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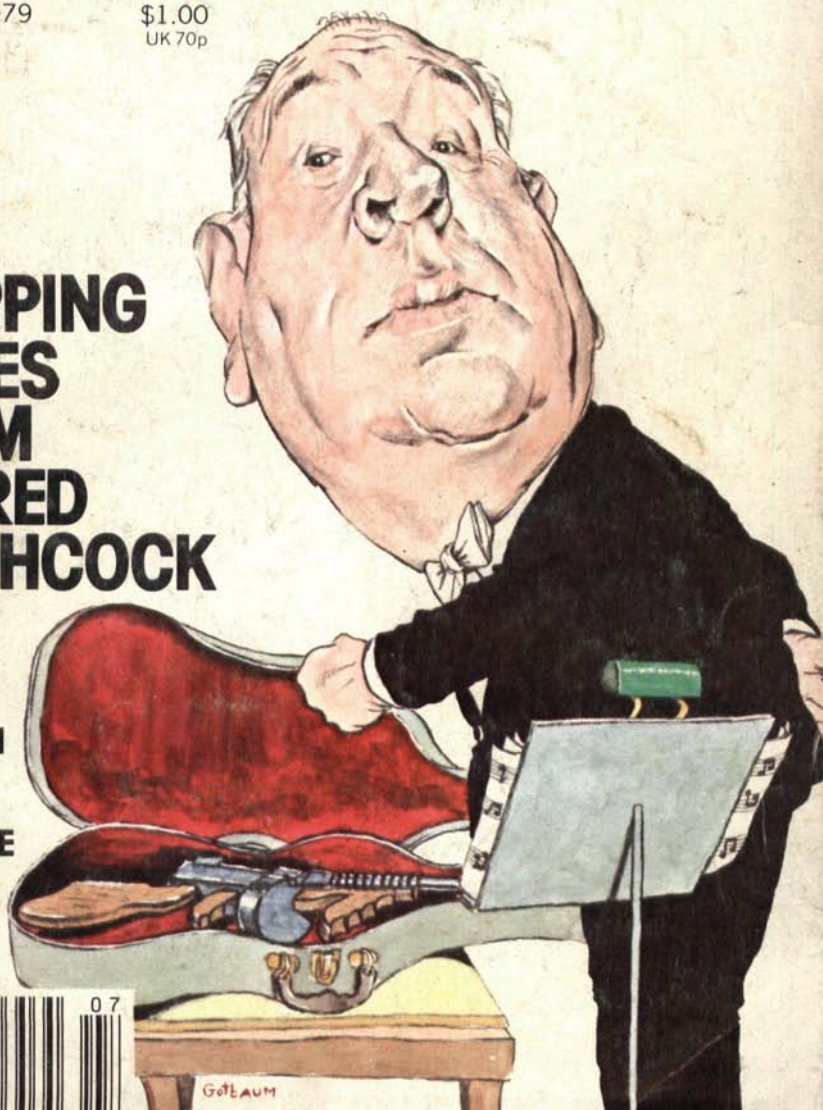

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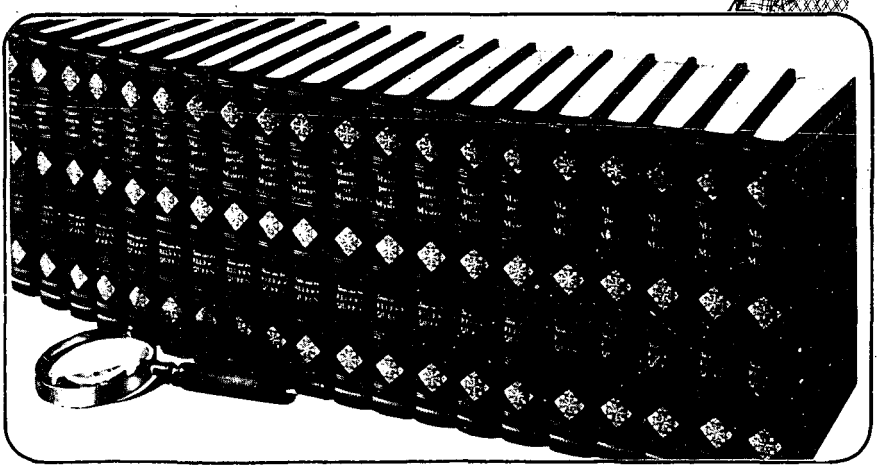

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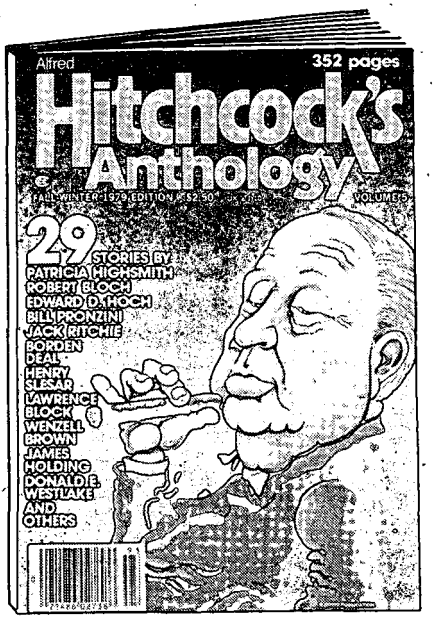

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VOLUME 24, NO. 7 JULY 1979

ALFRED HITCHCOCK'S MYSTERY MAGAZINE

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NOVELETTE

SHORT STORIES

MOVIES AND TELEVISION

ALFRED HITCHCOCK'S MYSTERY MAGAZINE Vol. 24, No. 7, July, 1979. Published monthly by Davis Publications, Inc., at $1.00 a copy. Annual subscription $11.00 in the U.S.A. and possessions; $13.00 elsewhere. Allow 6 to 8 weeks for change of address. Editorial and Executive Offices, 380 Lexington Ave., N.Y., N.Y. 10017, (212) 557-9100. Subscription orders and mail regarding subscriptions should be sent to P.O. Box 2640, Greenwich, Ct. 06835. Second-class postage paid at New York, N.Y., and additional mailing offices. © 1979 by Davis Publications, Inc., all rights reserved. Protection secured under the Universal Copyright Convention. Reproduction or use without express permission of editorial or pictorial content in any manner is prohibited. Printed in U.S.A. All submissions must be accompanied by stamped self-addressed envelope; the Publisher assumes no responsibility for unsolicited manuscripts.

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July 1979

Dear Reader:

From time to time I like to try something new in the magazine that might please you, and so, starting with this issue, *AHMM* will feature a monthly television/movie review column, *Crime on Screen*, by Peter Christian. I'm sure you will find Mr. Christian's previews and reviews well worth reading. I Confess that, given enough Rope, and not being particularly disposed to Stage Fright, my own participation in crime on TV and on the silver screen is Notorious beyond the Shadow of a Doubt.

Another innovation I would like to suggest to you is a Letters column. If you have any questions or comments about specific stories we publish or about the mystery field in general, please address them to Susan Calderella, Letters Editor, Alfred Hitchcock's Mystery Magazine, 380 Lexington Avenue, New York, N.Y. 10017. They will be carefully considered for publication and remain the property of *AHMM*.

Good reading.

Alfred Hitchcock

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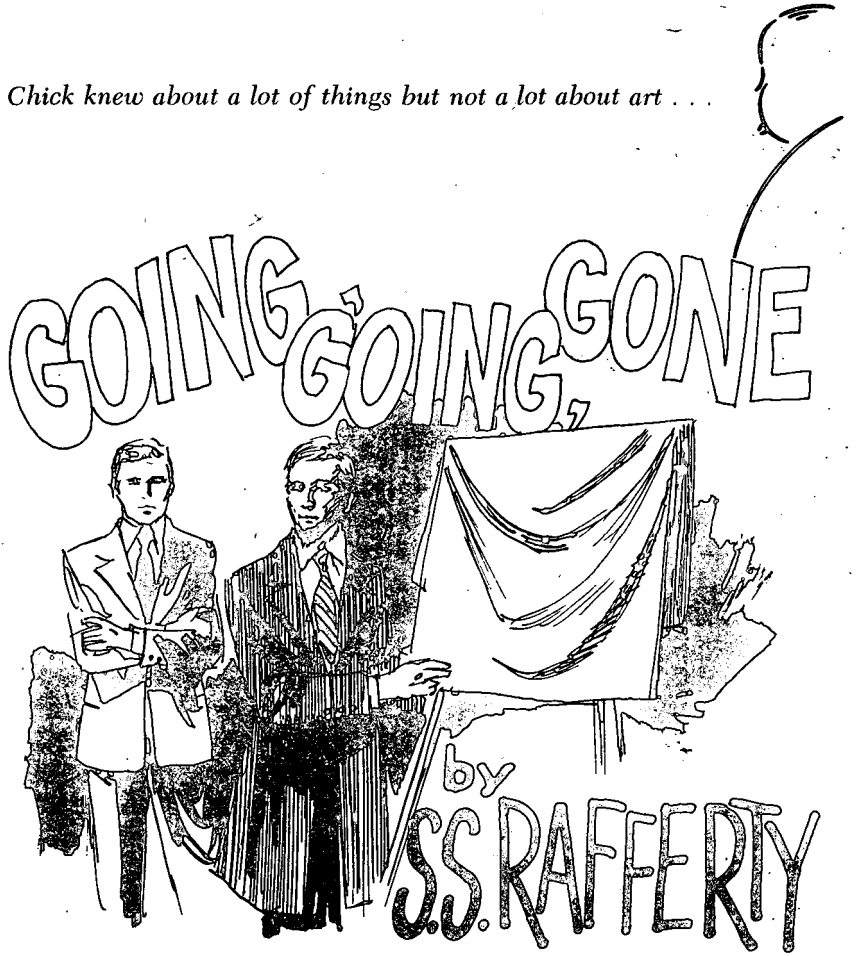
Irving Bernstein, Art Director

Chick knew about a lot of things but not a lot about art . . .



If you happen to have a calendar handy, please cross off the first week in October, because I'm insisting it never took place. Also toss out your recording of "Autumn in New York," because if I show up at your place and you're playing it, I'm liable to go berserk and litter your pad with fragments of Francis Sinatra's voice.

O.K., you're saying—hey, what's going down here with Chick Kelly, the ever-happy-go-lucky club comic? I guess you deserve an answer—but

no snickering. And don't waltz into the bistro I own on Third Avenue and lay the "you brought it on yourself" trip on me. Between Barry Kantrowitz, my partner and former agent, his wife Sylvia, the resident kvetch in my life, and all my employees, I'm overstocked in criticism.

So it *is* autumn in New York and the leaves *are* falling, and so is yours truly—for a dishy number named Monica Styles. I was falling for her from the moment she trooped into the joint to attend one of Tish Loman's hen luncheons.

However, I don't make a big deal over her in front of dear ol' Tish. Somehow, Mrs. Loman's got the idea in her head that she owns me, and in a way she does. Tish may not have quite as much money as Chase Manhattan, but she's sure got more friends, and she steers them all to my place. Poor enemies I can afford, but never a rich one.

"Chick dahling," La Loman says when I come over to their table, "you ninny, you said you were sleeping in till fiveish."

Hold it, folks—a little Upper East Side social psychology is in order. Here are four ladies, each a well dressed beauty, about to be introduced, and Tish is giving them the hands-off signal. You could interpret her line several ways, but the obvious reading is that she just left me snug between the porthaults an hour ago. (It was four days ago, and ancient history.)

Having shot that warning across their bows, Admiral Loman made with the intros. Two I already knew—Maybeth Ridley and Suzy Millard, veddy social and veddy old money. Another I knew from the newspapers—Wilhelmina Doys-Heppton (just call her Bill, folks—hell, Princess Grace does).

"And this bright young thing is Monica Styles, Chick dahling," Tish says through a smile that would put the Cheshire Cat out of business. "Monica is our *working* girl." That wasn't across the bows, pal, that was a broadside that was meant to put the poor kid out of commission. Maybe that's what turned me on to her, although the soft brown hair, green eyes, and slightly rose-tinted skin can't be totally discounted.

"Coal miner?" I tried to soften the blow. "No, your hands are too delicate. A doctor maybe?" (I have a fantasy about being married to a lady doctor. I mean, that would be the height of convenience.)

Tish shoots me a glance. "You slyboots, how did you know she's a doctor? Well, a Doctor of Fine Arts, anyway."

"I'm an art appraiser, Mr. Kelly," Monica Styles said, proving she

could stand on her own two feet.

"A very conservative one at that," Bill Doys-Heppton said with a tinge of pique. "You're much too low on that Mondrian, Monica."

"Oh, Chick isn't interested in art, girls," Bulldog Loman, sensing that I have been staring at the Doctor of Fine Arts like she was the Mona Lisa, moves for my dismissal. But I'm no stranger to social psychology, Upper East Side Division, and I figured it was time to neutralize Tish.

"*Au contraire,* Madame, I happen to own a Kevin Fleming. But, of course, you've never been to my apartment, so you couldn't know."

Zap. The score is evened. Jump ball.

"Well, you've never shown any interest in *my* collection, dahling, and if I recall, you once used a Tang Dynasty bowl—the one on the bed table, *dahling*—as an ashtray."

I could claim a personal foul on that one, but I had asked for it. Monica Styles ignored it.

"Is it an early Fleming, Mr. Kelly? My God, a Fleming!"

Her amazement sort of floored me, because the picture of the nude hooker smoking a cigarette that hangs over my fake fireplace was given to me by Fleming five or six years ago to square a $500 bar bill. Indirectly, I guess I helped old Kevin to his early grave via the cirrhosis-of-the-liver route. I knew that his work had gotten some publicity after his death, but I figured the painting was worth maybe a couple of hundred at best.

"I have no idea when he painted it, Monica. There's no date on it."

"He only had two periods, Chick—" her green eyes lit up like emeralds "—the Amber and the Pearl."

"I guess I'm Amber. It's a woman smoking a cigarette—well, from the look in her eyes, it could be a joint."

"Oh, my God! Oh, my! Chick, you might have the missing Madonna!"

Wow, was she up.

"His biographers call it *The Degraded Madonna* because Fleming wrote about it in his diary. How he knowingly corrupted a woman to capture her torment on canvas."

"It sounds disgusting to me," Bill Doys-Heppton said emphatically.

"I thought you owned several Flemings, Bill," Suzy Millard chided her. Suzy is very Junior League, but no stranger to zapping.

"Three from the Pearl period, dear, and quite beautiful. And the models have clothes on them, don't they, Monica?"

"That was the early period, Bill. Something happened to Fleming's

mind before his death. Instead of glorifying women, he saw them as evil creatures."

"Possibly booze, DTs," Maybeth Ridley said.

"Oh, nonsense, dear," Suzy corrected her, "he just came out of the closet. I was a bit furious with you, Monica—" she wagged a finger at Dr. Styles "—for talking my husband into buying the Amber #1."

"On which he could double his money if he took it to auction today. Your husband collects art for investment, and he made a sound one. Chick, I've really got to see that picture."

My brain is going bingo with dollar signs. "Monica, you said Mr. Millard could double his investment at auction. What kind of bucks are you talking about?"

"*The Degraded Madonna* could easily go for $250,000—maybe more."

Be still, my foolish heart. A quarter of a million could put me on easy street, but I've got a problem. No, three problems—my ex-wives. Once they know you've moved back into the bucks they put in frantic phone calls to their lawyers, and it's Up-the-Alimony time again. Shut up, my foolish mouth.

"Come to think of it, I'm not even sure it's a real Fleming. He could have palmed off any old picture on me. It doesn't have a signature on it." It was a lie, but all secrets start with lies.

Monica's face went sour. "Oh, damn, he was too much of an egotist not to sign a picture. Is it on canvas or wood?"

Oh boy, just what I needed—a multiple-choice question. Fact is, I don't know, or at least I don't remember. I took a shot for canvas.

"Definitely not a Fleming," says Monica, and I'm off the hook. "He abhorred canvas."

"He was too cheap to buy it." Suzy Millard added a dose of sarcasm. "I almost went through the roof when Stan paid $90,000 for a picture painted on a board."

Bill Doys-Heppton was appalled. "You certainly don't know your art, Suzy." She turned to Monica. "Could it be a prelim?"

"On canvas?"

"No, I guess you're right. Too bad, Mr. Kelly—you almost had a fortune on your hands."

"Poor baby," Tish cooed. "Naughty artist played dirty trick."

Man, I could have strangled her. Monica was giving me an enigmatic Mona Lisa look that was 60 percent disgust, 10 percent pity, and 30

percent apathy. But I didn't have time to correct the impression that I was Tish Loman's toy. I had to find out if the picture was on wood.

"Well, ladies, enjoy your lunch," I said, walking away from the table. I was heading for the back office and a private phone, but was intercepted midway between the main dining level and the buffet bar. Tish is light enough on her feet to make the Knicks' starting lineup. At the moment, she was setting up a screen play.

"Baby is mad at Mommy, isn't he?"

"Tish, I'm busy. I'll call you."

"She's a hustler, Chick, to say the least. An art hustler. She's only here because Bill invited her, and that's only because she reminds Bill of her dead daugher. I was simply putting her in her place. Don't look so stern, Beauty—I can't help being protective."

"Look, Tish, I'm not mad or stern or in need of protection. I said I'll call and I will."

"You haven't in four days." She put on her pouty mouth, which looks stupid on any woman over 35.

"Tonight. I've got to go, baby. Goodbye."

While I'm walking back to the office, you're saying to yourself, this Kelly must be God's gift to women, and in a way you're right but it depends on how you look at a gift. The women in my young life fall into three categories: those that yell at me, those that sue me because the law won't let them yell at me any more, and ladies like Tish, who defy definition. While you're thinking this, I'm thinking about Monica Lisa.

Office desk. Phone. Dial.

"Kelly residence."

I've been asking—begging—Mrs. Gull not to answer the phone that way for the three years she's worked as my cleaning lady.

"It's me, Gully."

"Well, Mr. Chick, I'm glad you called."

That's another thing I've asked her not to do—call me "Mr. Chick." Once I said she might as well call me "Massa Chick" and damned if she didn't start doing it.

"Am I supposed to rinse out the bra along with your things?"

"What bra?"

"The one I found under the bed. Your stuff I do down in the laundry machine with Tide, but bras should be done by hand with Lux."

"Gully, just throw it out. Now, what I'd like you to—"

"Mr. Chick, this is a fancy piece of goods." She started to chuckle. "Fancy, but puny. You're not using coasters on tables like I told you I don't know how many times."

Mrs. Gull is in the first category of the women in my life—yelling.

"I'll try to remember. Now, Gully, would you go into the living room and see if the picture over the fireplace is wood or canvas."

"Mr. Chick, you're awful drunk for so early in the day. You know I don't even dust that lewd thing."

She was right. The choir director of the First Pentecostal Church had never approved of the painting.

"Don't touch it with your hand, Gully—just hit it with a broom handle. It's important."

"No, Mr. Chick, I can't. I cast my eyes downward every time I pass it."

Bright-idea time. "Gully, if that picture is on wood, your choir is down for new robes."

The phone clicked on the table. (From evil shall spring good.)

"Wood, Mr. Chick."

"Hallelujah."

I sat back in the chair with a millionaire's smirk on my face. But I can't just sit there smirking, I've got plotting and planning to do. If the *Madonna* is as big an art find as Monica thinks, the chances of me unloading it in secret are zip. Collectors like to brag. And even if I did find a private buyer who would keep his mouth shut, how could I be sure I was getting the best price? It could be worth half a million.

The only way out is to take it to auction—so I'm in the going, going, gone business.

Well, first I need a pigeon to front for me, someone I can trust. Who else would come to mind except Jack McCarthy, my kitchen manager. I hit the house intercom and two minutes later the little guy is standing in front of me.

"Hey, Champ, what'll it be? Drink? Lunch?"

I could say I wanted him to go out and shoot someone (my three ex-darlings, for instance) and he'd do it. The guy loves me. He's the epitome of a fan.

"Sit down, Jack Mac, you've got to help me with a scam." As I laid out the plan for him, his face was beaming.

"Champ," he says when I finish, "have you come to the right guy about the auction racket."

"Sure, Jack Mac, but this is big-time stuff. Upper Madison Avenue, not lower Third."

He smiled, but there was hurt in his eyes. "I know the Sotheby Parke Bernet and Christie's route, Chick."

"You do!"

"Sure, remember when I worked the Carlyle Grille for three years? Man, that's the heart of High-Price Auction country."

He had a point. The Hotel Carlyle at 76th and Madison is surrounded by the class galleries and the Grille and Les Pleiades down the street are the favorite watering holes of the trade.

"Great, Jack Mac—you're wired in up there? I mean people?"

He nodded.

"I have to be careful that I get at least a quarter of a million. Can you rig an auction, Jack Mac?"

"You don't have to, Chick. They've got a gimmick called the reserve price. You tell the auctioneer the base price you'll accept, and if the open auction doesn't bid up to it, the house takes a mystery bid at your reserve price."

"And the mystery buyer is me, no doubt."

Jack Mac shrugged. "Every business has its dodges, Chick. The house gets five percent of the mystery bid, so it's costing you money to test the market. Five points off a quarter million ain't hay. But we're ahead of ourselves, Champ. First we have to authenticate the picture. This Fine Art Doctor hasn't seen it yet."

"We can't use her. I lied my head off about its not being signed by Fleming."

"Who'd've ever thought that stumblebum had talent? O.K., Champ, we got to bring it to an expert."

"But I don't want to tip my hand for a while, after shooting my mouth off at lunch. We'll wait a few months."

"And die of suspense? Wait a minute, what about Lord Harry?"

The kid's a genius to think of Lord Harry Delford. He's the best art appraiser on the East Coast. If anyone is an expert on art, it's Mickey Schwartz (his real handle). Mickey grew up with on the Lower East Side, and was considered a budding Michelangelo as a kid. He won a scholarship to Yale, went to Paris and London—I mean, the whole tour. But

human nature being what it is, Mickey is also given to taking things that don't belong to him—like other people's art treasures. As an artist he was a bomb; as a cat burglar he is the crème de la crème.

It took us one and a half hours to locate him, and he said he'd meet us at my place around five, only he didn't say it that way. It was more like, "Chick old horse, I'm delighted to help. Knock you up around bubbly hour. Cheerie-bye." I think he overdoes it, but it's his act, not mine.

Normally, there's never a doorman on duty at my apartment house in the afternoon, but there was when Jack Mac, Lord Harry, and I walked in. The new door jockey was very efficient, and looked quite spiffy in his blue uniform, his brass buttons, his badge, and his gun.

When Lord Harry spots the cop, he says, "Well, Chick old horse, nice seeing you, but I've got to toddle. Cheerie-bye."

He didn't get away with it.

When we were ushered into my pad, the first person among the throng was Lester Gull, and he looked as terrible as a 20-year-old can look. "It's Mama, Mr. Kelly. Someone killed my mother."

An hour later, Lieutenant Donald (Bullethead) Jaffee is still working me over, even though I'm cooperating 100 percent—a rarity for me where Jaffee is concerned.

"O.K., Kelly, let's go over it again. You talked to Mrs. Gull at one o'clock, and when her son came by to drive her home at 4:30 she was dead. You say you were at your gin mill until 4:45?"

"Man, you never give up, do you? What's your angle, Jaffee, that I ransacked my own apartment and killed my own cleaning woman? If this had been any other day but Tuesday, she wouldn't have been here. It's a breaking-and-entering with an unfortunate homicide thrown in. Look at this joint—it's Cycloneville."

"Yes, that's what bothers me. It's too messy, like someone was trying to make it look like robbery. And then you show up with Mickey Schwartz in tow. Something's going on, Kelly, and I want to know about it."

Well, I have to give him points on professionalism. The littered apartment did look like a cover-up. But robbery *was* involved—the Fleming was gone from over the fireplace mantel.

O.K., so I wasn't cooperating 100 percent. I didn't tell him about the picture—how could I?—or give him a list of names like Dr. Monica

Styles, Wilhelmina Doys-Heppton, Suzy Millard, Maybeth Ridley, and, last but not least, Tish Loman. So right now, you're making your judgments. What kind of bum is this guy, you're saying, Jaffee could check them all for alibis and pin it on one of them. O ye of little faith!

For openers, the second Jaffee got a load of the pedigrees of my luncheon ladies, he'd soft-pedal it. I wanted to avenge Gully.

"I want an inventory of what's been taken, Kelly," Jaffee is snarling. "And who's your insurance carrier?"

Suddenly, I see his wedge. I faked a robbery to collect on an insurance claim.

"In Cleveland, Dubuque, and Horseshoe Flats, they have burglary insurance, Jaffee. In New York, we just have burglary assurance. Everybody gets a shot at it sooner or later. The only thing of value in this dump is five cans of beer in the fridge. There was something of value here, but she's dead. How about working on that?"

"We will, Kelly, we will. Normally, I'd want a list of anyone who has a key to the place—but, knowing you, I might as well use the phone book."

Half an hour later, the three of us were back at the club while Jaffee's technical guy took over the pad.

"I think maybe you should have told Bullethead about the broads, Champ," Jack Mac says, bringing a tray of drinks into the office from the bar lounge. Lord Harry insisted on port yet.

"The banty might be a bit on the old beam, old horse."

"Mickey," I snarled at him, "will you can the pip-pip baloney when we're alone? For crying out loud, you sound like a burlesque of David Niven."

"Ta hell I am, I'm doing Olivier to the nines, but Jack Mac is still right. Hell, man, you can get walls for obstructing a police investigation."

Would you believe it? This I get from a man who makes a living frustrating cops.

"I'm not obstructing, I'm constructing some justice for Gully and some gelt for me. I've been sorting out motives in my head, and it doesn't make sense. This Doys-Heppton dame and Suzy Millard's husband collect Flemings, but with their dough why kill for one that might not even be authentic?"

"Even if it were," Mickey said in his own natural voice, "they wouldn't

need to. *The Degraded Madonna,* when auctioned at top price, would automatically make their holdings more valuable. My money is on the Styles dame, Chick. You said even Tish Loman called her a hustler."

"So?"

"So she sees through your story about the picture not being signed and on canvas and gets curious about it, goes to your place—hell, any broad would be admitted by Mrs. Gull—sees you've got the real goods, conks the old lady, and walks out with the picture after staging a fake robbery. She's a real amateur, pal."

"But where could she sell it?"

"Chick, there's enough stolen art floating around the OPEC countries to make the Louvre drool. Those cats will buy anything—no questions."

It's like a thorn (or a falling leaf) stuck in my heart to hear my Mona Lisa being talked about this way, but Lord Harry is on the old beam—maybe.

"Suppose Jack Mac here had another *Degraded Madonna* and put it up for auction? Nobody knows what the picture looked like, and it could smoke the killer out—or at least give 'em a hard time."

"Sure, but where am I supposed to get one, Champ?"

Lord Harry's eyes were sparkling. "Brilliant, Chick old horse, a sterling idea." Back to David Niven. "I know Fleming's style. You tell me what it looked like and I'll replicate it myself for four thousand pounds."

"You've got ten percent of the action, period, Mickey old bean, if we get the original back."

He looked sheepish. "O.K., old horse. What did it look like?"

Two hours and God knows how many rough sketches later, Mickey had what looked like what I remembered the picture to be—at least in black and white. Before he left, he told me the color in oils would be no problem because Fleming's Amber period was so simple in color tones. "It's the brush strokes that count, old horse. Ready in two days at most. Cheerie-bye." Now he was doing John Gielgud.

Jack Mac was elated when I suggested that he have Guido, my head chef, make us some steak and eggs to have in the office where I could watch the six o'clock news.

"You know, Champ," he said as we dug into the food, "I know you're sad about this new skirt being a murderess, but you're overlooking a beauty point."

I just gave him a questioning look and he went on.

"Lord Harry was told about the painting at three o'clock, but didn't meet us until almost five. Plenty of time to go over to your place."

"I know, little guy. That's why I'm having him paint the damn fake."

The TV news was short, unsweet, and, as usual, slightly incorrect.

"A daylight robbery," the newshen said from the tube, "at the East Side apartment of entertainer Chick Kelly cost the life of his housekeeper, Mrs. Bertha Gull, this afternoon. Police theorize that the intruder was surprised by Mrs. Gull, panicked, and struck the 60-year-old woman with a fireplace poker, killing her instantly. Kelly, who owns a popular East Side nightclub, was not home at the time. No estimate has been placed on the stolen articles."

