxuriance of eaves and gables silhouetted now against the setting sun.

Two dissonant features clashed with the vision of the unsung nineteenth-century architect—a solid yellow-brick bathhouse, added in 1932 for the purpose of cleaning up the boys if not the lines of the

building, and the jagged remains of the school chapel, indiscriminately blitzed to fragments by a German bomber that had lost its way six years earlier.

By now, in 1949, the building fund had still not taken off and morning prayers were still said in the school hall to the annoyance of the headmaster, the Reverend Mervyn Medway-Jones. The Reverend Medway-Jones felt that the fruity baritone with which he led the morning hymn deserved a better fate than its regular interruption by the piercing whistle of the 9:05 Express making up time through the railway cutting at the end of the school vegetable garden.

The Reverend Medway-Jones was pouring himself a generous glass of sherry and passing a more modest half measure to Birkenshaw, his assistant head. Slowly, they toasted one another.

"A particularly good prospectus this year, Headmaster." It needed to be, he thought. The school's accounts were nearly as depressing as the outside of the building.

But the Reverend Medway-Jones accepted the compliment. "I think the final paragraph reads well." He quoted it. "No prospectus of St. Jude's would be complete which did not declare our overall policy. The aim of the school is to turn out not future Prime Ministers, not intellectual freaks, not athletic morons, but good citizens." He paused. "A nice touch, that." He suddenly became earthbound. "Anything I've left out, Birkenshaw?"

"Have you mentioned the bathhouse, sir?"

"Damn it, no."

"That always fascinates the mothers."

"Let's see what we said last year." Reverend Medway-Jones delved into his desk. "The school places a special emphasis on personal hygiene and to this end the Waverley Bathhouse was built in 1932. Three baths a week per pupil are encouraged during the winter and enforced during the summer."

"That takes care of the washing."

"I go on to speak of the souls of the little bastards," said the Reverend Medway-Jones. "Our task is to find the individual, or rather to help him find himself. Personality is developed—and, alongside it, initiative. The boys are encouraged to take matters into their own hands. For example, each year each house organizes a mock trial. This is not, of course, to make our old boys feel at home in the dock—"

The sycophantic Birkenshaw echoed the headmaster's laugh. "That's a new slant, Headmaster."

"Yes. I'm rather pleased with that." He read on. "We hope to give them useful practice in public speaking and a healthy respect for British justice."

Inside the Waverley Bathhouse, Christopher Seasalter hurled the soap across to Ronald Firth. Christopher was head of Glennister House and Ronnie and he were leaving at the end of term.

"You know what next Tuesday is?"

"Of course I know. Five years to the day!"

"It doesn't seem like five years."

"It seems ages to me, Chris. We've waited a long time for Tuesday night. We've waited a long time for this mock trial."

"Talked and thought and dreamed about it."

"This is one dream that's going to turn into someone else's nightmare."

"With you as judge that's a cert."

"Not me, Chris! I'm not smooth enough. You'll be the judge."

"Oh," said Christopher, seeing himself. "Oh!"

At a glance they were an unlikely pair of allies: Christopher Seasalter, the son of a barrister who, out of a vague feeling for tradition, had sent him to his own old school even though he knew it to be in decline, and Ronnie Firth, whose scholarship had lifted him away from the drab village railway station where his father was not even stationmaster but only the porter, ticket collector, and odd-job man.

"Chuck us your flannel," said Ronnie.

"Don't be silly," Christopher said. "It's not hygienic."

Mr. Glennister surveyed the seniors without undue sorrow at the prospect of the parting that lay ahead. The mock trial was the last ritual of the school year. "Trial by jury," he said. "Trial by twelve idiots believing the last man who spoke." A couple of boys tittered. "We don't have to seek far for the judge, do we?" Glennister had always been the judge.

Ronnie's sharp voice cut across the housemaster's assumption. "Christopher's going to be the judge this year, sir."

"Oh, no, Ronnie. That's my job."

"Not this year, sir. It's not a good idea this year."

"It's not a question of a good idea. The housemaster's always the judge. It has to be someone in authority."

"Christopher's father is a K.C., sir. It's only fair."

Glennister tried a new tack. "I don't suppose for one moment that Christopher wants to be judge."

Christopher's answer was quiet, assured. "Oh, yes I do, sir. I want it very much."

"But it must be someone in authority."

Masterman, the boy whose voice had taken the longest to break, piped up, "Please, sir. Christopher wears glasses."

"So do you, Masterman, but I doubt if you'd make a good judge."

"But I don't want to be the judge, sir." Masterman was the school masochist. "I want to be the victim."

