

STREET & SMITH'S

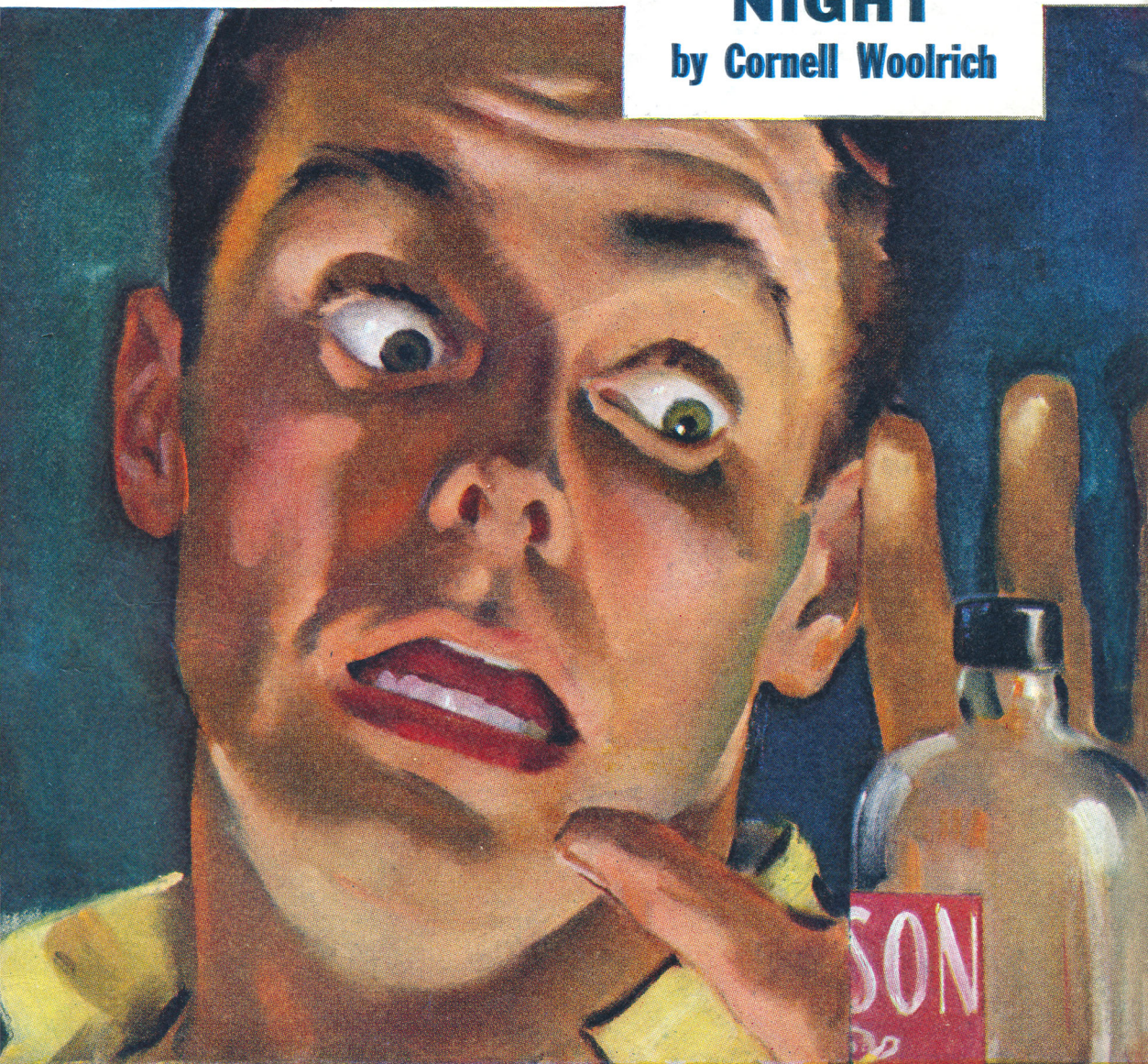
DETECTIVE

STORY 10¢

MAGAZINE MAY • 1940

ONE LAST NIGHT

by Cornell Woolrich



ON MURDER BENT

A Complete Mystery Novel by Ralph R. Perry

Listerine likes nothing better than to FIGHT INFECTIOUS DANDRUFF

THAT should be good news to you if you have any sign of this condition.

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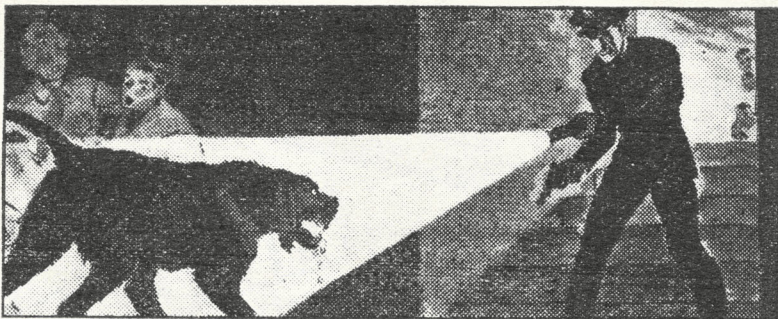


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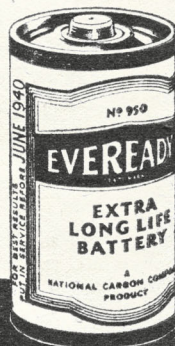


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DETECTIVE STORY

MAGAZINE

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CONTENTS MAY, 1940

VOL. CLX NO. 1

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The Ames estate was a prosperous New England farm, but on its beautiful acres one harvest was death.

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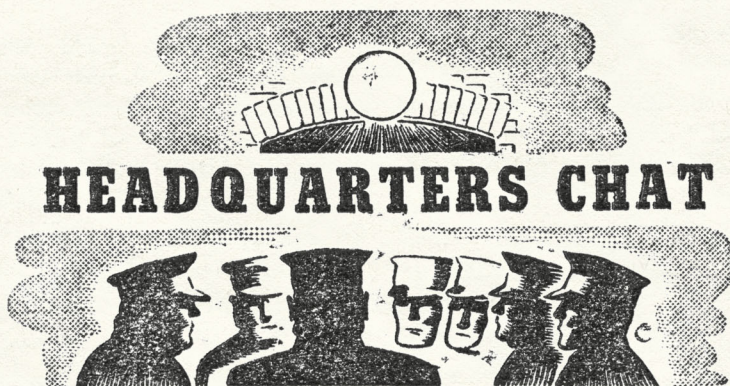


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Roger Blandon was one of those weak-kneed wealthy men who were certain the country was going to smash, but meant to emerge after the chaos with plenty of sugar. So he put millions into bullion back about the time of the bank holiday, and hung onto it even when the government called in gold.

But the debacle he visioned failed to occur. Years passed, and the country went on, and his hoard remained cached in a safe and secret place known only to himself. Then came a day when he needed cash desperately to save himself from financial ruin. Somehow, he must realize on his hidden fortune in illegal bullion. In some manner, he must arrange surreptitiously for its disposal—

Too late, he learned that the fortune he was not free to spend was a golden millstone around his neck, dragging him to his doom. For from the moment when his secret became known to other minds than his own, he was marked for prey by a ruthless organization ruled by a genius of crime.

What happened to Roger Blandon also happened to a number of hitherto respected and substantial citizens in various parts of the country who got themselves into financial difficulties. It became the business of Jigger Masters, famous Long Island private detective, to probe into a mystery of missing men, and come to grips with an octopus of the underworld whose tentacles reached over the nation for its victims in a diabolical and unique criminal plan.

This case for Jigger Masters makes a thrilling mystery novel, which appears complete in the next issue of *Detective Story*, and is entitled

THE YELLOW ALPHABET, by Anthony Rud

Another feature in the June issue will be a *Contacts, Inc.*, novelette, starring the popular team of Clark Dale and Petra Ericson:

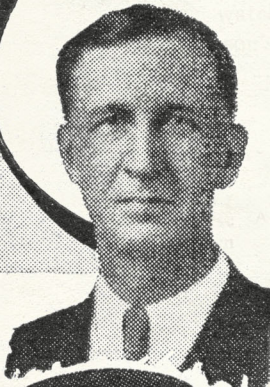
PETE MAKES THE FUR FLY, by Carl Clausen

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CENTS



On MURDER bent

by RALPH D. PERRY

At the moment of burial a shower brushed the Connecticut hills. There was one dark cloud; barely a minute in which the raindrops whispered against the leaves. It was as though Nature murmured, "Welcome" to the gentle old lady who

had always loved her, and who came now to her embrace.

Aunt Mary Ames. She had cherished delphiniums above other flowers, and the noisy, quarrelsome house wren beyond other birds. She had enjoyed life, though for sixty-

nine of her seventy years the money she could spend on generosity had been so very much less than her heart desired. Then she inherited the Ames estate. She controlled the income from a modest fortune. Six months later, she died.

The coroner reported Aunt Mary killed herself with aconite.

Why?

It was hard to believe. John Ames didn't believe it.

He stood with bowed head, barely conscious of the shower, and utterly oblivious to the words of the service. He was twenty-two, with the straight dark hair and high cheekbones that were the Ames' birth-right, and grayish eyes more green than hazel.

Aunt Mary had put wren houses under the eaves. She had gone on foot to the families the social workers missed, carrying cash money instead of a basket of food. Where she had had to apportion her pennies, she had dollars for all.

Kill herself? Never! Or if she had, she would have used the garden poisons—nicotine sulphate, the arsenicals. Their deadliness she understood.

Ashes to ashes. Dust to dust—

The grass by the graveside was refreshed and greener for the rain. A bit of reddish clay, spilled from the sexton's shovel, had moistened to a smear and was escaping into the grass under the tread of the mourners' feet, clad in proper black—

John Ames started violently. Suddenly he saw a pool of blood which four heavy black shoes were seeking to stamp back into the earth. Secretly, before people noticed, yet implacably.

It was an illusion, of course. As John Ames flung up his head, he saw two middle-aged men, shift-

ing their feet decorously on a film of clay. Yet the illusion represented his own unexpressed suspicions so exactly that he stared across the open grave at the stolid, weather-roughened faces of Adam Purcell and Paul Purcell, the twin brothers.

They were joint superintendents of the Ames estate. They had let him ride in the hayrick ten years ago, when he was last here on a vacation. He had thought them wonderful then. They knew so much. They swung the flashing hay forks so expertly.

Now he could hardly tell them apart. Both were between forty and fifty. Shoulders bowed by hard manual work; grayish-brown hair and thick, poorly trimmed grayish-brown mustaches. Paul was blind in his left eye, and had worn a black eye patch, but today his glass eye was in place, out of respect to Mary Ames.

They looked across the grave so steadily John wasn't even sure which eye was glass. They were watching him.

Somehow that was not a surprise. Not since that—illusion? He looked away.

All around him the tombstones bore the name "Ames," in every variety of capitals and script fashionable through the centuries.

John Ames and Samaranta his wife, 1732

*Once I was as you who see
Soon you will lie where now I be*

"Maybe. And maybe not as soon as those two expect," John Ames thought.

Nine generations of Ameses were buried in this plot, set on a knoll in the midst of three hundred acres some member of the family had tilled ever since King George I is-

sued the original grant. He glanced at the recent headstones.

Henry Ames, 1935—in the eighty-sixth
year of his life

Phil Ames, 1936—aged 53

Frank Ames, 1938—aged 49

Since old Henry passed on, Mary Ames would make the third heir to die. Healthy people, of sound stock, with everything to live for. Three dead within three years. Typhoid had killed Frank, the coroner reported. Phil had shot himself in a hunting accident.

He, John Ames, would be the fourth. But always, Adam and Paul Purcell ran the farm.

A hand closed on John's arm, powerfully, insistently. It was one of the Purcells. The funeral was over, the mourners were moving off.

"It's over, Mr. Ames. Your aunt is dead to sin, but lives to righteousness, as the apostle says." The voice was heavy, and sure? "A terrible thing, but we must all face it. Can Adam and I expect ye at the big house tonight?"