That night I had two phone calls and a visitor. First buzz was Tish, insisting I move out of "that dangerous building." The inference was that her townhouse on the East River is a veritable fortress. I declined.

Second buzz.

"Fang Lady on 3, Chick," Ling, my maitre d', said, referring, of course, to Maxine, Ex #2.

"Cha-a-luz," she said when I clicked in.

Forgive the Charles, folks.

"Cha-a-luz, it seems to me that if you can afford a housekeeper, your income must have increased since the last audit."

"She was a once-a-week cleaning lady, Maxine. The TV got it wrong. But the way, dearest, I had the cops put you down as a suspect."

"Me! Are you drunk?"

"No, but since you've been robbing me for years, I didn't want to overlook the possibility that—"

"That's slander! I could sue you for—"

"Maxine, I'll make a deal with you. I'll send you to law school and save a fortune on your legal fees."

"I'm not going to talk to you, Cha-a-luz, when you're drunk." Click. Delightful woman, huh?

Just before the nine o'clock show, Jaffee showed up on a snoop excursion.

"When I asked you who had keys to your apartment I should have been more concise, Kelly. Let's try Mrs. Tish Loman on for size."

"I do my act in ten minutes, but I'll watch yours for a while. It will probably be funnier. What has Tish Loman got to do with this?"

"Maybe nothing, but the lady shouldn't leave a custom-made bra that can be traced lying around your place."

"Times are tough; I take in washing. She's one of my *luxe* customers. Look, Jaffee, if you're looking to stir up a scandal just to knock me, you're off base. Mrs. Loman is very friendly with the Commissioner. Why don't you get a sex life of your own so you won't have to preoccupy yourself with mine?"

"I said it was maybe nothing. Why didn't you list the missing picture with the stolen items? All you put down was personal jewelry and $200 in cash."

"Picture?" I'm doing an egg walk because he might be onto something.

"Yeah, the one that was on the hooks over the fireplace."

"It was a piece of junk, real motel-type schlock. The thief certainly didn't know art."

"I could almost buy that, Kelly—almost—except for Schwartz being an art expert of a kind. Someday we'll pin a heist on him. He says he was meeting you for drinks, which is dumb, since you own a gin mill. Was Jack McCarthy going to mix and serve?" He got up and started out of the office, then turned.

"Eventually, I'll put it all together, Kelly, and you might regret that you didn't cooperate."

I said he brought me a surprise, and it wasn't Tish's bra. It was Tish herself. Sure, she's been to my place, but never in the living room—unless she sleepwalks. Maybe she did spot the Fleming and examined it. She's no slouch in the collecting business, and she may have known I was lying to Monica about the canvas and no-signature jazz. Crazy as it sounds, she might have swiped the picture to keep me from becoming independently rich, with double emphasis on the independence. O.K., I said crazy, but you don't know poor little rich girls when they want something. Well, it was a nagging thought anyway. My real money was on Monica Styles—a *painful* thought, believe me.

Two days later, Lord Harry Schwartz shows up with a package and unwraps it like he was unveiling the entire Sistine Chapel.

"Well, old horse?"

"Close enough." And it was—except for the way the smoke curled up from the toke in her mouth. But if Mickey did swipe the original, he'd be smart enough to alter the counterfeit.

"It wasn't an easy task, you know," he said, taking a paperback book from his pocket. It was *Studies in Pearl and Amber—The Descent of the Soul* by Kevin Fleming.

"Fleming describes all the pictures in the series in detail, but *The Degraded Madonna* is just mentioned as his ultimate project." He opened to a page and read, " 'To put the succubus upon her, corrupt the virgin in amber and red, the ultimate justice for Eve.' This guy thought he was the Baudelaire of art, Chick."

I sat there wondering who Baudelaire was and really looking into the painting for the first time. The subject was fascinatingly ugly, a naked woman in the throes of some tormented ecstasy. You could see a fading glimmer of beauty in the eyes—fading, fading. It was beyond pornography, it was evil, and I suddenly understood why the dead choir leader couldn't stand to look at it.

I felt dirty, and wondered if Fleming had been playing some ironic joke in giving it to me.

Lord Harry snapped me back with, "Well, what's the plan of campaign, m'boy?"

"First, you do a fade. Jaffee has got the wind up over you. See, Mickey, I too can do British schtick, old horse. You're still in for the money, but as a silent partner."

It was the biggest magnifying glass I'd ever seen, and Winston Burl used it to examine every inch of the picture for almost an hour. He was a jaunty cat with a Vandyke beard, morning coat, and beautifully manicured hands. Just what you'd expect a posh Madison Avenue art-gallery owner to look like. Finally, he turned to Jack Mac and me with a sardonic smile on his face.

"It's a pity King Farouk is dead; he'd have paid a million for this."

"It's authentic then—a Fleming?" Jack Mac asked.

Winston Burl made a funny little twist with his lips. "I'm no expert on Fleming, but from the color tones, the strokes, the age of the wood—well, it seems so. It could stand on its own, if properly presented." He was enraptured with the marketing aspect. "Caligulan, yes, that cruel and debased monster's name would best describe it. Of course, I would want a second opinion, and the leading expert is Monica Styles, who's just around the corner on 82nd Street. Wherever did you find this, Mr. McCarthy?"

I had rehearsed Jack thoroughly, and he was up in the part.

"When I was at the Carlyle I loaned Fleming some money, and he repaid the loan with the picture."

Damned if he didn't look at me for approval—what did he want, a bow, an ovation?

"Of course, the Grille." Burl smiled. "The service has never been the same since you left. For better things, I hope."

"I'm associated with Mr. Kelly's club. Sorta the manager of operations."

Jeez, talk about padding your part. The squirt is in charge of kitchen security. He lays in groceries and makes sure nothing is sneaked out by the help in the garbage cans. What a ham! But the mention of Monica's name meant I had covered all the squares on my card, and I felt like yelling bingo!

"I think I've met Dr. Styles," I said. "An attractive young lady."

"And brilliant, Mr. Kelly. Her editing of Kevin Fleming's diary is a work of art in itself. Are you a collector?"

"In a small way," I replied modestly. "Just dabbling. I take it Dr. Styles is the *foremost* expert?"

"Professionally, yes, but never discount the amateurs. That's where your money is, Mr. McCarthy—the aficionado collectors—should you care to take the picture to auction."

"Oh, I care to. Who would these amateurs be?"

"Well, I could hardly disclose that. I *am* in the business of selling, you know. But if you would give me a consignment contract, we could—"

Jack Mac was right—every business has its angles.

"If it's going to auction, what's the big secret?" I asked, and he gave me a prissy look. "I know several people who are interested in Fleming's work. Stan Millard, for one."

"Yes, he just bought the Amber #1, but I don't think he's serious about art. Just money. It's the connoisseurs who really bid the prices up. In fact, I have two clients who have an open bid on any newly discovered Flemings, and I'd like to give them first crack at it. Just to test the climate, so to speak. Of course, we won't be bound by anything, but I do owe them the courtesy—good customer relations, you know. If Dr. Styles authenticates the Madonna, Mrs. Loman would never forgive me."

"Tish Loman collects Flemings? She's a close friend of mine, and she never mentioned it."

"Really? She owns the Amber #2, and I thought she was quite proud of it. But then, she may have bought it to spite Mrs. Doys-Heppton."

"I thought she only collected the Pearl period."

He had a look of true admiration on his face. "My, my, you certainly *are* well connected, Mr. Kelly." He dropped his voice to a confidential whisper. "Actually, Mrs. Doys-Heppton didn't want the Amber #2 after she previewed it, but Mrs. Loman didn't *know* that." He was actually tee-heeing, and I played the game and tee-heed back.

An hour later, I was the recipient of the coldest stare ever recorded. Monica Styles' eyes were drilling right into my head when she turned from examining the picture.

"Well, Dr. Styles?" Burl said expectantly.

"I'd like to talk to Mr. Kelly alone for a moment, Mr. Burl."

Burl looked confused. "Mr. Kelly? But Mr. McCarthy is the—"

"Could we use your office, please?"

"Why yes, by all means."

I followed her into the room, checking it visually to see if any pokers were lying around. None were. She closed the door behind us, walked to the center of the room, and gave me the stare again. This time a speech went with it.

"In five minutes," she said, pointing to the phone, "I'm calling the police unless you explain this situation."

"Hold the threats, Monica. Is it authentic or not?"

"Three days ago, I'd have said yes, but now I'm not so sure. You told me that day at lunch that you had a Fleming on canvas and unsigned. Today you show up with a signed picture on wood. I read the papers, *Mr.* Kelly, so I know about this mysterious murder and robbery at your home. I don't know what's going on, but I think the police should."

"That's the second time you've mentioned police, *Dr.* Styles, and I'm still not impressed. But let me spin a little scenario for you. Foremost art expert doesn't believe me when I tell her about a painting, goes to my place to check it out, gets greedy—"

They probably heard my face being slapped in Jersey City.

"How dare you! I've spent most of my career furthering Fleming's work, enticing silly rich women to buy him. For your information, I found the first Fleming and sold it for a song, just to build public interest. Oh—you're—you're an ass!"

The tears coming into her eyes were either authentic or an Oscar was due her. She might be an expert at authenticating art, but believe me, I'm a pro at women's tears. She might be legit. I touched her arm lightly.

"Monica, I was way off base, but an awfully nice lady died because of Fleming, and if that painting out there is authenticated it would help her family."

Her face and speech were all question marks. "Do you know who the Madonna was? Did Fleming tell you? That would be as big a find as the picture itself."

"I'm not talking about the model. I mean my cleaning lady."

"Oh, of course. I'm sorry. But for a moment I thought you had some information to add to the literature. I make my living writing about art—not stealing it."

"Ouch. *Mea culpa* again. Is the picture authentic?"

"If Fleming gave it to you, yes. The brush strokes, paint consistency, and color tones are correct. But if your cleaning woman was killed for it how come you still have it?"

"That's an intricate story, Monica, which I'll tell you someday, but for the moment I have to nail a murderer. Did Fleming kill the model who posed for the Madonna?"

"Legally, no. Morally, yes. You see, no one has ever seen the picture—except you, apparently—but he describes his actions in his diary with sadistic candor. He actually set out to corrupt a well bred girl with liquor, drugs, and sex—any means—so that he could paint her in the depths of her depravity. He doesn't describe her or the picture, but what you have out there is what he was talking about."

"Someone said at lunch that he was homosexual—was he?"

"That was Suzy Millard—she's a pea brain. Gay guys don't necessarily hate women. Fleming was an evil monster—a sadist with a palette."

"Sorry, I only knew him as a drunk. How would you like to help me with a little project?"

Two days later, around four in the afternoon, Winston Burl is standing before an easel holding a draped painting. The group sitting in his gallery is very select (or carefully selected, to be exact). Suzy and Stan Millard, Maybeth Ridley, Tish Loman, and Bill Doys-Heppton are on one side of the room; Lord Harry Delford, me, Jack Mac, and Monica on the other.

"I have asked you here this afternoon, ladies and gentlemen," Burl is saying, "because I have been able to convince Mr. Kelly to auction a picture off privately rather than have an open auction. I might add that Dr. Styles persuaded him to offer a new Fleming to the people who have supported his work over the years."

Tish Loman turned and pouted at me. "So you were lying the other day at lunch, slyboots."

"I didn't notice you telling me *you* collected Flemings."

"I collect a lot of things, Beauty."

"Another Fleming," Stan Millard grumped. He was short, fat, and probably always grumped. "I thought he only painted a few pictures. What'll this do to the market, Burl?"

Burl looked pained at the remark, and went on. "Since this is a closed auction, we will start with a declared reserve of $200,000."

"Count me out," Millard said, getting to his feet. His wife pulled him back into his chair, saying, "At least we can look at it."

"Has this been authenticated by you, Monica?" Bill Doys-Heppton asked suspiciously.

"Yes, Bill."

"Then, Mr. Burl, I'll take it at $210,000 without an auction."

"$230,000 if it's authentic." This from Lord Harry the Forger.

"We haven't even seen it, for God's sake," Tish Loman put in her two cents.

"$250,000," Bill Doys-Heppton said through gritted teeth, "and a 15 percent bonus to the gallery, Mr. Burl, if you close the auction this minute."

That was my cue, and I got to my feet, walked to the easel, and lifted the drape.

Bill Doys-Heppton shrieked.

"Oh, no!" Tish murmured. "It's Bill's daughter, Bambi!"

"You know, Kelly, I ought to charge you with obstructing a police investigation," Jaffee was snarling after he had booked Bill Doys-Heppton. We were at the 18th Precinct, which is a crummy stationhouse considering its posh neighborhood. Some beef he's got coming. He's got a confession in his pocket, hasn't he? Of course, I got the play on TV, so he's mad. He's also burned because he had to stand behind a curtain at Burl's gallery while I staged the showdown.

"Who was obstructing? I was helping. You would have laughed in my face if I had given you a list of blue-blooded suspects—and justifiably, because there was no money motive involved. It didn't even make sense to me until Dr. Styles told me the picture wasn't described in Fleming's diary. Then I asked myself how Mrs. Doys-Heppton knew it was a nude at that luncheon. Was it a guess, or had someone told her? Like the model. Now, we knew her daughter OD'd after Fleming was through with her and threw her out, but you'd have gotten nowhere unless I had staged the dramatics. She knew the picture existed, and that's why she had a first-call bid in to Burl's, and probably every other gallery in town. Remember, she wanted to see the Ambers, but never bought one because it 'wasn't what she was looking for.' She found it at my place. Did she really burn it?"

"Yes, to a crisp, in her fireplace."

"It should be a law that all New York apartments come with fake fireplaces."

"I can't figure out why she owned three of the Pearl pictures if she hated the guy so much."

"I give you the tsk tsk, Lieutenant. She had to look like a heavy collector to get first call on any new finds. I guess that's why she cultivated Monica Styles too—because she's the Fleming expert."

Well, the leaves are still falling, but the next few days are not so delightful. Tish Loman thinks I'm a bum for turning in her friend, Monica. Styles claims I besmirched her reputation as an appraiser, Burl is suing me for misrepresentation, the First Pentecostal Church doesn't like the choir gowns I sent, Lord Harry's forgery is missing and so is Lord Harry, and Fang Lady is on line 2.

"First housekeepers and now $250,000 paintings—how much of this poverty talk do you think I'm going to stand for, Cha-a-luz? Now, my attorneys have—"

I'll be very happy when winter arrives. Autumn is for the birds.

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

With inflation, the Kettridges just weren't making it . . .

WINDFALL

by CARROLL MAYERS

I'd promised Janet I wouldn't argue. But I just couldn't help it. I mean, Mr. Winter sat there behind his big desk, pompous as always, and wouldn't even listen to me. "It's out of the question, Kettridge," he said flatly. "At this time, we cannot consider any salary increases at your level."

I said, "Mr. Winter, with inflation and all, my wife and I simply aren't making it. We're behind in the mortgage payments and may lose our house—"

He flapped a pudgy palm, cutting me short. "That's unfortunate. However, your financial problems are something you'll have to work out for yourselves."

"But, sir—"

He stood up. "I think that will be all. If you're not happy here, I can only suggest that you make a change."

That, of course, was easier said than done. I swallowed hard and made a final stab. "May I ask that I at least be considered for advancement?"

He gave me a cold smile. "Naturally," he said. And then, as I turned to leave, he added, "And I suggest, Kettridge, that you change your attitude. For obvious reasons, we don't favor dissatisfied personnel."

His intimation rankled, but I managed to bite off any caustic retort. Janet had been right—nobody argued successfully with bank manager Claude Winter, certainly not a lowly teller.

"Yes, sir," I said and went back to my station.

For all Mr. Winter's admonition, I knew a changed attitude wouldn't be easy. Aside from the question of the mortgage payments, our seven-year-old VW was acting up—I'm the world's worst mechanic—and the house itself needed new flooring for the back porch, the replacement of some rusted gutters, and new screens. The bank discouraged its employees from going into debt; it now appeared we'd simply have to get some help elsewhere.

As it happened, though, I was given no prolonged period in which to brood that morning. Because ten minutes later the bank was held up.

In retrospect, it was rather a comedy of errors, with myself the catalyst. The lone heister, a heavy-set character wearing a scruffy Eisenhower jacket, approached the station of one of the older tellers, Mrs. Eckert, and passed her a note instructing her to fill the brown paper bag he slipped over to her with large-denomination bills—with the admonition that she'd be shot if she refused or gave any signal or outcry.

I wasn't aware of the preliminaries. Through sheer accident I happened to glance over and spotted the naked panic and trembling lips of the woman as she fumbled in her cash drawer.

Even then, full comprehension wavered. But I did sense something was wrong and, without truly thinking, I blurted out, "Hey—you!"

There's only one word for what followed—pandemonium. The robber snatched back the partially filled bag and flashed a handgun. Other work-

ers' heads snapped up. Three customers near the gunman scattered. Somebody screamed. Then the heister whirled and bolted for the exit.

I vaulted the counter and went after him. So did two of my male associates. Mr. Winter came storming out of his office. The heister spun, triggered a wild shot, and gained the doorway. A new customer entered; the gunman bowled him aside. In immediate pursuit, a fellow teller collided with the reeling customer. While we were all tangled the heister raced into the parking lot, leaped into a battered but obviously souped-up jalopy, and careened away.

Mr. Winter rushed to the phone and called the sheriff's office. He'd managed to glimpse the getaway car, a grey two-door Chevy, but not the gunman himself. He had me supply what scanty description I could.

Something approaching normality gradually returned. Mrs. Eckert, still shaken, retired to the ladies' lounge to lie down. The rest of the bank personnel went back to their stations. A few customers, so terrified moments before, now hung on, patently wanting to be in on the excitement.

Sheriff Adam Rutherford and a deputy were at the bank within ten minutes. He had used the intervening time to alert the state police to set up a series of road blocks.

"Could be we'll be in time to intercept him," he told Mr. Winter, "but maybe not. There're a lot of secondary roads and cutoffs around here. He just may slip through."

Mr. Winter wasn't too happy about that prospect. "Damn it, Sheriff, you've got to catch that man. It's not merely a question of recovering the money—we're insured for that—but I won't have my record clouded by a successful holdup."

Rutherford nodded soberly. He was a lean, slow-moving individual with sleepy hazel eyes which, I suspected, masked a keen mind. I thought his lips twitched a bit as Mr. Winter cited his record, but he made no direct comment. "About the money," he said. "How much did he get?"

It appeared Mrs. Eckert had thrust only one packet of fifties—twelve hundred and fifty dollars—into the heister's bag before my interruption.

After a few more questions all around, the sheriff moved to leave. "That should do it here," he said.

Mr. Winter said, "You'll keep me informed." He made it sound imperative rather than interrogative.

Again Rutherford didn't seem provoked. "You can depend on it, sir,"

he said simply. "Any break we get."

At that moment my wife Janet came hurrying into the bank with news of the biggest break possible—she'd come across both the heister and his car. The Chevy was wrecked in a ditch half a mile from our house, and the holdup man was inside, dead.

I should explain that our modest home was located about three miles from town; two miles south down the state highway, and a mile or so east on an access road. This second stretch was heavily wooded, narrow, and unpaved, and didn't go anywhere in particular. That was why we'd settled there initially—with little or no traffic, the area was quiet and truly rustic.

There'd been a newsbreak on the local radio station right after Mr. Winter contacted the sheriff. The announcer gave what details were available and Janet had heard it. Even though the newscaster had advised that nobody had been harmed in the incident, Janet had wanted to be certain I was all right. Driving in, she'd spotted the wrecked grey car along the access road, recognized its possible identity from the newscast, and checked it out.

"That's a bad stretch for speeding," the sheriff mused. "He'd've recognized that. Probably chose it anyway because of its very unlikelihood."

Mr. Winter wasn't interested in speculation. "The money?" he demanded of Janet. "Did you see a brown paper bag in the car?"

Janet's blue eyes frosted. "I didn't take time to see anything—except a man crushed behind the wheel who was obviously dead." She bit her lip. "It was—horrible."

I squeezed her shoulder. "Easy, hon."

She sagged against me. "I—I'm still a bit queasy."

Oblivious to her state, Mr. Winter pressed his overriding concern. "Sheriff?"

Rutherford drew a breath. "We'll check it out right away, sir." He turned to Janet. "Do you feel up to driving back there with us, ma'am?"

I cut in. "I'll drive," I said. "And afterward I'll drive my wife on home."

Our usual routine was for Janet to drive me to the bank in the morning and pick me up after work. Now, because of her shock, I meant to take the rest of the day off and, in essence, I was *telling* Mr. Winter, not asking him.

Ordinarily, it would have been a questionable ploy. As it was, he gave me one hard look and started to say something, then let it ride.

The sheriff and his deputy followed Janet and me back to the site of

the wreck. Once there, while we waited in the VW, the two lawmen made a thorough inspection and search of the Chevy.

Afterward, as the deputy got on their radio, Rutherford came over to us. "I agree, ma'am," he said. "It's not a pleasant sight." His hazel eyes were steady as they regarded Janet. "And there's no money bag."

If his words weren't suggestive, his look was. I said quickly, "Now hold it a minute. My wife has already told you she only made a quick survey of the car."

He nodded and smiled slightly. "That's true. I only made an observation."

"I think it was more than that," I countered. "But you know how deserted this area usually is. Anyone might have chanced to drive along here either before or after Janet, seen and investigated the wreck just as she did, and discovered the money."

Rutherford assented. "That's also true." He eyed Janet again. "But I ask you specifically, ma'am—you just glimpsed the man's body? You didn't open any door or look inside the car at all?"

I said, "Damn it, Sheriff—"

Janet's fingers closed on mine. "It's all right, Lee. I only took one quick glance, Mr. Rutherford. That was enough."

His brief smile came back. "As you say. Thank you for your time and help, Mrs. Kettridge." He turned to me. "If you'd care to take your wife on home, that would be all right."

I did just that, and fast. By now, color was returning to Janet's cheeks, but I was still concerned about her. "You're sure you're all right?" I kept asking.

She laughed and kissed me. "I'm fine, really. Now—let's relax, shall we?"

So we both slowly unwound. By midafternoon, Janet had fully recovered. She even took a spin into town for some groceries before supper. Afterward, we spent a quiet evening discussing the whole crazy affair and its curious finale.

I kept speculating about the money even after we went to bed. I couldn't shake the sheriff's suggestion that Janet was hiding something. Like it or not, I began to feel positive the lawman would contact us again.

I was right. After breakfast the next morning we had two visitors. One was the sheriff's deputy. The other was Rutherford himself, with an official warrant to search our premises.

I blew up. "This is ridiculous! You've absolutely no right—"

The sheriff demurred. "The warrant says otherwise, Mr. Kettridge."

"I don't care what it says," I said. "My wife told you yesterday—"

"I know what she told me," he said. "I also know what Mr. Winter told me when I got back to him." He paused, studying Janet and me. "It seems you're in some financial straits, sir, that an unexpected windfall could clear up."

I was still fuming. I drew Janet to me. "My wife's not a thief!"

Rutherford wouldn't argue. He swung around and made a gesture to his deputy. "Go ahead, Ed."

Twenty minutes later, under a loose board of that back-porch flooring, the deputy found a brown paper bag containing twelve hundred and fifty dollars in fifty-dollar bills.

I was stunned, though Janet clearly wasn't. At the first electric instant of discovery, her breath sucked in; then she stood mute, her haunted gaze looking everywhere but at me. Abruptly, she crumpled in my arms.

The sheriff wasn't brusque, but he was firm. "I'll have to take you both along," he said. "You'll appear before Judge French this afternoon. You're not obliged to make any statement, and you'll have the opportunity to contact your lawyer if you wish."

My head was spinning, my mind numb. This was a horrendous nightmare. As to our lawyer, we didn't have one, but the bowling club I belonged to had a young attorney as a member. After Janet and I were booked and before we were placed in separate detention cells pending our court appearance, I called him and he agreed to appear and do what he could.

It probably wouldn't be much. There was nothing I could advance for our defense and Janet, who seemed totally disconsolate, wouldn't talk to him.

For that matter, Janet wouldn't even talk to me prior to our going before Judge French. That appearance—with Mr. Winter in grim, gloating attendance and showing approval of both Sheriff Rutherford's and his deputy's depositions—was but an extension of the nightmare.

Finally Janet spoke up in her own defense.

"Your Honor," she said with quiet assurance, her blue eyes suddenly mirroring no trace of despondency, "none of that money was taken from the bank yesterday. It was all ours."

Mr. Winter was instantly on his feet. "That's absurd!"

The judge frowned. "Order, sir." He gave Janet a dubious look. "You had better elaborate, Mrs. Kettridge."

"It's true," Janet said. "I borrowed the money yesterday afternoon from a loan company. My husband and I had talked about it, but we'd always hesitated about going into debt. I finally decided to go ahead without telling him. I thought under that floorboard would be a safe place to keep it overnight—"

Mr. Winter lurched from his seat again, waving his arms. "She's lying, Judge. She's making it up!"

"Mr. Winter!"

"But she's lying, Your Honor. You know and I know that's the money she retrieved from that robber's car. It's the exact same amount!"

Judge French banged his gavel. "I won't remind you again, sir." Then, to Janet, "Any comment, Mrs. Kettridge?"

"It's just a coincidence that I can prove," Janet said. "When I borrowed the money, I asked the man at the loan company to make a record of the serial numbers." She flashed a small smile. "Because they were such a large denomination, you understand. Mr. Zoda will confirm that."

A pleasant-featured individual advanced from the rear of the courtroom. "That's correct, Your Honor," he said, drawing a sheet of paper from his jacket pocket. "This is a list of the numbers on the bills Mrs. Kettridge borrowed."

For the third time, Mr. Winter got to his feet, glaring alternately at Janet and Zoda. He opened his mouth, started to speak, then abruptly sat down.

The judge traded a look with the sheriff. Rutherford passed over the evidential bag of currency, and French took it along with Zoda's list and gave it to the bailiff to check.

Ten minutes later, the bailiff said, "The numbers on the bills all agree with those on the list, Your Honor."

"I see." Judge French pursed his lips, picked up his gavel, and regarded it intently for a moment. Then he gave it one short rap and said, "Charges dismissed. Money to be returned to Mrs. Kettridge."

Mr. Winter appeared about to have a cardiac arrest. Janet was no palliative. She faced him, and said, "Mr. Winter, my husband and I are not vindictive people. But your intimations to Sheriff Rutherford which resulted in our arrest have humiliated us and caused us needless and

perhaps irreparable emotional distress. Through Mr. Callahan—" indicating my bowling associate "—we intend to sue you for a hundred thousand dollars."

Mr. Winter's anguish increased. "Now—now, hold on," he stammered. "There's no need to talk like that. I'm quite sure we can smooth this all out."

Janet turned away. "That's something for you to discuss with Mr. Callahan," she said.

Judge French intervened. "Mrs. Kettridge, Mr. Kettridge—I want to see you in chambers for a moment."

When we were settled there, he favored Janet with an openly skeptical look and went on, "I rather suspect I've been witness to some inspired chicanery. I have no proof, though under the circumstances as I understand them I can appreciate the motivation." He paused, and a ghost of a smile might have touched his mouth. "Regardless, I strongly recommend that any further action you contemplate be limited."

And that was precisely what Janet had envisioned from the outset. Mr. Winter advanced me to the Trusts and Wills department with a nice salary increase, and even threw in a generous bonus voluntarily.

Incidentally, the bank's money never did come to light anywhere. I guess, as I'd suggested to the sheriff, somebody else chanced upon that wrecked car, quietly made off with the windfall, and has kept his mouth shut ever since.

"The whole idea just seemed to pop into my head, full bloom, while we were sitting in our car, watching Sheriff Rutherford check the Chevy," Janet told me that night. "And it all worked out, even the search warrant and that loose floorboard which I was certain they'd spot." She smiled. "I didn't tell Mr. Zoda everything, but I was pretty sure we'd be in court this afternoon, so I got him to agree to appear with that list."

"My sweet wife. And consummate actress in portraying guilt."