Ronnie took advantage of the general titter. "Christopher's got to be judge, sir, like I said. I mean, it's up to us to decide who's going to be what. It always has been."

Glennister stiffened. "It's quite settled, Ronnie."

"But, sir, it's practice in public speaking. Like it says in the prospectus."

Christopher added wily charm to Ronnie's stubborn defiance. "And you don't need practice in public speaking, sir, do you? I mean, you do it so well already."

Masterman was on his feet again. "My mother says that speech you made to the Parents' Association was absolutely super, sir."

Glennister refused to be mollified. "Keeping order is not always as easy as you boys seem to think."

"I'd like to have a go at it, sir."

"You must see that justice is done."

"I'll do my best, sir."

Glennister gave in gracelessly. "Oh, all right. No one can say I'm not a good sport."

The boys looked at one another and smiled.

Glennister conducted the rest of the session with ostentatious disinterest. "Who do you want as prosecuting counsel?"

"Ronnie, sir."

"Any other suggestions? Anyone? All right, Ronnie it will be. And who shall we be hearing for the defense?"

Christopher suggested Masterman.

"Give the criminal a chance."

Out of the boys' laughter Christopher said, "Oh, yes, sir, we must do that." Steel had entered his voice.

"Exactly. Remember what I taught you. Justice must not only be done, it must manifestly be *seen* to be done."

"We won't forget," said Ronnie under his breath.

The captain of cricket volunteered his services.

"Do you think you'll be able to cope with the procedural complexities, Gary?"

"I'll have a go, sir."

"Then we only have one person to choose. Who's going to be the criminal?"

Ronnie and Christopher answered together.

"You, sir."

"Me?"

"That's right, sir. You."

"Certainly not. I will have no part in it."

"We don't want you to be left out, sir."

"That's very considerate, Christopher, but it's an honor I must decline. Aren't you forgetting that I shall be depriving someone of practice in public speaking?"

"You won't have to speak, sir. You just say 'Guilty' or 'Not guilty,' depending on which way you decide to plead."

"It's out of the question. I won't hear of it."

Glennister's defense counsel wouldn't let him off the hook. "Leave it to me, sir. I'll make sure it's a fair match."

Christopher clinched it. "No one can say you're not a good sport, sir."

"Oh, well," said Glennister, resigned. "What's the charge?"

"There's only one charge worth trying, sir. Murder."

In Christopher's study the judge and prosecuting counsel were engaged in a little collusion.

"What facts are you cooking up for the mock trial, Chris?"

"I'll think of something."

"We couldn't use the real ones?"

"Can you see Glennister coming into the dock if we do?"

"Frankly, no."

"Well, that's where we want him, Ronnie."

"Yes. I hope it works out."

"It will if we time it right. Look, the buses take the rest of the school off to the Bristol Old Vic at six. Our little show rings up at seven. We mustn't give him any idea of what we're up to until we've got him safely in the dock."

"Once I get him in the box I'll go through him like a knife through butter."

"Don't forget, we're not looking for revenge—we're looking for justice."

"It's the same thing, isn't it?" Then a doubt entered Ronnie's mind. "Chris?"

"What?"

"What about Matron?"

"What about her?"

"She came last year."

"She didn't."

"She did. I sat next to her. She was there from start to finish. I think she's got a crush on Glennister."

"On Glennister? She can't have!"

However, on the afternoon of the trial Matron settled the raging doubt herself. She was pouring a second cup of tea for Mr. Glennister.

"You always look forward to the mock trial. Your voice will need all the lubrication it can get."

"Not this year, Mrs. MacFarlane."

"There, I knew something was the matter. I can always tell. Would an aspirin help?"

"Thank you, Matron, but it's not a headache that's bothering me."

"You make such a good judge."

"This year I'm not to be the judge. This year they've chosen Christopher Seasalter. They've maneuvered me into the dock."

Matron could hardly believe her keen Scottish ears.

"According to the fiction they've invented, I'm supposed to have murdered Masterman."

Matron nodded sympathetically. "That's something I've often wanted to do. What was your motive?"

"He's supposed to have seen me fiddling the funds of the Old Boys Association. And I'm supposed to have lured him down the garden path, across the lawn, through the kitchen vegetable garden, and then pushed him under the 9:30 Express."

"If you're not going to be judge, I shan't mind missing it so much."

"You won't be there?"

"No. The Jones boy is running a temperature and he needs careful nursing. We can't do that by committee."

Glennister was mulling over his own grievance. "A practice in public speaking, indeed! I'd like to see the head in the dock being cross-examined by a prefect. It's not going to make discipline any easier for me tomorrow."

"Och!" soothed Matron, "they're only a pack of boys playing a game."