This was Paul, then. Now John could distinguish the glass eye.

"Later, perhaps," he answered vaguely. "My trunk's still in the hotel, and I've got to drive to Hartford and pick up my dog. I couldn't make it back before ten. More likely to be midnight."

Paul nodded. Adam Purcell had moved up on the other side of John. Adam said:

"We'll be awake, Mr. Ames. We'll be ready for you."

The brothers turned away. Seen from behind, they were as alike as two peas. They were respected, substantial, middle-aged. They had managed the Ames estate ably for many years. His grandfather had employed them, his two uncles, his

Aunt Mary. Now they were on his pay roll.

Murderers?

He could not say that. Nor help thinking it. On the Ames farm one harvest was death. Someone reaped it.

John Ames walked slowly toward his car. He was the last of the name. With him, the crop would be garnered.

Awake? Ready?

In the voice of Adam Purcell had been neither embarrassment, nervousness, nor doubt. Adam had decided exactly what he was going to do. John Ames shook his head. By law, he owned the farm. In fact—in comparison with the Purcells—he was a stranger on its acres.

II.

Scofield was a town of five hundred. Its hotel and boardinghouses were not open so early in the spring. John drove slowly, the last car in the funeral procession, along the three miles of winding road between the farm and the village. He could not pass without an appearance of haste until the road widened into a street under the village elms. He stepped it up to forty as he passed the white church and the yellow-painted store, and once on the concrete beyond Scofield he hit a steady sixty-five. Hartford was seventy miles away, and he wanted a little time in the city which everyone in Scofield would think he had spent on the road, while driving at normal speed.

He reached the hotel at dusk, strolled around the foyer twice, and went to his room. As he opened the door, a black Scottie lifted its head from the pillow, stretched, and then leaped up with a frantically wagging tail and guilty eyes.

"Get off the bed, Mac," said Ames for the thousandth time. He patted the rough coat. "Think I wasn't coming back, fella? Don't I always? Gwan, now; that's enough. Mac, you go lie down."

MacTavish obeyed to the extent of putting his chin on his forepaws, but his tail wagged harder than ever. There was a knock at the door. He barked.

"Shut up!" Ames commanded. He gripped the dog's nose an instant. The bark died to a rumble, and Ames opened the door.

The man who entered was tall and bald with the wide cheekbones and light-blue eyes characteristic of a man descended from northern European stock. He said:

"Ames? I'm Danows—Chief Danows, of Scofield. You're earlier than I expected."

"I drove fast."

"I'd recognize you anywhere. You favor your uncles. Your grandfather, too, for that matter."

"You knew them all well?" Ames asked.

"Scofield's a small town," Danows remarked. "We know each other too damn well."

"You talk like a city man," Ames smiled.

"Well, Mr. Ames—"

"Ames, or John," Ames corrected. He liked this policeman. "We're going to work together, I hope."

"Well, Ames, since you're going to be a resident and will hear the story anyhow, I'll give you the low-down myself. My old man's name was Danowski. He came in with all the other foreigners when the mills were running good. Once he got it through his head that every man could really vote in this country, he decided politics was easier work than tending a lathe. He couldn't read a word of English, but he went

out and bought the biggest book he could find.

"Everywhere he went, he walked fast, with the book under his arm. No more gossiping with the neighbors in Polish for my old man. He was always in a tearing hurry, and if he did have to wait, he opened the book and stuck his nose in it."

"I don't get the point," said John Ames.

"Neither did the Scofield town fathers, until too late." Danows' pale-blue eyes twinkled. "But people from the Old Country decided my old man must be pretty smart, to be reading all the time in such a big book. Also that he must have a lot of business, or he wouldn't always be in such a rush. So when he ran for the board of selectmen, they elected him."

"Oh!" Ames grinned.

"I went to high school, and got a job with the New York police. No small towns for me. Got to be detective, first grade; politics threw me out, and I came back home and took the chief's job. My old man was first selectman, by that time. Maybe I wasn't ambitious, but I've never regretted it. Point is, Ames, I *have* been on the other side of the mountain in my time."

"You must be about as old as the Purcell brothers," said John Ames.

"Eight years younger," the chief answered. "They're forty-eight." He bit the end off a cigar, and tossed the shred of tobacco at McTavish's nose. The Scottie squirmed closer and rested his jaw on the chief's shoe. "I knew you were going to talk about the Purcells when you sent for me, Ames. I just hoped you wouldn't."

"Hoped why?"

"Scofield is a small town, Ames. Ever since Phil Ames died—that's two years—there's been a word whis-

pered, but never spoken aloud. Murder, Ames. 'There might be murderers right on the Ames farm.'"

"Well?" John Ames challenged.

"Well, either that's a devilish slander against an innocent family, or else I'm a bust as a detective. I've worn a first-grade badge. I've studied since, and this is the big case in this town. I've put two years on it."

"So the Purcells are innocent?" Ames implied.

"I didn't say that," Danows contradicted. "Nothing's proven. Maybe they're uncommon smart. But meanwhile there's Adam, and Paul, and Adam's daughter Sally Purcell, and Lizzie Gregg, their hired girl. Wherever they go, people smile at them to their faces and whisper behind their backs. How do you suppose they like that?"

"I haven't given their feelings a thought."

"Well, you should," Danows declared.

"I hope to see anyone who is guilty hang."

"So do I—but not a hard-working family persecuted. Or . . . or any more Ameses buried prematurely."

"It's like that?"

"It could be," Danows said gravely. "Now, have you really got any new evidence?"

"No," John Ames said. "Except that I'm a medical student. The chances that three people would die off like that, purely as a coincidence, are about one in a hundred."

"Sure!" snapped Danows. "I've kept coming back to that point myself. O. K.! Now take the cases in order. Any question but that your grandfather died a natural death?"

"No. He was eighty-six. Heart failure seems natural enough."

"O. K. Next is Phil. He liked his

liquor and he loved to hunt. He was a regular guy, but, Ames, he was the most careless man with firearms I ever saw. He'd twirl a loaded shotgun around like a cop does a nightstick. I like to hunt, too, but I quit going out with him. O. K., he was out with the Purcell brothers, and shot himself in the chest with his own gun while crawling over a stone wall.

"It was his gun, Ames, for the others used different loads, and showed clean bores. And there wasn't a fingerprint near the breech of Phil's gun except his own. I can still show you the enlarged microphotographs."

"Killed while alone with the Purcells. Where were they?"

"Adam testified he was after a covey about fifty yards off, and that Paul was on the other side of the wall, five or ten feet away, when it happened."

"You've only their word for that."

"Right," Danows admitted.

"You checked for fingerprints at the scene of the shooting?"

"No, they brought the body and the gun back to the big house."

"Oh-ho," John Ames grunted.

"Hunters will move a body nine times out of ten," Danows answered. "With me, that point is rather in the Purcells' favor. Getting the body home is the natural, human thing to do. Paul's fingerprints were on the shotgun, right hand near the muzzle, left hand near the grip. Exactly where they should be if he picked up the gun in a hurry."

"Could Paul have fired Uncle Phil's gun without touching it?"

"Damned if I can figure how," sighed the chief. "He'd not only have to fire the gun, Ames. He'd have to be sure the shot killed Phil. Otherwise Phil's either going to kill him, or arrest him for felonious as-

sault. You try grabbing a man's gun away from him, and see what happens."

"You've tried it?"

"Yep. With Paul and Adam right there watching me. With bare hands, and by hitting at the trigger with a branch, and every other way I could think of. No soap."

"How about Frank's case?" Ames persisted.

"He died in his bed. Dr. Foster signed a death certificate of typhoid fever. It did seem funny they'd have typhoid on a farm where plenty money is spent on upkeep, like yours. But when Foster tested, he found the water contaminated and when the pipes were dug up, we found a crack where they passed near the stable."

"New break?" Ames asked hopefully.

"No," said Danows. "Adam and Paul set those pipes, a year before your grandfather died. Can you claim they were planning a murder three years in the future?"

"I'll take a rain check. I was very fond of my aunt Mary, chief."

"You should be. She was a fine, sweet woman," Danows agreed. "When I heard the news, I said to myself: 'No! She never! Three in a row is too much. It's murder somehow.'"

"Right," insisted John Ames.

The pale eyes of the chief grew paler with suppressed anger. He said:

"O. K. I'm a louse. Here's the facts: The big house is surrounded by open lawns and a barnyard. It fronts the barns, which are about a hundred yards off. The tenant house is at the east end of the barns. You can see that the Purcells don't need to pass the big house to tend the stock. They live in the tenant house with Sally. Lizzie sleeps

there, but she does all the cooking and housework in the big house, too, and is around there most of the time in daylight."

"Then Aunt Mary was alone in the big house at night?" Ames inquired.

"That's right. She had four people within call, though. Now, on the night she died, there was an April snow that began at dusk, and stopped about one o'clock. I've checked that both with people in the town, and the weather bureau.

"At seven in the morning—the usual time to a dot—Lizzie walked over to the big house. She called your aunt, and got no answer. Lizzie went up to the bedroom and found your aunt in bed, dead."

"Again you've only the Purcells to check that testimony."

"No, the prints in the snow corroborate it, and the times check pretty close. Anyway, Lizzie testified that she shouted from the bedroom window right away, and Adam and Paul ran right over. Sally was away on a visit. Adam telephoned me, and I got the call at seven ten. Adam was frantic."

"Why?" John Ames demanded. "Aunt Mary was elderly. Why did he suspect foul play? Why call you, and not a doctor?"

"Because there was a bottle of aconite on the bedside table beside the customary Thermos water carafe, and a glass of water with a few drops of liquid left in it. Let me tell this in sequence, and it will be clearer. I arrived within fifteen minutes, at seven twenty-five and brought Mike, my patrolman, with me.

"Adam yelled to us from the upstairs window that he thought it was suicide, and for Heaven's sake to clear him, there'd already been gossip enough. We circled the house. We found the tracks Lizzie had made leaving the night before, cov-

ered over with fresh snow, and the four sets of tracks going in. Aside from those, Ames, no one had gone in or out of the big house since the snow started.

"My cop and I are country people," Danows went on earnestly. "The snow was thawing. We could tell, and we made sure by examining the sharpness of the imprints in the melting snow, that the new tracks had really been made only a few minutes earlier and that Lizzie's first trail was approximately thirteen hours old. I'll show you plaster casts and measurements. Ames, *no one was in the house that night with your aunt*. You can rule out any other possibility absolutely."

"I hear there are at least three ways of going out of a room and leaving the door bolted on the inside. I don't know as I will rule out anything."

"Well, eliminate stilts, overhead trolley wires, and secret tunnels," Danows retorted. "*I'll swear your aunt was alone*. The Purcells claimed they'd touched nothing, and the inside of the house looked to me as though they hadn't. Your aunt lay in bed facing the wall. The bedding was not disturbed, glass and poison bottle and water bottle were in natural positions—"

"Like Paul's fingerprints on the shotgun, eh? Could you trace the poison?"

"Easily. Lizzie Gregg had taken aconite for neuralgia, and to relieve a heart condition for more than ten years," Danows reported. "She kept a bottle at the tenant house, and also in the kitchen cabinet at the big house. This second bottle was not in the cabinet. It was plainly labeled, the druggist identified it, and the bottle had the fingerprints of your aunt over innumerable fingerprints of Lizzie's."

"All as it should be," Ames admitted grudgingly. "Nevertheless, a murderer might have tricked my aunt into leaving prints on the bottle, and administered the poison from another source."

"Sure," Danows conceded. "But now look at the post mortem. There were no marks of a struggle. Your aunt died between one and two a. m., when I swear she was alone in the house! The poison was administered through the mouth, and it *couldn't* have been forced down her throat. There was nothing else in the stomach."

"O. K. Aconite is the deadliest of the common poisons," Ames argued. "An extremely minute dose is fatal, but—I've read up on this—aconite is neither odorless nor tasteless. It does not kill instantaneously, and it leaves the mind clear to the end. Socrates was executed by a distillation of aconite, and according to Plato he did brilliant thinking up to the moment of death. Now then, how's a person going to kill themselves accidentally with a poison like that?"