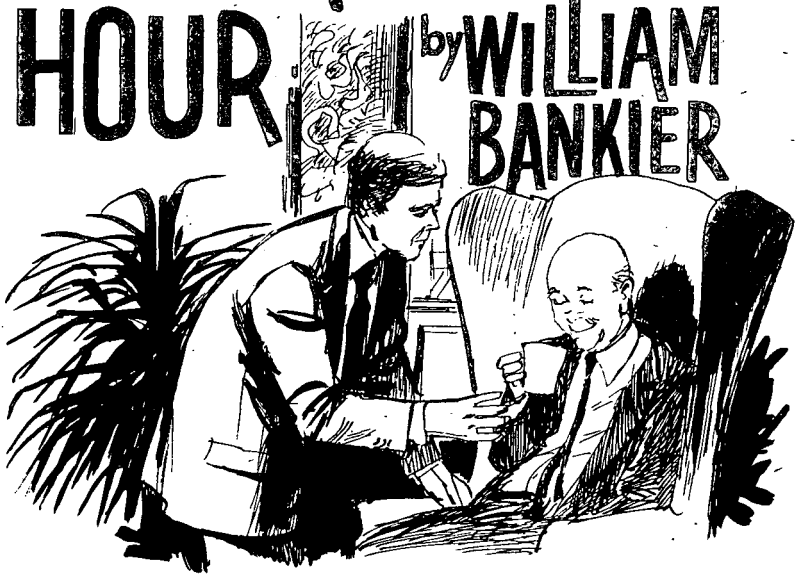
She gave me a big kiss. "I couldn't tell you what I hoped to work out, honey. I was afraid you wouldn't go along."

She was right there. I probably wouldn't have. But then I'm not the smart one in the family. Janet's the truly brainy one, as you've seen. One in a million. Or at least, one in twelve hundred and fifty.

Tom's father had had too much Christmas cheer . . .

THE MAN OF THE HOUR

by WILLIAM BANKIER



Tom Parker saw two men help his father out of the car and deliver him to the hotel door and he knew the old man was drunk. Rotund and as awkward on his feet as a tame bear, Jimmy Parker grinned sleepily at his son, who was standing now in the open doorway.

One of the men said, "He had a little too much Christmas cheer." Then, freed from responsibility, they both escaped to the idling car and drove off to wherever Kiwanians go at that hour of a Friday night.

It was after eleven o'clock. By rights, Tom Parker's shift on the desk was finished and Jimmy should now be on duty to see the Coronet Hotel through another night. But there was no way the old man could take over at the moment. Tom skated him across the shiny black asphalt tile floor and through a doorway into the deserted back lounge. As he wrestled his father out of his overcoat, he asked, "Are you all right, Dad?"

"Mmmmmm." Jimmy Parker was deep down inside an echoing well and wise enough to know there was no use trying to communicate from that location.

"Sit here. Can you sit up, Dad?" Tom propped his father in an upholstered wingback chair. The old man sat bolt upright with a tiny smile on his pursed lips, the large bald head gleaming under lamplight, his baby face firm and healthy after sixty-eight conscientious years. To be inebriated at all was rare for Jimmy Parker—to be drunk on duty was unheard of.

"I'll get you some coffee. Can you just sit here?"

"Mmmmmm."

Tom went back to the kitchen and moved around amid the smells of salad and disinfectant. He organized a mug of black coffee—not so hot it couldn't be taken down—and carried it out to his father. He fully expected to find the old man flat out on the carpet but, miraculously, he was still balanced on the chair, hands fitted onto blue-serge knees, trouser cuffs riding up to show thick grey socks above the tops of shiny black boots.

"Drink this, Dad. You'll feel better." Tom handed the mug to his father and stood poised to take it back. But the old man sipped and then managed to turn and set the mug down on the small table beside the arm of the chair, exhibiting the old-fashioned grace and dignity of the sort of garden party he'd never attended. That's good, Tom thought, that's human. Maybe he can take over by midnight and I can go home.

The bell dinged once on the front desk. Tom hurried into the lobby and saw Connie Avison standing at the counter. She was surprised to see him. "Hello, Tom. Where's Jimmy?"

"He's going to be a little late." Tom slipped behind the desk. "He's singing at a Kiwanis dinner up in Madoc. So I'm hanging around till he gets back."

Connie smiled and her plain face became almost pretty for that moment. She was a tall woman in her thirties, large-boned and muscular.

"Has the Judge been asking for me?"

"Not this evening." Like everyone else in Baytown, Connie referred to her father as "the Judge," even though he had been retired from the bench for almost ten years. Judge Avison was a permanent resident at the Coronet Hotel, occupying Room 312 on the top floor. Connie's idea of exerting her independence was to have moved downstairs some years ago to Room 209, a whole floor and a half a corridor away.

"I wish I could have heard Jimmy singing tonight," she said, smiling affectionately. "He's at his best at those service-club affairs. I'll bet he sang 'The Fighting Temeraire' and 'Danny Deever.' "

"I'm sure he did," Tom agreed. "And for an encore, 'The Road to Mandalay.' "

Connie Avison stumped away upstairs on her thick legs that were hardly worth looking at and Tom Parker went back into the lounge to check on his father. Things were improving; the old man turned his head when Tom entered the room and the coffee mug he held was empty. "Good man, Dad. Feeling O.K.?"

"Mmmmmm. O.K."

"Are you going to be able to carry on?"

"Oh, yes."

Tom took the mug back to the kitchen and refilled it with coffee. He was afraid to suggest his father go home in a cab for fear the old man would accept the offer. The prospect of a long night alone on duty didn't bear thinking about.

When Tom came back to the lounge, Jimmy was on his feet with his body leaning forward and one hand knifed into his jacket pocket in that stagy pose of his. Tom had seen a snapshot taken on his father's trip back to Glasgow a few years ago. There were four Parker men in the photo and they all stood that way, as if a brisk wind from Loch Ness was blowing against them.

"That's the stuff," Tom said. "You look great."

His father's face was changed now, set in the semi-frown of the sober citizen. "You go on along home. I'll be all right."

It was the suggestion Tom Parker wanted to hear and he took his father up on it, helping him into the lobby and installing him behind the desk with coffee to hand, showing him the list of morning wake-up calls. Then Tom got his overcoat from the back room, buttoned himself into it, clamped a pair of green earmuffs on his head, waved goodbye, and stepped

out of the overheated lobby into the cold December night. One thing about Jack Danforth, owner of the Coronet Hotel—nobody could accuse him of being cheap about the heat. His wife was a dark-eyed Mediterranean-looking lady who liked her comfort and there was no way to maintain the Danforth suite at the temperature of Alexandria in August without also roasting the rest of the rooms.

Tom Parker vaulted a snowbank, crossed the road, hurried past the dark stone mass of St. Martin's Church, and headed through the market square on his way up the hill toward the old house on Bleeker Avenue. Strange, he thought, how Connie Avison doted on his father. She was a bit of an eccentric who spent too much time by herself. Tom recalled the period when he was still a bellboy. One summer evening he'd carried a tray of room-service dinner to 209. Connie had let him in and closed the door, and as he was setting things out on the dresser she hovered at his side and he distinctly heard her say in her sing-song voice, "You're the man of the hour!"

Tom had handled the situation in his customary way. He pretended not to understand and said nothing. The event had been vaguely exciting for an eighteen-year-old and he supposed if Connie had flung him onto the bed he would have become involved. As it was, he'd pocketed her quarter tip and let himself out.

But that was the thing—Connie Avison was a little cuckoo, slipping past the marriageable age in the one-chance village of Baytown, typing all day for a lawyer who kept her around because her dad was Judge Avison, and getting most of her excitement from singing in the alto section of the choir at St. Martin's. Tom supposed her affection for his father could be attributed to this hard-up condition of hers. She was starved for male friends.

It was universal, though—the town's feeling of admiration and respect for Jimmy Parker. They said he was generous with his talent. True enough, he had a marvelous, full-throated tenor voice—just this side of operatic—and he would sing anywhere, any time, with or without payment. But what was so noble about that? As for any other contribution to the community, he just went his silent way with that little-boy smile on his face, and everybody thought he was the greatest thing since Daylight-Saving Time.

These thoughts kept Tom Parker reasonably warm all the way up the

hill and down the street and into the house. They also fueled his progress through a frigid bathroom and into a bed made up with sheets as stiff and cold as the sail on an iceboat. Thank God for woolly socks.

He had managed to create a cocoon of body heat for himself when the doorbell rang.

It turned out to be Jonesey. Formerly a truck driver for the Baytown Steam Laundry, Jonesey used to call daily at the hotel to lug away huge canvas sacks of linen. Now he was the operator of his own taxicab. Tom stood at the front door, shivering inside his robe, not wanting to believe what Jonesey was telling him.

"He looks in pretty bad shape, Tom. I went in for cigarettes and when he got them out of the counter, he didn't act like old Jimmy."

"He'd had a drink or two when he came in," Tom said, "but he was shaping up when I left at midnight."

"Then he must have had a relapse. If you want to get some clothes on, I'll run you down there." Jonesey gave Tom that neat, grasshopper look of his. "No charge—not for old Jimmy."

For Tom Parker, the taxi ride to the hotel was a feverish dream. Snowflakes were falling out of the darkness at a rate of six an hour, but Jonesey put the wipers on and left them bumping and squeaking across a dry windshield. The tires shuddered over the icy washboard surface of the road and the banks of grimy, eroded snow they passed threw shadowy yawns at them like trees in a Disney cartoon. Nobody spoke, and Tom felt that Jonesey must be thinking what a creep he was to be so bitter about coming to help his dear old dad. Actually, Jonesey was wondering whether the Round Spot was still open, so he could go there for a hamburger and some coffee after he dropped Tom at the hotel.

"You want me to come in with you?" Jonesey said.

"No. It's O.K. I'll give him some more coffee and let him lie down in the back room."

The taxi crept off, tires creaking, and Tom pushed open the heavy brass-plated glass door and went into the lobby. His father was not behind the desk. The coffee mug, empty, stood beside the switchboard. Tom walked into the lounge. There was nobody there.

"Dad?"

He could be in the kitchen or he might be back in the furnace room checking on the automatic stoker. Tom tried the furnace room first, put-

ting his head inside, turning on the light, smelling coal and frosty air, and hearing the noise of the stoker feeding the furnace steadily. "Dad?" If the old man had come in here and fallen down, the light would have been on.

The kitchen was dark and so was the dining room. There was no sign of Jimmy Parker's presence in either place. Tom was beginning to feel the keen edge of anxiety. There were only the corridors upstairs left; his father might have felt sober enough and conscientious enough to make his hourly round. In that case, in the Coronet Hotel at dead of night Tom could have sensed his heavy tread from here. He listened and heard nothing.

He went back into the lobby and mounted the stairway to the first floor, unbuttoning his overcoat and stuffing his gloves into his pockets. His father was not in sight anywhere. As he reached the second floor and trudged on around the landing toward the next flight, he saw a crack of light vanish under the door of 209. Connie Avison must have been reading late. For a moment, he felt like knocking and asking whether she had heard any disturbance. But there was no sense in alarming the lady and, besides, the thought of a conversation with Miss Avison when she was ready for bed made him feel creepy.

With the tour completed, Tom sat down in one of the lobby chairs. He had been all over and, as far as he could see, his father was not in the hotel. But his overcoat was still on the sofa in the lounge. Jonesey had seen him within the hour and his alcohol level had been obvious. Had it been bad enough for him to wander out into the street without a coat? Had he gone out the back door and fallen into the river?

With his alarm increasing, Tom got up and went behind the desk to the switchboard where he plugged a cord into an outside line. It was time to call the police.

Upstairs in Room 209, Connie Avison waited till she heard Tom descend the stairs. Then she switched on the light and looked at Jimmy Parker stretched out on her bed. His eyes were open and he was breathing regularly, but there was a heavy look about his limbs that suggested he was not about to move. Connie sat on the edge of the bed and placed the back of her hand against the old man's forehead, as if all she had to cope with here was a fever.

"Jimmy, can you hear me?" The lids blinked over cloudy blue eyes but

hey remained focused on the ceiling. "Everything is going to be all right. 'm going to take care of you."

She stood up and went to the dresser where there was a bottle of whiskey standing open and two tumblers, each containing a generous shot. Hearing Jimmy on his rounds, she had invited him in for a drink and found him ready to accept her hospitality. The liquor in the glasses would have been their second. She picked up one of the glasses, glanced at the man on the bed, then took it into the adjoining bathroom and poured it down the sink. Collecting her own drink, she sat back down on the side of the bed.

After some thought and a couple of sips of whiskey, she said, "I suppose I should phone for a doctor. And I promise you if you get any worse, I will. But it wouldn't look good for you to be found loaded and in my room at this time of night. Can you imagine what that would do to both of us in this town? You'd lose your job, and I'd have to leave. My father—I don't even like to think."

Connie finished her drink and set the empty glass on the carpet. She used both hands to smooth the white hair on Jimmy Parker's temples, then went on to loosen his collar further and remove his tie. "You've had a stroke," she said, "and it's left you partly paralyzed. So the best thing is to keep you quiet in bed. Tomorrow I'll get you some medication. I know somebody at Lorimer's Drug Store who'll supply whatever pills they'd give you in the hospital. I won't tell him who they're for. Then you'll rest and get better, and everything will be all right." She leaned over and kissed him on the forehead. "You'll be back singing in the choir by Easter."

The search for Jimmy Parker was the most thorough and widespread ever conducted by the Baytown Police. Every vacant piece of ground within miles was checked out. Photographs were posted in towns throughout Ontario in case the old man had blacked out and gone wandering off. As for malicious strangers who might have abducted Parker, they were practically nonexistent in Baytown in winter. Besides, what would have been the motive? No ransom message had been received.

"One good thing," Chief Kalb said, displaying his usual degree of sensitivity, "if they killed him I doubt if they buried him. The ground is frozen for two feet down."

So with this mental image of his father possibly dead but probably not

buried, Tom Parker soldiered on through the days leading up to the saddest Christmas of his life. On Christmas Eve he had to make the decision whether or not to attend the midnight candlelight service at St. Martin's across the road. Tom was an expendable member of the choir—not having inherited his father's vocal equipment, he was just tolerated in the bass section, where his ineffective rumble was lost at the bottom of every chord.

"You're going across to the service, then," Marvin Kelly said. Kelly was the desk clerk who had been given the dreary task of replacing Jimmy Parker on the night shift. Now, at eleven o'clock, he had just come in from the cold to replace Tom. He was a dapper man and stood erect with his head back, his glasses coated with vapor.

"Yes," Tom said. "It'll be painful not hearing Dad's solo, but going home alone would be worse."

"I think you're right. For the time being anyway, we've got to face up to life without Jimmy." Kelly was one of those who believed the old man had gone off the parapet into the river, had somehow crashed through a thin place in the ice, and would be found after the spring thaw.

Tom got his coat on and stood on the customer's side of the desk, apparently in no hurry to leave. Kelly gave him a few sidelong glances, then said, "What time do they want the choir over there?" They could see people arriving in cars and on foot, entering the church, assembling for what would be, as usual, the largest congregation of the year.

"Any time now," Tom said. Then he got Kelly's meaning. "I'm waiting for Connie Avison. I promised I'd go over with her."

Kelly selected a cigar from the display of open boxes in the glass counter, then made a production of ringing up his payment and biting one end and lighting the other. "Strange lady," he said.

"Connie?"

"She hasn't let the maid into her room for a week. She's doing some confidential work for her lawyer, she says, and has it spread out all around the room. She doesn't want it touched. Or seen." Kelly puffed superficially, barely allowing the smoke past his teeth. "She has all her meals up there too, much to the Judge's annoyance." For almost a week, the retired jurist had been a tall, lonely figure over his roast beef in the dining room.

"If she goes on like this she'll turn into— A mild night from the look of it. We could lose all our snow by January." Kelly's sensitive hearing

had detected Connie Avison's step on the stairs. Tom stood away from the desk and met Connie as she reached the lobby.

"I'm sorry to hold you up, Tom," she said. As they moved to the door, she added, "Do we have to have so much heat on, Marvin? My room is stifling."

"I agree. But you know Mrs. Danforth."

He mimicked the hotel owner's wife entering a room, sensing a chill, and hunching her shoulders as she sucked in her breath with a faint little "*Tssst!*"

"Don't fight it," Tom said. "Just turn off your radiator."

"I can't. The handle is jammed." Then, as if she knew they would insist on sending somebody to fix it, she hurried on to say, "Never mind. I have my window open now. And it'll probably turn cold again tomorrow."

They exchanged Merry Christmases although the fatherless Tom Parker was feeling none of the seasonal comfort and joy, then Tom and Connie went outside and hurried across the street to St. Martin's. As they passed through the church vestibule and headed down the stairs to the changing rooms in the basement, Tom said, "It won't seem like Christmas Eve service without Dad singing from the balcony to start us off."

"I know," Connie agreed. They were about to enter the separate rooms when she put a hand on his arm. "Don't worry, Tom," she said, her pale, homely face a few inches from his at the bottom of the dim stairway. "I just know Jimmy is O.K. and he'll turn up one day, as good as new."

"I wish I could think so. I have this feeling something terrible has happened to him."

Fifteen minutes later, dressed in cassock and white surplice, carrying his hymn book and a short white candle fitted into a hole drilled in a block of pine two-by-four, Tom stood in the vestibule upstairs waiting for the processional hymn to begin. He always felt nervous before a service, even though there was no way his mediocre voice was going to be heard through the roar of organ, choir, and congregation.

To make matters worse, Professor Wheeler, the organist and choir leader, had suggested a two-minute silence just before the processional. The minister had agreed and it was printed in the program as a time for everyone to pray for the safe return of the beloved Jimmy Parker during

this time when he would traditionally be singing the aria "Comfort Ye, My People" from a place high in the balcony.

Tom had grown up hearing the solo sung every year on this most atmospheric of nights in his father's heroic tenor voice. Now, in the silence following the organ's last chords, hearing the hush from the church and seeing the bowed heads of his fellow choristers, he suddenly knew that he would not be able to hold back the tears. Quickly, he turned and fled to the great wooden door, swung it open, and stepped through into the frosty night. As the door closed behind him, he caught a glimpse of sympathetic faces turned his way, including the serious features of Connie Avison peering from beneath her black mortarboard hat.

It was cold out on the granite porch. Tom shivered and realized he must look ridiculous out here in the dark in his choir vestments. Fortunately, the street was deserted—the good citizens of Baytown were either stationed in pews at carol services or relaxing at home beside ornamented trees if they weren't buried under mounds of blankets while visions of sugarplums danced in their heads.

Buried. Tom thought again of his father and wondered if the pessimists were right and that he was in the cold ground somewhere. As if to emphasize the strength of this theory, from the other side of the market square the Town Hall clock produced one funereal bong to indicate the arrival of Christmas Day.

Warm tears soon turned icy on Tom's cheeks and he brushed them away with the starchy hem of his surplice. Then he hesitated, his eyes looking up into the black sky. In the distance, faintly, he heard a tenor voice singing, "Comfort ye . . . comfort ye . . . comfort ye, my people . . ."

It was Jimmy Parker's voice, somewhat muffled, but recognizable nonetheless. Tom turned toward the church door. Had they found a recording of another year's solo to use tonight in the old man's absence? No, it would have been announced. Besides, the singing was not originating inside the church. It was coming from behind him now, from somewhere across the road.

Parker turned and stared at the face of the hotel. The lobby appeared deserted. There was no sign of Marvin behind the desk. Above, the rows of windows showed some lighted and some dark. Then he spotted one that looked different from all the others because the sash was thrust up to the fullest extent. It was two floors above the canvas canopy that protected the main entrance—Room 209, Connie Avison's room.

The singing was fainter now. The voice was weak, and it broke on a ıigh note as Jimmy Parker's voice had never done in all his years of solos ŕom the balcony at St. Martin's. Suddenly Tom Parker understood every-hing and he felt anger rising in him as he rushed across the street, under he canopy, and in through the front door. His father must have been in Connie's room all the time. It was nonsense, that business about confi-lential work. She was just keeping out the chambermaids. And the room-ervice meals must have been used to feed him. What the hell was going on?

"Marvin?" Tom called as he entered the lobby, but the clerk was ıowhere in sight. Quickly, he reached across the desk and snatched from ts pigeonhole the spare key for Room 209. He took the stairs two at a ime, one flight, and then the next. Connie's room was next to the linen oom. Lazy chambermaids, anxious to get home on Christmas Eve, had eft four large canvas sacks of laundry in the corridor. Tom had to dodge ıround them to reach 209.

Unlocking the door and flinging it open, he felt the contrast of fresh ıir after the overheated corridor. He snapped on the light and was both shocked and reassured to see his father's head on one pillow of the double ed. The indentation on the pillow beside him called up an image Tom lid not want to think about. On the bedside table was a glass of water ınd a bottle of pills. A tray of used dishes rested on the dresser.

"Dad! What happened?" Tom sat on the bed and leaned close to hear he faint reply.

"Couldn't talk. Couldn't move. A little better now." The big head urned and there was life in the pale-blue eyes. "It's Christmas Eve, isn't t? I missed the service."

"Yes. But you're going to be all right now." Tom's relief at finding his ather was being replaced by anger. "I don't know who to call first, an ımbulance or the police."

"She was good to me," Jimmy Parker said. "She took care of me."

"She had a hell of a nerve. We thought you were dead." He hurried ŕom the bed and went to a table by the open window where the tele-phone rested. As he reached it, he stumbled over a chintz sack on the loor. Lacking fire escapes, the hotel was required by law to provide each oom with a rope attached to the radiator—the decorative storage bag for ach rope was Mrs. Danforth's idea.

Tom had one hand on the window ledge and was kicking the bag out

of the way when he heard a movement behind him. He glanced around in time to see a flash of white moving swiftly across the room. It was Connie Avison in her choir outfit and she was rushing at him with outstretched arms like an aggressive basketball guard. She struck him on the hips and suddenly he was out of the window, falling through the darkness, the brick face of the building flashing past.

He hit the canvas canopy with head and shoulders first, fortunately landing between two of the curved metal struts. He bounced a few inches, rolled to his left, and managed to hold on as he slipped off the side. Hanging full length, he was left with only a two-foot drop to the pavement.

Heading unsteadily for the front door again, Tom saw the astonished face of Marvin Kelly at the plate-glass window. The clerk met him inside the entrance. "Did you just fall onto that canopy?"

"I didn't fall. I was pushed through the window! By Connie Avison—she's crazy."

"But you're supposed to be in church!"

"I came back. Where *were* you before?" Something was wrong with Tom's left knee. He limped towards the stairs.

"I was out back feeding the stoker. What's going on?"

"I told you, that woman is crazy. My dad is up there in Room 209. She's been hiding him there. It looks like he's had some kind of a stroke. She's been giving him medicine and feeding him." Tom grimaced as he bent his knee over the first step. "God—they've even been sleeping in the same bed."

Kelly hesitated. "Shall I call the police?"

"After. Let's get up there first. If she's willing to push me out a window, who knows what she's doing to my father right now."

The two men climbed to the second floor at Tom Parker's reduced pace. They circled the stuffed laundry bags by the linen-room door and faced the black door with the numerals 209 fastened to it. Kelly knocked once and, when a tense-sounding Connie Avison asked who was there, he identified himself.

She opened the door, trying to look put-upon but not succeeding because of the incongruity of the choir costume she was wearing. "Hello, Marvin." She looked across his shoulder at Tom. "You again," she said. "You lay another hand on me and I'll call the police."

"A hand on *you*?" Tom exploded. "You pushed me out the window. I'm lucky to be alive."

She explained to Kelly, "I did push him out the window. But it was an accident. I was taken ill just before the church service so Tom volunteered to bring me back here. But when we got up here he made a pass at me. We struggled and he fell out the window."

"Lies, lies!" Tom said. "She's got my father in there. Make her let us in, Marv."

"Do you mind, Connie?" Kelly said.

"Of course not." She stepped back and the two men entered the room. The bed was rumpled but empty. Kelly looked around, then raised his eyebrows at Tom.

Tom bent to look under the bed. Then he brushed past Connie and looked inside the bathroom. His father was nowhere in sight. He pointed at the bottle of pills on the bedside table. "What about those?" he said. "You must have been giving Dad medication."

She shook her head. "I take those to help me sleep," she said.

Marvin supported Tom as he limped downstairs, complaining all the way. It was true, his father *had* been there. She had done something to him. She was crazy.

"Listen, Tom," Kelly said at the desk, "you've been under a terrible strain. I understand how you must be feeling. Why don't you go over for the rest of the service—"

"Don't humor me, you idiot. I saw my father in 209 not fifteen minutes ago. Now he's not there. She's hidden him."

"That's a small room, Tom. We searched it."

"Then maybe she put him somewhere outside the room."

He heard himself make the suggestion and suddenly the preposterous possibility exploded in his mind. "Laundry bags!" he shouted.

"What?"

"You saw them yourself. There were laundry bags outside the linen-room door, right beside Connie's room. Dad isn't all that big, and she's built like a fullback. She could have put him in one of the bags with the sheets."

"Why wouldn't he yell? Didn't you say you were talking to him?"

"I don't know. Maybe she knocked him out." Tom limped for the stairs again. "Let's go. He's still up there with her."

As they hurried to the second floor, Kelly said, "I don't believe this. It's like being a bellboy again."

Arriving on the second-floor landing, Tom attacked the first of the giant canvas bags. He unknotted the rope fastening and burrowed inside. Used sheets and pillowcases. Kelly worked on one and Tom did another. There was nothing in them but soiled linen ready for pick-up after the holiday.

"Satisfied?" Kelly whispered.

"You don't have to keep your voice down," Tom said. "She's got him back inside. She had time while we were downstairs." He went to the door and hammered on it with his fist.

"It's open," Connie Avison scolded from inside. "No need to break it."

Tom burst into the room. Connie was standing by the window, which was now almost closed. She was holding a cigarette in one hand, her arms folded. Except for the window the room looked the same—and there was no sign of Jimmy Parker, under the bed or in the bathroom.

"Take him away, Marvin, will you?" Connie said.

Back in the lobby, Kelly said, "Tom, I believe that *you* believe you saw your father in Connie Avison's bed. For all I know you saw some other man there—maybe a boy friend of hers and he's made himself scarce. But your dad is not there now. We've proved that."

Tom's face was screwed up like a shriveled apple. "Marv, how many bags of laundry did you search?"

"One. You did the others."

"The other two. Three altogether." His eyes were getting wider. "But there were four bags outside the door when I went up before—I'm sure of it. Where's the other one?"

Kelly threw up his hands. "Tommy, go to church. You can still make the sermon and the collection."

"Of course!" Tom leveled a finger at Kelly's nose. "The rope! The rope!" And he raced out the door as fast as his twisted knee would carry him.

Kelly went after him. He joined Tom on the chilly street looking up at the front of the building. And there it was, hanging from the window of 209, one large stuffed canvas laundry bag, turning on the end of the fire-escape rope.

"Now do you believe me?" Tom said as they watched strong hands drawing the bag up toward the open window. "There he goes. There goes my father. . ."

The specialists from Baytown Hospital were amazed at how well Jimmy Parker was doing after his ordeal. They put it down to the fact that he was a tough old bird, and so it wasn't this stroke that was going to do him in but another stroke some years down the line. And apart from the bundling about at the end Connie Avison had taken very good care of him—and even that she had executed with tender loving care. As for the medication, she had been lucky with that—the pills were just what the doctors would have prescribed.

The police came into it, of course, but went right back out again. They wanted to lay a kidnapping rap against Connie, considering all the trouble they had been put to in the search, but Connie had two things going for her. One was her father, Judge Avison, who telephoned a couple of people and explained how his little girl had embarrassed him and asked if the whole affair couldn't be quietly set aside.

Connie's other bit of support came from Jimmy Parker himself. He refused to press charges because he knew what she was doing all along and he was on her side. Even on the night of the laundry bag, he had cooperated as she stowed him in it and slung him out the window. "Once we had the conspiracy going," he said from his hospital bed, "it made sense to try and sustain it."

Jimmy Parker came out of hospital after a month of recuperation looking younger than ever. The only evidence of his illness was a slight limp that would affect his walk from now on. This was handy because it matched Tom's damaged knee, which plagued him for the rest of the winter. The two of them, father and son, made a fine heroic picture as they gimped on down the hill to choir practice on Thursday evenings.