The pack of boys assembled for the trial behind the steeply ranked desks of the main lecture hall. The last of the buses bearing the rest of the school to the blood bath of *Macbeth* at the Bristol Old Vic had left an hour before, leaving the Gothic pile strangely quiet.

"The court will be upstanding."

Christopher, arrayed in a master's gown and an old wig borrowed from his father, made his dignified entrance.

"Dennis Glennister, you stand charged upon the indictment with murder and the particulars state that on Tuesday the eighteenth of June five years ago to this day, you did cause John Hopkinson to take his life."

Glennister was on his feet and pounding the desk before him. "Hopkinson?" he shouted. "What had that unfortunate boy to do with this mock trial?"

"But this is not a mock trial, Mr. Glennister, it's the real thing." Christopher resumed his formal voice. "You did cause John Hopkinson to take his life and in this manner did murder him. To this charge do you plead guilty or not guilty?"

"I refuse to take any further part in this charade! Christopher Seasalter and Ronald Firth, report to my study immediately!"

No one moved.

"Just a minute, Mr. Glennister," said the judge. "You can't stop your trial. It's on now."

"It is not on! This ridiculous game is over! You are not a judge any more! Open the door, boy!"

"Don't open the door, David."

"O.K., Christopher."

Glennister lunged toward it. Hands held him roughly. "Stand back!" he insisted. "Let me through!"

"Don't let him through, David." Christopher's voice was gaining in authority. "You'd be wiser to come back to the dock, Mr. Glennister. If you don't come of your own accord we shall have to make you."

"If this is a joke, it isn't funny."

"This isn't a joke, Mr. Glennister," Christopher said bitterly. "It's the real thing."

There was resentment in Ronnie's voice too. "We've waited a long time for tonight."

"Hadn't you better tell me just what you're up to?"

"Counsel for the Prosecution will make that clear."

It had taken a long time to prepare the indictment. Five years. Ronnie opened his case with an unsteady voice.

"John Hopkinson died five years ago today. He was twelve years old. We were all about twelve or thirteen at the time. We were all new here and you hadn't been here very long, Mr. Glennister. We were just settling down, getting to know one another, making our friends, sorting out our enemies.

"Christopher and Johnny and me—we were always together. And then one day some money was missing. It was stolen from the pavilion from one of the visiting team. There was all hell let loose. At first everyone was suspected, and then quite suddenly only one person was suspected—Johnny. Nobody knew why. At least, we didn't. Christopher and I didn't suspect him, we knew him.

"But you sent for him, Mr. Glennister. You questioned him and you cross-questioned him. You broke him down—you made him cry. And when he still wouldn't say he'd done it you went to the headmaster. Then the headmaster started cross-questioning him and he wouldn't believe Johnny until it was more than Johnny could bear. He came back and told us they were going to send for his father to take him away. And that was more than he could bear too. We found him in the gym . . ."

"All right, all right. I know you found him in the gym."

"And when we cut him down he was dead. I'd never seen anyone dead before. A friend—a friend that had come and gone in no time at all. And you killed him."

"You mean you've been holding this against me all this time, Ronnie?"

"You killed him, Mr. Glennister."

"Wait a minute, Ronnie," Christopher interrupted from the bench. "That's what we're going to try."

"I refuse to take part in this morbid nonsense."

"That's up to you, Mr. Glennister, because if you don't prove you're innocent—"

"Well? Finish your sentence."

"We shall have to find you guilty."

"Guilty of what, may I ask?"

"Guilty of murder."

"And then we'll all go upstairs and drink our cocoa?"

"Not tonight, Mr. Glennister. All of us here, we're all in this together and we shall carry out the sentence on you."

"You'll use the school gallows, of course. Strange that the headmaster makes no mention of that in the prospectus."

"Oh, we have the means, Mr. Glennister. Your study is on the side near the railway line, isn't it? Just before the 10:10 is due we shall all go with you, through the French windows, across the lawn, nicely shielded by those thick black yew trees, through the shrubbery and the kitchen vegetables and down to the embankment. And when the train's gone by and it's quiet again, we shall come back."

Ronnie's smile had gone. "Don't worry. You're guilty all right—"

"If we acquit you," Christopher interrupted, "that's an end of the "You see, justice will not only have been done—it will also manifestly *not* have been seen to have been done."

"Justice! And if you decide that I am innocent—three hearty cheers, or what?"

Ronnie's smile had gone. "Don't worry. You're guilty all right—"

"If we acquit you," Christopher interupted, "that's an end of the matter. We shall never speak of it again."

"And you think I shall keep quiet? I'll have you up before the headmaster. I'll have you beaten. I'll have you expelled."

"We shall have to take a chance on that."