"The verdict was suicide," the chief reminded.

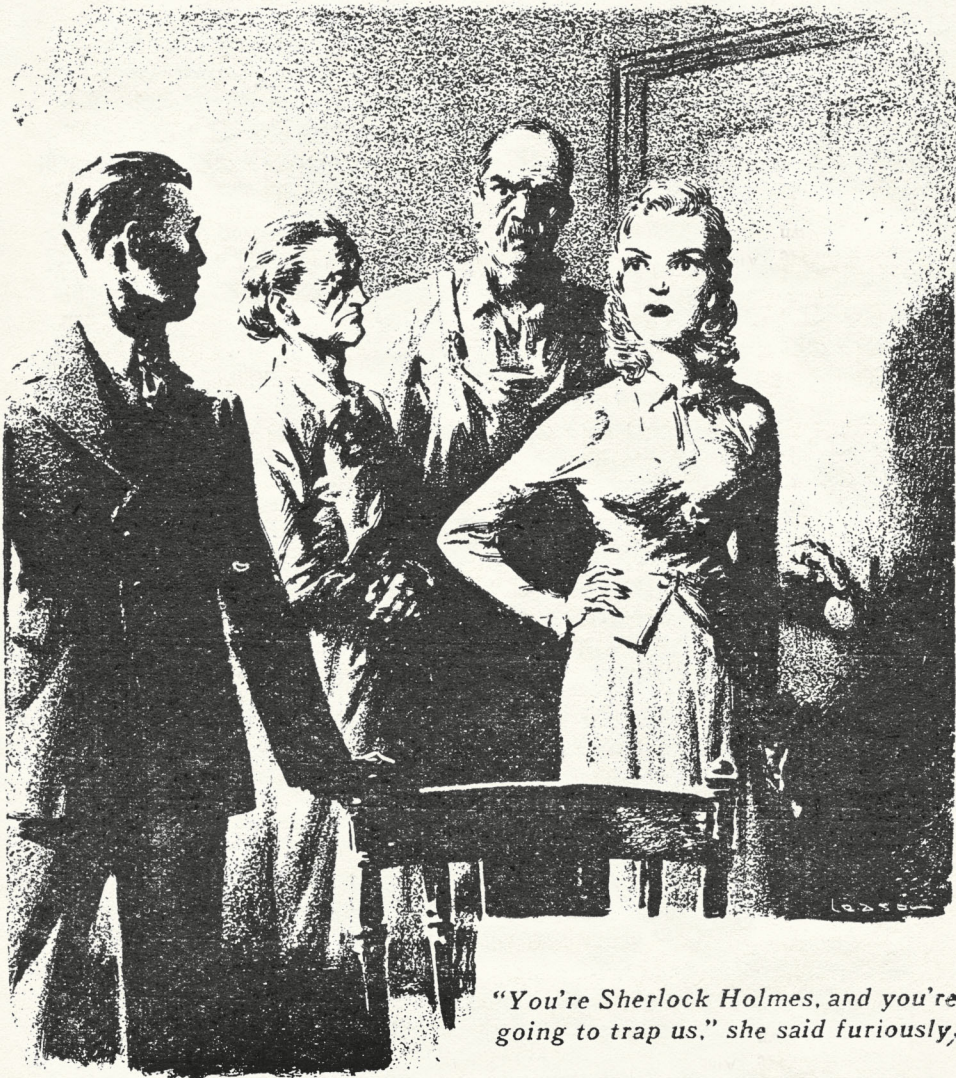
"Why didn't my aunt leave a suicide note?"

"Sometimes they don't."

"How often?"

"Mighty rarely," the chief conceded. "But look here! Isn't it reasonable to suppose she went to the cabinet, carried the bottle to her bedside, took it, and turned her face to the wall to die?"

"It's not reasonable to me! It's too pat. It's all too pat! Adam and Paul are hunting with Phil, yet they haven't fired their guns when he is shot. Wonderful as an alibi, sure, but is it probable? Typhoid is rarely fatal to a healthy adult, yet more cases of arsenic poisoning have been



"You're Sherlock Holmes, and you're going to trap us," she said furiously,

diagnosed as typhoid than you can shake a stick at! Who nursed Frank?"

"Trained nurses, toward the end. Before the crisis, Lizzie looked after him."

"In other words, all the Purcells were around. Seems to be a habit," John Ames retorted. "In this last case, my aunt's fingerprints on the bottle don't impress me. It would be too easy to get her to handle it,

and then for Lizzie or the Purcells to plant it by the bedside by lopping a thread over the neck of the bottle. They could pour a few drops of poison from the bottle in the other house into the water glass, and—"

"Says you!" Danows snapped.

MacTavish barked sharply.

"I'm hunting facts I can take to a D. A., not gossip for a hen party!" the chief swept on. "They planted the poison bottle! How'd they

force poison on your aunt when she was alone? They're clever! Yeah, so smart they made her take aconite without knowing what she was doin'! They murdered her without even lettin' her know she was bein' killed, since her mind was clear! Ames, I'm a cop! I tell you—bunk!"

"That so? How much poison did my aunt Mary take?"

"Barely enough to be fatal!"

"That's a speck, hardly a grain!" Ames raged back. "How'd Aunt Mary know the proper dose? Why didn't she do as every layman does that uses aconite to kill—pour out enough to slay an army? Because she *didn't* know what she was taking, that's why! I tell you the Purcells—and I don't omit Lizzie and Sally—are murderers and accomplices. I'll prove that, or I'll believe it until I prove the contrary! There's a nice income they stand to gain, as you know. They knew my grandfather would die soon. They began to scheme. They prepared for years for a series of murders. Every time the evidence exonerates the Purcells. I say—bunk! It just proves premeditation and cold-blooded planning!"

MacTavish barked again. Ames swung around in his chair, then leaped up. The door was open. On the threshold stood Adam Purcell. He was dead-white, except for a patch of red on each cheekbone. He was trying to speak, but his lips worked soundlessly.

"What are you doing here?" Ames demanded.

Adam Purcell swallowed. He stepped into the room, and shut the door firmly.

"I knocked," he said. "Ye was jawin' so you didn't hear. I came in, and I heard."

"All right, you heard something that I'm not taking back," John

Ames replied. "I think you and your family ought to be investigated, and I'm going to do it—personally, and with police help, too, if I can get any. So what?"

"I knew 'twas bein' said, but it took me aback some to hear it spoke right out," said Adam Purcell. "I'm obliged to you for insistin' on proof, Danows. Mike let it out ye'd gone to Hartford, and I guessed why, an' followed. Seemed like a good notion. Dunno now that 'twas."

"Spying on us?" said John Ames.

Adam Purcell looked at him squarely, with an anger so intense, and so completely controlled, that Ames was abashed.

"You're young, young man. And hotheaded. I don't need to spy on ye. I came here to resign. Paul and Lizzie and Sally are agin' the idea, but I'm the elder brother, even if 'tis only by an hour. They'll do as I see fit."

"You mean you'll all move off the farm?" Danows demanded.

"Just that. Seemed like the best idea earlier and now I don't wish to work for a man that calls me and my brother and daughter murderers. I'd like to see ye dead."

Adam did not mouth the threat. His voice merely deepened.

"You lie, young man. I'd best be going before I forgit myself."

"Mr. Purcell, will you please sit down?" John Ames commanded.

The older man had turned toward the door. He swung around, though he remained standing.

"I meant what I said. But I wish to be fair." Ames' voice also deepened. "It will be unpleasant for all of us on the farm now, but you can't resign and I can't let you go."

"Why not?" asked Danows.

"Either Mr. Purcell is quitting under fire, or I'm afraid to live at the farm with him."

"Me nor mine have nothing to hide," Adam answered proudly.

Danows began to drum on the table rapidly with his fingers.

"Under grandfather's will, you and Paul were to occupy the tenant house rent free for your lifetimes, and receive a salary of a hundred dollars a month each."

"We don't want money, young man. We got enough laid by."

"Danows," John Ames went on quietly, "my grandfather was old and conservative. Fearing inflation, he decided that no property was worth a continental but land. Beginning in '33, he invested the Ames fortune in real estate."

"Told my father all about it until the ceiling in the parlor near fell," commented the chief. "The property was to go first to his sons, then his daughter, and then their issue. That's you. The others had no children."

"And my father died in '34, before he could inherit," said Ames. "But after my death, a life interest in the whole property reverts to the Purcells, in consideration of faithful service. That's another reason I can't let them resign, Danows. If I die, they are the next heirs. A murderer can't inherit, and if they leave under a cloud, they hurt their legal standing. Also, by the terms of the will I must live on the Ames farm, and operate it as a farm. I need superintendents. I'm going to investigate three deaths that I think are suspicious, but I'm not going to steal any man's job, or his prospects. Is that clear, Mr. Purcell?"

"I can stand it if you kin," said Adam grimly. "The others don't want to leave no ways." He paused at the door. "We'll set food on your table and clean your house, and that's all."

"I understand," John Ames agreed.

Adam Purcell turned. Slowly, with decisive finality, he shut the door.

Danows pursed his lips in a soundless whistle. "May I telephone the bar? I want a double Scotch. When are you going back?"

"Tonight."

"I'd better stay with you."

"Mice won't play with the cat around, chief."

"You still think they're guilty?"

"As hell. Do you figure Adam came to resign because he was afraid, or to establish an alibi? If I should be killed somehow while the Purcells were off the place, they'll be cleared of the whole series of crimes."

"I wouldn't know," the chief remarked briefly. "Ames, you're doing a fool thing. But I can't think of any legal way to stop you."

John Ames let his hand drop lightly on MacTavish's rough, hairy head. The dog caught the fingers in his teeth, gently.

"I was mighty fond of Aunt Mary. Suppose I am right, chief? Think of a gentle old lady who never had a thought in her life except how to give some person or animal a better, happier chance. Poisoned for her money. By the Purcells. I can't rest under that suspicion. I don't see any other way to handle this, chief. Really, I don't!"

III.

Ames had never carried a pistol. The unaccustomed weight of a .32 automatic in his hip pocket made him self-conscious as he swung the car into the driveway of—his own house. To realize that was a shock. This big, low house, dark but for the one light burning in a downstairs window, was home!

He followed the driveway. In the

light of the head lamps he noticed that the garage was attached to the house, that the doors were already opened in readiness for his arrival, and the garage itself cleaned and swept bare. The stains of oil on the floor had dripped recently from another crankcase. There were dozens of nails driven into the garage walls, where others had found it convenient to hang chains and wrenches.

Every nail was bare. Mutely they said, "Someone has moved out of here to make a place for you."

He cut off the engine. He was sure Adam had returned. He could not blame the Purcells for not welcoming him, but to ignore him so pointedly—

"To hell with them, MacTavish," said John Ames. "They let us come home like old members of the family. O. K. That's what we are."

He snapped a leash into the Scottie's collar, shut the garage doors, tested a pencil flashlight—an old one, part of his medical equipment—and turned out the headlights. The garage had an inner door which must lead to the house.

Ames opened it. His heart was jumping like the tiny spot of light from his flash.

It was a woodshed and tool house. Stacks of white birch wood at the end, an orderly array of shovels, hoes, and rakes facing him. Another door, with light gleaming through the hole under the old-fashioned latch. MacTavish whined and pushed his nose against Ames' heel. The second door opened into a kitchen.

Electricity lighted it brilliantly. Otherwise it was as his grandfather Henry had equipped it when a young man. The floor was wide boards of oak, scrubbed into a light-brown surface that billowed slightly wherever there was a knot. The sink was iron,

with a wooden shelf above packed with bottles, and a medicine cabinet to one side. The iron stove was shiny black with polish, and decorated with the floral arabesques beloved by founders in the '80s. Potted geraniums banked the south windows in a stand with three shelves. He could see his face in the copper boiler.

It was the only face he saw, but a rocking chair set with its back toward him, between the sink and the window, vibrated steadily. Ames said:

"How do you do?"