The worst of the outcome, to Tom's way of thinking, was the new relationship between his dad and Connie Avison. She began coming over to the house for meals and she and his father would sing duets—Connie at the keyboard, Jimmy standing beside the piano with one hand thrust into his jacket pocket, leaning forward slightly into the wind.

On these occasions, Tom had to get out of the house. But he couldn't escape the public events at which the December-April couple flaunted their new friendship. The Spring Choir Concert, for example, when his father and Connie entertained a crowded community hall with their rendition of "Drink to Me Only with Thine Eyes." The old man's volume was considerably diminished since his illness—all the sweetness of the

Irish tenor was there but it was now conveyed in a whispering tone.

And did Connie Avison take this into account? She did not. She made no effort to modulate her voice, but stood like a triumphant Wagnerian heroine, towering over her partner, giving full vent to her powerful contralto, absolutely burying him.

Watching his father accepting this indignity with a smile, Tom Parker found himself remembering his fall from the window of 209 and the canopy that had saved his life. The canopy was being taken down next week for cleaning and mending and would be gone for a month. It would merely be a matter of going to her room when nobody knew he was there. Then, if he could maneuver Connie Avison near enough to the open window he might end up being the man of the hour after all.

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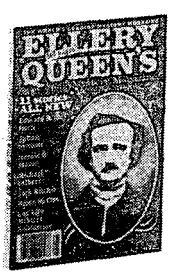

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Heloise was sure the marriage wouldn't last . . .

ACCIDENTS WILL HAPPEN

by TONITA S. GARDNER

I don't care what anyone says, there's got to be something wrong with Jeff Warner. Any young man who would choose a girl like my sister's daughter Babs in preference to my Tory must have a serious lack of judgment. And because of it, Jeff Warner deserves what he's going to get. Yes, I'll make a prediction: the marriage won't last—if I have to see to it myself.

But now, as Babs is coming down the aisle on her father's arm, I can't

help concentrating on Serena. Serena, the mother of the bride, is my sister. To watch her glowing with happiness—gloating would be a more accurate word—you'd think this wedding could compensate for all the times my daughter outshone hers. Still, if it weren't for Jeff things would be different today. Jeff was Tory's boyfriend and let her believe he was serious, then he dropped her when he fell for Babs. And the way he ended it! "Victoria, you're very beautiful, but when I marry I want a wife, not a monument to your mother."

Of course, Tory kept her chin up through the entire fiasco, but I know how it rankled. Just as I'm rankled by this endless ceremony—not to mention all these sharp-eyed people checking me over, thinking that even if I wore a Paris original and had the world's best hair stylist and makeup artist I couldn't look half as stunning as Serena.

How do I know what they're thinking? I can feel it in the prickling of my skin and the perspiration forming on my upper lip—a reaction I have every time I'm in a position to be compared to my sister. But that's the way it's always been: Serena is the Queen Bee, Heloise doesn't count.

That's why it was such a shock when our daughters were born. Tory had opalescent skin, long dark eyelashes, and silvery gold curls, while Babs, scrawny as a mongrel runt, had wisps of dull hair and shapeless features. Even though I felt a touch of pity for my niece, I could have kissed her for being so homely. Not that Serena, always so sure of herself, would acknowledge the difference. To watch her as she cooed to Babs and caressed her, you'd have thought she was as delighted with her child as I was with Tory.

But even the prettiest outfits couldn't do much for Babs. Serena must have realized it. And, seeing our girls together, she also had to realize that Tory sat up first, walked first, and spoke in complete sentences while Babs was still saying "Ma-ma."

Then my sister gave birth to twins—identical handsome boys—and she was ecstatic.

As content as I was with Tory, I might have had more children too, but just before our fifth anniversary Max was killed in a crash on the turnpike. My husband had been a quiet man, easy to get along with and devoted to our little girl. Not that we had a perfect marriage. How could we when, every so often, as I shopped in the supermarket or browsed in the library, some busybody would approach with a friendly smile.

"How's everything?" she'd ask, as if she were making polite conver-

sation. But I was nobody's fool. The intimation was that Max was sorry he'd married me and not Serena.

I'd go home with a violent headache, imagining that if people thought that, it could be true.

When I'd confront Max with what had happened, he'd listen impatiently as if he couldn't wait for me to finish, then he'd gather Tory and me in his arms. "Can't you see we're a family?" he'd insist.

Wanting to believe him, I'd scold myself for rehashing the old myth about Serena, concluding that, unlike most men in town, Max had not been enamored of my sister, nor had he settled for me after she'd chosen Ralph. Still, because the myth persisted, I hated Serena for being the cause of it.

After Max was gone, I drew even closer to my daughter. When Tory cried for her father, I tried to make it up to her as best I could.

"Would you like a puppy?" I suggested.

"No," she said. "I want a baby brother."

"Darling, that's impossible."

"Why, Mommy? Babs has two of them. Can't we take one of hers?"

"If there were some way to do it, I would, Tory. But you'll have to settle for a little dog."

Tory shook her head. "I'd rather have a kitty."

I let her choose one herself. It had orange stripes, and she named it Tiger.

Tory was enthralled with her pet, but I never felt comfortable with him. As he grew from a tiny kitten into a young cat, he displayed a nasty temper, complaining loudly when he wasn't fed or let in or out on time.

One day, just after Victoria turned five, she picked Tiger up as he was eating and he raked his claws down the side of her lovely face. She dropped him and screamed. I grabbed her in my arms and ran with her to the doctor's.

"Children shouldn't have pets," Dr. Sanford said as he bandaged Tory's face. "They tease them."

I turned to him. "How dare you accuse her of such a thing?" I demanded. "You'd never say that about my sister's children!"

Dr. Sanford looked dumfounded. "I didn't mean to upset you," he said. "Please accept my apologies."

Although he assured me the gouges would leave no scars, I was panic-

stricken. Victoria could have been maimed for life by those infernal claws that had dug into her just as those busybodies had once dug their claws into me.

When we got home, Tiger was skulking in a corner. Sending Tory to play at a neighbor's, I enticed him into a cardboard box with some liver. While he was devouring it, I shut the box, sealed it, carried it out to the car, drove to the edge of town, and started across the bridge. In the middle, I pulled over to the side and tossed the box over the railing. It slashed into the murky water below and sank without a trace.

Tory and Babs were assigned to the same kindergarten class.

Victoria came home elated one day soon after school started.

"Mommy, look what I did!" She held up a brightly hued painting of a schoolhouse, its red-brick façade rendered with perfect brush strokes. "Miss Wissman says I'm an artist."

"You are, sweetheart." I put the painting aside to frame it. "Did Babs draw one too?"

"Yes," said Tory, "but she used so much paint the sky dripped down on the trees and the sun looked like it had yellow legs. It was yukky!"

A few days later, I stopped by at Serena's and noticed the picture Tory had described displayed on the wall of the dinette.

"See what Babs made," my sister said. "An impressionist landscape!"

One day Tory arrived home in tears. "Mom, I only got a ninety-four in spelling."

"What's so terrible about that?" I tried to console her.

"Peter got a ninety-six. And I'm smarter than he is."

"Of course you are, darling."

"I hate him," she said. "And I'm mad at myself for letting him beat me. How can I keep him from doing it again?"

"I'll drill you on the words," I told her. "Over and over, until you can't fail."

She thought about it. "From now on," she said, "I'm going to get a hundred on all my tests."

But even though she kept her promise, Victoria wasn't *just* a grind. Besides being involved in a number of extracurricular activities as the years went on, she always had friends who clustered around her like butterflies awed by light.

To be fair, I admit that as the girls entered their teen[illegible] more friends than Victoria. But anyone who saw my daugh[illegible] into a breathtaking beauty would know why. The majority were jealous—and who could blame them?

They were especially envious when she was invited to the Senio[illegible]om while she was still only a freshman.

"I tried to fix Babs up with my date's best friend," Tory told me, "but after Dave saw her he decided to invite another girl." She giggled.

"It was nice of you to make the effort," I said.

"Well, maybe some other guy will ask her."

But Babs wasn't that lucky.

When I casually mentioned it to Serena, she interrupted before I could finish. "There's plenty of time for that sort of thing," she said. "Besides, Heloise, you're always drawing comparisons between the girls. Each of them has her own virtues and faults."

I felt my muscles tighten. "Whatever faults you see in Babs are your business. As far as I'm concerned, Tory's perfect."

"Tory's a lovely girl, but *nobody's* perfect," said Serena. "Why do you set her such an impossible goal?"

"I could say plenty," I countered. "But I'll keep quiet about your daughter if you'll do the same about mine."

She never brought up the subject again, and I determined not to either. For the truth was that all during high school Babs couldn't excel at anything. But that didn't stop Serena from being proud of her. Once at a family picnic she said, "Babs wrote a wonderful essay for the Senior contest."

"Do you think she'll win?" I couldn't help asking.

"I don't care one way or the other," said Serena.

"Neither does Babs," added Ralph, my brother-in-law. "She had fun doing it, and that's good enough for us."

When we got home I suggested to Tory that she should enter the contest. Needless to say, she demolished her opposition.

The prize was awarded at graduation. After the exercises, Serena and Ralph pushed their way through the crowd to congratulate Tory. Then Ralph took Babs in his arms. "Your mother and I are very proud of you, sweetheart," said Ralph. Serena beamed at them. You'd have thought Babs had won the contest instead of Tory.

That was just before Tory snared Jeff Warner—Jeff! Another Tiger—turning on the person he was supposed to love.

Even though she has no scratches this time, I sense that Tory's wounds are deep. Nevertheless, I'm gratified that she agreed to be her cousin's maid of honor. When she floated down the aisle like a dream in blue silk it was obvious from the gasp of approval that she was infinitely more lovely than the bride. But that's just a small and temporary consolation.

More comforting is what will happen in the future. And something *will* happen. As accidents will: a man falls in front of an oncoming train; a woman tumbles down a steep flight of stairs; a driver is killed on a high-speed highway because he failed to notice that a perfectly good tire had been replaced by one with no tread. I can vouch for this latter method, having used it on Max's car right before his smashup. What choice did I have when he finally admitted he *had* been in love with Serena and had married me on the rebound? I can remember his exact words: "If that's what you want to believe, Heloise, who am I to argue with you?"

Once again, I didn't count.

But Tory does.

And that's why I've made up my mind. Because of his lack of judgment in choosing my mousy niece over my beautiful daughter, Jeff Warner deserves the accident *he's* going to get.

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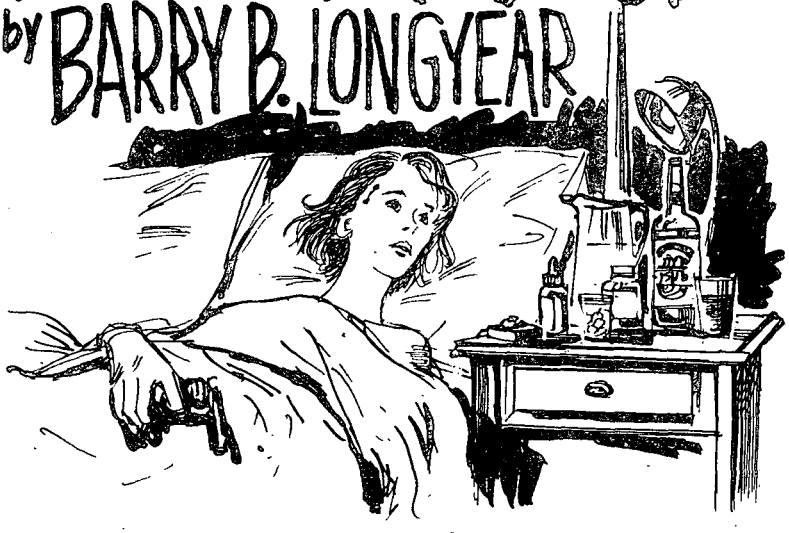
The Slaughterhouse was an exclusive London club . . .

SLAUGHTERHOUSE

by BARRY B. LONGYEAR



Killing Martha Griever was the only thing Nathan Griever had ever really done well, and he had done that very well indeed. The sole heir, Nathan had netted nearly twenty-three million dollars after taxes. Of course, his inheritance made him the number-one suspect, especially after it was learned that Nathan had only known his wife a scant few months before her unfortunate passing.

A clever fellow, Nathan had seen no way to divert suspicion from

himself. Therefore, he did the next best thing—he made sure no one could prove he did it. The game had dragged on for a while, but the final score was L.A.P.D. nothing, Nathan Griever multi-millionaire.

The money had bought Nathan his place in the world. Even the suspicion of guilt now worked to his advantage. He was not only wealthy, he had an air of mystery about him that interested the ladies and encouraged people to invite him to dinners and parties. Before, his conversation had been banal and witless; now, though it hadn't changed in the least, he was considered urbane and clever by his new circle of friends. Nathan Griever belonged.

Smiling, he tipped his bowler over one eye and aimed the other in the direction of his new friend, Sir James Owens Cockeral. That's me, folks, Nathan thought as he looked his distinguished friend over—that's Nathan Griever walking down a London street with Sir James Owens Cockeral. Nathan thumbed his Bond Street threads and restrained himself from bursting out with a very ungentlemanly whistle and whoop.

"You seem chipper, Nate. What is it? The spring air?"

"No, Sir James—"

"Call me Jim."

"Why, certainly, Jim, old boy. As I was about to say, I'm looking forward to joining the club."

Sir James furrowed his brow and shook his head. "I do wish you'd take this more seriously, Nate. You know I'm going out on a limb by sponsoring you?"

"Not to worry, Jim. I think I can make a real contribution."

"You know, if any of those fellows guess how you've done it, I'm afraid there's nothing to do but try again at a later date."

"I understand, and, as I said, not to worry." Nathan frowned, then looked at Sir James. "I have to admit I'm a little reluctant to spill the story in front of a bunch of strangers."

Sir James nodded. "As well you should be. However, we are very careful about selecting candidates for membership. And there is also the guarantee, Nate. Once you are accepted, each of us will recount his own story. That way, if any one of us talks, we all suffer. So no one ever talks.

"Did you bring the application fee?" Sir James continued.

Nathan patted his breast pocket. "It's right here—and in cash, as specified. Why the uneven amount? Instead of $13,107.17, why not just make it thirteen or fourteen thousand?"

"I suppose our customs seem strange to an American."

"No, no—not at all. I just wondered."

Sir James aimed his walking stick at the ornate entrance of an ancient greystone structure. "Here we are."

They turned in the entrance and Sir James pulled a hand-wrought chain extending from the mouth of a brass lion's head set in the stone to the right of the iron-strapped double-oak doors. The left door opened and a liveried doorman, complete with powdered wig, stood in the entrance.

"Sir James," he said.

"Yes, Collins. This is my guest, Mr. Nathan Griever. Would you announce us?"

"Certainly. If you gentlemen would follow me."

Nathan followed Sir James through the door and they handed their hats to a second bewigged servant. Dark gilded frames surrounded even darker portraits of distinguished persons in uniforms or high-collared formal wear. The servant opened another set of doors, and inside the room five distinguished gentlemen rose as he announced the pair.

One of the gentlemen, with monocle, three-piece tweed suit, and handlebar moustache, approached Nathan and held out his hand. "Ah, Mr. Griever, I am happy to make your acquaintance. Welcome to Slaughterhouse."

Nathan grasped the outstretched hand and was pleased at the firmness of the fellow's grip. "Thank you."

"I am Major Evan Sims-Danton, late of Her Majesty's Irish Guard." As Nathan thrilled at the hyphenated name, Sims-Danton turned and held out a hand toward his four companions. "Mr. Griever, may I introduce the other members of Slaughterhouse—Wallace Baines, Edward Stepany, Charles Humpheries, and our treasurer, Malcolm Jordon."

Nathan nodded at each in turn, shaking hands and smiling. After shaking Malcolm Jordan's hand, Nathan looked at his new friends, bounced a bit on his toes, and grinned. "I'm very pleased to make your acquaintance."

Sims-Danton cleared his throat and leaned his head in Nathan's direction. "I believe you have something for Mr. Jordon?"

"Oh, yes." Nathan reached into his pocket, withdrew a heavy letter-size envelope, and handed it to the treasurer.

Jordon nodded as he took it. "Thank you. I'm certain it's all here, Mr.

Griever, but club policy requires that I count it. I hope you understand."

"Certainly."

Jordon opened the envelope, quickly thumbed through the bills, dumped the change into his hand, glanced at it, then nodded at Sims-Danton. "$13,107.17."

Sims-Danton nodded, took Nathan by the elbow, and held his other hand out toward an imposing marble staircase. "Then shall we be off to the problem room?"

They turned and led the procession up the staircase, followed by Baines, Stepany, Humpheries, Jordon, and, at the very end, Sir James Owens Cockeral. Nathan turned toward Sims-Danton. "If I pass, will I be accepted today?"

"Yes. Of course, you understand that each of us in turn will have a crack at guessing how you did it. If any of us is successful, then I'm afraid you don't qualify for membership."

"I see."

Sims-Danton slapped Nathan on the back as they reached the top of the stairs. "Have faith, my boy. If Sir James sponsors you, I'm certain you'll give us a run for our money."

Nathan smiled. "You mean a run for *my* money, don't you?"

Sims-Danton frowned, then barked out a sharp laugh. "Yes, a run for *your* money! Good. Very good, by Jove." He held out a hand toward a flat white-painted door that stood ajar. The doorjamb was splintered, indicating the doorway had been forced. "Here we are, Mr. Griever."

The procession came to a halt. "Now, according to the police report, this is exactly the way the room was found. As you can see, the door has been forced. The report states that Angela, the maid, heard a single shot as she was sitting in the kitchen downstairs having a cup of coffee. She rushed out of the kitchen, through the dining room, down the main hall, then up the staircase to Mrs. Griever's bedroom."

Sims-Danton pointed toward a doorway at the other end of the upstairs hall. "As she came to the door, Angela noticed you, Mr. Griever, in your robe and slippers, leaving your room. Is that correct?"

Nathan nodded. "This is amazing. The hallway looks just like the one in my house. How did you get copies of the police report?"

Sims-Danton waved his hand. "We try to be thorough here at Slaughterhouse, Mr. Griever." He studied the paper in his hand and rubbed his chin. "Now, Angela stated that you rushed to her side. With both of

you standing in front of Mrs. Griever's door, you asked, 'What was it? Did you hear something?' Angela replied in the affirmative. Then both of you tried to rouse Mrs. Griever by pounding on the door and shouting."

The Major rapped on the door, producing a clanging sound. "The door to Mrs. Griever's bedroom was made of steel, and the doorjamb was made of wood-filled steel. For these reasons, neither you nor you and Angela together were able to break down the door. Hence, the gardener, Oshiro, was called. Oshiro subsequently broke down the door by bending and splintering the doorjamb. Correct?"

Nathan nodded. "So far, very accurate."

The Major nodded. "The door was pushed open and Mrs. Griever was found in her bed, shot through the right temple, a .32-caliber pistol in her right hand. You, Mr. Griever, went to her side, determined she was dead, then ordered Oshiro and Angela from the room. You accompanied them, leaving the door as we find it now. Correct thus far, sir?"

Nathan nodded. "You are thorough, aren't you?"

The Major nodded. "We try to be." He pushed against the door. "Gentlemen, you will notice that the door is spring-loaded in the closed position. The only reason it stood ajar is because of the solenoid-controlled deadbolt, in an extended position, leaning against the splintered doorjamb." He held out a hand toward the open door. "Gentlemen?"

The members, led by Nathan, entered the room. Baines immediately began studying the solenoid lock, while Jordon began tracing the wire from the lock around the room to the push button located on the night stand next to the bed. Nathan walked to the edge of the bed and looked down at the representation of his former wife, gun in hand, staring with sightless eyes at the canopy. In the mannequin's right temple was a dark hole pocked with powder burns above a slight trickle of reddish-brown blood. Nathan bit his lower lip and felt the cold sweat on his forehead.

"Quite realistic, isn't it?"

Nathan turned to see Sims-Danton standing by his side. He nodded. "Yes, very."

Sims-Danton clapped his hands. "Very well, gentlemen. Baines, Jordon—you're jumping the gun." The two errant members gathered with the others around the Major as he introduced the problem.

"First, gentlemen, we have Martha Griever, the former Mrs. Stanton Atwood. When Mr. Atwood passed away, he left her a fortune of some

eighteen million dollars, which she subsequently doubled. Then—" the Major bowed toward Nathan "—Mr. Griever entered the picture."

Nathan turned away from the still figure on the bed. The Major drew a small notebook from his left breast pocket and continued. "After a brief period of courtship, Nathan Griever was wed to the former Mrs. Atwood, who promptly became an alcoholic as well as a raving paranoiac." He plucked the monocle from his eye and raised an eyebrow in Nathan's direction. "Forgive me if my description is harsh, Mr. Griever."

Nathan shrugged. "It was more than generous, Major." He pointed toward the door. "You can see how she rigged up her bedroom. No one could enter or leave unless she pressed the button on her night stand and, even so, you had to stand outside her door and shout for twenty minutes to convince her to press the button. She probably would have had a closed-circuit TV camera put in if she could have allowed a stranger in to do the installation."

Stepany raised a hand and cleared his throat. "If you please, Mr. Griever—how was she able to leave the room herself?"

Nathan shook his head. "Except for two visits to the hospital, she never did. Both of those times, she had me prop the door open with a wooden chock."

Baines nodded, then rubbed his chin. "That, I think, would give Mr. Griever ample opportunity to examine the room undisturbed." He turned to Nathan. "Correct?"

"Yes."

Sims-Danton held up a hand. "One moment, gentlemen—I am almost finished." He flipped a page of his notebook. "After the discovery of the body, the police found the room as you now see it. The pistol in Mrs. Griever's hand was registered to her, and only her own fingerprints were on the weapon. However, the bullet's entry path aroused suspicion, since for Mrs. Griever to have done herself in, she would have had to hold the pistol in a possible, but very awkward, position." Sims-Danton formed a representation of a gun with his right forefinger and thumb, held the "barrel" next to his right temple, then rotated his wrist until the "gun" was in front of his face. The path at such an angle would enter the right temple and exit behind the left ear.

Humpheries frowned and shook his head. "Sloppy. Very sloppy, Mr. Griever."

The Major held up a hand. "One moment, Charles. The test is whether

or not Mr. Griever got away with it. As you can see by his presence here, he obviously did. In fact, though his motive was undeniable and Mrs. Griever's death a highly probable murder, our candidate for membership was not even brought to trial. He was held on suspicion for a few days, but they had to release him because they couldn't figure out how he did it."

He turned to Nathan. "Mr. Griever, before the members begin trying to crack this nut, I would like you to examine the room very closely to make sure everything is as it was when the police entered the room."

Nathan went to the door and examined the lock, checked the pictures on the walls, noted the absence of windows and air vents, and went to the night stand and checked the objects there. He raised his eyebrows as he checked the labels on the numerous prescription pills, drops, sprays, and powders his wife had always kept handy. Everything was accurate, down to and including the printed name of the pharmacy. The half-filled, open bottle of whiskey—her brand—stood behind the pills next to a pitcher of ice water and a half-filled glass of the whiskey-water mixture she loved so well. The push button that controlled the door lock was in its proper place on the edge of the night stand near the bed, and Nathan would have sworn that even the scratches in the brass cover surrounding the button were identical to the original. He reached out his hand, pushed the button, and heard the lock buzz and click open. He released the button, the buzzing stopped, and the lock's heavy spring shot the bolt into its extended position.

Nathan nodded and looked at the wiring that led from the back of the night stand, in which the battery was contained. It was stapled around the baseboard behind the bed and around the room, until it came to the door, where it was attached to the solenoid's contacts. He examined the wire to make certain it hadn't been disturbed. The wires in the original bedroom had been painted down the last time the room had been decorated. Nathan raised his brows and nodded in admiration. The paint was the identical color.

He faced the members. "As far as I can see, everything is exactly the way it was when the police entered the room."

Sims-Danton smiled. "Before we begin, gentlemen, I should add that from the time the maid Angela met Mr. Griever at the door, he was under constant observation. In addition, the police conducted a thorough search of his room and the rest of the house. Nothing that could have

been used in the murder was found—at least, in the opinion of the police. Shall we begin?"

Jordon rubbed his chin and held one hand toward the lock and the other toward the push button. "There seems little doubt that the problem is to keep the lock open long enough for the murderer to escape, but then to allow the lock to close, fastening the door shut." He turned to Sims-Danton. "I say, Evan, do we have a replica of the door in good condition—before the doorjamb was splintered?"

"Of course." The Major went to the door, pulled it open, and waved his hand. The doorman and another liveried servant carried in a pre-hung steel door fitted with a stand. They set it upright in the center of the room, bowed, and left.

Baines examined the door, pressed the push button, and nodded as the lock buzzed and clicked open. He pulled the door open and released the push button. "Jolly good." He pointed at the lock. "Now, gentlemen, I prefer the simple to the complex. Let us say that the murderer gains entrance to the room, uses the wooden block to chock it open—" he smiled "—kills Mrs. Griever, then leaves. He holds the door open, removes the chock, takes a credit card thusly—" Baines removed a plastic card from his pocket "—pushes in the lock's bolt, closes the door, and pulls the card out through the space between the doorjamb and the door."

Major Sims-Danton nodded. "Is that your choice, Wallace?"

"Yes."

The Major turned to the others. "Very well, gentlemen—have at it."

Stepany stepped to the door replica, placed a finger against the lock's dead bolt, and pushed. "Wallace, old man, I'm afraid this ends your theory."

Baines stooped over and looked at the lock. "Eh?"

"The bolt doesn't move. Obviously, the solenoid operates a key of some kind that falls in place when the solenoid is not energized."

Baines shrugged and the Major nodded at Stepany. "Eddie, are you ready to have a go?"

Stepany nodded. "I agree with Wallace as to the nature of the problem, and even the method—however, the bolt must be held back before the key can fall in place. This means that a clamp must be placed over the lock before Mrs. Griever releases the button to let in the murderer. Then the deed is done, the clamp is removed—the bolt still being held in—and

then the door is closed, using a credit card in the manner Baines has suggested."

Jordon examined the door, the lock, and the doorjamb. "I think I see a problem, old fellow. The lip on the doorjamb is at least three quarters of an inch thick, and fitted with a rubber molding. If the door fits snugly, I don't see how one could pull the card free. Since the lip extends around the entire door, including the bottom, that would appear to exclude using a string on the card and pulling it through in some other place."

Stepany pushed the button, held the bolt in with his thumb, then released the button. The bolt immediately slammed back into an extended position. "Dear me!" Stepany waved his hand. "The spring driving that bolt is certainly a strong one. I couldn't hold it." He smiled. "I suppose that shoots me down, even if the card could be pulled through the doorjamb. If that bolt is to be held open, it would have to be done electrically."

Jordon nodded. "I agree. And, where something as thick as a credit card might not have made it, a pair of strong thin wires probably could. If the murderer placed a battery on the hall floor, gained entrance to the room, chocked open the door, then did the deed, he could run his wires through the hinged side of the opening, connect into the circuit where the wire jumps the gap between the baseboard and the door, and thus hold the lock open. Then he closes the door and pulls the wires after him, breaking the circuit and thereby closing the bolt."

Humpheries shook his head, went to the door of the room, and stooped to examine the wire where it jumped the hinge between the baseboard and door. "See here, Malcolm. The insulation on the wire hasn't been disturbed." He stood and examined the contacts to the solenoid. "Hmmm. He could have connected here, then pulled the wires out."

Sims-Danton held out a hand. "Gentlemen, the scheme now being pondered requires just the sort of equipment the police were looking for when they searched the rest of the house."

Humpheries stood. "Yes, Evan, but a battery and two lengths of wire can be made to appear very innocent. For example, the battery could easily be put into a radio or some other appliance. The wires could be tucked into a television set or just hidden in some small niche."

He smirked. "As we all know, gentlemen, the usual run of police inspector is not terribly bright. Could we send Collins for wires and a battery?"

After a few moments, equipment in hand, Humpheries nodded his thanks and Collins left the room. He removed the insulation from the tips of two lengths of steel bell wire, screwed the ends of the pair to a large dry-cell battery, then carried it to the "outside" of the unbroken door. "Very well—if one of you will play Mrs. Griever and push the button, I will show you how it was done."