"You can't really believe you have the right to sit in judgment on me."

"Can't we?"

"Some of you weren't even here at the time."

"Twelve to be precise. They form the jury."

"I can't believe that twelve silly boys can set themselves to try me for something I obviously didn't do, five years ago."

"Shall we proceed?" said the judge.

"No, we will not! David, are you taking this thing seriously?"

"Yes."

"James, do you imagine you can try me?"

"Yes."

"Phillip, you're not having anything to do with this?"

"Yes, sir."

"Jack?"

"Yes."

"Dominic!"

"Yes."

"Donald!"

"Yes."

"*Bill?*" The roll call had risen to a wail. The answers were quiet and matter-of-fact.

"Yes."

"*Gary, you cannot be taking this thing seriously?*"

"I'm defending you."

"It's monstrous! One of your friends, a boy you all liked, died, and you are turning it into a game."

"It's not a game. It never was a game. We are taking it seriously."

"You're mad. You're all of you mad!"

Christopher was willing to concede that. "Yes, I think we may be a little. We've thought about it so much."

Ronnie's emotion took over. "We've thought about Johnny for so long, those of us who knew him. And those who didn't we've told. We've kept him alive. It was up to us. We've got you where we want you at last and you're going to answer for what you did."

"I am, am I?" Glennister's control cracked again. His shouts echoed through the empty school. "Hey! Someone! Anyone! Glennister here!"

The boys let him exhaust himself. "Aren't you forgetting they've all gone to the Old Vic?" Ronnie said. "We're here alone."

"Except for Matron." Christopher let in the false ray of hope.

"Help!"

"But she won't hear you," Christopher added quietly. "She's in the sanitorium looking after the Jones boy."

The judge spoke into the silence. "Dennis Glennister. To the charge of murder, do you plead guilty or not guilty?"

The silence seemed to last forever before Glennister spat out the words, "Not guilty."

The boys relaxed. He had accepted their jurisdiction. He was pleading for his life.

Ronnie rose, formally this time. "May it please your Lordship, gentlemen of the jury, you have just heard the charge. We know why the prisoner is in the dock—because he drove Johnny Hopkinson to suicide."

Defense counsel was on his feet. "Your honor, I object."

"Wait a minute, Gary." Glennister's voice shot up an octave. "There's something I want you all to get clear. From now on, I'm speaking for myself."

"I'll defend you as well as I can, Mr. Glennister. I'll put all I've got into it."

"Thank you, Gary, but as I'm the only person here who knows *all* the facts in the case, I think I'd better put them before you myself. You may call it conducting my own defense—I prefer to call it clearing up a misunderstanding."

The judge conceded the point. "If you wish, Mr. Glennister. It's only fair."

Ronnie continued with the prosecution.

"Gentlemen of the jury, I'm going to show you why he did it, where he did it, and how he did it. And when I've proved all that, I'm going to prove to you beyond all reasonable doubt that what he did was the thing that made Johnny take his own life.

"First of all, then—why did Mr. Glennister kill Johnny? What was his motive? I don't think we have to look very far. Mr. Glennister didn't like Johnny. It was the same at that other school, he was always on at him."

Dominic, the foreman of the jury, rose to his feet. "Christopher, may I ask Ronnie a question?"

"Certainly, Dominic. It's your duty as foreman to clear up any points that may be puzzling the jury."

"Ronnie said 'that other school.' What other school?"

"Johnny's prep school. Mr. Glennister was a master there before he came here. That's where the trouble started. Johnny said he never knew why. It was just that Mr. Glennister didn't seem to like him. Johnny said that when he arrived to find that Mr. Glennister had come here as a housemaster, he nearly ran away. Looking at it now, it might have been the best thing. There isn't any doubt in my mind that Mr. Glennister was persecuting Johnny and I shall prove it.

"Let's go on to the next thing. We may not have picked up much law in Mr. Glennister's civics lessons, but he did teach us one thing—where to go for the answers. Christopher and I have been going through *Kenny's Outlines of Criminal Law* pretty thoroughly these last few months. On page one hundred and forty-six, Kenny gives us a clear definition of murder and here it is."

He opened the heavy book at a passage he had marked. " 'Unlawfully killing a reasonable creature who is in being and under the Queen's peace, with malice aforethought either express or implied; the death following within a year and a day.' "

Glennister tried what reason would do. "You know, Christopher, hearing Ronnie read those words makes me think of all the clever men of law and all the years it took them to clarify a point like this. All the trouble those trained brains took to define a murder—and why? So that if a man should come into the dock and be charged with killing another man he should not be hanged unless he deserved to be. How can you hope, Christopher, knowing as little as you do, feeling as strongly as you do, keeping a rosy memory of Johnny alive and a burning sense of the wrongs done him as you have—how can you really imagine that you're going to give me justice here tonight?"