The rocking chair was lifted slightly, twisted, and hit the floor with a thump, facing him. The motion was too slow to be called a whirl and too quick for a turn. It was a practiced heave and twist by feet in high black-leather buttoned shoes, and hands whitened and wrinkled from scrubbing, big-knuckled, and ringless. The woman in the chair went on rocking.

She was tiny. Ames thought of a pine knot. Hard, sound to the core; but somehow worn down and twisted awry. The woman's skin was sallow and tight to the bones, the mouth was pinched, the hair pulled back and sprinkled with gray. She possessed the ageless quality of an old maid.

This was Lizzie Gregg, who took aconite for a heart condition. Yet the spotless kitchen and the hard brightness of her brown eyes indicated prodigious nervous energy.

"You let your dog come in the house?" she demanded. The voice crackled.

"Why, yes," Ames replied. "Mac has always lived in my room, and—"

"Sheds hair. Gits mud on counterpanes," said Lizzie Gregg. "Suit yourself, but 'tain't fittin'. Where ye sleepin'?"

"The master's bedroom, of course."

"Mean the room where your aunt died?"

"Yes," said John Ames.

"That's sensible. Nicest room. Turn left if ye take the front stairs and right if ye go by the back. When'll you eat breakfast?"

"Eight," said John Ames.

Lizzie Gregg said, "Huh!" More contempt for lie-abed laziness could not have been packed into a thousand words. "Just eggs, or bacon, too?"

"Bacon. Two strips. Two eggs, fried lightly on one side, the whites firm, but not leathery."

Lizzie Gregg rose. A spot of crimson flashed into the withered cheeks.

"You mind your manners, young man. Guess I can cook. Good night."

She raised her voice, called, "I'm waitin', Paul!"

An inner door opened. The brother looked at Ames without speaking, or even nodding. He had removed his glass eye, and wore knee-length rubber boots and denim chore clothes. The glance was at once expressionless, and coldly hostile. He looked at Ames, there was no doubt of that, and still refused to see him. He had been sitting in an unlighted room—had stepped out of sight, yet within hearing, when Ames arrived in the car.

The outer door was opened before they reached it. A girl walked in, with cheeks bright and battle in her eye. She looked at John Ames until he flushed, and kept on looking until he said:

"Won't you sit down?"

"No!"

She was not large, but she bore herself like a Valkyrie. Tawny hair lighted with titian, gray eyes, and burning contempt. The green suède

jacket was a coat of mail, and brown tweed skirt a queen's robe.

"Has Lizzie shown you your room?"

"I can find it."

"You don't need anything else?"

John Ames said, "No, thank you."

"Lizzie—Uncle Paul, please leave us alone. I'll be over in a minute."

"We'll wait—" Paul began.

"I'd rather you didn't."

She stepped away from the door. Lizzie gave Paul a push. They went out. The door closed. She said:

"My family doesn't believe in talking. I do. I wanted a good look at you. You hurt my father in a way he won't get over. He's given his life to this place. Yet he was ready to leave it. You're an under-handed, contemptible sneak!"

"I—"

"He told us what you said. 'Fair'—bah! 'Our legal rights'—phfui! You're Sherlock Holmes, and you're going to trap us."

"All right, damn it! I'm going to try."

"Go hide behind doors. Go put a dictograph in our living room. Do you want to start now? I'll help you!"

She trembled with fury. "Father's crushed because you named *me*, too. He never realized all this gossip could hurt me. I've told him it wouldn't and he's just the simple straightforward literal kind to believe *me*."

"I don't mean—" Ames began.

"You don't know what you mean, except it's nasty. You'll hurt us, and we'll stay. I guess we've got to. My family won't say anything to you. I won't again. But they despise you, and I despise you. Lizzie's lived with us for twenty years. You made her very angry. I'll bet you treated her like a servant! She's

not *your* servant. Remember that. Good night!"

She had never stepped far from the door. She whipped through and slammed it. He could hear her heels stamp on the stones of the walk.

He drew a long breath. He was glad the kitchen had no mirror. He wouldn't have liked to see himself.

IV.

The old house was full of little sounds that his imagination magnified and his common sense dismissed. That creak was nothing but the complaint of an old wooden beam; that stealthy brushing noise, the tip of a branch that swept the shingles of the garage. A steady *tick-tick-tick* was an insect in the walls.

Of course. Certainly. Murderers don't strew infernal machines about like bewhiskered anarchists in comic strips.

And yet Ames opened the door to the dining room with his breath held and his weight on his toes.

It was just a dining room, furnished in solid mahogany in the uninspired Victorian style of the late '80s. The sideboard was locked.

There were odors in the old house, as well as noises. He could identify lemon oil. The furniture had been polished until it just missed being greasy to the touch. A faint mustiness was characteristic of old New England houses. Usually it can be traced to carpets, tacked one upon the other as they wear out, until there is an inch of disintegrating jute and wool on the floor.

These floors were bare. It must be that the deep upholstery was desiccating into dust. Ames sniffed. That smell was alcohol. Booze in Aunt Mary's house? Preposterous. She was of the sherry-and-biscuit

generation. Yet alcohol it was, distinct and pervasive.

Nothing in the dining room to account for it. Nothing in the living room, save a huge rosewood press, solidly locked. The sun room smelled of bone meal and humus, and was crowded with the flats in which Aunt Mary's flowers had grown almost large enough to be set out. They had been carefully watered since her death.

Except for a hall, Ames had now explored the whole ground floor. He tried the cellar. The sharp odors of vinegar and hard cider tickled his nose, but the scent of alcohol rode the rest like a jockey. He traced it to a rusty iron drum set on two-by-fours above the dirt floor. The earth beneath was moist, and by unscrewing the bung, he found the barrel about a quarter full of denatured fluid used to keep cars from freezing in winter.

"Sniffy, sniffy everywhere. Nor any drop to drink," Ames muttered.

He really didn't want a drink, anyhow. He wanted noise. A dozen people to stamp and dance and chatter. Thoughtless gaiety. He was tiptoeing, with his ears primed for echoes to his own noiseless tread.

How long was he going to slink about, reading strange conclusions into the simple, homely surroundings of this house of his? Six generations of Ames had lived and died here. Nothing soundproof and slick and modern. Here one slipped into old patterns, influenced by the relicts of those other Ames who had gone before—died before.

The vinegar was for his salads. Some people like to drink hard cider, even if he didn't. Cars and trucks need alcohol in a New England winter. Cheaper to buy by the barrel, yet—shouldn't it be stored in the garage, or the barn?

One thing was sure. No tunnel entered this cellar. The floor was earth, packed so hard by generations of use that the surface gleamed faintly in the light of the unshaded bulb at the head of the stairs. The whole place was neat, and rather bare. Every barrel was lifted above the floor on sticks, and the idea of disturbing that packed earth without leaving obvious traces was as preposterous as tunneling upward through the coal bin.

The walls were of big stones, laid without mortar. Most of the rocks

were so huge that hinges like those on a bank vault would be needed to swing them aside. Ames poked his flashlight into the crevices and saw earth everywhere behind the boulders. He returned to the kitchen with one fact settled.

None of the Purcells had been in the house at the time of Aunt Mary's death.

That they had concealed a confederate in the house before the fall of snow, and smuggled him or her out after Danows' departure, was within the realms of physical possibility.

The evidence of the autopsy, however, made such a theory untenable. The empty house was making Ames nervous, and putting him into a frame of mind to imagine almost anything. Yet, as his toes trod cellar stairs worn into deep hollows by the feet of his ancestors and their servants, he mentally cast aside notions of elaborate and diabolical apparatus, concealed poison guns, monkey men that flew through the air with the greatest of ease, and such trash.

As Ames re-entered the kitchen, MacTavish crawled from beneath the stove and lifted suppliant forepaws.

"You had your dog dinner in Hartford, and lamb-chop bones at that," said John Ames. "Don't you know overfeeding is bad for dogs? You don't? Go lie down on the floor and make the best of it. I'm not ready for bed yet."

No, Aunt Mary had been poisoned while alone, and without her own knowledge, by aconite. A drug infinitely deadly, but not instantaneous in effect. Deadening to the muscles before it affects the brain. A bare three one-hundreds of a gram is the usual dose, one half drop of the extract in which the drug is dispensed.



He tried the cellar.

He opened the medicine cabinet. A new aconite bottle stood conveniently on the lower shelf. A few drops had been used. It was only seven days since Aunt Mary died. The prescription number was 3027. Check.

Ames got a piece of string. By dropping a double loop over the bottle neck, he could lift it from the shelf, carry it where he pleased, and set it down without leaving a fingerprint on the glass. The bottle could have been planted on the bedside table easily enough, but his problem was to discover how a dose might have been administered.

He went upstairs. His aunt's room—and his grandfather's and his two uncles—was furnished in rosewood. Both the bedside table and the bureau had marble tops, dark-chocolate in color. The effect was somber, to modern taste, but not at all depressing.

"Get down, Mac," said Ames. The Scottie had leaped onto the bed and settled on the pillows defiantly, like a black ink blot. Ames caught the dog by the throat, pretended to choke him, thrust him down on the folded comforter. Mac barked and pawed. The sound, and the warm life of the compact, little body were the only things really homelike in this lonely, whispering house.

Br-r-ring! rang the phone.

John Ames exclaimed, "Jeepers!" but he seized the instrument like a friend's hand.

"It's Danows," said a voice over the wire. "You O. K., Ames?"

"Yeah."

"You don't sound positive."

"I've been bawled out. I'm low," said Ames. "Don't hang up, chief. This place would give a fan dancer the blues."

"Want me to run out?"

"No-o," Ames decided reluctantly.

"Chief, an hour alone here has changed my ideas a lot. I'm not going to crack this in fifteen minutes."

"Goo-ood!" Danows intoned, dragging the word out and making it wholly approving.

"I came with a gun in my pocket. Since then I've grown up. Chief, I want a permit to disinter Frank Ames and autopsy the remains. If arsenical poisoning was diagnosed as typhoid, we can still check."

"Right. It's a private graveyard. I'll have the permit tomorrow."

"Bring it out, will you? Now, did the footprints in the snow establish the order in which Lizzie, Adam, and Paul arrived?"

"Not definitely. No two were superimposed. But Adam and Paul testified Lizzie came first, and she didn't deny it."

"She doesn't inherit, chief. And she wasn't out hunting with Uncle Phil. She might be lying, or she might even have transferred the bottle of poison to make the third case look like suicide. But the motive is obviously control of the Ames property, and she'd never touch a dollar."

"Yeah," Danows agreed. "She mighty near became a Purcell once, but nothin' came of it. She and Paul were talkin' marriage five years ago. But they never."

"They're engaged?"

"No." Danows chuckled. "Paul took her ridin' in the car pretty often that spring. That's keepin' company, accordin' to the old folks' ideas. We all laughed, 'cause Lizzie was considered an old maid. Then the rides stopped, and so'd the talk."

"Paul never promised to marry her? In public?"

"Nope," said Danows dryly. "And that's a fact. The news would have made the town sit up quicker'n the

fire siren. Yankee farmers don't do that sort of thing, Ames. They might live with their housekeepers, for twenty years or more; but when they marry, they up and marry.

"It's the young people that have long engagements. Lizzie was engaged once, when she was a girl. She waited quite a spell, and then the man died. She left town, and was a waitress in the railroad station at Hartford for a while, then came back and began to keep house for Adam and Paul. Adam's wife died when Sally was born. And Paul's a regular bachelor."

"He might have married Lizzie in secret."

"What old maid makes a secret of wedding bells?"

"All right, all right," Ames conceded. "You have microphotographs of Uncle Phil's gun. Where's the gun itself?"

"Locked in my office."

"Ever examine it? Suppose the trigger was filed down so it would explode at a touch, or something? Phil was careless, and if someone made his gun dangerous to handle, he might eventually kill himself with it. Wouldn't that be murder? I don't know how you'd go about checking the gun—"

"Well, I do, and I know two experts in New York that know more!" exclaimed Danows. The phone hummed for ten seconds. "Ames," he added, "that's a new angle. Phil was the first to die, see? It was so plausible he shot himself hunting that I just made sure Adam and Paul didn't murder him out of hand. Ames, you may get somewhere if you go at the case this way!"