Jordon reached out a hand and pushed the button set in the doorjamb. The lock buzzed and clicked open, then Humpheries pushed the door open and turned to Baines. "Wallace, old man, would you play the door chock and hold it open?"

"Yes, of course." Baines held the door open while Humpheries stepped through, carrying the wired battery.

"Now, gentlemen, I move to the bed, kill the victim, rush back, and attach these leads." He frowned at Jordon. "Release the button."

Jordon removed his finger from the button. "Sorry."

With the bolt extended, Humpheries bent one of the leads around one of the solenoid contacts. "And now, the other." As soon as he touched the second lead to the second solenoid contact, the lock buzzed, retracting the bolt. He bent the lead around the second contact and, still holding the battery, stepped through the door. "Now I remove the chock and close the door." The door closed on the wires and the lock controlled by the doorknob caught, while the solenoid lock remained retracted. "Now all I do is pull the wires through—" Humpheries grunted as he tugged at the wires. "Drat! That door does have a snug fit, doesn't it?" One last grunt and the solenoid de-energized, slamming the bolt home.

Jordon laughed. "Good show! Well done, Humpheries."

Sims-Danton pointed at the solenoid contacts. The wires were still attached. Humpheries walked around the door, sheepishly holding out the battery.

"I'm afraid I broke the wires."

Sims-Danton rubbed his chin. "Charles, try it again, but don't let the door latch. Leave it open just enough to pull the wires through."

The experiment was repeated, with the door held open a bit. As the wires were pulled from the solenoid, the bolt shot home, forcing the door to shut on the wires. "It's no use. I pulled them as fast as I could, but it's just not fast enough."

Sims-Danton pulled the door open. "Hook it up and try it again—but this time open the door a little further."

The experiment was repeated but, instead of forcing the door shut, the bolt forced the door open. "Hmmm. That would never do." Sims-Danton again pressed the button and opened the door. "The taper on the bolt seems to do it. When the door is in an approximate position, the bolt shoots for the bolt hole and either finds its way in, forcing the door closed, or hits the sharp edge of this lip, forcing the door open." He closed the door, released the button, and shrugged. "I'm afraid that exhausts my theory as well." He faced Nathan. "In which case, Mr. Griever, it looks as though Slaughterhouse has another member."

Nathan beamed but, feeling reckless, shook his head. "Sir James hasn't had a crack at it yet."

Cockeral cleared his throat. "Nate, you must understand that I am your sponsor. It wouldn't be proper for me to make an attempt against my own candidate."

Nathan shrugged and held out his hands. "Please—I insist."

The membership looked at Sir James, who smiled and turned toward Nathan. "Very well, then. I'll take a crack at it. Most of the solutions thus far appear to take up too much time. How long does it take to run from the kitchen, through the dining room and hall, then up the stairs to the bedroom door?"

Sims-Danton pulled out his notebook. "According to the police investigation, at the most Mr. Griever would have fourteen to sixteen seconds from the time of the shooting to place the gun in the victim's hand, leave the room, and make it into his own bedroom. One of the officers making the run did it in eleven seconds, but he was, I gather, an exceptional athlete."

Sir James nodded. "That would appear to preclude anything complicated and time-consuming. If he used any extra equipment, I can't imagine where he could have put it. He would only have time enough to get to his room before he had to turn around and come out to meet Angela, thereby making it appear that he too had been drawn by the sound of the shot." He turned to Nathan. "Tell me, Nate—what physical shape was Angela in—old, young, slender, obese?"

"She was twenty-nine, but quite plump."

Sir James nodded. "Then, for the sake of argument, let's say the sixteen-second run was what she made." He went to the side of the bed. "Therefore, within sixteen seconds he had to place the gun in the victim's hand—say four seconds. Then he had to traverse the distance from the

bed to the door." Sir James turned to Jordon. "Give it a try, will you, old man? I'll keep your time."

"Of course." Jordon moved to the side of the bed.

Sir James examined his watch. "Go!"

Jordon ran to the door and opened it, stepped through, and let the door close behind him. He opened the door and looked through. "How did I do?"

Sir James nodded. "Three seconds." He turned to Sims-Danton. "Do we have the hallway outside the bedroom plotted? I would like to time a run from Mrs. Griever's door to Mr. Griever's door."

Sims-Danton turned again to his notebook. "We don't have it plotted, but tests by the police on the scene made the run at about four seconds, which includes opening his bedroom door, entering, and closing the door." The Major closed the notebook and smiled at Sir James.

"Very well." Sir James nodded and turned back to the bed. "Very well. On the sixteen-second run, that leaves only five seconds for Mr. Griever to do whatever it was that he did to effect his exit. That would leave no time either to use or dispose of batteries, wires, and the like." Sir James opened the front of the night stand, stooped, and looked inside. He then stood, looked at the back of the night stand, and carefully traced the wire to the solenoid lock. When he was satisfied, he turned and faced the room. "The insulation along the entire length is undisturbed, and I saw no discreet little holes in the wall, which would appear to preclude any sort of timing mechanism prepared in advance." He rubbed his chin. "Hence, to my mind, it seems that whatever was used should still be in the room."

Wallace Baines cleared his throat. "Sir James, it really is bad form to work against your own candidate. If you should guess the method, Mr. Griever would be disqualified for admission. I would think that would cause bad feeling between you."

The other members nodded and Sims-Danton stepped forward. "I agree."

Nathan Griever held out his hands and grinned. "Please, gentlemen. I insist that Jim have his go at it. I'm not worried." He turned to Sir James. "Go ahead, old boy. Give it your best shot."

Sir James shrugged and walked to the side of the bed, then turned to the night stand and placed his finger on the push button. He tried it several times and listened as the solenoid energized and clicked back the

bolt. Removing his finger from the button, he looked at the articles on the night stand, then lifted up the glass half filled with whiskey and water. He sniffed at it, replaced it, then opened several of the plastic containers of pills, uncapped the three plastic nasal-spray bottles, and unscrewed the tops on a bottle of nose drops and a bottle of eye drops. Then, replacing all the caps, he again lifted the glass of whiskey and water. He turned to Sims-Danton. "Tell me, did the police laboratory find anything unusual in any of these containers?"

Sims-Danton frowned. "Surely, Sir James, you don't suspect that the victim was poisoned."

Sir James looked back at the glass. "Oh." He nodded and replaced the glass. "Of course not. How silly of me." He turned to Nathan. "Well, Nate, it looks as though you're a member of Slaughterhouse. We all seem to be baffled. Please accept my congratulations."

Nathan shook the hands that were extended toward him, his face wreathed in smiles. "Thank you. Should I demonstrate now?"

Sims-Danton patted his forehead with a handkerchief and nodded. "Please do."

Nathan walked to the side of the bed. "I suppose that all I have to do is to account for those five seconds?"

Sims-Danton replaced his handkerchief. "That is correct."

Nathan nodded. "Jim, old boy, if you would time what I do, I'd like someone else to time how long the lock on the door is open."

Sims-Danton pushed back his sleeve, uncovering the watch on his left wrist. "Any time, Mr. Griever."

Nathan smiled, rubbed his hands together, and nodded. "Go!" Nathan turned from the bed, uncapped the bottle of nose drops, put the end of the dropper into the water and whiskey, and sucked up barely enough to fill it past the tapered tip. Then he held the dropper over the push button, squeezed out four drops, and replaced the cap on the bottle as the liquid seeped into the space between the button and case, and shorted out the circuit. Nathan replaced the bottle as the solenoid buzzed and clicked open. "Of course the timing might be a bit off since I am using a different push button," he said.

A moment later the buzzing stopped and the bolt shot back out. Sims-Danton looked up from his watch. "Seven seconds. That would enable him to get through the door with time to spare."

Sir James nodded. "I have five seconds on the nose, Nate. Bravo! That

accounts for the missing time, lets you absent the premises, baffles the police—and gets you into Slaughterhouse."

Nathan beamed. "You see, when my wife was in the hospital, I was able to try out a variety of liquids and numbers of drops. As chance would have it, four drops of her favorite drink did the trick. All I had to do was wait for the maid to be settled down in the kitchen. My wife always had a drink on the night stand."

Jordon nodded. "Excellent."

"Four drops is just enough to short out the push button. Between the short, evaporation opens the circuit in just a little—"

Malcolm Jordon slapped Nathan on the back, took his elbow, and steered him toward the door. "Come, we must celebrate!"

Stepany, Humpheries, and Baines followed the pair through the door and down the stairs.

Sir James turned to his companion. "I almost muffed it, didn't I, Lieutenant Danton?"

Danton nodded as he removed his handlebar moustache. "You had me worried, Inspector Cockeral, no doubt about that."

Cockeral nodded. "Of course your laboratory found nose drops in the glass and whiskey in the nose drops."

"Yes. As soon as we got the results, we knew how he had done it. The problem was getting him to admit it. The District Attorney was certain he'd never be able to convince a jury that Nathan Griever could be that imaginative. The defense could easily produce a thousand bits of evidence that his client is about as sharp as a pound of wet silage."

"Still, it is rather imaginative."

Danton nodded. "Twenty-three million dollars can mother a lot of invention."

Cockeral nodded his head toward the door. "What happens to him now?"

"First, a party welcoming him to the club. Then, an epic pub crawl will begin that will end with his delivery back at the Los Angeles airport, where he will be arrested."

Cockeral shook his head. "Pity. The fellow did so want to belong."

"Oh, he'll belong—and wait till he gets a load of his new clubhouse." Danton turned and walked toward the door. Cockeral followed.

"You must have been awfully certain he would fall for your charade."

Danton smiled. "I studied Nathan Griever very carefully. He's nothing

but a small-time grifter who only made one clever score in his entire life. Can you imagine how frustrated he must have felt not being able to tell his story? All we did was provide an audience worthy of his confidence."

"Danton, what about the strange amount for the initiation fee? The $13,107.17?"

Danton shrugged. "Proposition Thirteen."

"Eh?"

"Proposition Thirteen. Money is very, very tight, and the only way I could get my superiors to go along with this was if it didn't cost us anything. $13,107.17 was the exact cost of the charade. We could have gotten more from him, of course, but it wouldn't have been sporting to make profit, don't you agree?"

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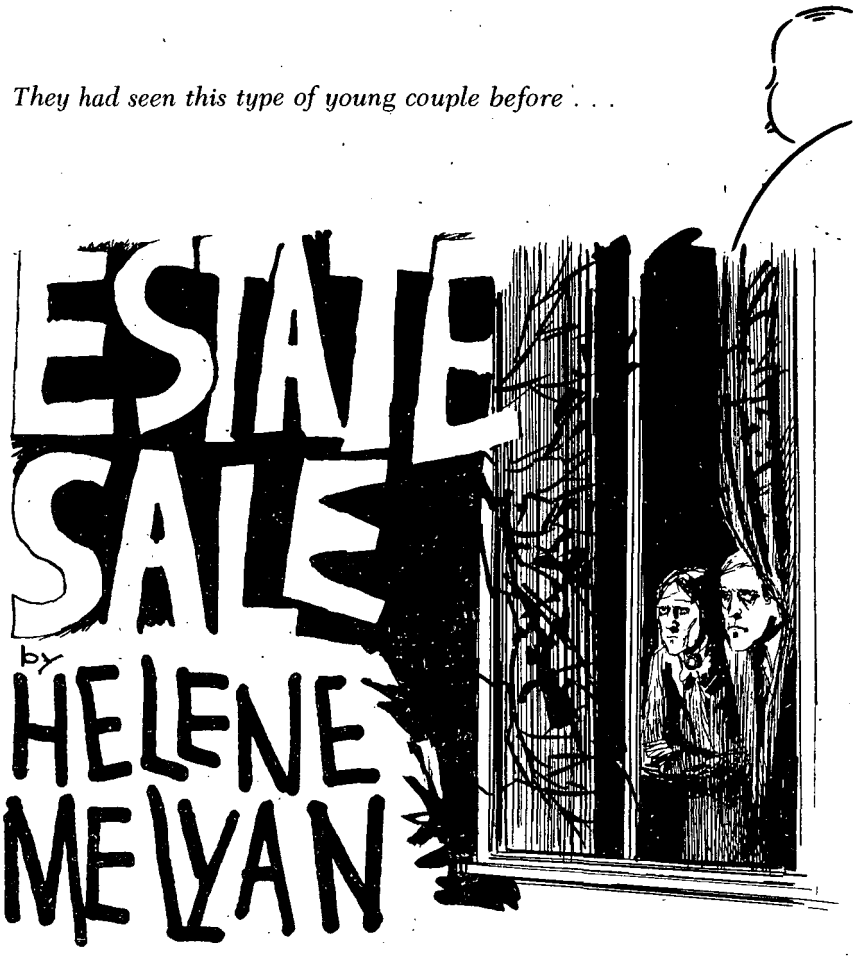
They had seen this type of young couple before . . .



Alex said it was a lovely night on which to hold an estate sale, the moon being full and the sky clear, so we took the sign out and Alex pounded it into the front lawn under the street lamp. We sat by the front window and waited, Alex and I, talking of old times, as we often do on these cool pleasant evenings. When you have been married as long as Alex and I, there are many things about which to reminisce.

On evenings like these, many years ago in the Old Country, Alex and

I used to go out and walk for hours, sometimes staying up until nearly dawn. Now we find it more pleasant to stay home and have people in, especially young people. Alex and I do so enjoy young people.

Presently a young couple walked down our street—I told Alex they looked like newlyweds, honeymooners perhaps. They stopped to read our elegant, hand-lettered sign, edged in gilt. People nowadays do not do things with such care. Sometimes it distresses me to see how the world has changed, but Alex says that to live is to change, and there is nothing one can do.

Alex and I watched, amused, as the couple debated whether or not to stop. The young man seemed inclined to continue their stroll, while the girl pointed again and again to the sign, and looked longingly at our front door. Finally the young man grinned and followed her up the steps. We allowed them to knock twice before we opened the door.

"Hi," said the girl. She was about twenty, and quite radiant. "We saw your sign. Boy, this is really unusual, finding a garage sale open this late."

"Doris is crazy about sales," the young man explained. "Garage sales, rummage sales, you name it—she just can't get enough of them."

Alex and I exchanged glances and nodded. We have seen the type often. They come to sales not merely to buy, but to browse through others' lives, to touch, smell, and see the discarded memories of other people's experiences. In their innocence they see themselves not as voyeurs or intruders but as bargain hunters. A sale prompted by death, divorce, or old age—it is all the same to them.

Alex says that they feel nothing because they are young. He is a man rich with understanding.

"We're trying to fix up our apartment," the girl was saying as they entered the house. "We don't have much money, so we can't afford new things."

"You have your health," said Alex graciously. "That is, after all, what counts."

Dear Alex. He always knows the proper thing to say.

We took them to the basement, Alex and I, and let them browse. We had prepared our things well, as usual. Alex and I stood back, amused as always, and watched them finger the bric-a-brac, the tapestries, the fine china and glassware. The young man seemed especially taken with a chess set of hand-carved ivory. His wife stood in front of the china

cabinet, her mouth slightly open, her eyes aglow. We wondered which of them would be the first to ask.

It was the young man. "Boy, this is the sale to end all sales. Where'd you get all this stuff?"

"Europe," said Alex. "The country no longer exists as such, and you would not recognize the name of the town."

"But the sign said 'Estate Sale,' " persisted the young man. "I mean—who died? Somebody's grandmother or something?"

The young woman turned from the china cabinet when she heard Alex locking the basement door. Alex looked at me and said, "Go ahead, dear. It is your turn to say it."

"My husband and I died—after a fashion—two hundred and fifty years ago," I said. Then Alex and I moved closer, quite close, and smiled so that both the young man and his wife could see our long white canines. As always, they were quite surprised.

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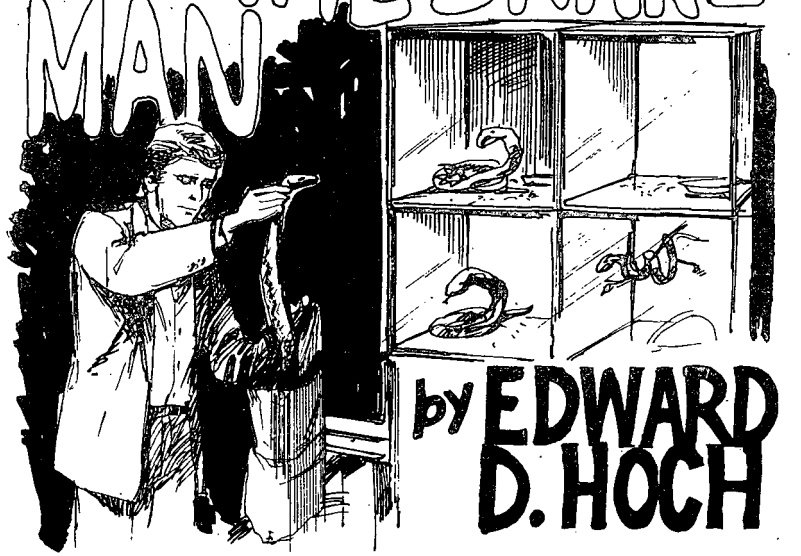
THE RATTLESNAKE MAN



by EDWARD D. HOCH

Crocker was awakened by the ringing of the telephone next to his bed. He opened one eye and guessed by the amount of light filtering through the drapes that the time must be somewhere around noon. He picked up the phone and gave a mumbled hello.

"Is this Steve Crocker?" a young woman asked.

"Yes," he admitted reluctantly.

He didn't like calls from strangers.

"You don't know me, but my name is Amy Brand. I'd like to interview you for a magazine article."

"What for?" he asked, sitting up in bed.

"Well, you're the one they call the Rattlesnake Man, aren't you?"

"Sorry, I don't give interviews," he said and hung up before she could reply.

He got out of bed and pulled open the drapes, squinting his eyes against the brightness of the Las Vegas sun. In the distance he could see the hotels along the Strip, rising like modern monoliths from the desert floor. But he preferred looking in the other direction, toward the hazy mountains with their promise of escape.

Crocker poured himself some orange juice and wondered how the girl had obtained his number. It was in the book, of course, and almost anyone could have told her his name.

He remembered suddenly that it was Monday. Stunt night, when the suckers came to see him perform. What the hell—it was a living.

After he showered, Crocker went downstairs to the lobby of the small residential hotel where he'd lived for nearly a year. It might be time to find another place, he speculated, and get an unlisted phone number.

Sammy called to him from behind the desk. "Got an incoming call for you, Mr. Crocker."

"Man or woman?"

"Man. Sounds like Mr. Qually."

"I'll take it here," Crocker said, and went to pick up the phone at the end of the desk.

"Crocker?" the familiar voice rasped. "This is George Qually."

"How are you?"

"Not bad. I wanted to tell you about tonight. There are some Arabs in town with big money. They want some real action. Don't be surprised if somebody brings them around."

"That's your end of it," Crocker said. "As long as they're betting real dollars, you can have whoever you want."

"Another thing," Qually said quickly, as if sensing the conversation was about to end. "Holston is looking for you. Yesterday he came by my office. You got dealings with him?"

"Not if I can help it. Thanks for the tip."

"You'll be here tonight?"

"Have I ever let you down?"

Crocker hung up before Qually could answer. He waved a goodbye to Sammy and went out into the sunlight.

Another day.

But a Monday.

He had breakfast at the Hilton, lingering over his coffee while he played a few losing games of Keno. "It's not your lucky day," the red-haired Keno girl told him.

"I hope you're wrong about that," he replied.

He gave her a generous tip, maybe to change his luck, and took a cab downtown. The city was full of tourists, as always, and the sight of them depressed Crocker. He wondered why he stayed in Vegas, carrying on his strange Monday-night ritual for the high rollers. Was it only to demonstrate that he could beat this city after all?

A stick man at one casino told him, "Holston's looking for you."

"So I hear."

He went on to another place, nervously killing time as he always did on Monday afternoons. He was looking over the race results from the eastern tracks at one of the betting parlors off Fremont Street when a young woman he'd never seen before came up to him and said, "You're Steve Crocker, aren't you?"

Her precise eastern accent was like a voice remembered from a dream. "Yeah," he admitted.

She extended her slim white hand. "Amy Brand. I called you a few hours ago for an interview."

"You woke me up," he said. "Have you been following me? How'd you find me here?"

"You were pointed out to me once. When I saw you walking along the street just now I thought I'd ask you again about that interview."

"The answer's still no."

"I wouldn't take long. Really!"

She was wearing a white-linen pants outfit that was dressier than usual for Las Vegas by day. With her blonde hair and slim figure she looked more like a model or a high-priced hooker than a reporter. Maybe that was why he said, "Sit down. I'll give you ten minutes."

"Thanks!" She brushed the hair from her eyes and slipped a tiny cassette recorder from her purse. "You don't mind if I tape this, do you? It saves taking notes."

A shout went up from some of the customers as the late results from another track were posted. "Maybe you'd like someplace quieter," he suggested.

"This'll be all right. I sometimes think there's no really quiet place in Vegas."

"Try the casinos on a Monday morning, when everybody's sleeping off the weekend."

She snapped on the recorder and began. "Mr. Crocker, there have been a great many stories circulating about the Monday-night game that's played at a secret location here in Las Vegas. I understand that only important people—movie stars, special visitors, and the casino owners themselves—are admitted."

"You know more than I do," he said with a smile.

"Hardly, Mr. Crocker. Among certain people you're known as the Rattlesnake Man because of your participation in these Monday-night games."

"That's just a nickname. I got it years ago because I used to catch snakes in the desert and sell them to zoos and research labs."

She smiled sweetly, letting him know he wouldn't get off that easily. "I'm told you're called the Rattlesnake Man because at these Monday-night games people wager on whether or not you'll be bitten by a snake. I have that from an eyewitness."

Crocker smiled. "If you know that much you don't need to interview me."

"Then it's true?"

He reached over and shut off the tape recorder. "Come on—I'll buy you a drink."

The afternoon sun seemed hotter than usual along Fremont Street, as he walked with long-legged strides toward the next air-conditioned oasis. Amy Brand had no trouble keeping up the pace. "Why do you do it?" she asked as they walked.

"Do what?"

"The thing with the rattlesnakes on Monday nights."

He shrugged.

"It's a living."

"So's robbing banks."

"Let's go in here," he suggested, steering her into a little show bar where he knew the sound of the band would make recording impossible.

He realized his mistake almost at once.

Big Holston was playing the silver-dollar slot machine just inside the door. "Well, if it isn't Crocker! You're one hell of a hard man to reach."

"Hello, Holston."

"Where can we talk?"

"I'm with the lady."

Holston seemed to notice Amy Brand for the first time. "And a charming lady she is. But we've got business. You'll excuse us, won't you, Miss?"

Amy Brand smiled at Crocker. "Don't be too long."

The band was just starting a new set. It might have been three in the morning, and most of the customers didn't know the difference. Las Vegas was a city without clocks, with only the sun to tell time—and most bars and hotels kept their curtains drawn. "It's too noisy to talk here," Crocker said.

"Come on in the men's room."

The place was empty and smelled of disinfectant. Holston leaned back against a sink and took out a cigarette. "Now, then—what about our agreement?"

"What about it?"

Holston tried a smile but it didn't go with his face. "You were going to deliver one rattlesnake with its rattle removed, exactly like the kind you use on Monday nights."

"I changed my mind."

"Why's that? It's the easiest five hundred you'll ever earn."

"Whatever you're planning, Holston, count me out. If your plan goes sour I don't want to be your cellmate for the next five years."

"It won't go sour."

Crocker shook his head. "Rattlesnake venom doesn't kill instantly. There's usually time to suck it out or get medical attention. Believe me, if you want to kill someone it's foolish to use a rattler."

"Did I say I wanted to kill anybody?"

"Let's quit fooling around. I'm not selling you a snake, Holston, and that's it."

The big man drew on his cigarette and then stubbed it out in the sink. "A thousand. That's my final offer."

"No."

"A thousand. Your name won't come into it at all. If it goes sour I'll never mention you."

"Who the hell else in this town would be supplying rattlesnakes? The cops would come knocking on my door in a minute."

"You said you'd do it! We had a deal!"

"That was last week. I was young and foolish."

Holston lowered his voice. "Maybe you'd change your mind if you heard who we're after. One of the big casino operators, a guy who did you plenty of dirt—"

"I don't want to hear," Crocker said, heading for the door. "Don't follow me out. That's a reporter I'm with."

He went back to Amy's table and sat down. "Did you have a pleasant chat?" she asked sweetly.

"Business. What'll you have to drink?"

"A glass of white wine. I already ordered it."

Crocker kept an eye on the men's-room door till he saw Big Holston come out and stroll to the side exit. Then he relaxed. "What were we talking about?"

"Rattlesnakes."

"Do you think people really want to read about that? Why don't you do a nice article on what the stars are wearing in Vegas this summer?"

She ignored the question and asked, "How many times have you been bitten?"

"In my life? Five or six."

"On Monday nights. Since you've been doing your act."

"I'm no performer. You make me sound like a circus star." But he answered her question, because it was a point of special pride with him. "I've been bitten twice."

"In how many weeks?"

"Tonight will be forty-six."

"Almost a year. That's amazing really. As I understand it, the rattlesnake is placed in one of four numbered drums without your knowledge. You come out, choose one of the drums, and plunge your bare arm through the paper lid."

"Something like that." He was always uneasy talking about it.

"And they bet on whether or not you'll be bitten?"

"That's right. The odds are three to one in my favor."

"Does the snake always bite if it's in the drum?"

Crocker nodded. "It's a reflex action. They're coiled up in the dark and something bursts through the lid at them. Naturally they strike at it."

He could see her doing some mental calculations. "In forty-five weeks you should have been bitten eleven times."

"Those are the odds."

"But you only chose the wrong drum twice."

"I guess I'm lucky."

"Can you hear their rattles?"

He shook his head. "I remove them. There's no way I can tell which drum the snake is in."

"Do you remove the poison sacs too?"

"No. They're still quite deadly."

She stared at him. The waiter brought her glass of wine and Crocker ordered a scotch. When they were alone again she asked, "Why do you do it?"

"I get five percent of everything that's bet, either for or against me. Some nights that can be a lot of money."

"But you're risking your life!"

"Not really. The two times I was bitten there was plenty of time to get me to the hospital. Qually wanted to have a doctor standing by, but I said no. That takes away a little of the thrill."

"Who is this Qually?"

Somehow the encounter with Holston had made him more willing to talk with her. "He runs a liquor distributorship here, serving the bars and casinos. He got to know a lot of people and discovered the casino owners had grown bored with their own games. Monday's a relatively slow night and Qually decided to open a private little game, unlicensed and unadvertised, for a very select clientele. That was when he came to me and suggested the rattlesnake business."

"How much does he make?"

"He holds out ten percent of the purse and we split it down the middle. The least I've ever made is a thousand dollars. One night I made over six thousand."

"You do this just once a week?"

"That's all. No sense tempting fate."

Amy Brand finished her wine and clasped her hands on the table. "I want to see it. Could you get me in tonight?"

"No," he said at once. "That's impossible."

"Why?"

"Admission is strictly limited. Qually would never allow a reporter to be present. He wouldn't even want me to be talking with you."

"Look, there are plenty of people who know about this thing, and more are finding out every week. You've kept it a secret for nearly a year, but now the word is out. Before many more Monday nights are over, some paper or magazine will be sure to carry the story. It might as well be me."

"No." He shook his head. "Qually wouldn't let the game go on with you there."

"Tell him I'm your girl friend. He couldn't object to that."

He tried to read something into the words, but her face was all business. "Why should I do that for you?" he wanted to know.

"Does it count for anything that I just saw you plotting some sort of deal with Big Holston, a known criminal?"

"I wasn't plotting anything with him. He owes me some money."

"Take me with you tonight and I won't write about Holston and you."

"There's nothing to write!" he insisted.

"Maybe I'd find something."

She had him and she knew it. "Look," he suggested, "how about a deal? I take you along and you write it up for your magazine, but without using real names or addresses. How's that?"

"Why should I hold back the names?"

"Because then the local cops won't do anything. If you name Qually or me they'd be forced to take action."

"I don't know," she said.

"It's that or nothing."

"What time?"

"You agree?"

"I agree. No names. What time do we go?"