"I don't know, sir—but it's our only chance to get justice for Johnny."

"Johnny is dead. He killed himself. He couldn't face the consequences of what he had done."

"You will have your chance to address us later, Mr. Glennister. I must ask you to let counsel for the prosecution continue now."

"If we must discuss this unfortunate affair, why can't we sit down and discuss it? Why must we play at judge and jury?"

"Because it's the way we've chosen to do it, Mr. Glennister. We felt we owed it to Johnny, and to our consciences. Go on, Ronnie."

"Now it's clear if you read this book that the law states that to kill somebody you don't have to stick a knife into him or put the poison in the cup. It's enough to perform an act which sets the chain of consequences in motion—an act that makes the victim want to call it a day. Mr. Glennister did not have to tie the noose and kick away the stool from under Johnny. It was enough that he made him so wretched that he put his head in the noose of his own accord. That is murder."

"I shall have something to say about that later, Christopher."

"Of course, sir."

"That's *how* Mr. Glennister killed Johnny." Into the loaded silence Ronnie moved on to his second point.

"Now about the 'malice aforethought.' Mr. Glennister stored up plenty of malice for Johnny. I shall now call witnesses who will be able to prove that."

One after the other the boys took the witness stand to dredge up a record of Glennister's persecution of Johnny. Glennister heard the accusations in silence until Ronnie called Sidney Bloom.

"Now, Sidney, you saw a lot of Johnny about the time of the theft. How did he seem to you?"

"He seemed nervous, very nervous."

"Did he seem guilty?"

"Oh, no, not guilty—worried. But he *couldn't* have taken the money, could he?"

"Why not?"

"Because he asked me to lend him ten bob the very next day."

"And did you?"

"Certainly—he was my friend."

"Any questions, Mr. Glennister?"

Glennister seemed genuinely puzzled. "What's the point you're making, Ronnie?"

"I think, sir, it proves that Johnny didn't steal the money. He wouldn't have borrowed from Sidney if he'd been flush. He wouldn't have needed to. And that reminds me—Sidney?"

"Yes, Ronnie?"

"Did Mr. Glennister know at the time that Johnny had borrowed ten bob from you?"

"Sure, I went and told him."

"And what did he say?"

"Glennister? He just told me to shut up and sent for Johnny and started going at him again."

"You see, gentlemen of the jury, Mr. Glennister was not impressed. He didn't want to find out if Johnny was guilty or not. He just wanted to make life unpleasant for him."

"Why, Ronnie?" the accused asked. "Why should I have wanted to make life unpleasant for Johnny?"

"You have your favorites and your unfavorites, Mr. Glennister."

"Which do you think you are, Ronnie?"

"Well, I've been one of your favorites—up to now—but that hasn't fooled me."

"Yes, you have. You've always puzzled me, you and Christopher. You seem to be interested and aware, and I like that. You're a little prickly and Christopher is a little pompous and there's always been something I couldn't quite fathom—perhaps this is what it was—but I've always liked you."

The judge interceded. "It's the jury you should be flattering, Mr. Glennister, not us."

"I am not flattering you!" Glennister burst out. "I am paying you the compliment of treating you as adults. Ronnie—" He turned to the boy.

"Yes."

"You say Johnny wasn't guilty."

"I know he wasn't."

"You say I had no reason to suppose he was."

"You hadn't and you knew it."

"You thought I just wanted to persecute him?"

"Why else did you sneak on him? Why else did you take him to the headmaster? You practically dragged him into that study."

"Was anyone else under suspicion?"

"Not once you'd got going."

"Did you suspect anyone else?"

"No."

"Nobody at all?"

"No."

"But the money disappeared."

"Yes."

"Would you agree it was important for the culprit to be found?"

"I don't know. Why should it be?"

"The honor of the school was at stake."

"So was Johnny's life! I'm glad you think you saved the honor of the school, Mr. Glennister—otherwise they'd have had to bring the fees down, wouldn't they?"

Glennister lowered his voice with a show of control.

"I'm trying to show you it was important for the culprit to be found."

"You mean it was important for you to find that the culprit was Johnny. Then you'd have it both ways. It would put you in good with the headmaster, and rid the school of Johnny, whyever you wanted that."

"I had good reason to suspect that Johnny did it."

Christopher rapped with his ruler. "I cannot allow this line of questioning to go any further. We're not here to try Johnny or to prove who stole the money. We're here to try you, Mr. Glennister, because some of us believe that by sneaking on him you killed him."