"I was pretty bullheaded this afternoon, chief. This house creaks, and it smells of alky from a barrel in the cellar, and there's nothing to

drink. Where was Sally when Phil and Frank died?"

"Away at school, both times."

"Always where she couldn't possibly be implicated, eh?" She was mad clear through at me tonight."

"She would be."

"What's she doing?"

"Studying to be a trained nurse."

The solid rosewood furniture gleamed somberly. A branch brushed the shingles like fingernails scraping at a door. Mac, at the foot of the bed, rubbed his nose with his paws.

"Hello? Hello, Ames?" Danows demanded sharply.

"We weren't cut off. There are more girls studying nursing than there are nurses employed," Ames answered. "It's good pay if you can get any, yet it's not an easy road. We Ameses have never paid the Purcells much. They've worked hard for us, for a long time."

"I don't follow you."

"You would if you were sitting alone in an old house and were the last of your family. It's just that maybe money isn't the sole motive, chief. A widower, and a confirmed bachelor, and an old maid. Sally'd be like a daughter to all of them. She'd mean more than three heirs who were strangers on the property, and middle-aged."

"You're young," said Danows sharply.

"Sure. I was a kid wincing across a hayfield in bare feet when Adam and Paul saw me last. I don't remember Lizzie at all. I was just a name to them when this started, chief."

"It's just as much crime."

"Sure, and you and I are going to dig just as straight to the bottom of it," Ames replied. "It's just that I'm not so cocksure. There's more to it than crime or punishment. My

grandfather made that will to establish a family—no matter what happened in this country. Maybe the Purcells had the same idea.”

Danows cleared his throat.

“I’ll put a micrometer on that gun, and be out with the exhumation permit by eleven,” he promised officially.

“Thanks. And chief! The prescription number on that aconite is very low for a remedy used so steadily. Check that with the druggist, will you, please?”

Ames hung up and undressed rapidly. He was not superstitious, or timid. That Aunt Mary—and probably Uncle Frank, too, come to think—had died in this bed postponed his sleep no more than a moment.

He did not allow MacTavish to remain curled on the counterpane at his feet.

V.

The smell of bacon awakened him. The morning was sunny. Through trees budding into leaf around the house he saw broad brown fields freshly plowed, and farther off, the bright green of pasture springing to life. At eight precisely he started down the front stairs.

The kitchen was empty. Lizzie ascended the back stairs as he came down the front. He could hear her heels now tapping briskly about her chamber work. But on a piping hot plate lay bacon and eggs that were perfect.

Flanking them were prunes so plump he mistook them for plums. He tasted, hopeful but steeled against disappointment. They were ambrosia. Just the right amount of lemon; and the coffee was in the big pot, with a big cup awaiting it, and cream that was yellow and thick. Pot-boiled coffee settled with an

egg. The world’s best; if, and only when, the brew is timed to the golden instant.

Ames drank three cups. He called up the back stairs:

“Lizzie! I never ate a better breakfast.”

An armful of bed linen smudged by Mac’s paws came flapping down the stair well.

“What’ll we have for dinner?”

“Anything you cook!” said Ames fervently.

She appeared at the top step, tensed, acid, and pleased.

“Well, now, mister—”

“I mean it, Lizzie.”

“Huh! Guess you do. I know when I’m being made fun of by a man.”

“Do you make coffee as good as that always?”

“I throw it out when I don’t. Adam’s particular.” Lizzie tightened her lips and added, “Kin I put down a door mat for your dog?”

“Make it a sack. I’ll wipe his feet. He’s a nice dog.”

“No dogs is nice in a house.”

Ames coughed. “I wonder,” he suggested diffidently, “if you could manage to get rid of that barrel of alcohol in the cellar. I smell it all over the house. When I woke up, I thought I had a hang-over. I could imagine the dark-brown taste—”

“Phil Ames drank, too. Pokin’ round, huh?”

“Well, I—”

He’d expected her to be angry, but she was smiling. It changed every line on the taut, sallow cheeks.

“Speak to Paul, young man. I been tryin’ to git shut of that barrel all winter. It leaks.”

“It certainly does.”

“Paul ’lows it don’t. He says I got notions. He says that drip is old cider stains. He’s stubborn.”

“Where’ll I find him?”

"Plowin', of course. Where else, this time o' year?"

She vanished. Ames stepped outside. Here the last spring snow had lain. A narrow strip of lawn, a fence with a wide gate, and the barnyard. Only a winged thing could cross that space between house and tenant house without setting foot to earth. On the porch Sally sat, slim shoulders rounded to shade a book, and at the same time enjoy the sun. She did not look up as he crossed the barnyard. He said:

"Good morning."

"Good morning, Mr. Ames."

He tried again.

"That book looks as thick as the one that elected Danows' father selectman."

"His was a dictionary."

"It couldn't have been! He pretended to read in it."

"I'm not pretending."

She'd barely looked up.

"I was studying medicine, too. I wanted—and expected—to be a doctor. Not an heir."

She did look at him now, candidly. She had good eyes. Straight and clear and confident and hostile.

"And what's that to me?"

"I'm not offering help in your studies. I'm pointing out I'm here because the executors demand it. My father quarreled with Henry, and went to live in Chicago. You know that. I never expected to touch a penny of this estate. I'm here on duty."

"Then go do it." Her temper was too quick to let the matter rest there. She said hotly: "You enjoyed it. You ranted."

"O. K. That was yesterday. I'm sorry."

"We made you ashamed of yourself. You're lonely. You just want someone to talk to."

"That's true. All of it. But

doesn't Scofield talk, too? Have I said anything different? Or have I simply been the one who said it aloud?"

She closed the book. He said:

"The sooner all doubts are settled, the better for us all. By us I mean everyone who lives on this farm. I want you to walk around the place with me. Otherwise I'll feel like an interloper and a snoop."

"Aren't you?"

But she was thinking over what he suggested.

"I'm not a snoop. I've made every suggestion I could to Danows about your relatives. You can undoubtedly tell me a lot I don't know about mine."

"Could, but shan't." She lifted the green leather jacket from the arm of her chair. "You are blunt. I think I'll accept your apology. In fact, I agree. The sooner we're completely cleared, the better. By the way, Danows telephoned you last night."

"Huh? How'd you—"

His consternation amused her. "The extension phone rings in our house. Uncle Paul answered, and promptly hung up. That's how much we're worried by your 'investigations.' As for showing you the place—I'm sorry."

He was crestfallen. She went on swiftly:

"Can't you see I couldn't? I'm not angry any more, but really! If you'd started in this mood, we'd have met you halfway, but father and uncle wouldn't understand and Lizzie—she's watching us from the kitchen window—still believes in chaperons. You're in the dog house, Mr. Ames. And what particular place would you wish to see?"

"I meant to have a look at the stone wall where Phil was shot."

"There you are," she said quietly.

"I think you should go to Paul for that. He's plowing in the long field. Take the cattle lane. Good morning, Mr. Ames."

He said, "Thank you."

The cattle lane began at the big hip-roofed barn. It ran two hundred yards before the first turn, fenced with five strands of wire as tight as banjo strings between posts eight feet apart and five high. It was a model fence. The whole farm by daylight revealed the unremitting and painstaking labor such as an ambitious man does for himself. Paul was plowing near the fence. At Ames' request he unhitched the team and led them into shade. All he said was:

"We're behind with the plowing." He walked with long strides, unbarred the gate at the end of the lane, and rehooked the chain. Ahead a brook brawled among boulders. The pasture was cleared of brush as far as a stone wall topped by two strands of wire. Beyond was cut-over land.

"We were after grouse. I climbed through here." Paul shook the taut wires.

"Wow! What a whopper!"

"Young man—"

"That trout! Didn't you see him jump? A pound, he was!" Ames exclaimed excitedly. "He leaped after a May fly. Just wait till I unpack my rod!"

"Big ones is in the emergency cistern."

"A pounder jumps—and you talk big ones?"

"Show ye plenty. Never waste time fishin'," Paul said. "Make yourself fishers of men, as the Gospel says. Look yonder, young man."

His gnarled hands gestured across the checkerboard of fields. "All run down when your grandpa hired Adam and me. Barn roof leakin'.

Goldenrod in the hay, crab grass in the fields, an' less'n twenty acres under plow. Now look. Never a cent put into it, young man. Twelve cows. Ten pigs. Eight acres in sweet corn—it'll sell thirty-five cents a dozen this year. Ninety acres cropped, countin' the clover, and not a square foot that's not payin'. Cement floors, and aluminum paint. Everything up to snuff. They call it the Ames farm, but no Ames ever drove a nail or turned a furrow."

His one good eye ran over John. "All you see is a fish. It wouldn't make us breakfast."

"I like fishing," Ames answered. He ran his eye along the wall. It had to be climbed to reach the good shooting, and everywhere the ground was treacherous and rocky on the far side.

"Uncle Phil was a great hunter?"

"Yep. He stood where you be. Shoved his gun through right there. Stock hit that rock, and *bang*."

The rock was a gun's length at the bottom of the wall. The shot would have struck in the chest and throat. The whole length of the wall was a menace for a person careless with firearms.

Could the murderer have counted on that? Or was Paul lying when he said the fence was between them? He could not have reached down and fired the shot unless he lied. To reconstruct the crime was hopeless.

"Some shot's in that post. Still see 'em if ye look close," said Paul bleakly. "Mind if I get back? I got work to do."

"Go ahead," Ames said. "I shan't interfere."

The one eye stabbed him.

"None of ye do. Adam an' me been paid reg'lar. 'Taint that. But we could be *shiftless* and none of ye'd notice!"

"We've been careless," Ames agreed.

He bent over the post, pretending to examine the tiny holes left by bird shot. Paul walked heavily down the slope.

The man loved this land. He believed he had reclaimed it. Probably he had.

Another trout jumped, and Ames postponed problems of murder. He hadn't fished since he entered medical school, and the books claimed these Eastern trout were gamer.

VI.

He didn't mean to follow the brook as far as he did. There was simply pool after pool, all with trout. A distant auto siren, and the ringing of a dinner gong—though his watch said only eleven—ended his truancy.

Danows must have arrived. Ames hurried toward the farmhouse.

He entered the pasture lane without noticing that Paul was no longer plowing, though the team stood in the furrow. He was close to the barn when a bull lurched out of a door into the lane. The bulk of it filled the path. It put its head down and bellowed. The sound seemed to rise through the earth and shake it.

Then the bull charged.

"Run!" Sally screamed. "Father, quick!"

Barbed wires made thin silver walls.

Run? Where? The bull was too close, too quick.

Five wires, not the usual three. Too high to jump. Too closely spaced to crawl through.

Ames set his hands on the top of a post and vaulted, acutely conscious of the bright streak of the wire top. It was too high to clear

by a leap and a swing of his legs. He must get his body up. Balance on bent elbows. Straighten his arms and swing his legs up and forward.

He had vaulted a five-foot bar a hundred times in the college gym. Done it only ten days ago, before the telegram came about Aunt Mary. That glittering wire was no higher than a bar would be.

But the post top didn't give a proper grip.

He kicked with his legs and tumbled over and forward. He smelled the rank stable odor, felt the rush of air as the bull charged past, heard the taut barbed wires clang to the scrape of a horn. He'd made it. He was lying on the freshly plowed ground that had broken his fall. Lucky. Mighty lucky.

He got to his feet, brushing the dirt from his clothes. His hands shook. He thought: "I can vault, and I vaulted damned well. Otherwise I'd have been gored."

The implications were like the gleam of the wire, bright, tenuous, stretching beyond the range of vision.

Sally was running across the barnyard, with two strange men in town clothes slightly in advance. Out of the door through which the bull had escaped ran Adam, hatless, panting, gripping a pitchfork. Paul pounded after him, barehanded. Lizzie leaned far out of a window on the upper floor of the barn. Her face was a bloodless parchment-yellow, like the complexion of an aged Chinese.