"I'll pick you up here at ten o'clock."

The temperature dropped after sundown, but not by much. It was still a warm night when Crocker returned to the show bar and met Amy Brand. He'd dined alone at one of the restaurants on the Strip, feeling the tension build as it always did on Monday evenings. Now he cursed himself for ever having become involved with the girl. The last thing he

needed was publicity about this foolish weekly ritual.

Why did he do it? He often asked himself the same question Amy Brand had asked and his answer to her—that he did it for the money—was not completely honest. There was something else, something he couldn't put his finger on. He'd felt it in his youth, catching rattlers in the desert with a forked stick and a burlap bag. It had always been something of a gamble, and with Qually's help he'd only formalized that gamble, turned it to his own advantage.

"Ready?" he asked her.

She abandoned her drink and went out to the car with him. "Is it very far?"

"Nothing's very far in this city. We'll be there in ten minutes."

He drove to the liquor warehouse south of the business district, where George Qually had set aside two windowless storage rooms—a large one for the Monday-night game and a smaller one for the snake cages. A fair crowd had already assembled and Crocker recognized familiar faces. Most were casino partners or managers, and a few dealers and stick men who worked the day shift had come along too.

The only strangers were four well-dressed Arabs in the company of one of the regulars. Crocker disliked the man who'd brought them, a former singer named Billy Ives who owned five points in one of the Strip casinos. Ives had vetoed Crocker's attempt to buy into the same casino, and had even tried to get him arrested once on a trumped-up charge.

"Hello, Billy," he said, sounding friendly. It wasn't a good place to show one's true feelings.

Billy Ives grinned. "Still geeking for a living, Crocker? These fellows are in town for the week, and I told them they couldn't miss your performance."

Crocker shook hands with the Arabs and introduced Amy as a friend. He found her a front-row seat where she'd have a good view.

By the time the three dozen or so spectators had crowded into the room there was barely space for the four small steel barrels that Qually rolled out. "Quiet down, everyone," he shouted, "it's time to begin!" He glanced at Crocker, but didn't speak. They never spoke just before a game.

Crocker went out to get the snake and returned as Qually was explaining the action for the Arabs. "While Crocker's gone from the room, one of you chooses the barrel in which the rattler is to be placed. Then the

drums are covered with these numbered paper lids. We'll have a ten-minute betting period, either between individuals or with the house. In any event we retain ten percent of all monies wagered. Agreed?"

"Agreed!" Billy Ives shouted. "Let's get on with it!"

Crocker was escorted from the room after carefully handing over a heavy canvas sack containing one of his snakes. He kept four of them in cages at the warehouse, and now he went to feed and look after the other three while the bets were made. After about fifteen minutes he was called back in by one of the bettors. Again, he was allowed no words or contact with George Qually, who might have found it advantageous to warn him of the snake's location.

The spectators fell silent when he re-entered the room, and he could see Amy sitting tensely in the front row. The bets, he knew, had all been made. He studied the four steel barrels, each numbered on its paper lid. Carefully he unbuttoned the cuff of his right sleeve and bared his arm.

One, two, three, or four? Which barrel was safe tonight?

Without further hesitation, he plunged his arm through the lid numbered one.

There was a mixture of cheers and groans from the crowd, but the cheers were louder. The barrel was empty. He'd beaten them again.

"Nice going," Qually said, coming up to shake his hand.

"Which barrel?" he asked.

"Three."

Crocker nodded. Later he would return the snake to its cage.

Amy Brand ran up then, pushing through the crowd of bettors collecting their money. "That was amazing! Do you have x-ray vision or something?"

Crocker smiled. "Only luck. You should have seen me the nights I picked the snake!" But he was elated, as he always was when the game went his way.

Billy Ives came up and shook his hand again. "I won two grand on you tonight."

"How'd your guests do?"

Ives made a face. "Those Arabs—they always bet on the snake!"

Crocker sought out George Qually. "How much was wagered?"

"One hundred thirty-three thousand. The best night we ever had."

He did some quick calculations. "That makes my cut $6650. You should invite these Arabs more often."

Amy Brand joined him as he removed the paper lid on barrel number three. "God, he's ugly-looking! How do you get him out?"

"This stick with a noose on it. The noose goes around the rattlesnake's neck—like this—and I lift him back into his sack. Simple!"

"For you, maybe."

As he carried the canvas sack into the back room with the cages, he saw that Billy Ives had brought his Arab guests over to speak with Qually. They spoke intently for a moment and Qually frowned, glancing in Crocker's direction.

"I used to adore Billy Ives' singing," Amy said. "Why'd he stop?"

"In Vegas there are more ways of making money than most people dream of. Ives found them all, and he liked some of them better than others."

"You sound as if you don't like him."

"Lots of people don't like Billy," Crocker said, and realized suddenly that Big Holston was one of them.

Holston had wanted the snake to kill Ives. Crocker should have guessed it from the beginning.

"Crocker!"

Steve turned and saw that George Qually had followed him into the back room. "What's up?"

Qually gestured toward Amy. "Can she leave us for a minute? I've got business."

"Go on, Amy," Crocker said.

She retreated with reluctance, and he wondered if she'd be listening at the door. "Something's come up," Qually said.

"With the Arabs? I saw you talking to them just now."

Qually shifted uneasily. "They're high rollers, Crocker. They're in town for a week and money's burning holes in their pockets."

"So?"

"They want more action. They didn't understand there was just the one chance to bet."

"Tell 'em to come back next Monday."

"They'll be gone by then."

Crocker shrugged. "Then they'll have to settle for roulette and blackjack."

"They want to bet on this again."

Crocker studied the man's face. "What are you trying to say, George?"

"They want another game tonight. I told them we couldn't do it for less than a hundred grand in bets. They said fine."

"Oh, did they?"

"That's five thousand more for each of us."

"No dice. Once a week is all I do it."

"Five grand for a few minutes' work!"

"No." Steve started to walk away.

"Crocker, think about it! We can't go on doing this forever. Sooner or later something will get in the papers and the Gaming Commission will shut us down. We've got to make the money while we can!"

"Once a week is enough for me."

Qually stared at him. "Damn it, Crocker, if you won't do it, I will!"

"Don't be a fool."

"You said yourself it's just luck."

Steve was annoyed with the man, and annoyed with himself when he realized he didn't want anyone else doing the stunt. He was the Rattlesnake Man, not Qually.

"All right. I'll do it."

"Now?"

"Give me fifteen minutes."

Qually squeezed his shoulder. "There'll never be another one like you, Crocker."

"Sure there will. They come in on every plane."

Steve went outside and found Amy Brand waiting in the hall. "Are we leaving now?" she asked.

"Not yet. The Arabs want another show."

"You're going to do it *again?*"

"It looks that way."

"Have you ever done it twice in one night?"

"No."

"I guess I'm going to get a bigger story than I bargained for."

He looked at her. "I hope not. Longer maybe, but not bigger."

"Are you afraid?"

"I've never been afraid of the snakes, only of the people who try to use them." People like Holston, he thought, but he didn't say it.

Qually was back suddenly, looking alarmed. "We got a problem."

"What now?"

"They want two snakes in the barrels."

"What?"

"You heard me. They want it to be an even-money bet or they won't play."

"That's out," Crocker said, feeling his stomach begin to knot. "I won't do it."

"I told them that."

"Good." Crocker started to walk away.

"Listen—"

"What?"

"If you go for two snakes, even money, they'll bet a hundred and fifty."

"Bet it with who?"

"I'll cover part of it and Billy Ives will take the rest."

"You're crazy!"

"I'm betting your luck, Crocker."

"You're still crazy. I won't do it."

"That's seventy-five hundred for you."

"Yeah, and a rattlesnake's fangs in my arm."

"You've been bitten before. And never for money like this."

"Get lost!" Crocker said and walked away.

Amy ran to catch up with him. "Why won't you do it?"

"You want me to? It would make a real story, wouldn't it?"

"I don't want you hurt, Crocker, and you can believe that or not. But why is it that much different from what you've been doing? You're willing to gamble with three out of four drums empty, but not with two out of four empty."

"Damned right!" he told her. "Nobody goes out looking for a rattlesnake bite!"

"But there's *always* the chance of being bitten!"

He looked into her face and decided to tell her something he'd never told another person, not even Qually. "It's a trick," he said, keeping his voice low. "The odds are a lot better in my favor than three to one."

"What? But how—"

"It's an old psychological trick. Ask a person to pick a number between one and four, and most times they'll choose three. It works the same with the barrels. Someone from the audience picks the numbered barrel the snake is placed in. I'll bet over half the time they've picked the number three barrel. I just avoid that, and I also avoid number two, which is the second most popular."

"But they must notice that you usually pick one or four."

"Sure, sometimes they notice. But even if they put the snake there, I've got a fifty percent chance of beating them. And if they put it in one or four one week, I figure they'll do the same the next week, if they're regulars. So then I go back to picking two or three. Then they switch back to three the following week. Tonight was easy. When there are strangers as guests one of them is usually allowed to pick the barrel. And strangers almost always pick three."

"That's right," she said. "One of the Arabs chose it."

"But I don't know how to figure it with two snakes in two different barrels. They might put them next to each other or separate them or anything. I don't know how to figure it."

She was standing very close, gazing up at his face. "Has all of your life been some sort of con, Crocker?"

"This is no con. I'm just outwitting them. There's a difference."

"Twice the snakes bit you."

"Yeah. That proves I didn't outwit them every time."

They stepped further apart as Billy Ives came through the door. "What's this Qually says? You won't go for two snakes?"

"Do I look foolish?"

Ives shot a glance at Amy and then pulled Crocker aside out of earshot. "Look, Crocker, I want that wagering. The Arabs are my guests. Go through with it and I'll tip you off about the barrels."

"What?"

"I'll signal you where the snakes are."

"How?" Crocker asked.

Billy Ives smiled. "Simple! Figure my right elbow is one, my left elbow is two, my right knee is three, and my left knee is four. When you walk out there I'll touch two of them to tell you where the snakes are."

Crocker was dubious. "I don't know."

"Come on! Those Arabs don't care if they win or lose as long as they get action. This way we keep them happy and you and Qually get your cut. It's harmless fun."

"You're banking some of their bets, Billy. You'll make money on it too."

"Sure I will! But like I told you they don't really care if they win or lose. The money they got, it don't make any difference to them."

Steve glanced over at Amy Brand, standing out of earshot. Suddenly

the whole thing was important to him, maybe because she was there. "All right," he said, "I'll do it. Tell Qually I'll do it."

There was a stirring out front as Billy Ives delivered his message. Qually hurried back to shake Crocker's hand. "Stay here while we place the snakes and make the wagers. Maybe some of the casino people will bet too." He paused for a moment. "Good luck, Crocker."

"Thanks."

Amy didn't go out front. "I'll stay back here with you," she said.

"Don't you want to see which barrels they choose?"

"I don't think so."

Qually came back again for the rattlesnakes and Crocker placed two of the biggest in canvas sacks. "These'll make them think they're getting their money's worth."

Then he waited.

Amy nervously lit a cigarette. He wondered if the tape recorder in her purse was turned on.

"Are you worried?" she asked.

"No." He thought about Billy Ives and the signal he'd promised. That would be his salvation.

Then, all too soon, it was time. "Coming with me?" he asked.

"I'll stay here. I saw it once."

He strode out purposefully, his eyes seeking Billy Ives with the Arabs in the front row.

Ives smiled slightly and placed both hands on his knees.

Both knees. Three and four.

Crocker swallowed and stared at the paper lids with their bold black numbers. Qually had made up a new number one lid to replace the one he'd burst earlier. One would be safe again this time. He'd tell them he stuck with a winner.

He raised his bared arm above it and then hesitated.

The Arabs always bet on the snake.

But did they?

What if they'd switched to betting on him, and Ives was covering the action by betting on the snake? What if Ives stood to lose if he picked an empty barrel?

He whirled at the last second and plunged his arm through the paper lid numbered four.

The barrel was empty. . .

She was waiting when he came through the doorway. "I heard the cheers. You picked an empty barrel."

"Yeah."

"My God, Steve, you're the luckiest man I know!"

"It wasn't luck. It was all in knowing who your friends are. Come on—let's get out of here."

"Aren't you going to wait for your money?"

"Qually'll hold it for me."

They went out the back door and were halfway to the car when Crocker heard Billy Ives call to him. "Crocker! Damn it, you cost me fifty grand!"

"How, Billy? By ignoring your signal and not getting bitten?"

"Hell, you've been bitten before. I didn't think—"

A car cut across the parking lot then, targeting them with its headlights. Crocker dove for the ground, pulling Amy with him. There was a quick chatter of gunfire and Billy Ives spun around, falling across Crocker's legs.

"What is it!" Amy screamed.

"Lie still," he warned her, but the car sped away without firing again.

Crocker eased Billy's body off his legs and stood up. Qually and the others came running out.

"What happened?" Qually demanded.

"Someone gunned Billy down from a car. Get everyone out of here and then call the cops."

"Is he dead?" Qually asked, staring at the body.

"Dead as he'll ever be. I guess Holston decided he didn't need a snake after all."

"What?"

"Never mind. Go call the cops."

Amy Brand steadied herself against the hood of a car. "I need a drink," she said.

"There's plenty back at my apartment. Come on."

"Is every Monday night like this?"

"No. Sometimes the snake bites me."

"How long do you think your luck will hold?"

He opened the car door for her. "I don't know," he said. "I hope at least till next Monday night."

Sakai ruled the countryside with terror tactics . . .

INSPECTOR SAITO AND THE SHOGUN

by SEIKO LEGRU

"Let's have all that again, Sergeant," Inspector Saito said and offered a cigarette to dilute the sternness of his order. They were standing on a narrow country road just south of Kyoto; the great and teeming temple city of Japan. The sergeant, a middle-aged man, neat in his armylike uniform, faced him, and a younger constable stood respectfully to the rear.

The sergeant pointed. "Over there, sir. A small three-wheel truck,

parked under the trees near the river, almost out of sight from the road."

The inspector peered. He saw the canvas hood. "Yes."

"It was found by a fisherman, sir, about an hour ago. He went away but I have his name and address. He didn't see the corpse under the truck but he thought something was wrong. The doors of the truck were open and several empty crates were shattered about the vehicle. The driver was missing, of course. He telephoned our station from the big house over there on the hilltop, Sakai-san's house. Me and the constable came over and investigated and found the corpse. We know the victim—young Muto. Muto lived close by, on a small farm on the other side of the village proper. He raised livestock and sold it in the Kyoto street market. The crates must have contained chickens, for we found their feathers. As we ascertained that Muto was murdered we radioed for assistance from the city police—and you came, sir."

Saito looked at the sun rising above the mountains. He had been ready to go home after an uneventful night behind his desk at Kyoto headquarters when a girl from the radio room brought him the message. The message mentioned a truck and an accident but wasn't too clear and, as he knew that country policemen tend to exaggerate, he had decided to come out by himself and check the case before bothering the experts.

"Let's have a look," he said.

"He's not a pretty sight, sir."

The sergeant was right. Saito saw a gaping wound on the back of the skull, and fat flies feeding greedily on the clotted blood. He sighed and walked back to his car.

The experts took their time and gave him a chance to investigate a little further by striking up casual conversation with the local policemen. The sergeant didn't say much, reserving his energy for puffing the cheap Shinsei cigarettes that Saito kept handing out, but the constable, a man of Saito's own age—on the short side of thirty—talked easily.

"A robbery?" Saito asked. "Taking a human life just to get a few chickens?"

"The thief may have been surprised, sir. Perhaps Muto had gone into the bushes to relieve himself and the thief tried to get the chickens, and Muto came barging back and surprised the thief. The thief panicked and killed Muto."

"By hitting him on the *back* of the head?"

The constable nodded thoughtfully. "True, sir. It doesn't sound likely, does it? Maybe the thief found Muto already dead and took the chickens afterward."

"Yes. Maybe he didn't even see Muto's corpse. You said you found him under the truck."

The sergeant grunted.

"You don't think so, Sergeant?" Saito asked him.

The sergeant kicked a pebble.

"So who steals chickens around here?" Saito continued. "This is fairly sparsely populated country. You two must know everybody in the area." Saito stared at the sergeant.

The sergeant cleared his throat. "There's a man on the other side of the river, sir, a man by the name of Mishi. He is a widower and he has some small children. He is fat, so fat that he cannot work and has been declared an invalid. He collects welfare but the money isn't enough. Mishi likes to fish. It's about the only thing he can do, because he doesn't have to move about when he sits in his boat—and he has strong arms, so he can row. He used to be a wrestler. He has several boats and his kids use them too. The kids are troublesome—they sneak about and steal."

"With the father's consent?"

"Yes, sir," said the sergeant.

The constable dropped the stub of his cigarette and stood on it. "Yes. But Mishi hasn't had much luck. Wrestlers have to be fat, but when they grow older the fat gets in their way and they have to retire—and everybody forgets them. Mishi never got into the big money. His savings dwindled away when his wife kept on having kids. Then she died—she was blown to bits when Mishi's house exploded last year."

"Exploded?" Saito pushed himself free from the hood of his car. "How do you mean, *exploded?* Houses don't explode, do they?"

"Mishi's house did."

"How did that happen?"

"Nobody knows," the sergeant said gruffly.

The constable frowned.

"Is that so, Constable?" Saito asked.

"Everybody knows, sir."

The sergeant almost snarled. He turned toward the constable and took a deep breath, but Saito stepped between the two men and smiled pleas-

antly. "This is very interesting, Sergeant. Please tell me more about the explosion."

The sergeant glared at the constable, who was polishing a dull spot on his boot with his handkerchief.

"Well?"

The sergeant sighed. "The constable is right, sir. Maybe I should tell you but it won't do any good. It'll do bad. As you said, this is the country—everybody knows everybody. People talk, but only to each other. You're an outsider, sir. If I talk you may investigate further—you'll make out all right, but I may lose my job."

"I'm a policeman too, Sergeant."

The sergeant studied Saito's stylish dark suit, the white shirt and the narrow black tie.

"Go on, Sergeant. Don't worry. I've never gotten a colleague into trouble yet." He touched the sergeant's shoulder.

The sergeant cleared his throat again, very thoroughly this time. "Yes, sir. Mishi's house blew up because his wife slipped a piece of birch into the stove. It had been filled with gunpowder. So we think, sir."

"And how did the gunpowder get into the piece of birch?"

"Mishi's kids had been stealing firewood for a long time, sir, and people were getting tired of the thefts."

"What *people*, Sergeant?"

The constable stopped polishing his boot. His lips moved. "Sa—"

"No!" the sergeant barked. "Don't mention names, Constable. That's an order!"

The constable laughed. "The sergeant is a bit nervous today, sir. I think you should be told what we know. This village is a mess, and the mess is all one man's fault. If we don't denounce him we'll all continue to live in hell. We may have to go to hell anyway, sir, but later on—there's no need to live in it now."

Saito studied the constable's face. It was a sharp face but an open face. "So? Who is the criminal?"

The constable pointed at the house sprawling on the hilltop. "Sakai. Who else? The mountain-ogre who has us all by the tail and who is pulling us the wrong way. I can't prove that Sakai made the wooden bomb, but it's just the sort of thing he would do. He's a bad man, sir—he's grown rich in bad ways, and he won't share his wealth. What does it matter to him if Mishi's kids steal a few of his birch logs? The

Mishi family needs wood to keep their bodies from freezing while Sakai burns wood for the orchids in his greenhouse."

"Shut up," the sergeant growled, and came to attention.

A new Datsun convertible had stopped behind the two police cars and a squat old man with a shaven skull was trying to extricate himself from the low driver's seat. The sergeant ran to the car and extended a helpful hand.

"Never mind," said the old man. "I'm not a cripple. What do we have here? Trouble?"

"Yes, Sakai-san," said the sergeant, "trouble. Young Muto got himself killed. His head is bashed in, sir—we found his body under his truck. Somebody tried to hide the corpse. And his chickens have been stolen. That is Inspector Saito from the Kyoto police, Homicide Department. There are more police officers on the way."

Sakai had managed to get himself out of the Datsun and began to walk in the direction indicated by the sergeant.

"Hold it," Saito said quietly. "You can't go in there."

Sakai proved himself capable of quick movement. He whirled around and glared at the inspector. "You're telling me where I can go and where I can't go?"

"Exactly. Don't go in there."

Saito was lighting a cigarette. He kept his voice low and steady. Sakai took one more step and stopped. The constable was in his way, his legs apart, his hands folded at his back.

"Are you on guard here?" Sakai asked.

"Yes," the constable said loudly. "You heard what the inspector said—you can't go in there."

Saito ambled up. "We don't want to disturb the area. I'm waiting for my colleagues. Do you know the victim, Sakai-san?"

"Of course. I know everybody around here. What's this about some chickens?"

"We think there were chickens in Muto's truck, but they aren't here now. Somebody may have stolen them."

Sakai laughed, in a deep hoarse voice, as if he had gravel in this throat and chest. "If anything is stolen we don't have far to look. Did you tell the inspector about our charming Mishi family, Sergeant?"

"Yes, Sakai-san."

"Well? What are you waiting for? Get in your car, drive across the

bridge, and check Mishi's yard. You'll find Muto's chickens."

"Mishi has chickens of his own, Sakai-san. How do I know which are his and which were Muto's?"

Sakai repeated his mirthless laugh. "Do I have to teach you your business? Mishi feeds his fowl on anything he happens to have around. Muto fed his chickens on good corn—I know because he bought his corn from me. If Mishi doesn't own up to his crime he'll soon give in if he sees you begin to cut the chickens' crops. Just one crop filled with corn will hang him. I've told you many a time you should take care of Mishi and his brood. This is what we get when the police are too soft on thieves. If you had listened to me—"

"Let's go, Constable," the sergeant said, bowing to Sakai. He turned to Saito. "We'll be back soon, sir. The bridge is only a mile from here, just beyond the river's bend."

"Stay here, Sergeant."

The sergeant was halfway to the patrol car when he hesitated. Saito's order had been formulated gently, but there was authority in his soft voice.

The sergeant came back. The constable hadn't moved. Sakai snorted and was ready to regain the initiative when two black Toyotas arrived and six men spilled out. They were greeted by the inspector.

The sergeant sidled up to Sakai. "I'm sorry, Sakai-san, but I have to obey these officers. I will go to Mishi's place as soon as I can."

Saito strolled over. "Ah, Sakai-san. I don't think you can be of use to us now but I'll come to see you later. Go home and wait for me."

Sakai's reply was both furious and surprised. "You mean you're telling *me* what to do? I'm on my way to the city. If you wish to see me you can come tonight—or tomorrow, if I decide to spend the night in Kyoto."

"Not tonight. I'll probably be over at your house around lunchtime. Sergeant, come with me. Constable, direct Sakai-san. His car is wedged in between the others, but if you help he can get out. If not, you can ask my colleagues to back up a bit."

Saito walked to the truck, followed by the sergeant. The constable positioned himself in the road. Sakai breathed deeply. The constable had taken out his nightstick and was twirling it around.

The experts busied themselves and left, taking the corpse with them.

The constable shook his head. "They didn't find much, did they?"

"No—but we know a little more. Some of the fingerprints on the doors

and the crates were made by children. And poor Muto got his head bashed in by his own wrench, while he was standing up. So the kids didn't kill him. Now we can make sure that the thieves were the Mishi kids. Go to the Mishi house, Sergeant, and do exactly what Sakai told you to do—then come back and report to me."

"Here, sir?"

"No, the constable can show me a restaurant—I wouldn't mind a bit of breakfast. Don't be too hard on Mishi, Sergeant. The days are gone when a judge would be interested in the theft of a few birds."

"Shall I mention the murder, sir?"

"Mention it, yes. If he becomes nervous—guiltily nervous, I mean—come and call me, we may have to bring him in for questioning. I leave that to your discretion, Sergeant. You have a way with people, I can see that—I don't have to tell you what to do."

"Thank you, sir."

The sergeant left, smiling. Saito was smiling too. So was the constable. "He does get upset easily, sir, but he means well—it's just that he's so frightened of Sakai."

Saito and the constable sat at a table on a balcony overlooking the river. The restaurant owner had been serving them personally. Saito watched the constable pick his teeth and said, "My favorite dish, Constable—fried river crab and pickled radish. That was the best breakfast I've had in a long time. You chaps in the country don't know how lucky you are. Look at this view! All I can see from my office is a blank wall."

The constable nodded. "That may be, but I would still prefer the city. This place has been getting on my nerves. It's beautiful but it's so small—small-minded, I mean, sir."

The owner brought a pot of tea and poured two cups. Saito raised his and bowed slightly. The constable bowed back and they drank the tea ceremoniously, holding the cups with both hands.

Saito replaced his cup with a little click. "Tell me what you think happened. You know, don't you? You've been acting very sure of yourself. Tell me why. Who is this bad guy you mentioned?"

The constable grinned. "Sakai, sir. Sakai killed young Muto. I'll tell you what I think—even if the sergeant is right and it'll be the end of me here. What I'm going to tell you may be useless, because the way the people are here, we'll never be able to prove anything."

"Go on."

"Sakai is a powerful man, sir, and an evil man. He was a lieutenant in the secret police during the war. He tortured people, and killed them once they told him what they knew. I've met ex-soldiers who served in the same area, in Java. Even our own army was afraid of Sakai. When the war was over, the Americans were looking for him, but he managed to escape."

Saito frowned. "A lieutenant in the Kempeitai, eh?"

"Yes, sir. The Kempeitai ceased to exist, of course—but after the war Sakai settled here. He had some gold that he used to buy land. The people didn't want to sell, but he forced them. He's good at manipulation and he can always get help. He's the richest man of the entire district here now—he even owns the stores in the village, and the mayor is Sakai's right hand. He exercises the same kind of authority as the shoguns did in the old days. But his rule is always for selfishness and evil, never for good. Nobody dares to oppose him, except Mishi's kids—and Muto."

"Are you from here, Constable?"

"Yes, sir. My father lost his land to Sakai and died of grief. My mother moved in with relatives."

"I see. What did Muto do to provoke Sakai's wrath?"

"He slept with Sakai's mistress. Sakai's wife was sent away when she lost her teeth. This girl comes from a sex club Sakai used to go to. He must be boring company, or she wouldn't have smiled at Muto."

"Wasn't Muto discreet?"

"Very. He only saw the girl when he was sure Sakai was in Kyoto. But somebody must have breathed a word into the old boy's ear."

The constable handled his cup and Saito poured more tea for both of them. They drank in silence.

"So Sakai planned to kill Muto and Muto didn't even know he was in danger," Saito said. "That would explain why he wasn't on the defensive when Sakai met him. You think Muto was set up this morning in that out-of-the-way spot?"

"No, sir. Sakai planned to kill Muto, yes, but their actual encounter today was by chance. I've been watching Sakai for years and I know how his mind works. He uses fate. How can I explain his method? Do you know what I mean, sir?"

"I think so. You mean that Sakai doesn't act until circumstances turn his way?"

The constable slapped his thigh. "Exactly. Sakai is a true evil spirit who, as the priest says, moves with the currents of heaven. Sakai knew that he would get his perfect chance if he waited and stayed alert. I'm almost sure that Sakai went out for a walk today at dawn. He's always complaining that he can't sleep and has too much energy. His land borders the road and he must have seen Muto drive his truck into the bushes. Sakai strolled up, they talked for a minute, Sakai pointed at something, Muto turned—"

"Yes?"

"But somebody saw Sakai cross the road. Today is market day. A lot of the local farmers were up and about, driving into town with their vegetables. But they'll never say anything."

"That's right," the sergeant said. He had stepped onto the balcony from the shadow of the restaurant. "You're a fool," he continued in a whisper. "The restaurant owner is just inside with his ears perked. He'll be on the telephone in a minute and Sakai will crush us like cockroaches. Sakai's friends run the city like he runs the village. Your eagerness has ruined all three of us."

"Sit down, Sergeant," Saito said. "You're just in time for breakfast. How did your investigation go?" He waved to the owner who was, indeed, hovering behind the sliding doors.

"Thank you, sir, I'm not hungry."

"Of course you are. One more plate of the same, my friend, and another pot of tea," Saito ordered. "Now, Sergeant, tell me what you found in the chickens' crops."

"Like Sakai-san said, sir, I opened two of them and the second was full of corn, so Mishi confessed that his kids had stolen the chickens."