"But I'm doing my best to show you I was justified in taking Johnny to the head. I had to do it."

"Why?"

"You boys think you know everything. Ronnie, did you know everything about Johnny?"

"I knew a lot about him. He was my friend."

"Did you know, for instance, that Johnny was expelled from his last school for stealing?"

There was a moment's silence and then Ronnie said, "You're lying."

Glennister held up the Bible. "I swear by Almighty God that the evidence I shall give before this self-appointed court shall be the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth. So help me, God."

"You say Johnny was expelled for stealing?" Christopher could not bring himself to believe it.

Ronnie rallied. "Then they were just as blind at that school as they were here."

"They weren't blind, Ronnie. Johnny was seen doing it. He was caught red-handed."

"Well, he didn't tell us."

"Tell you? Would you have told anyone if you had done what he did? Of course he didn't tell you. And that's why he was uneasy about me. When he arrived here, I called him to my study and told him that as far as I was concerned the past was the past and we never need speak of it again so long as he behaved in the way I genuinely hoped he would in the future. And I did give him that chance. I trusted him completely—for as long as I could. But I couldn't let the whole school stay under suspicion when I had good reason to believe that I knew the culprit."

There was a murmuring among the jury and the foreman stood up. "The jury has a question to ask, Christopher."

"What is it?"

"You've talked to us a lot about Johnny. He's become sort of a legend. But you never told us he was expelled and we've got to take it into account—it's only fair."

"*If* it's true," Ronnie cautioned him. "If you can believe Mr. Glennister."

"You can believe me. I'm on my oath—I'm the only person in this room who is on oath."

"I think it is time I clarified a point for the jury," Christopher said. "Mr. Glennister has tried to make us believe that Johnny stole money before he came here—and he may have done. But that doesn't prove he stole a second time. It doesn't prove anything. If it did, each time a crime occurred the police would only arrest people who had been inside before. It's well known that if the police bring a person before the courts and charge him with a crime, his previous record is not disclosed until after he has been tried for that crime on the facts of the case. Isn't that so, Mr. Glennister?"

"Yes."

"And yet when you had Johnny crying in your study, when you had him up before the head, all you had against him was a crime he had done before—in other words, his previous record."

"It was my duty to inform the headmaster of his previous record."

"Inform? That makes you an informer!" Ronnie said contemptuously.

Christopher interceded. "Can't you see what we're trying you for? We're trying you for driving Johnny beyond the point he could bear. He took his own life and it was your fault."

"The line of guilt leads straight to you, Glennister," said Ronnie, "straight as a rope, and it's enough to hang you. Johnny was innocent. You told on him and because of that Johnny killed himself."

"You've called this a court of justice," said the master. "All right, let's look at your justice. You've called it a court of law. All right, let's have a look at this law. You've quoted Kenny. All right, let me refer to Kenny. I'll read you another passage."

He grabbed the book. " 'It was held by Baron Martin in the King versus Monks in 1870 that if an engine driver negligently caused a collision, and a passenger, on seeing this collision to be imminent, jumps out of the train and is killed by the jump, the liability of the engine driver for the manslaughter of this passenger will depend on the question whether a man of ordinary self-control would have thus jumped, or only a man unreasonably timid.' "

"What's that got to do with Johnny?"

"Well, I am the engine driver; Johnny was the passenger. I was doing my duty as I saw it when Johnny jumped out of the train. The point is whether, given the same circumstances, any of you boys would have jumped. Would you have kicked away the stool as Johnny did?"

"I'm not here to give answers, Mr. Glennister—only to sit in judgment on yours."

"All right. Ronnie, what would you have done?"

"I'm not here to answer questions either, I'm here to ask them."

"You're going to answer this question. Every boy in this room is going to answer it. You've been looking at this catastrophe blinded by the image of Johnny you've built up for five years. Now you're going to look at it with your eyes opened."

"I come from a tougher place in life than Johnny. I wouldn't kill myself so easy."

"Exactly, Ronnie. That's my point. Dominic, would you have killed yourself in Johnny's place?"

"No, I wouldn't. But—"

"But nothing. You've answered the question."

A train hooted and a moment later it was thundering through the cutting.

"That's the down train, Christopher," said Ronnie. "He's playing for time, can't you see?"

"Come on, Mr. Glennister, get on with it."

"The law cannot be hurried, Christopher."

"Justice must be done, Mr. Glennister, and time is running out."

Glennister turned to Sidney. "You, Bloom, would you have killed yourself in that situation?"

"No way."