"I'm all right," Ames called out. He was; but the situation wasn't; it wasn't all right at all. "I shut the upper gate. The bull can't get away."

His mind was working again. They were all shaken, and shocked. They all stared.

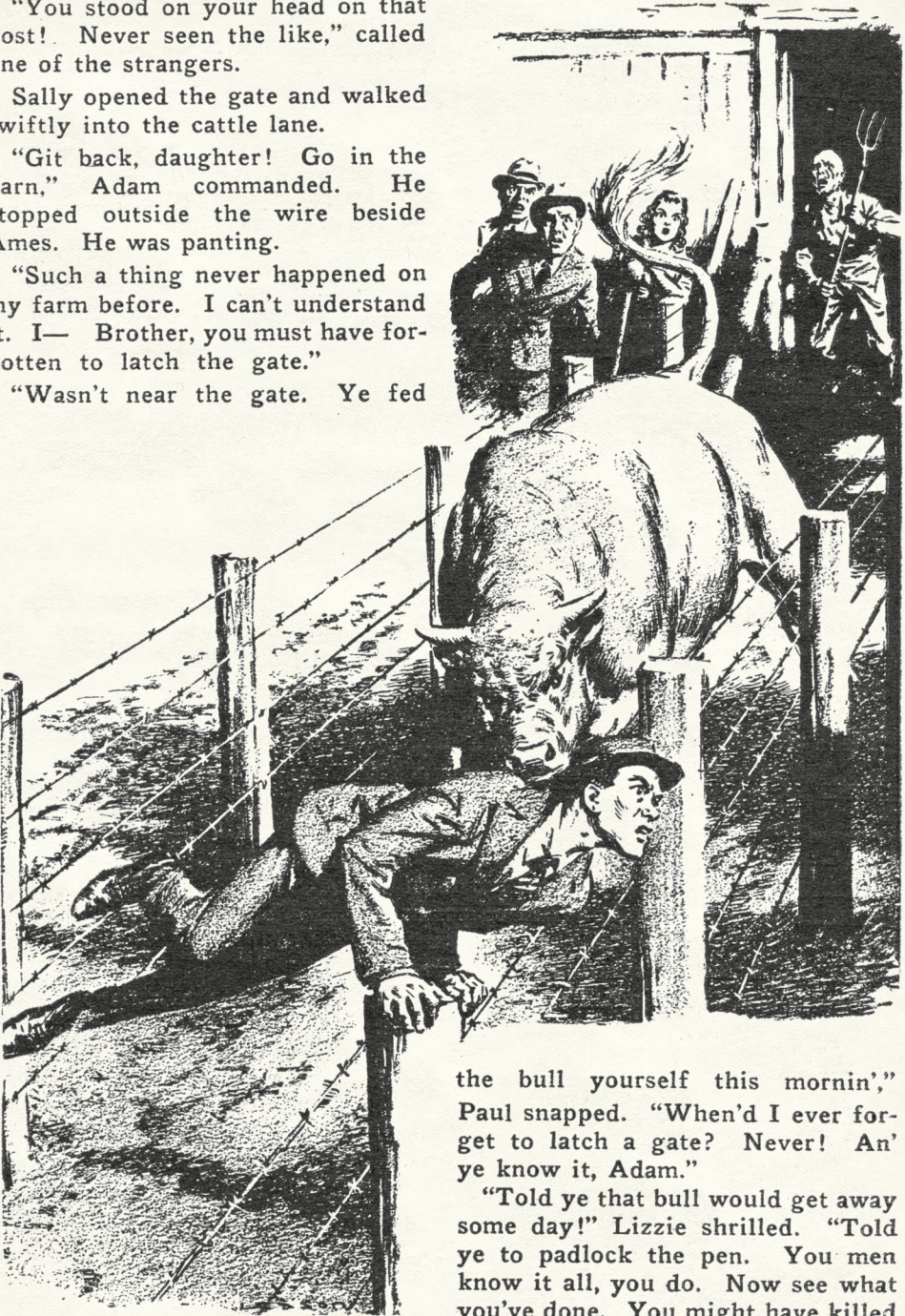
"You stood on your head on that post! Never seen the like," called one of the strangers.

Sally opened the gate and walked swiftly into the cattle lane.

"Git back, daughter! Go in the barn," Adam commanded. He stopped outside the wire beside Ames. He was panting.

"Such a thing never happened on my farm before. I can't understand it. I— Brother, you must have forgotten to latch the gate."

"Wasn't near the gate. Ye fed



He kicked with his legs and tumbled over.

the bull yourself this mornin'," Paul snapped. "When'd I ever forget to latch a gate? Never! An' ye know it, Adam."

"Told ye that bull would get away some day!" Lizzie shrilled. "Told ye to padlock the pen. You men know it all, you do. Now see what you've done. You might have killed him."

"Maybe the bull broke out," Ames suggested.

Both brothers stared at him. Paul shook his head. Adam said:

"No, young man. I built that gate myself. I stopped to rest the horses, and I was forkin' down hay for the calves. I'd a-heard a plank break-in'."

"So'd I. I was after a new plow point," Paul chimed in.

They turned. Ames walked back to the barn near them, with the high wires between. He asked:

"Why'd you build this fence so high?"

"'Cause we ain't shiftless!" snapped Paul.

He and his brother turned to the cattle door. Ames entered through a side door and reached the bull's pen as soon. The gate had a massive wooden bolt which no horn could possibly reach, and that a man could not push back by knocking against it accidentally—certainly not without feeling the impact.

But the bolt was back. Ames glanced at the wood, shiny with much handling. A partition divided the barn. The calves were beyond it. The tool room was also partitioned off. Both places were close to the pen, both had windows looking toward the lane down which he had hastened.

From an open hatchway Lizzie looked down at the brothers contemptuously.

"One of ye forgot and it don't make no mind which," she accused. "Maunderin' and wool gatherin' 'stead of tendin' to your business."

"I left that gate shut," said Adam positively. He kept staring at the latch, not his brother. "I just can't understand. I made that gate especial. Bulls are dangerous."

"What you doin' out of the house, Lizzie?" Paul demanded.

"Came to git you. Young man

has company, and he didn't hear the bell," she retorted.

Sally's face was as white as the barn whitewash. She stretched out a hand to support herself.

"Can I get you a glass of water?" Ames asked.

"No. No, thanks," she answered. "I'll be all right. I thought for a second that you were . . . that you wouldn't make it. I'll be all right. Really, Ames."

"You're thinking right now that maybe I'm right. You know this was no accident. You're afraid," Ames thought. "You and I'll never find out what happened, but Adam and Paul can guess." Aloud he said:

"Let's go. That bull might wander back and I don't care to look him in the eye again. Did you want to see me, sir?" he asked the stranger.

"Yeah. I'm Phillips, the undertaker, Mr. Ames. Danows got your permit and asked me to come out and exhume the body. He sent you this note."

Phillips handed over a sealed envelope, and added in a whisper audible to everyone: "Said it was very confidential, and that was why he sealed it. I'm mighty close-mouthed, though."

The hopefulness in the man's eyes made Ames smile.

"Guess you have to be, in your profession," he agreed. "You buried Uncle Frank, didn't you?"

"Yes."

"Mind if I don't go with you? I don't feel up to it right now. What I'd like is a drink," said Ames slowly. "Lizzie, there's a sideboard that's locked—"

"Ain't no liquor in it, though."

"Hi-ho," Ames sighed. "What misfortune. Say, Paul, when you get around to it, will you take that leaky barrel of alcohol out of the

cellar? The smell keeps putting ideas in my head, and—"

"That barrel don't leak," Paul declared flatly. "Lizzie put ye up to that. She's been jawin' at me long enough." He flushed angrily. "That barrel's where it's always been kept, and belongs. I tested it right before her eyes, and it don't leak, and she still says it does."

"I think it does, too," said Ames.

"Well, it don't," Paul snapped. "Think I'd let good alcohol worth twenty cents a gallon by the barrel go to waste? Huh! It's the cider you smell."

"Have it your own way," Ames agreed wearily. He stepped from the barn into the sunlight, walked away from the others, and tore open Danows' note.

Dear Ames:

Your hunch on Phil's shotgun panned out. It's an old gun, but the safety catch is brand-new. It shows no signs of wear whatever under the microscope. I'm starting for Hartford right away to run this lead down. It's possible someone tampered with the safety catch, and then put in a new one after your uncle shot himself.

I'll be gone two or three days. Phillips is O. K. and knows his business. I'll be back by the time we get the autopsy report. Lizzie kept refilling the original prescription. It's a small town, and we're all thrifty.

Hastily,

Nace Danows.

Ames tore the letter into shreds and dropped these back into the envelope to burn later. Sally, who was crossing to the tenant house, suddenly turned.

"Thank you for offering me that water. I needed some."

"Why didn't you take it?"

"I'd have felt silly. It was just a second I felt all gone. That might have been such a terrible accident."

He caught the wish that her tone and expression could not wholly conceal.

"Sure," he agreed. "But after all, nothing happened. There's millions of those near accidents every day. Why, I never drive a car a hundred miles that I'm not almost smashed up—"

"And the back-seat driver gets heart failure," she agreed eagerly. "What are you going to do this afternoon?"

"Going trout fishing. Want to come?"

Her face lighted, and then fell. "Not this afternoon. I promised to help Lizzie with the ironing. I do love to fish, though."

"Tomorrow?"

"Perhaps. I hope so. Ask me then."

VII.

The fishing was all that Paul had promised. The emergency cistern turned out to be a deep pool formed by a dam built halfway up the sides of a rocky gorge below a waterfall. Cracks and fissures in the rock had been sealed with concrete, leaving a narrow path to the cliff over which the falls cascaded. Wild grape vines, just bursting into leaf, hung like stiff, tangled ropes across the granite sides of the gorge. Ames could see the trout, big fellows; but it was a spot for bait fishing, not a dry fly.

For half an hour he attempted in vain to lure the fish into rising, but they were gorged with insects carried into their mouths by the current. Ames disdained to use worms. He laid his rod aside and sat on the dam. The sun-warmed cliff made just the right angle to support his back.

He thought of murder. A farm was the ideal setting. City people

purchase poisons by the bottle. On the farm, deadly mixtures stand about the year long in barrels and five-pound sacks. There is a succession of minor mishaps, any one of which may have fatal consequences. Sanitation is at the price of eternal care and vigilance.

He could not blame Aunt Mary for failing to insist on an autopsy after Frank's illness. Why should she suspect? Nor Danows, for applying only the simpler tests to Phil's gun. Only reiterated fatality had aroused suspicion. Really, only the apparent suicide of a woman everyone loved.

He heard a step and sat up. After all, had Sally—

But toiling up the stream bed in her high buttoned black shoes came Lizzie. Her apron was tied at the corners to make a sack. She stooped to pluck some weed growing from the earth, caught his eye, and sniffed.

"Restin'," she accused. "What's the matter with them fish?"

"They'll fry as well tomorrow. Sally wants to catch one."

"Never keered to b'fore," Lizzie commented tartly. "Young man, I didn't like ye at fust. But I told the others I was going to pick a mess of milkweed for supper. Slipped away from 'em. They'll never know I've met ye."

"Do you eat milkweed?"

"Sweeter'n spinach and tastier'n sparrowgrass," Lizzie declared. She lifted a sprout from her apron. The plant had just pushed through the earth and was as thick as a lead pencil and as long as her little finger.

"Eat 'em yourself and find out. Young man, 'tain't my business, 'cept as the Bible says we all of us are our brother's keepers. You leave this farm tonight. Right after supper. Stay as long as you kin under your grandfather's will. Come back

for as short a time as you kin. Then go 'way again. Otherwise you're going to be killed."

"By whom?"

"Don't bark at me," Lizzie retorted acidly. "I might not know. Ain't certain I'd say if I did. I've kep' house here twenty years. I ain't turning 'a man whose bread I've et and whose meals I've cooked over to the hangman. Less'n I must. And it's goin' to be a pretty big 'must' to make me. I ain't folding my hands and seein' you hurt, neither."