"Had the kids seen Sakai?"

"They saw him walk away, but they didn't see him kill Muto, and they didn't see the corpse either. It's a rather low truck, and the kids were in a hurry, as you can imagine."

"Good!" the constable shouted. "We have witnesses!"

The sergeant squealed with rage. "Idiot! The kids are eight and ten years old, and known thieves! Who will believe them?"

Saito pushed the sergeant back into his seat. "Calm down. We've had enough of your antics. The constable says there will have been other witnesses—farmers who saw Sakai go into or come out of the bushes. And there's also Sakai's girl friend. She knew he wasn't in the house

during the time of the murder, and he may have bragged about it to her when he came back."

The sergeant shrugged. "An ex-whore, an unfaithful mistress. Nobody will believe her either."

"I disagree. I think we have enough to make a move. When you've finished those tasty crabs we'll go to the Sakai mansion and arrest our suspect. Once he's no longer free and capable of hurting them, the witnesses will come forward. We'll also accuse him of filling a log with gunpowder with the deliberate intent to blow up poor Mishi's house—and Mrs. Mishi's death turns that caper into manslaughter. We'll delve into his past and charge him with any crime that crops up. Once a tyrant sits in a cell he becomes a mangy dog."

The sergeant poked at his crabs with a chopstick.

"You're still not convinced, Sergeant?"

"No, sir," he said gloomily. "The case will be thrown out."

Saito smiled. "You're a country cop. I'm a city cop. Homicide cases never get thrown out of court, because the press makes a living out of them. I know every journalist in Kyoto. If we hurry, Sakai's arrest will be in the evening papers. Eat your crabs—you're delaying justice."

The constable sat next to Saito as they drove to the hill.

"Sir?" he ventured.

"Yes?"

"How come I could convince you so easily? I'm from here and I know what I'm talking about—there was no doubt in my mind. But why did you believe me? It's only my word against his."

"Two reasons, Constable. I've dealt with criminals before, and Sakai made a nasty impression on me when he arrived on the scene. A squinty, blown-up, poisonous toad if ever I saw one. But that was only an impression."

"And the other reason, sir?"

Saito stopped the car and asked the sergeant to hand him his briefcase from the back seat. "This book, Constable, *Parallel Cases from Under the Pear Tree*, a thirteenth-century manual of jurisprudence and detection. An antique book, Constable, containing cases solved by truly brilliant Chinese magistrates. There are fools who say the book is out of date, but there are still wise men in the police academies who advise their students to learn from the past. But brilliant detection can be used both

ways. The Kempeitai studied the ancient wisdom too." He flipped through the book and smiled. "Here we are—case 18A—let me read it to you.

" 'When Fu of the Sung dynasty—' fifth century, Constable '—was magistrate of Shan-yin—' a Chinese province, as you know '—two men got involved in a dispute about the ownership of chickens. Fu asked, "What do you feed the chickens?" One man said beans, the other said rice. Fu had one chicken killed and its crop cut; it contained beans. He thereupon fined the man who fed rice to his chickens.'

"You see? Sakai probably learned the book by heart, just as I did when I was a student. This morning, when the fisherman used Sakai's telephone to call you, Sakai knew that you would find the corpse within the next few minutes and worked out his defense. He tried to defend himself by attacking you—the police authorities, of all people—for not dealing with a minor theft, while you were still investigating a murder. By suggesting a solution to the question of who stole the miserable chickens, he hoped to involve his other enemies. Muto was already dead, but he still wanted to get rid of Mishi and his kids. He surmised that you would charge Mishi with the murder—or the kids. But that would be the same thing since the kids are minors and their father is responsible for their behavior. It was a clever trap, but the fool forgot one basic rule. When a bystander in the case of a crime suggests a solution, he immediately becomes a suspect himself.

"And there was something else I'm sure you noticed. This is a small village, and everybody knows everybody. Muto had been buying Sakai's corn. Yet Sakai never expressed the slightest concern for the victim. Maybe that's natural in a tyrant and an egotist who has had his way for many years, but it doesn't make a very good impression on the officers of the law. It makes them think, doesn't it?"

Saito turned around. The sergeant seemed a different man—he was almost smiling. Saito laughed.

"Won't Sakai look silly when you and the constable arrest him!"

"I hope you'll witness the arrest, sir."

"But of course—thank you for the invitation. This is your case and will bring you much credit, but I'll be honored if you will let me follow its various stages. It'll be good to see you put the handcuffs on the villain and drag him to the car. Be sure to drive him slowly through Main Street so that the villagers can see the mountain-ogre in his true form. Then they'll know that the divine power the emperor himself has invested in

you will crush this little fellow and make him do penance for his vile deeds."

The sergeant knotted his eyebrows and his facial muscles tightened. He looked almost ferocious, but noble at the same time.

"You can leave this to me, sir," he said.

"I will do so with pleasure," Inspector Saito said.

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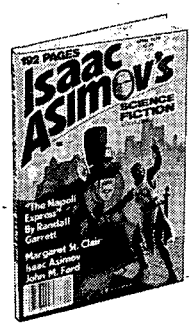

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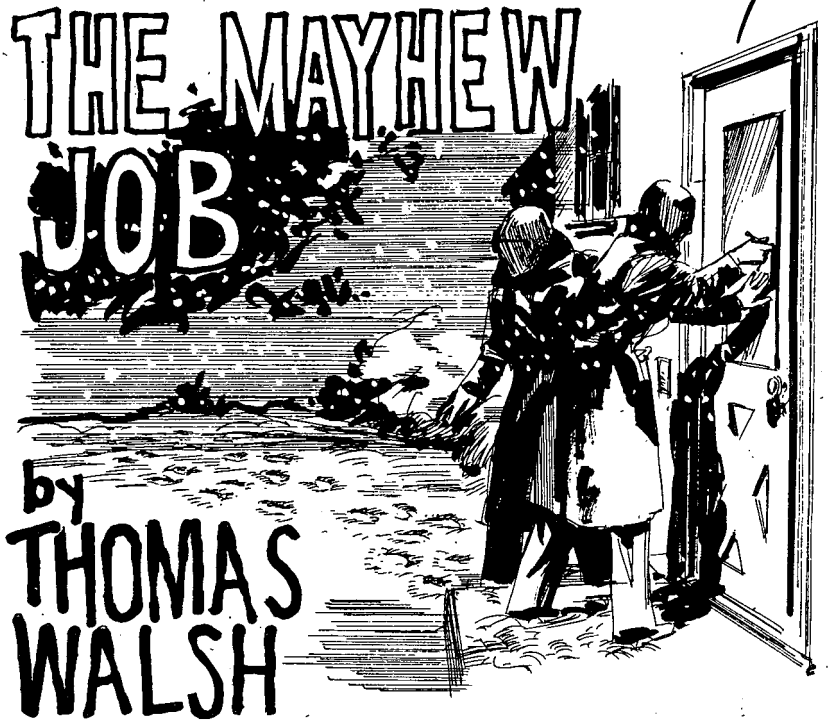
A snowstorm was not going to divert them from the plan . . .

THE MAYHEW JOB



by THOMAS WALSH

Mr. and Mrs. Al Healey laid the groundwork. In the summer of 1977 they took up residence in Hawley's Creek, a small resort village in the Adirondack region of upper New York State. Al, a first-class mechanic, soon found a job at one of the local service stations, while Dolly opened the one and only beauty shop in town. As Al explained it, Dolly had something of a lung problem, and had been urged by her doctor to get away from the smog and congestion of a big city.

Not long after their arrival Al joined the Elks Club, and Dolly became a faithful Sunday attendant at the Methodist Church. They took part in several other village activities as well, Dolly in the Tuesday night sewing circle and the cancer drive and Al in the Red Cross and the Heart Association. Soon everybody in town knew them as friendly, helpful, hard-working neighbors, and two or three times Al fixed up Police Chief Clarence Roberts' old car at minimal charge.

During Christmas week, Al had two visitors. He introduced them to all and sundry, including Chief Roberts, as his two brothers from San Francisco. There was very little physical resemblance between them, however. John, described by Al as an accountant, was a medium-sized man with a neatly trimmed Vandyke beard, and Ernest—the baby of the family, Al called him—was much younger than Al and John and full of fun.

They stayed for about a week, meeting almost everyone in town, and then left for New York to see their mother. She was almost seventy-seven, Al explained mournfully, and not feeling well. In January, unfortunately, she took a turn for the worse, and Al and Dolly drove down to visit her in the hospital. When they came back, Al was more mournful than ever and once or twice, in talking about her condition, he had to wipe his eyes with a handkerchief. It wouldn't be long now, he told them at the Elks Club; it was her heart. He had notified his two brothers, which was about all he could do. Sometime in February they planned to come east again, and then all three would drive down to New York for what might well be a last visit.

And John and Ernest did come in February. Al met them at the airport in Albany, and that evening, since Dolly had a house call to make at the estate of Mrs. J. Elliott Mayhew just outside of town, the three of them had dinner at the Hawley's Creek Diner.

"You remember my brothers, don't you?" Al asked Chief Roberts, who had dropped in for a cup of coffee. "I think you met them when they were here at Christmas, Clarence. We're driving down to New York tomorrow morning. The news about Mama is bad."

"I'm sorry to hear that," Clarence said.

"Well, what can you do?" Al said mournfully, as he rose to leave. He was a tall man with a prominent Adam's apple and a gangly walk, and he kept the mournful expression on his face until he was out in the car with

the other two men. But then, pulling out of the parking lot, he replaced it with a sly grin.

"How's that for timing, Arnold?" he said to the one with the beard. "I told you he always drops by the diner around this time. Everything's just about set now. What can go wrong?"

"What always does," Arnold said, removing a pair of dark glasses wearily and stroking the bridge of his nose. "The one thing you never expect. How did Dolly get hold of the key?"

"Easy as pie," Al told him, still grinning foxily. "Last time the old lady was under the dryer, Dolly looked through her purse. The key was right there.

"So Dolly gets talking to her and drops a towel over the key. As soon as she makes the impression, which takes only a minute or so, she returns the key to the purse. The old lady never noticed a thing. Cute, eh?"

"Brilliant," Arnold said, closing his eyes wearily. "Where's the house?"

"Just coming to it," Al said. "It's right in back of mine, Arnold. The white house in the middle of the block there."

Arnold, following Al's jerk of the head, saw a modest Dutch Colonial painted white and dark-green. The front walk and the driveway were shoveled out, and there was a basement garage on the right. There was a single light on, in one of the windows upstairs, and by the front steps, angled up against them, was a child's sled.

"Is that his room?"

"The one with the light." Al nodded. "Yeah. He must read until eleven or twelve o'clock up there every night. All you'll have to do is cross from my yard into his, Arnold. Nothing to it."

"No one else in the house with him?"

"I brought him over some cookies last night," Al grinned, "just to make sure. He told me the wife was still over to the Medical Center in Burlington. All you have to worry about is him and the kid."

They got out of the car in Al's garage and he led the way into a cellar clubroom with a sofa, a couple of big armchairs, a television set, and a bar in one corner—but with only one dim light burning. Same old Al, Arnold thought, watching every last penny, even with the electric lights. A plate of sandwiches had been left on the coffee table. They were bologna sandwiches with one very thin slice in each one, and no butter or mayonnaise.

"High living, eh, Eddie?" Arnold commented to the other man. "How

much do you charge for a cup of coffee with cream and sugar, Al?"

"Well, that's another thing," Al said, nursing his oversized Adam's apple a bit petulantly. "I think we ought to decide about the expenses right now, Arnold. Up here it's been one thing after another for us. We had to join everything, me and Dolly. You got any idea how much it all costs?"

"Yeah," Arnold said even more wearily, sitting down on the couch. "A small fortune. Fix me a drink, Eddie. Scotch and soda."

"No scotch," Al said in an apologetic tone. "I didn't have time to stop at the liquor store, Arnold. But wait a minute—here's Dolly."

A car could be heard in the driveway, and a moment later Dolly came in. She was a short, stocky blonde in her late thirties, and as soon as she entered the clubroom she exchanged a furtive glance with Al. Did you ask him yet? her hard blue eyes flashed.

"All he got," Eddie drawled, "is Silver Queen gin, Arnold. Even today it sells for about three bucks a full quart. Some expenses, Al."

"I don't run a barroom," Al said fretfully. "But what Dolly and I figure, Arnold—we figure we ought to get $10,000 right off the top, just for our expenses."

"And we're going to get it," Dolly put in, her tone venomous. "I can't pay my expenses in that lousy beauty shop. And all Al's making at the gas station—"

"Shut up," Arnold said, sprawling down low in the chair and closing his eyes. "Keep her quiet, Al."

"Yes, keep me quiet!" Dolly said, even more venomous now. "The big man can't be bothered with petty details, can he? If you think for one minute we're going to—"

Al scowled at her. "You want a rap in the mouth?" he said. "Take them sandwiches upstairs. But don't throw 'em away—we can bring 'em along in the car tomorrow. What time you figure on, Arnold?"

"I think about five in the morning," Arnold told him. "The sooner the better. We might have to work him over for a couple of hours. You never know. And you don't have to start worrying about your expenses, Al. There's going to be more than enough for us all around."

"Well, yeah," Al persisted, when Dolly had left them. "Only you got no idea how much it's cost us since last summer. Forty dollars just to join the Elks, for instance. But of course"— a smug smile settled on his lips—"I won two hundred and thirty last week playing blackjack down

there. I think maybe I can make a pretty good thing out of that for myself. The brothers don't look any too sharp."

"They might be sharp enough," Eddie told him. "It doesn't take much brains to spot a hustler who walks away with the big money week after week, Al. If that's what you want it's your funeral."

"Yep, two hundred and thirty bucks," Al repeated comfortably. "And Joe Riley the undertaker had to whisper to me to stay in one time. Seems like I didn't know I got twenty-one on five cards. Beginner's luck, Arnold. I never played before. Hey, it's beginning to snow."

"That right?" Arnold said, dangling his dark glasses listlessly from his right hand. "The Al Healey Meteorological Service. It's beginning to snow, Eddie."

Dolly revealed herself at the upstairs kitchen doorway.

"Go ahead," she said. "Keep slapping down at him all the time. And me."

"Ah, quit your bellyaching," Al ordered. "We got everything set now, even Clarence. I think it's going to work out perfect for us."

"Yes, just perfect," Dolly countered. "*They'll* be out on the Coast tomorrow night, or down in Miami. And where will we be? Stuck here for the rest of the winter in this stinking little town. I got to join the goddamn Women's Club, where it costs me two dollars a week for lunch, because the great Mr. Arnold Connaughton tells me I have to. And he—"

"Al," Arnold said, "shut her up."

"Yes, shut me up, shut me up," Dolly sneered down at him. "When Al and me have been carrying the whole thing for you up to now. Well, we want our expenses, and we want them off the top. We deserve them."

"I told you once," Al said ominously, "get the hell up to bed. Listen to me good, Dolly."

She slammed the kitchen door, muttering to herself.

Yes, Arnold Connaughton reflected, it was zero hour, and everyone except Eddie Conklin was on edge. Eddie—round-faced, cheerful-looking, young—was at the bar pouring some gin for himself, while Al watched intently from the corners of his eyes to see how much he was taking.

"Not that Dolly doesn't have a point about our expenses," he said. "A lot of little stuff mounts up in the end."

"Nobody's getting a free ride around here," Arnold said curtly. "Eddie and I do the thing, you and Dolly arrange the setup. That was the agreement, remember?"

"O.K., O.K.," Al muttered. "I was just reminding you, that's all." He went up to the kitchen, and Eddie started to pour out another drink. Arnold shifted his eyes to him.

"Eddie," he said. "We got just about five or six hours, Eddie. Knock it off."

Eddie did, but he finished the second drink.

Arnold removed his false Vandyke beard and sprawled back in his chair with his legs extended and his eyes shut. Nothing more was said. But the one dim lamp was left on, and at half past one, at a quarter of four, and at four forty-five, Arnold opened his eyes and looked at his wristwatch. At five minutes of five he looked again, and got up to touch Eddie on the shoulder. He felt all right then, perfectly all right. It was time to get started.

"How are you feeling?" he asked. "Ready to go, Eddie?"

"Any time you say." Eddie nodded. Getting up from the sofa, he yawned and stretched. "Time to go?"

"I think so, just about," Arnold said. "If you want, take one more drink for yourself—but just one, Eddie, to wake you up."

"I think I will," Eddie grinned cheerfully. "I've always been easily led, Arnold. Maybe I'll steal a couple of Al's cigars too. Just to break his heart."

He took two or three cigars from a box on the table, added a packet of matches, and followed Arnold upstairs, where they found Al Healey waiting for them in the darkness of the kitchen in pajamas and bathrobe.

"It's still snowing," he whispered anxiously. "Think that might spoil anything?"

"Think this, think that." Arnold gritted his teeth. "Suppose you just keep your damned mouth shut."

There was a plastic trash bag on the table, folded up neatly and very small, the way it had come off the store shelf. Arnold stuffed it into his overcoat pocket, and then he and Eddie each pulled a wool stocking cap down to his chin. There were eyeholes cut into them, and over his eyes Arnold carefully fitted the dark glasses. Al, moving nervously past them, looked out into the yard through the glass panel of the kitchen door.

"Are you sure you'll know the right house?" he whispered.

At that, even solid Eddie reacted. "No, tell us again," he advised irritably. "Or better yet, draw us a map, Al."

He opened the door. Outside there was no black to be seen, but instead a confused mass of white flakes, thick here, thin there. They moved down into it, Al peering after them from behind the pane. Framed against the darkness of the kitchen and wrapped to the ears in his grey-flannel bathrobe, his face hovered for a moment as if with no visible support under it.

Neither Arnold nor Eddie looked back at him. There was a roar of wind in the darkness, rumbling like a far-off express train, and once they were down the steps it became necessary for them to balance against it. A street lamp at the end of Al Healey's driveway guided them on. The new snow had piled up over the old up to their knees, but even so Arnold decided it was all the better for them. In half an hour, long before anyone around would be up, whatever path they made across to the Dutch Colonial would be blotted out. They had only to clamber over a wooden fence at the back now and they'd be in the other yard.

A second street lamp, on the road in back of Al Healey's house, showed them the Dutch Colonial. The driveway had drifted over a few inches, and facing them was the cellar garage Arnold remembered. Just around the corner from that four or five wooden steps led up to the kitchen entryway. When they reached it Arnold paused and glanced around carefully. All he could see was the street light blurred misty pale by the heavy snow and a line of glary grey icicles hanging from the roof gutter of the neighboring house.

The kitchen entry was very small. He and Eddie had to crowd together into it. Over in the right-hand corner were two pairs of galoshes—one child-size, one adult—and on the floor a rubber mat with the word WELCOME on it.

It was possible now to see chairs and a table in the kitchen, a white stove and a white refrigerator, and on the stove a tiny white bulb over an electric clock. Four minutes past five. Arnold gestured and Eddie began working on a corner of the glass door panel. Soon there was a slight rasping scratch, and Eddie lifted away a small section of the glass and set it down cautiously beside the galoshes. All he had to do then was to reach in through the opening he'd made and turn the knob.

The kitchen was shiny and clean, with no overnight clutter. On the left was an open archway to the dining room and on the right was an open doorway to the hall. Arnold led the way to a flight of carpeted stairs to the second floor.

The upper hall was also carpeted, and when they reached it Arnold held up a cautious hand to Eddie.

There was a window at the street end of the hall, and one at the yard end. Through the front one a street light shone in, enabling Arnold to make out a long narrow table and two flanking cane-bottomed chairs between the bedroom doors on his left. There was a bowl of artificial white flowers on the table and, over that, a small eagle mirror.

When he had a clear idea of the surroundings, Arnold pointed to where Eddie should take up his stand. Eddie nodded, and Arnold moved ahead again silently. At the front bedroom on the right, which was the same room in which he had seen the light a few hours ago from Al Healey's car, he got hold of the knob and began twisting it with caution, a quarter inch at a time.

When it worked free he glanced back again at Eddie, who was watching from the head of the stairs. They exchanged nods and Arnold eased the bedroom door open until he could hear a man breathing in sound sleep, then he moved into the bedroom, leaving the hall door wide open behind him.

In the room were two front windows and a side window. Even with his dark glasses on, Arnold could make out the twin beds facing him. One was occupied by the sleeping man, the other neatly made up and quite empty. A step in from the doorway, Arnold paused for a moment. His leg muscles had begun jerking, which they invariably did at the moment of no return. He waited patiently a minute or two until he felt sure of himself and then turned on a pencil-sized flashlight in his right hand. The streak of light it shot out he held steady on the sleeping man's face.

This was the most critical moment of all. Any emotion might overtake Frank Higgins when he woke—panic or terrified recklessness or wild anger. Arnold kept carefully away from the bed, well out of lunging range, and flashed the light on the man lying before him.

Higgins turned his head fretfully away from the flicker of light, but Arnold kept flashing it until the sleeping man turned his head, put his right hand up against it, and blinked his eyes open. He looked to be about forty years old, with pleasantly rugged features and a thick shock of tousled black hair with a few streaks of grey showing in it. When he opened his eyes, Arnold moved forward another step and displayed the automatic in his right hand.

"Get up," he said, very calm about it, altogether businesslike. "I want you to get up, Higgins. Put on your clothes."

He used the name deliberately. The name always stopped them dead for the first vital second or two. Who was this person in the bedroom with them? What did he want? It had to be someone who knew them and therefore someone who had a reason for being in the house at this hour. Arnold could see that first thought flash across Higgins' face and knew better than to try to explain anything. He had learned many years ago that it was much more effective to use the human dread of the unknown for as long as possible. A man who understood what he faced might somehow be able to throw up defenses against it.

Arnold stood, the gun visible in his hand, and offered no other instructions.

Higgins shifted his eyes in bewilderment, but once they fixed on the gun and remained there Arnold knew he had achieved exactly what he'd wanted—frozen shock.

Ten seconds went by. Arnold counted them off silently. At eleven the man in the bed sat up, bracing himself with one elbow against the pillow and with the other arm automatically pushing the bedclothes away from him.

"Who are you?" he said. "What do you want?"

Arnold didn't answer. What he had to do now was wait for Higgins to catch up with him, and very soon he did. But after he had swung his legs over the side of the mattress he wasn't permitted to see very much other than the vague masked figure, the stocking cap, the dark glasses, and the gun and he froze again.

"All right." Arnold called back to Eddie outside in the corridor. "He won't move for me! We'll have to do it ourselves, I guess. Get the child!"

"No, no!" the man said, swinging both legs onto the floor. "Carol, you mean? No, wait a minute. Wait, please!"

Eddie trotted in from the hall to work on him from the other direction—Arnold the cold, savage threat, absolutely implacable; Eddie the comfort, the ray of hope. That could work miracles, Arnold had discovered. You mustn't let them feel immediate despair at their helplessness, because then anything might happen. Little by little was much better. When they broke under that they broke all the way through, like a snapped wire.

"Now it's O.K.," Eddie said. "There's nothing for you to worry about,

Mr. Higgins. Just do everything he says. No one's going to hurt that cute little doll of yours. Last thing we'd ever want to do. But get your clothes on, will you?"

And right there Arnold could see that it was all going to be just fine for them—no stupid commotion, no insane rush for the gun, no physical struggle. "My God," the man said, staring fearfully from one stocking mask to the other. "Get my clothes on? Of course. Just as long as you leave her—thank you. Thank you very much."

He even managed to direct a strained smile at Friend Eddie, so that Arnold didn't have to threaten him any more; Frank Higgins was now more eager to obey than Arnold was to command.

"I know just how you feel," Eddie explained to him with the most heartening amiability. "Kind of a shock, eh? But you don't have to worry about a thing, Mr. Higgins. Let me close the window while you get dressed. It's pretty cold out."

Higgins had finished buttoning his shirt clumsily.

"Now I'll tell you," Eddie suggested then, "the best thing is to make out that it's a little surprise for her. Kind of a game, Mr. Higgins. Then she'll be all right, see? You know how kids are. I can do anything I want with my three so long as they think I'm playing with them. They love that, don't they?"

"Yes, they do," Higgins said, once more sounding enormously grateful to him—common ground had been established in their mutual fatherhood. "But what do you want from me? I don't understand. If it's a question of money in the house, I'm afraid all I have is—"

Arnold gestured at him with the gun and he stopped mid-sentence. They filed out silently into the hall and crossed it to another, smaller bedroom. There Higgins hesitated a moment, looking at Arnold, then got down on his knees and attempted to speak in a normal and reassuring manner.

"Carol," he whispered. "Carol, honey."

She was sound asleep with a white teddy bear between her arm and her cheek. She did not waken. Eddie, his head cocked, was studying her as if with the greatest possible admiration.

"What a little doll," he told Higgins. "Just look at her sleep that way, huh? No need to even wake her up, Mr. Higgins. Just carry her downstairs and I'll take along a couple of these blankets. Is she in school yet?"

"What?" Higgins said, once again reacting in the precise way Arnold wanted him to—forced now to carry on two different conversations on two vastly different levels, and so altogether unable to respond sensibly to either of them. "Yes, she is. She's in the—"

But he must not be allowed to place too much dependence on Eddie. He must be made to remember there was still the other one. "Keep quiet," Arnold ordered. "Get her out of that bed, Higgins, or you want us to do it?"

Higgins showed the tip of his tongue delicately and lifted her.

This time Arnold went first, Higgins and the child second, and Eddie third. Down in the living room Arnold snapped off the flash, which he didn't need any more. A street light showed him the front windows, and there was also a pale upward glare on them from the deep snow.

"You can lay her right down there on the couch," Eddie said, having remembered to bring along her white teddy bear.

"But I don't understand," Higgins said. "What do you want with me? If it's money—"

Not even Eddie answered him this time.

"You just wait till she's sixteen years old," Eddie remarked. "These high-school kids are going to be around her like bees after honey. Like I said only the other day to my missus, when they're this age you have to do anything you can for them. Anything."

Which was one more step on the way, and very adroitly slipped in—what Higgins could do for her. Frank Higgins jerked up his head and stared from Eddie to Arnold, then back to Eddie.

"I guess she misses her Mommy a whole lot," Eddie suggested. "Too bad about that, Mr. Higgins. How *is* Mrs. Higgins getting on over there in Burlington?"

"They tell me all right," Higgins said, his face glistening. "They might let her come home next week. But I don't understand how you got in the house. What do you want from me?"

Arnold stopped Eddie's reply curtly. "Keep your mouth shut," he said. "I told you before."

"Oh." Eddie nodded, immediately obedient. "Yeah. Sure thing, Chief."

Chief. Arnold could see Higgins tasting that word, and he let him taste it. No question now as to who was the master here and who the underling. It appeared to be time for the silent treatment, and Arnold began it. When he gestured with the gun one more time, Higgins sat down by

the child, putting a protective arm around her. Arnold and Eddie sat down facing them.

They began to wait. Icy sleet pattered crisply against the two street windows. On the mantel shelf a glass clock ticked and the pendulum swung gently back and forth, back and forth, but there was nothing else to be heard. No one spoke. On the couch, snuggled up to her teddy bear, the child slept.

Six o'clock came; six-thirty; seven. After seven the darkness thinned out and a dim, ghostly white crept in through the street windows. Arnold sat with his legs crossed, the automatic in his lap, the stocking cap and dark glasses on, and at ten minutes past seven Eddie got up, ominously silent, and went to the kitchen, where he made a pot of coffee.

He was on the way back with it when a Jeep ground into the driveway. He stopped rigid. Arnold didn't turn his eyes to the window. "Snow plow," he said. "They're just digging us out."

They were the first words he had spoken in more than an hour, and as usual the silent treatment had been exactly the right way to handle things. Higgins had already smoked half a pack of cigarettes and was reaching for another.

"If I could understand this," he said. "But you just sit here. What is it? What are you waiting for?"

But he knew, Arnold suspected; or at least he was beginning to have a vague idea. Good. Let him sweat it out a little more. And he stared blankly at Higgins through the dark glasses while Eddie poured a cup of coffee for each of them.

The Jeep backed out to the road, came on again, backed out again, and moved along to the next house. Through the curtains Higgins stared after it with a look of hopeless yearning. The clock ticked. The ghostly pale light grew stronger around them. Then at twenty-five past seven Carol began to turn herself around under the blankets and yawn drowsily.