"Of course you wouldn't." He raked the jury box. "What about you? You? You? You? You?" Each boy in turn shook his head. "You see, Christopher, none of them—not one. Everyone here has been a boy like Johnny and not one of you would have killed himself as Johnny did—so how could I, a stupid master, be expected to consider that Johnny's death was even a possibility? I did no more than my duty as I saw it."

"He's trying to get out of it, Christopher. He's making excuses."

"But isn't that why you asked me here—to clear myself? The trial is your little game; not mine."

The Judge looked severe. "It's not a game, Mr. Glennister."

"All right, if it's not a game, if you insist on taking it seriously, I've seriously proved I'm innocent. That is the law. You must acquit me."

Dominic spoke for the jury. "Look here, Christopher—is it the law or isn't it?"

"Gentlemen of the jury"—Christopher became formal—"in the first place, we are trying Mr. Glennister because the law failed to do so. Mr. Glennister did what he did and the result was that Johnny died. Mr. Glennister was never called to a court to answer for it. That is why we've assumed the responsibility—because the law failed. Legally, Mr. Glennister may be acquitted."

"Legally I *must* be acquitted. You haven't proved me guilty."

Bloom said, "You haven't proved you're innocent."

"I don't have to, Bloom. I don't have to. I quote Kenny again: 'Throughout the web of the English Criminal Law one Golden Thread is always to be seen, that it is the duty of the prosecution to prove the prisoner's guilt. The prisoner is not bound to satisfy the jury of his innocence—legally.' "

Christopher weighed in. "Legally, Mr. Glennister may tell himself that Johnny was responsible for his own death. But we're here because our consciences have brought us here. We're here because the law has failed. It has left a large loophole and Mr. Glennister has slipped through it. If we're here to supplement the law then it's not reasonable

to allow ourselves to be bound by it. A court of law, they say, is not a court of morals, but what are we trying here if it's not a moral issue? Morally, Mr. Glennister was responsible for Johnny's death."

Glennister hung on to his patience. "Morals are a personal thing. Every man keeps his own conscience and it differs from the next man's. You cannot measure someone's conduct against a moral standard. It is not a standard at all. But the law is exact and impersonal. It is a safe standard against which you can measure evidence and say this course of conduct is right and this is wrong."

"This is not one of your bloody lectures, Glennister," Ronnie snarled. "The oath means damn all to you, doesn't it? You'd swear away Johnny's last chance for justice without turning a hair. Well, fortunately Johnny's justice lies with *us*. We haven't worried this over for five years only to be laughed out of it in a couple of sentences. We haven't forgotten Johnny with no one to speak for him—no one to say 'I trust you' or 'I believe in you' except us. We didn't count then, but, by God, we're going to count now. Aren't we?"

He looked around the hall and was rewarded with a shout of "Yes!"

"Justice for Johnny!" Glennister cried. "What about justice for me?"

"You're going to get what you deserve, Glennister, and soon."

"Have you never stopped to wonder what I felt like when they found Johnny?"

"Guilty, I should think—I don't see how else you could feel."

"No, I didn't feel guilty, Ronnie, but I did feel very troubled."

"It was too late to feel troubled."

"I couldn't have acted differently!"

"You could," Sidney countered. "You could have shut up."

"I had my responsibilities."

The whole room was throwing questions at him now.

"Which is more important, your responsibilities or a boy's life?"

"I didn't see it like that, Dominic. I couldn't see into the future. I didn't know what he was going to do to himself."

"You didn't think he'd throw his cap in the air, did you?"

"I thought he'd act like any of the rest of you would, Phillip."

"We weren't being persecuted."

"I gave him a chance to clear himself. I gave him every chance."

But now they were giving him no chance to reply.

"It didn't look like that to Johnny."

"You wouldn't believe him when he did."

"He knew you were out to get him."

"You can't deny it."

"I do deny it! I do deny it! But you won't believe me!"

Christopher's voice cut through the hubbub. "Did you believe Johnny, Mr. Glennister?"

"No."

"Then you know how he felt now, don't you?"

"I have always felt bad about Johnny's death but I know in all conscience that it was not my fault. But do you know how you'll feel if you do this monstrous thing to me? Every one of you will be haunted for the rest of your days. When you wake up tomorrow morning, you won't want to look at each other. You will find that you are avoiding the next boy's eyes. You may think now that you'll stay firm, but can you be sure that somebody won't crack? As the morning progresses they'll start asking questions: 'Where's Mr. Glennister? Where's he gone?' You'll all look down at your plates. And they'll either know straightaway or they'll soon find out. Do you think there won't be an inquiry? Do you think you're all so clever you'll get away with it?"

Coldly, Christopher addressed the court. "Members of the jury—"

"But you *can't* kill me, I'm a master!"