Ames thought fast. Lizzie was like glass—hard, and not to be bent. He said quietly:

"I promise to not repeat what you say to anybody. But I ought to know myself who threatens me."

"You're bullheaded as your grandpa. All right: when I walked into the barn today, I could see down by the bull's pen through the hatchway. I seen a hand and arm push the bolt open. B'fore I could run to where I could see down good, whoever 'twas had skedaddled."

Her sharp voice cracked.

"I've seen to 'em for twenty years. I've ironed every shirt they've ever bought. Maybe you think work shirts is alike, young man. Not to me they ain't. That sleeve lining was ripped a mite. That bull was loosed deliberate and—maybe the neighbors are right. Maybe I've been a blind woman all these years."

"Paul? Or Adam?"

"I won't say. They might have gotten their shirts mixed. And ye'd subpoena me, and the lawyer'd make a fool of me. Suppose I did say, 'It was the one I think 'twas, and I'm certain in my own mind.' And the lawyer asks, 'Why?' And I say, 'Cause there was a little ripped place in his sleeve lining.' Can't you hear everybody laughin'? I kin."

"Maybe you're right," Ames acknowledged. "Thanks, Lizzie."

"You'll go? Let Danows tend to it. It's his business, ain't it?"

"It's the business of all of us," Ames corrected. "Lizzie, why is Paul so furious about moving that barrel of alcohol?"

"He's sot in his ways," declared Lizzie. "Always gits furious when he can't do just as he's a mind to."

She moved off, and in ten yards a turn in the banks hid her.

The identification she had made, Ames decided swiftly, was too slight to stand in court, but in her simplicity Lizzie had forgotten that he could identify the brother she had seen. He snatched up his rod, climbed the bank, and set off across the pasture.

Adam was plowing. He stopped the horses, and wiped the perspiration from his face with his sleeve. His face was haggard—but both the sleeve facings were intact. The shirt, however, though sweat-stained, was not dirty. Even so late in the afternoon it showed traces of the creases left by the iron.

"Where . . . where can I find fishing worms?" Ames stammered.

"In every furrow," Adam answered. The silliness of the question passed unnoticed. "Ames, I guess Providence sent ye. I was trying to make myself hunt ye up. I didn't want to. I scarcely know what to do. Ames, my brother's lost his senses."

John Ames made no answer. Adam's heartbreak was too manifest.

"I'm closer to Paul than most twins are, even. We've shared a house. I've married, and widowed, without a single fuss. And now—Ames, I seen him loose that bull!"

"You're sure?" Ames' heart skipped a beat.

"Wish I weren't. I seen his arm

through that little window that looks from the calf pens. Ain't no other man on the place wearin' a work shirt. Ames, if Paul would do that, God knows what else he might have done. What can I do? Not send my own twin brother to an asylum!"

"Did you notice anything unusual about the shirt?"

"No. Blue chambray shirt like we both wear. I buy one make and Paul another so we can tell them apart by the trade mark. I was so dumfounded the bull was out before I came to myself."

"I wasn't hurt," Ames answered. "Don't do anything, or say anything, just now."

"My own brother out of his head, an' God knows what, and you say do nothing?" Adam demanded. His face aged. He lifted the reins and tossed the loop over his neck. Like one in a trance he went on plowing.

Ames swung across the field. A premonition made his heart pound. Beyond the cattle lane, which he crossed carefully, Paul was resting his team. He smiled sourly at the sight of the fly rod, and the absence of a string of fish.

"Won't rise to a fly," Ames remarked. "Just wait till I get after them with worms." He sat down beside Paul. "How do you and Adam manage to keep your shirts so clean at such dirty work?" he asked.

Paul started violently and pretended to slap at a horsefly.

"We don't manage. Lizzie made us change them after dinner."

"She *what!*"

"Brought us two fresh shirts and made us put 'em on," said Paul. "Got one of her notions, I guess, though I never remembered her bein' so finicky." He turned his single eye, bloodshot and strained. "Will you take my advice?"

"Go fishing in Canada for a spell. Go anywheres out of Scofield."

"Why?"

"Wild horses won't drag the reason out of me!" Paul exclaimed violently. "Don't the Bible say: 'The voice of thy brother's blood crieth unto me from the ground. And now thou art cursed from the earth'? I've good reason. You go!"

"Did you see Adam open the bull's pen?"

Paul jumped to his feet. He shouted: "I saw nothing! Nothing! You don't put Cain's curse on me! Get out! Leave us settle our troubles and go play. It's all ye're fit for!"

"I simply asked," Ames said soothingly. "Nothing happened. About *that* accident, nothing will ever be proved."

Paul glared. Ames turned his back. As he approached the big house, two shirts flapped on the line. He examined them. One was torn slightly at the sleeve. As he fingered the cloth, he glimpsed Lizzie's face at the kitchen window. She beckoned, and he entered.

"I ain't a fool," she told him sharply, as he closed the door. "You've opened our eyes. You go, b'fore worse happens. Leave us Purcells to tend to our trouble!"

VIII.

Supper was over. By seven, Lizzie had finished the dishes and withdrawn to the tenant house, exactly at her usual time. She had put the food on the table and left without one more word, even good night.

Ames sat by a wood fire burning in an iron grate that was like half an iron basket, or the bars of a window, surrounded by the white marble facing of the fireplace. The arrangement was not quite so efficient

as a stove, or so conducive to reverie as an open fire. It warmed, and saved wood.

He had satisfied himself that if Lizzie had good eyesight she could have seen the rip in the shirt sleeve, and also that both Paul and Adam might have glimpsed no more than an arm and a hand from the tool room and calf pen. All the stories sounded straight.

He wasn't going to leave. He did weigh packing a bag and making the pretense; stealing back and hiding. But where would he hide, to accomplish anything? He muttered:

"Be your age!"

MacTavish, as black as a lump of cannel coal against the marble hearthstone, opened one red-rimmed eye.

"Go back to sleep. You can't help, and you look like Paul," Ames commanded. A pine stick smoked, scenting the room. Beneath the redolence there was the faint, elusive reek of alcohol.

"Come on, Mac," Ames said sharply. "I'm chemist enough to settle one riddle."

They went to the cellar. The sides and bottom of the iron barrel were dry—bone-dry. Paul was right. The barrel did not leak.

Ames scraped up a handful of the moist earth beneath the barrel. The smell was indisputably alcohol, and not cider. He was aware that the nose is as accurate in identifying certain chemicals as a full-fledged qualitative analysis. Lizzie was right, too. Alcohol escaped from the barrel. He couldn't imagine how, unless someone deliberately slopped it out on the earth floor.

MacTavish barked impatiently.

"Yeah, right here I ought to produce a rabbit," Ames muttered. "Go chase yourself, pooch. I've got

nothing to throw you. This is important, but—we're not playing 'Ten Nights in a Barroom.'"

Adam, Paul, Lizzie. Suppose one of them poured out alcohol, and blamed the others. All right, suppose it. *Why?* Yet it was the one abnormal circumstance he had been able to discover. He hummed:

"Don't say nothin', must mean somethin',
Just keeps on rollin' along."

Secret tippling? Nonsense. The stuff was mixed with wood alcohol, deadly poison. But aconite was the poison used when—

A bang of the brass knocker on the front door sent Ames running up the cellar stairs, feeling as guilty as if he had been surprised in crime.

He admitted—Sally Purcell.

She was hatless, with no wrap over her blouse. He said: "This is swell! Come on in!" before he saw her face. This wasn't a call. She sought refuge.

"I can't stand it. They sit and stare at each other!" she gasped.

"Skip it." Ames hooked out a chair near the fire with his foot and offered her a cigarette, all together. He held the match, waited until she sat down, then pretended that the fire needed more wood, and considerable poking. When he heard her draw a quavering breath, he sat down, facing her and lighted his own cigarette.

She was staring at the little flames curling around the dry sticks. She spoke more to the fire than to him.

"If they quarreled, it wouldn't be so bad. They're afraid. They've lived in the same house so long. They can remember so much. One word and it would be in the open. They just sit, and turn their faces just enough to steal a look at one another, and turn away again. They

. . . they shut me out. I had to get away. Anywhere."

"I know. I've felt the same way. Right in this house."

"It was murder."

He said, "What was?"

"Today. Murder was intended. Last night I was so sure about everything. Now I can't pretend to myself. I sat over there and felt something cold pushing nearer. Like a wall of ice."

"Would it help if I went away? Tonight?" Ames asked.

She looked up, startled.

"Why—no. Help how?"

"I don't know. I just asked. Why don't you leave, Sally? Go stay with a friend in Scofield overnight. Here's the keys to my car. Use it. Please."

She shook her head. "No. I'd lie awake and wonder what they'd say—if they ever did talk. They don't *believe* in talking. I've got to stay within call. What . . . *what* are we going to do?"

He glanced at her sharply. She was torn by dread of what Purcell might do to Purcell. He said:

"May I make you some coffee?"

"I don't want any."

"Neither do I," he admitted. "It's making it that will do us good. It's familiar, pleasant routine. Let's go to the kitchen."

He took her hand, which was clammy and chill. She rose, unwilling, but obedient.

"You're imagining things," he said. "I did that once, too, but you're even worse. I don't think they're both guilty."

"Both?" she exclaimed. "You should see Lizzie. She sits like a cat. You know. Ready to pounce."

He thought, *Lizzie knows*. But what he said was:

"That's pure, absolute imagination, Sally. Lizzie's just excited.

Lively day in an old maid's life. Frankly, I do think that bull was turned loose in the hope I'd be gored to death, but that doesn't prove anything about the others that have died. You gave me hell for taking a leap in the dark, and you jump farther."

Sally spooned coffee into the pot and added water.

"I am not," she contradicted. "It's they that will take the leap, John. They've been contented. Or thought they all were. Now—one's a murderer. We've been living with a murderer, that we love, for years. Something terrible's been hidden. Now it's dragged into the light. That's what *they* are all aware of, John. That's why they didn't speak. Some plan has been hardened and whetted until it's like *that*."

Her hand swung out and pointed at the ice pick.

"You mean that when one heir was left the scheme came to a point?"

She nodded. She would have spoken, but the headlight of a bicycle passed the window, and a moment later there was a rap at the door.

A boy held out a special-delivery letter. John Ames took it and dismissed him.

"Excuse me," Ames apologized, and read:

Dear Ames:

Autopsy showed poison in fatal quantity in Frank Ames' stomach, and I have presumptive proof that Phil Ames was murdered, too. Will take me until tomorrow afternoon to clear up details. Have all the Purcells in the big house at four. We'll spring it on them. Suggest you hint I've got deadwood, but no details. I'd like to get a confession.

Nace Danows.

Ames tore up the letter and threw the scraps in the fire.

"Danows writes bad news—for you," he said. "I'm afraid I was right."

"Murder? He's found proof?"

"Yes. I'm awfully sorry for you. I never wanted to hurt you."

She edged past him and slowly twisted the doorknob open.

"No, you never wanted to hurt me," she said. "I know that, now. I don't blame you. Not any more. You and I don't count for much in this. We're just here, that's all. We can't help it. Nobody can help it."

"You're not going home? Not now! Sally, listen to me—"

She opened the door.

"I've got to go, now. Now they need me. I can't run any more. May I tell them?"

"Yes. Danows wants to see them all at four. Here."

She said very quietly: "We'll be here. We'll face it. John, if they'd only speak out! It'll be so *long* until four tomorrow."

The door swung slowly, and latched with a barely audible click. He could hear her heels on the stones, walking—home.

Home!

He couldn't let her go alone. Yet he must. He couldn't help her, yet the desire was overpowering. He gripped the doorknob, listening, hoping she might turn back. There was no sound. The seconds passed. He could not help her. Of all men, he least. His suspicions had brought her to this.

IX.