She saw Eddie first—the burly figure, the dark overcoat, the stocking cap over his face—and for a moment she studied him with nothing more than sleepy interest.

"Who's that man?" she asked Higgins. "Why is he dressed like that, Daddy?"

"It's all right," Higgins said with an effort to make his voice steady and comforting. "It's just—a kind of joke, honey. He's a friend of mine."

"Oh," Carol said. The explanation was perfectly satisfactory to her.

"And you know what?" Eddie cajoled, leaning over the back of the couch and tweaking her toe playfully. "We might have a big surprise for you. Only if you're a good little girl, though."

She lay drowsily. "What's the surprise?"

"If I told you," Eddie said, "it wouldn't be a surprise, would it? I got a little girl just like you back home and she can dress herself. I bet you can't."

"I *can*," Carol said scornfully. "Can't I, Daddy?"

Higgins stared up haggardly at the dark glasses—No, his eyes said, no—not the child. But the glasses sent back the silent and expressionless answer—Yes, and don't you forget it.

"Then suppose you go do it?" Eddie coaxed, lifting her from under the blanket and patting her bottom. At that, Higgins started to rise hurriedly and Arnold moved the hand under his coat. Higgins stopped.

"All right," he said, but he showed a sudden and rather convulsive swallow. "I want you to get dressed, Carol. You know where your things are."

For a moment she dawdled in the hall doorway, looking back at them. "But what's the surprise?"

"Wait till you're all dressed," Eddie promised her. "Go on now. You have to be ready in five minutes."

Holding the white teddy bear by one arm, she banged it against every post in the guard rail on her way upstairs. Arnold pointed a silent forefinger after her.

"Right, Chief," Eddie said, and stood at the foot of the stairs.

"No," Higgins managed, "I won't have that. Not her."

He received no answer from behind the dark glasses except that it was not what Frank Higgins wanted any more, but what the man with the gun wanted.

Water began to run in the upstairs bathroom, and small bare feet pattered around. Higgins leaned forward on the couch and began rubbing his temples with both palms.

Five minutes later Carol ran down fully dressed, a blue coat with brass buttons over her arm and a red beret on her head.

"Aren't you something," Eddie said approvingly, taking her hand and walking to the living room with her. "You did that real quick. Quicker even than my little girl, honey."

"What's her name?" Carol asked.

"Sue Ann," Eddie told her. "And I think you and Sue Ann—"

But Arnold discovered then that the pressure was not building up only on one side. There was a sudden loud thump against the street door, followed by complete stillness. Eddie moved quickly, swinging the child up and around in front of him, and Arnold dodged back.

"It's nothing," Higgins said. "Only the paper boy."

Arnold relaxed. "You shave every morning before you go to work, don't you?"

Higgins instinctively felt his stubble of beard. "Yes."

"Then go do it," Arnold said contemptuously.

There was a downstairs bathroom and an electric razor. Again Eddie stood guard. A car went by out on the street, and next door a dog barked, demanding to get in for breakfast after his first run of the day. Carol sat patiently on the couch and twirled an Uncle Sam pencil between her fingers.

"Do you know what that dog's name is?" she asked. "It's Bucky."

Arnold did not answer her. Outside everything glittered. Long icicles hung outside the living-room windows.

"Do you have a little girl too?" she asked.

"Keep quiet," Arnold said.

"If I want to," Carol said. "Daddy didn't tell me I had to. I can talk if I want."

"Daddy ever slap you across the mouth?"

"What?"

"What?" Arnold said, mimicking her and snatching the pencil away from her. "Do what I tell you. Keep your mouth shut."

Higgins came back and Arnold beckoned him out to the front hall for a briefing period, during which only Arnold spoke.

When they reappeared in the living room, Higgins had an oddly dazed smile on his lips.

"But why take her along?" he insisted. "What can she do? She'll be safer here in the house."

"I'll make a promise to you," Eddie said. "Nothing will happen to this cute little doll of yours. I give you my solemn word, Mr. Higgins. She's just our insurance, that's all—to prevent you from trying anything. We'll let her wait in the car if you want. And look at it this way—it ain't even your money."

"No," Arnold said. "No, it isn't. It's only his child. Let's go."

Out in the kitchen, Eddie opened the door to the cellar garage. He led and Higgins and the child followed, after another brief but futile hesitation on Higgins' part. Arnold went last.

In the car, Higgins took the wheel with Carol next to him and Eddie and Arnold in back. Before they backed out of the garage, Eddie squatted down low on the car floor, and Carol pulled excitedly at her father.

"That man's hiding himself," she whispered.

"Remember the surprise?" Eddie asked her. "It's coming right up, honey. Just wait and see."

There was an electric door to the garage. It tilted out from the bottom, then up and in from the top. After Higgins touched the dashboard signal device again the door came down after them. A small boy was shoveling off the front steps next door and waved a hand. Arnold was sitting sidewise to him, the stocking cap now properly up around his ears, one hand covering most of his face.

So there was nothing at all unusual. It was five minutes to eight and Frank Higgins was leaving for work at his usual time. Behind him could be seen another man, but only one. He had dark glasses on, and he was holding a white handkerchief up over his face as if he was about to sneeze. No one paid any attention to him as Frank Higgins drove down the hill, turned right on Main, and left on Elm.

At one minute to eight, quite as usual, Frank Higgins got out of his car in the rear parking lot off Elm Street, and the man with the handkerchief over his face followed him to the back door. On the left was an alley, on the other side of which was the back of Greenberg's Department Store, an old building with narrow, dirty windows. Across from Greenberg's was the rear premises of P. Mullin and Son, Moving and Storage, with a loading platform and two big wooden doors that were still padlocked. Greenberg's didn't open until nine-thirty and so there was no one around to pay any attention when Higgins unlocked the back door with his key and went in, followed by the man with the handkerchief over his face and a third man who darted quickly out of the car and in after them.

There was no delay or hang-up of any kind. Higgins had been given explicit instructions back at the house—and Carol did exactly what her father had told her to do. She waited in the car, and she would wait

there no matter what she saw happen, being an obedient little girl and the car heater left on to keep her nice and warm until Daddy got back.

Inside, the three men were gathered in the rear corridor of the Hawley's Creek National Bank. It was a narrow corridor with small offices on each side and, further in, a circular iron stairway that led down to the safety-deposit vaults. Past that was the open, sunlit hush of the main area in the quiet before-hours hush, everything in perfect order for the day. The floors had been mopped and polished the night before, the tables and desks were all clear, and steel-bright winter sunshine glittered in through the two big windows facing Elm Street.

"Get his keys," Arnold instructed. "In his right coat pocket."

Eddie snatched them, and ran down the stairs to the basement area, knowing exactly what he would find there. Several months earlier, Al Healey had rented a safety-deposit box. Almost at once he could be heard unlocking the grilled metal door at the bottom. Higgins faced the back steps as he had been ordered to do, and Arnold moved back into the last office on the left, where he couldn't be seen from outside but, with the door kept a bit open, he could watch Higgins and the section of Elm Street in front of the bank.

Higgins kept his eyes on the back steps, but now and again he glanced haggardly at the gun and the unreadable dark glasses and white handkerchief confronting him from the office doorway. The waiting had begun. But it wasn't for very long.

Kitty O'Mara always showed up just after Higgins, Al had explained, and this morning she was on time as usual, in spite of the snow. Her quick steps tip-tapped up to the back door and it opened.

"Oh, good morning!" she said. "Is that Carol out in your car, Mr. Higgins? You left the motor running."

"Yes, I know," Higgins said. "I'm taking her to school in a few minutes. But Mrs. Mayhew is coming in today, and you know how she hates to be kept waiting, Kitty. So would you get the key to her safe-deposit box and leave it on the desk blotter downstairs for me?"

"Of course," Kitty said. Arnold caught a glimpse of her as she moved past—a dark, pretty girl, her cheeks healthily aglow from the cold.

So that part was all right—and Arnold hoped he and Eddie would be long gone when Number Two appeared. It was three minutes past eight. In a second or two Kitty's steps could be heard tip-tapping down the iron

steps to the safe-deposit vault. Suddenly there was a frightened squeal from down there, and Eddie could be heard murmuring to her. Only quietness came back. Higgins remained where he was.

But then Number Two appeared—very tall, very skinny and prim. She proved to be the switchboard operator, Miss Foley, and Higgins addressed her by name as he had been instructed to do. When he had, Arnold reached out of the office, got his left arm around her throat, and let her feel the gun in his hand.

"Sit down at your switchboard," he said. "Answer your phone. Whoever calls, whoever they want to speak to, you'll ring back. Do what you're told now, or I'll blow his brains out."

Higgins cleared his throat effortfully. Miss Foley was shoved back into the hall, where she began to cry.

"Oh, Mr. Higgins," she said. "Oh, Mr. Higgins!"

"It's all right," Higgins said. "Go on, Miss Foley. He won't hurt you."

It was 8:05 now—why was Eddie taking so long down in the vault? Could anything be out of the way down there? Arnold had estimated it would take no more than two minutes, and now it was more than five. He felt a sour taste in his mouth, and jumped slightly when the phone rang. But Miss Foley, great glistening tears on her face, managed to reach out and answer it.

"Yes, Mr. Cotter," she said, as Arnold swung the gun and his dark glasses in her direction. "As soon as he comes in I'll have him call you."

Then, thankfully, there was another grating from the massive steel door at the foot of the steps and a sudden sharp click of the lock. A moment later Eddie came running up the stairs, his stocking cap still on, and the plastic trash bag in his right hand bulging out around the bottom.

Higgins backed off a step or two toward the wall. Perhaps he had cherished a faint hope until then. Now he did the only thing that was left to do. He appealed to Arnold.

"You promised me," he whispered. "I've done everything you told me to—so let her go!"

"Not yet," Arnold said. "Come on, Eddie."

Higgins grabbed at him, planting himself in front of the rear door.

"Get out of the way," Eddie urged him. "Use your head, Mr. Higgins. What the hell would we want with her now? We'll drop her off out on the street!"

But Arnold didn't waste words. He smashed Higgins with the gun, to

get him out of the way, to save time, but even knocked to his knees by the blow Higgins managed to reach out and hold Arnold by one ankle.

"No," he said. "No. You promised."

"Now stop that," Eddie cried, coming back to help. "She's all yours, Mr. Higgins, if you behave yourself. Let him go, damn it!"

In the confusion, Number Three appeared. Eddie glanced at her and then, proving himself solid Eddie again, took her kindly by the arm, saying, "Come on, dear. Easy does it."

But in doing it, he dropped the plastic bag, and Arnold had to do two things at once. He wanted the gun that had been knocked away from him when he fell and he wanted the bag. He got only the bag. Higgins already had the gun, and was squirming over the shiny linoleum floor toward Arnold. Eddie held the door open for Arnold and Higgins, on his knees, his face distorted, began firing the gun with both hands. He didn't hit Arnold, however. He hit Eddie.

Eddie was knocked down the back steps in a long, lazily floating plunge. He landed flat on his back and stared dazedly up at the dazzling blue sky with one or two angelically white clouds drifting across it.

"Help me," he managed to say. "Help me, Arnold. Don't leave me!"

Arnold bent over him and took his gun. He fired it back at the door to give them a few seconds. Glass tinkled. But then Higgins came out after them, crouched down low but firing wildly, and eventually on empty chambers, a fact he did not realize but Arnold did. He ran around the car and got in, not firing any more, while Eddie got the door open on the other side and dragged himself up on the seat.

Carol was crouched down in blind terror between them, and Arnold pulled her across his knees and threw her out into the snow. "Close your door," he ordered Eddie, and backed the car around in a sudden wild yaw, leaving Higgins still clicking the empty gun after them from the back steps.

Out on Elm Street everything had a placid, early-morning appearance. A snowplow inched along and two yellow school buses waited to turn off at Main Street. Arnold took the left, clear side of the road, running an old Ford into the snow, and got past the buses. He kept his horn blaring, scattering the few cars in front of him, turned right at the gas station Al had told them about, and then left two blocks on. After a while he stopped

watching the rearview mirror and glanced at Eddie.

"I think I'm hit bad," Eddie whispered. "What did he have to do that for? I feel like I'm going."

And he did go, almost at once. His eyes, with their expression of oddly puzzled anxiety, glazed over and he toppled sideways across the front seat.

On Frew Terrace Arnold slowed down to about forty, and at Miller's dairy farm he followed the Holmville sign. Half a mile further he abandoned the car in a stand of thick pine, then ran back to it and put two bullets into Eddie's head, smashing it beyond any chance of recognition. Recovering, he ran west as he had been told to do, slipping and scrambling in the deep snow, and came out again to another secondary road just in time to meet Al Healey's car, rounding the corner opposite to him. No other car was in sight, and Arnold darted out into the road. Al slowed a bit while Arnold heaved in the plastic bag and himself after it.

"What happened?" Al said anxiously. "Where's Eddie?"

Arnold waited a moment, catching his breath.

"In the car," he said.

"In the car?" Al repeated, watching the road with badly frightened grey eyes. "What are you talking about? Why would he stay in the car?"

Arnold wanted a cigarette but his hands were too shaky. "Higgins shot him," he managed, still struggling for breath.

Way off over on Main Street sirens began to be heard.

Arnold was down on the floor when they pulled into Al Healey's driveway.

"What did you mean when you said in the car?" Al said when he had switched off the motor in his cellar garage so much like Frank Higgins'. "You must be out of your mind, Arnold. It won't be no time at all till they find him there. And as soon as they do—"

"His own mother wouldn't know him," Arnold assured him. "I blew half his face off. I had to. Now get Dolly. We're supposed to leave here this morning. That's what you told Clarence last night. If there's any chance for us now, we've got to stick to schedule."

In the cellar clubroom he washed and changed his clothes hurriedly, and when Al and Dolly came down with their suitcases, he had discarded the dark glasses and replaced them with the dignified accountant's beard. Dolly was sobbing, and Al was threatening her savagely for it.

"No, let her alone," Arnold ordered. "Let her bawl all she wants. Your mother's dying, remember? That's why she feels so bad. Now let's get started."

Half a mile out of town they came to the first roadblock, with Police Chief Clarence Roberts, a uniformed man, and two state troopers checking all traffic.

"What the hell's going on?" Al asked. "Somebody rob the bank, Clarence?"

"Seems so," Clarence said. "They grabbed all the stuff out of Mrs. Mayhew's safe-deposit box. There were two of them, so far as we know. But we didn't get much of a description. There were two of them and they were both masked."

"Hell of a thing," Al said. "We're not even safe up here any more, eh?"

Clarence peered in at the sobbing Dolly, and exchanged nods with Arnold.

"They're all right," he told one of the troopers. "Al's got a sick mother in New York, and they're going down to see her. Go ahead, Al."

"Well, I don't know," the trooper said, peering in. "Mind if we check the trunk, fellows?"

"No, no," Al said, giving over his keys at once. There was nothing to worry about in the trunk. They had made a stop at the post office and by now the contents of the safe-deposit box were being processed casually down to an address in New York.

So the trunk was opened, and the three suitcases inside, while Clarence and Al passed the time of day.

"Where's your other brother?" Clarence asked. "He isn't with you?"

"That's right," Al mourned. "He's taking this thing a lot harder than John and me. He's all broken up. Couldn't take the drive. He's going to fly down from Plattsburgh this afternoon."

Clarence nodded. "I know how he feels."

Arnold smoked quietly. There was nothing to worry about. Every part of the operation had been thought out to the last detail. Nobody would ever find out how Mrs. Mayhew's safe-deposit key had been obtained; the New York trip had been alibied to Clarence Roberts last night; and no one would pay attention to the ordinary package in the mail, about the size of a shoebox, that carried only twenty-five dollars' insurance.

But should he say something too? A certain curiosity was called for, and Arnold showed it.

"Who's this Mrs. Mayhew?" he asked.

"Only about the richest woman in the whole country," Clarence told him. "Got places in Washington, New York, Paris, Florida, and up here. She always throws a big birthday party this time of year and flies the guests in on her private plane."

"You must have read about her," Al added, playing to Arnold's lead. "She's got one of the biggest jewel collections in the world. Is that what they got, Clarence?"

"I have to think so," Clarence said. "We're getting in touch with her right now. It only happened about eight o'clock this morning—yeah?"

He addressed this last to the trooper, who had just opened Arnold's suitcase and had beckoned to him. Clarence excused himself and walked over to the trooper. They murmured together, the trooper watching the car. Arnold moistened his lips. Why the conference? The trooper could have found no guns or jewels.

The second trooper joined Clarence and the other one. After a minute or so he moved over beside Al and addressed Dolly through the window.

"I understand you do Mrs. Mayhew's hair," he said. "That right? You been out to her place lately?"

"What?" Dolly said, doing the one thing she never should have done—glancing hurriedly around at Arnold for guidance. "Well, yes. I go out there every week when she's up here."

"Where do you do her hair?"

"In her bedroom," Dolly said. "Where else?"

"Where she keeps her purse?" the trooper said. "Where you could get at it when she was under the dryer maybe?"

Dolly made another mistake. She tried to bluster angrily.

"Listen here," she snapped. "If you mean that I—"

"No, you listen," the trooper said. "Out of that car, all three of you. Line them up, Grogan, and show them what you found in the suitcase."

And Grogan did, lifting Arnold's crumpled shirt out of the suitcase. It was the shirt he had worn before changing clothes half an hour ago, and Grogan turned it around to show him the front of it. There was something still clipped to the pocket, where Arnold himself had attached it earlier that morning, something with a cash value of about ten cents. Carol Higgins' Uncle Sam pencil.

"That was some kid," Grogan explained later back at the barracks. "What the hell did she care about Mrs. Mayhew's jewelry collection? 'That man took my Uncle Sam pencil,' she kept telling me. So of course that popped into my head when I saw that shirt. Why would a grown man be carrying an Uncle Sam pencil? Unless it was the same man who had taken it."

"Did they admit it yet?" his friend asked.

"No, but they will," Grogan said. "They'll have to. Clarence's sister just called. She was standing behind Dolly Healey in the post office this morning and she saw Dolly mailing a package. We got the insurance slip out of her purse and they're checking the mails for it right now. They pulled off a million-dollar job as easy as pie and then had the whole thing blow up in their faces because of a kid's ten-cent pencil. Hard luck, huh?"

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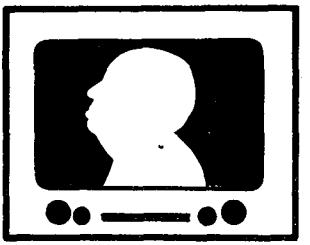

CRIME ON SCREEN

by Peter Christian

Rotund, somewhat frail, but still in command of his and our emotions, the man who made an art of screen suspense recently received the Life Achievement Award of the American Film Institute—and none deserves such tribute better than our Alfred Hitchcock. Sitting serenely in a banquet hall surrounded by some of the motion picture world's most glittering luminaries, Hitchcock watched an image of himself walking into his own image (the famed opening to his television series) and clips from the masterpieces with which he has been terrifying and delighting audiences around the world for six decades now. And heard praise from his peers.

Director Francois Truffaut explained some of the French affection for Monsieur Hitchcock, and how it may differ somewhat from American attitudes toward Hitch: "*You* respect him because he shoots scenes of love as if they were scenes of murder; *we* respect him because he shoots scenes of murder like scenes of love!" The welcome from Ingrid Bergman, who worked with the director in *Spellbound*, *Notorious*, and the less successful *Under Capricorn* and who acted as hostess for the evening, was especially warm and heartfelt—"Dear Hitch, I've come all the way from London, from your home town, to give you my love and affection." He has ours as well.

Hitchcock has always been more concerned with what is to be *seen* on the screen than with "photographs of people talking." John Houseman

showed an early example of his "cinematic audacity," the 1926 silent *The Lodger*, in which the audience peers up through a glass floor to a driven Ivor Novello pacing in his room. More memorable sequences followed: Margaret Lockwood's hysterical appeal to her fellow train passengers in *The Lady Vanishes*, Grace Kelly kissing Cary Grant against exploding fireworks in *To Catch a Thief*, the pursuing cropduster in *North by Northwest*, the murder of Miriam reflected in her fallen eyeglasses in *Strangers on a Train*, the assassination among the umbrellas in the rain in the underrated *Foreign Correspondent*, the intruder stabbed by shears in *Dial M for Murder*, a wonderful blending of the Albert Hall concert climax from both the 1934 and 1956 versions of *The Man Who Knew Too Much*, and the infamous shower stabbing (actually, the knife never touches Janet Leigh's body) in *Psycho*—Hitchcock's supreme exercise in terror, which before its release—a fact not mentioned that night—everyone thought would be a tremendous failure.

Happily, moments from many less frequently viewed Hitchcock films (*Suspicion*, *Stage Fright*, *Vertigo*) were screened, but a legal problem appears to have removed *Rear Window* from a re-examination it richly deserves. There were also joyous quick shots of the director's own cameo appearances in his films, all the way back to his initial walk-on in the 1929 *Blackmail* as a train passenger—and also showing him with a cello in *The Paradine Case*, with his own dogs in *The Birds*, as a silhouette in *Family Plot*, in a class-reunion photo in *Dial M for Murder*, and as the "before" and "after" in a newspaper reducing-ad in *Lifeboat* . . . the master on parade.

The tributes of the celebrities on parade that evening sounded unusually deep-felt. James Stewart, who starred for Hitch in *Rope*, *Rear Window*, *The Man Who Knew Too Much*, and *Vertigo*, revealed how Hitchcock once cut a long explanatory speech of his because it interfered with the flow of the climax. Jane Wyman confessed that she learned more from her one picture with Hitch (*Stage Fright*) than from any other. Also in attendance were other of his cool heroines (Vera Miles, Janet Leigh, Tippi Hedren) and dashing heroes (Cary Grant, Sean Connery), even some of his villains—Norman Lloyd, who fell from the Statue of Liberty in *Saboteur*, and Dame Judith Anderson, the evil Mrs. Danvers of *Rebecca*.

Finally, in the best tradition of climactic surprise, Ingrid Bergman presented the director with the key which had been the focal point of

that dazzling, legendary shot in *Notorious* (which begins with an overview of a vast embassy party and swoops down to a closeup of the key clutched in Bergman's hand). After the scene co-star Cary Grant had stolen the key and later presented it to Bergman, who kept it for luck. "It has given me a lot of good luck and quite a few good movies. And now I'm going to give it to you with a prayer that it will open some very good doors for you too," she said. "God bless you, dear Hitch."

From the very onset of *Murder by Decree,* just beyond the opening credits of a murky Victorian London, you are aware that Jack the Ripper is not just one lone knife-wielding fiend but some sort of group effort, so I am not giving much away by saying this historical interpretation disappoints me: I don't care if Jack is unveiled as the Duke of Clarence or Queen Victoria herself as long as he is a single entity and not a coven. And yet much of the police work and many of the incidents in the film are rooted in fact, and the crimes-in-high-places solution of *Murder by Decree* was suggested by a recent British non-fiction study upon which the filmmakers grafted the figures of Sherlock Holmes and Dr. Watson and is decked against a marvelous period recreation of a sinister London locked in swirling fog.

The handsome production includes some truly spectacular sets—an evil stretch of East End docks, the squalid alleys of Whitechapel, a busy turn-of-the-century street with horse-drawn omnibuses. Christopher Plummer and James Mason make a most attractive Holmes and Watson, the latter an especially perceptive and endearing old soldier who shares a warm, vital relationship with his friend. Plummer's Holmes and Mason's crusty Watson add much to a richly melodramatic film with, alas, a disappointing ending.

Much of the nightmare of *Phantasm* is sheer nonsense, but it is put together in such an engaging way that it will probably gather about it the same cult following as did last year's chiller, *Hallowe'en.* Two young brothers, one only fifteen, explore a dreary country mortuary from which bodies keep disappearing and other mysterious things happen. Every ten minutes the older of the two boys orders the kid upstairs or to some other place "where you'll be safe"—and a tremor of anticipation goes through the audience for we know there is no safety. There are enough shocks to supply a dozen less hyperactive movies. Writer-director Don

Coscarelli, barely in his twenties but with two studio-released features behind him, describes his film as "a series of frightening images and sensations, woven into a very bizarre plot, with only one objective—to scare the hell out of people." *Phantasm* steals its chills from everywhere, including your worst dreams.

The upcoming studio production schedules have announced some mystery films to watch for. Both bestsellers *Bloodline* and *City of the Dead* are on their way to becoming movies. Christopher Plummer (who has been asked to play Holmes again) is next to star in *Hanover Street*, a romantic spy adventure set in wartime London, and Peter Sellers is to portray the insidious Dr. Fu Manchu (as well as his nemesis Nayland-Smith) in what alas will be a spoof. George Lucas is finally becoming serious about his *Radioland Murders*, and Brian de Palma is set to direct Mary Higgins Clark's *Where Are the Children?* You'll get the details on all these projects in future bulletins of CRIME ON SCREEN.

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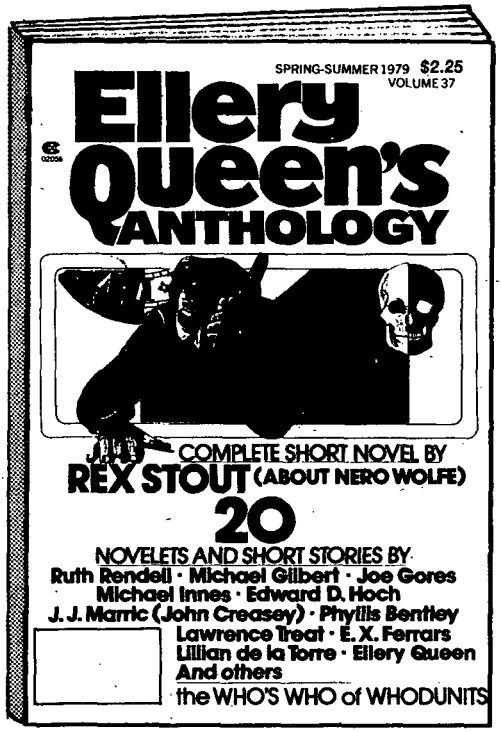

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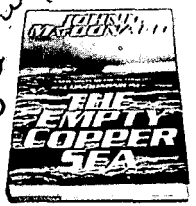

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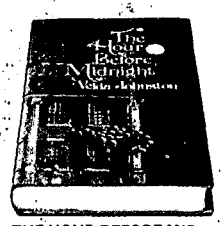

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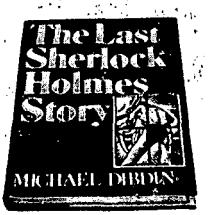

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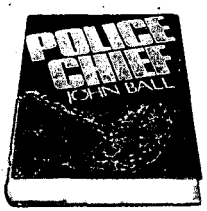

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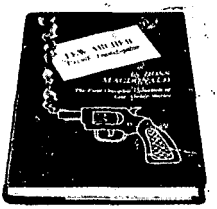

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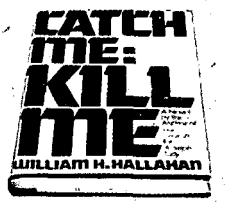

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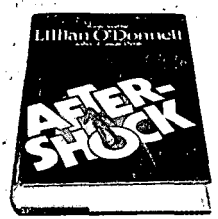

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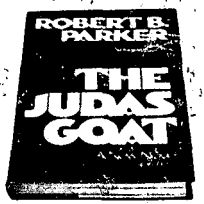

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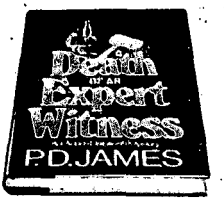

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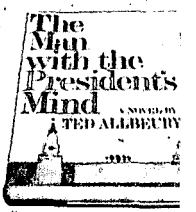

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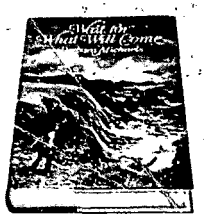

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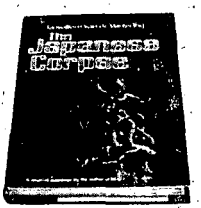

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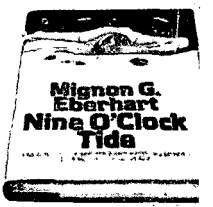

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