"That is irrelevant. We have exactly five minutes to get you to the embankment and push you over. It'll take us a good two minutes to drag you there and I should think you're the sort to struggle."

"We could hit him on the head first."

"My God, Ronnie, you really mean to do it, don't you? You've meant to do it all along!"

"The prisoner will stand to hear his sentence."

"Get up, Glennister."

"But the jury! The jury!"

"Members of the jury, are you all agreed upon your verdict?"

"Yes."

"Do you find the prisoner at the bar, Dennis Glennister, guilty or not guilty?"

"Guilty."

"You find him guilty of murder and that is the verdict of you all?"

"It is."

"But you can't! Not on the evidence!"

"Not on the evidence here, Mr. Glennister. On what Christopher and Ronnie have been telling us all these years. We always knew you were guilty." Dominic looked at him steadily. There was a sadistic relish in his voice. "But we wanted to hear you talk."

"This is horrible. Johnny chose his death for *himself!*"

"Dennis Glennister, you stand convicted of murder. Have you anything to say why the court should not give you judgment of death?"

"I can't think. I can't reason any more."

"That's what happens to sneaks."

"My God, you said that as though you were still thirteen."

"Have you anything to say, Mr. Glennister? It's your last chance."

"I can see now. I haven't a hope—you're still thirteen, the lot of you. Don't you see? You resent things at thirteen that you wouldn't resent at thirty—somebody says he won't buy you an ice cream and you could kill him for it. But you grow out of that—"

As Glennister talked desperately on, Christopher started to pronounce the sentence. The two speeches, one cold and measured, the other mounting in hysteria, wove in and out, but it was Christopher to whom the boys were listening.

"Dennis Glennister. The sentence of the court upon you is that you be taken from hence to the place of execution and may the Lord have mercy on your soul."

Glennister's cries for help were drowned by a robust chorus of "Tipperary." Together, singing vigorously, they dragged him out of the lecture hall and toward the railway. It would have cheered the headmaster to hear the steadfast harmony of tone. "The school neglects no opportunity to cultivate a love of music in the boys. We encourage choral and community singing. A boy who sings is a happy and a healthy boy."

Birkenshaw sat opposite the headmaster, studying the prospectus. "I suppose you're going to have to lower the fees because of the scandal."

"Oh, don't say that, Birkenshaw. A suicide is a suicide and poor Glennister was always unbalanced. I never thought he'd make old bones and I've got a very good civics man up my sleeve, and cheaper. I see no need to change the prospectus either." Plummy confidence returned to his voice as he read: "The aim of the school is to turn out not future Prime Ministers, not intellectual freaks, not athletic morons, but"—he paused, never tired of the effect—"good citizens."

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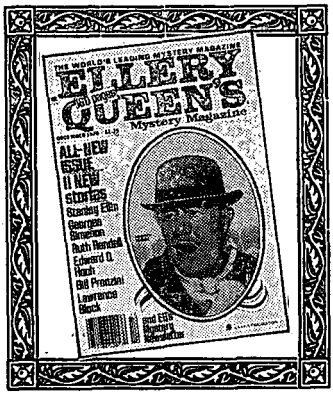

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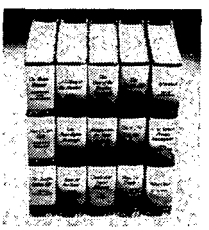

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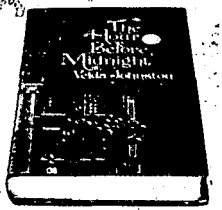

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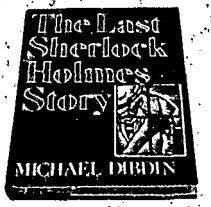

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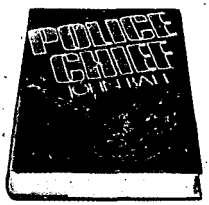

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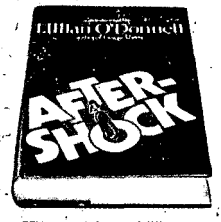

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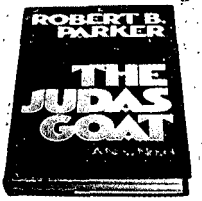

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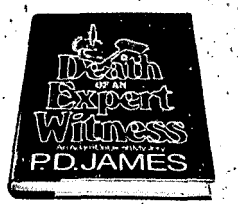

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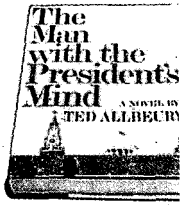

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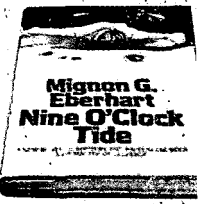

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