The old house whispered. By the embers of a dying fire, and later in the bed where Aunt Mary had died, staring wide-eyed at the less-dark oblong a window made in the darkness, John Ames rephrased what he had said to Sally. Despite Danows'

letter, he did not puzzle over the murders. Instead he visualized the droop of Sally's shoulders as she left to go home.

He had taken the initiative. The outcome was his responsibility. His fault. He could not sleep. He tried to plan some way of easing the blow to her. And there was no way at all.

He loved her. Realization came suddenly, yet with a clear simplicity that made the fact no surprise. His mind was astonishingly lucid. It perched on a mountaintop; problems were as distinct as the boundaries of woodland and field viewed from a snow-capped summit.

That he could ever tell Sally he loved her was the most unlikely. That was tough. That was the way it was bound to be, though. Unless—unless he could manage to place the guilt so that Sally would really have nothing to blame him for.

The illuminated hands of his wrist watch read 2:10 a. m. At the foot of the bed MacTavish wheezed in sleep, with such a pause between breaths that Ames' own chest rose slowly, involuntarily keeping time. His body was lethargic. The leap to escape the bull must have exhausted his reserve strength, yet mentally he was stimulated. The riddle of Aunt Mary's death emerged from a confusion of detail.

Since he had no idea what Danows had found, Aunt Mary's case was his point of attack.

Here, on this bedside table within reach of his hand, the innocent water jug and the glass with the trace of poisoned water had been discovered. Here she had lain; only an hour or two earlier than this she had died. Alone.

He seemed to float in space. He did not feel the weight of the bed-clothing, or the pressure of MacTavish upon his feet. Out of the

darkness winged a thought that changed the riddle into a problem. Always before he had striven and groped for the complex. He had overshot the mark.

Aconite had a taste. Grant that, but why should Aunt Mary suspect that water which tasted strangely was poisonous? A fatal dose was measured in drops. Would she not ascribe a strange, yet almost imperceptible flavor to water that had stood too long in the glass, or to careless dish washing? Wouldn't she swallow the mouthful? Instead of rising from bed to spit it out?

Just one swallow would be fatal. Instead of compelling her to take the poison by force or trickery, the murderer—Ames corrected himself—the murderer or the murderess had merely left a glass of poisoned water beside the jug, in the expectation that Mary Ames would drink it.

And having drunk, if she had felt strangely, would she not have decided that she was only a trifle ill, and that sleep would be the best medicine? Aconite slowed the heartbeat. It induced sleep. The results of the autopsy were accounted for.

It all added up, but nevertheless Ames, in his detachment and lucidity, perceived that any of the Purcells could have put poison in the glass. His inspiration had gotten him nowhere. Moreover, how could anyone be sure that Aunt Mary would drink the water? Yet if she did not, the whole timing of the murder to coincide with the fall of snow was useless. That snow exonerated the Purcells. Without it, Lizzie would have been suspected at once.

Well, to suspect Lizzie suited him fine. But aconite had an odor as well as a taste. Dispensed as an extract, the stuff smelled of alcohol.

If Aunt Mary picked up a glass that smelled like liquor, she would most promptly and indignantly set it down untasted. Sherry and crackers at four, perhaps, but booze at bedtime? Never!

Never if she spotted it. Yet the whole upper floor was tainted by that faint odor of alcohol. *Could* she have smelled a diluted extract in the glass of water? Ames sniffed. Familiarity had dulled his senses, he could smell nothing. He would have to make a test with the bottle in the kitchen. It was Lizzie and Paul who had quarreled over that barrel. *Not* Sally's father.

Moving was an exertion. As in a dream, he visualized himself up, and walking into the hall, only to discover he hadn't actually stirred. Ames groaned, and dragged leaden feet from under the blankets. Even Mac, usually eager for midnight prowls that were apt to end at the icebox, was lazy tonight. He slept on, with drawn-out snores.

In the hall Ames stumbled and had to brace his shoulders against the wall. He couldn't feel his feet. It was like walking about when dead for sleep, yet he was wide awake. It was like that stage of drunkenness when the mind watches the foolish body stagger and weave and rides above the faltering feet, detached, contemptuous, and utterly unable to control.

"Jumping one fence shouldn't leave me like this," Ames thought. "What's the matter with me? It can't be anything I ate or drank. It's hours since supper!"

He snapped on the kitchen light and opened the medicine cabinet. There stood the little vial of aconite. Empty.

Poison enough there yesterday to kill a dozen. Gone now.

His eyes widened. He staggered

backward. The edge of the kitchen table brought him up. He felt the impact only dully. He'd been falling. Yet the blow didn't hurt. He—

He was poisoned. Clear head and dead legs. Dulled nerves. He was poisoned with aconite. He whispered:

"I'm dying. I've touched nothing since supper. Not even the coffee Sally started to make. I—"

He pressed his hand against his chest. The heartbeat was as slow as a knell. He couldn't speed up his breathing. Aconite.. Could be nothing else. Impossible?

He gripped the table legs with both hands. He thought: "If I got the whole bottle, I'd be dead already. I couldn't have! I was awake every second. I'm a fool. I'm going to die if there's enough of the stuff in me."

He pushed himself to the sink. Mustard and hot water first. He cleared an empty stomach. Thank God this was a farm. Everything handy. Antidotes wouldn't help much, now that the poison was in his blood stream, working. He must stimulate his heart. Speed his respiration. Couldn't do that alone.

He got to the telephone. He said: "Emergency. I'm poisoned. Ring the extension on this line." He waited while his bell shrilled and shrilled. When the ringing ceased, he lifted the phone.

"Sally?"

"Yes. What on earth—"

"Sally, I need you. I'm poisoned. Get over here. *Quick!*"

She gasped. The phone banged against the wall as she dropped it. He heard her call:

"It's John. I'm going over—"

Then the slam of a door, and Adam's voice on the wire:

"You can't call my daughter to you at this time o' night—"

"I'm poisoned. She's the only one of you I trust!"

Adam whispered, "Oh, my God!" For an instant the wire was silent. "I'm coming over, too," Adam said.

"If you set foot in this house, I'll shoot!"

"I must come," Adam insisted. "Can . . . can I wait on the porch?" Ames hung up. Then lifted the receiver.

"Operator, get me a doctor. . . . What one? . . . Any doctor. Whoever'll get here quickest. Connect me to the police station."

"Nobody'll be there so late."

"Then call the patrolman, damn it! Get him out of bed and up here. I'm poisoned, I tell you! Get Danows next. He's in Hartford."

"Where in Hartford?" the operator appealed.

"I don't know. Call the Hartford police. Make them find Danows. Get him here quick—"

Sally ran into the kitchen and on into the hall, guided by his voice. She cried out:

"I'll get the doctor! John, you must lie down—"

She caught his left arm by the wrist and threw it over her shoulder to support him. The phone dangled by its cord, unheeded.

"John! What is it? How—"

"God knows. It's aconite. I'll make that straight chair. Get me a heart stimulant. I can't find one."

"I can." She helped him as far as the chair, let his weight down, and ran. A coat was over her nightgown. She had not stopped for slippers. The barnyard mud soiled her feet.

Adam's face peered through the window. Seeing Ames in pajamas, arms dangling, legs sprawled, he entered.

"Kin I do anything?"

The despair on his face could not be misread.

"No. But I wish you'd step outside," Ames answered.

Adam moved heavily to the kitchen table, and sat down, dropping his head into his hands and staring at nothing. Sally ran in with a glass of medicine. As Ames took the potion, their eyes met. Hers widened and darkened as though a whip had lashed her face.

Ames drank to the last drop. He said:

"I'm not afraid. Sally, I'll drink anything you give me."

"You shuddered—"

"Did I? I thought, if this doesn't work, I can't finish. I can't help her. I almost did, Sally. I had my fingers on the answer. It slipped away."

She didn't understand. She took his pulse, professionally, as she had been taught in nursing school, but as she counted the beat, she could not keep the color from leaving her face.

Adam saw. He said: "Sarah, I'd take that poison into my own stomach if I could."

"Yes, father."

"I wanted to provide for ye. Better'n I have. But I never dreamed of killin', or knowed 'twas bein' done."

"We know it," Sally answered. "Don't we, John?"

"Yes," he answered. "Adam, I'm sorry for what we said when we met. Will you get me paper and pencil, please? I'd like to write a statement, just in case—"

The farmer stared helplessly around the kitchen. Sally shut her eyes tightly for an instant. Her lips trembled, but she was opening the table drawer when Lizzie screamed from the tenant house:

"Adam! Adam!"

Sally rushed to the door, flung it open.

"Ad-am! Come quick! I can't wake up Paul! Ad-am! Paul's lyin' like a log! He's barely breathin'. Ad-am!"

Sally turned a face stony with foreboding.

"Paul, too?" Ames said. "Sally, get over there. Quick. Heart stimulants—"

She hesitated. Adam arose.

"Give me the stuff, Sarah," he commanded. "I'll tend to my own brother. You stay here, Sarah. We owe the young man that much."

He snatched the medicine at which Sally pointed and ran out, shouting:

"Comin', Lizzie. I'm a-comin'!"

Sally picked up Ames' wrist, but only to drop it. "Paul poisoned you and himself," she declared. "He must have. We all ate the same things tonight. We had a little wine, but all of us took it."

"When?"

"Just after I left you. About nine thirty. They went to bed right afterward. Paul gave you aconite somehow and took the rest himself. He knew Danows was coming with proof of murder."

"It looks so," Ames admitted. "Yet I took nothing. It's all too deep for me. I couldn't sleep. I was trying to think of some way to get you out of this mess. I—"

A car turned into the driveway at top speed.

"If that's the doctor, rush him to Paul!" Ames ordered. "Rouse him. Make him talk. Go, Sally! We've got to break this. We must!"

X.

Sally ran out. Loneliness stabbed Ames, though her going was his wish. He heard her call:

"Dr. Foster! This way—"

Across the barnyard lights flashed

up in the tenant house, room after room until every window blazed, but in the kitchen was only the tick of the clock. Faster, so much faster, than his own pulse. Strange how quiet the house was!

He rose with determination and walked up and down, up and down, lest he fall asleep. The doctor ran in, administered a hypodermic.

"That's right, Mr. Ames. Keep walking. You're young, with a strong heart—"

"Paul?" Ames questioned.

A shadow crossed Dr. Foster's face. He was middle-aged, stout. His clothing had been only half buttoned in his haste.

"Let's hope for the best," he said.

"You mean you came too late," Ames interpreted.

He went on walking. Up and down. Up and down. Mike, the patrolman from Scofield, came in and locked all the doors in the big house to safeguard any evidence, then ran for the tenant house to keep watch on the Purcells. Half an hour passed, an hour, an hour and a half.

Quiet, so quiet in the big house. Something was missing. Ames walked like an automaton. His breath was coming faster. His heart was beating more strongly, yet as his physical condition improved, his mind became more depressed.

He had saved his own life. It might be that he had forced a murderer to make expiation. Only a day ago, when he entered this house with a pistol in his pocket, he would have called these things success. He was wiser now.

A car drove madly into the barnyard. Danows leaped out, clutching a brief case. The chief hesitated between the houses, then ran toward the big one.

"Thank God! You're living!" he cried out, standing. "Where's

Mike? What's happened? How were you poisoned?"

"I don't know," said Ames. Disbelief flashed into the policeman's face, so he added: "I mean it, chief. Sit down. I'm going to live, and I'm pretty sure Paul Purcell is going to die. Sit down. There's no hurry."

Danows sat, but on the edge of a chair.

"Is it any pleasure to convict a murderer?" Ames asked.

"Hell, no!"

"That's what I've learned," Ames agreed. "I'm after something more than justice, chief. I'm dreading something worse than murder. What's happened tonight is Aunt Mary's case over again. I tell you she was poisoned without knowing when it was done, or how, because the same thing happened to me. You're going over to the tenant house. I'll tell you what to look for. Somehow, the smell of alcohol is the key to the riddle. I became accustomed to that smell. The Purcells had a drink of wine tonight. That would prevent them from smelling anything alcoholic."

Danows frowned. "Something worse than murder, Ames?" he questioned.

"Yes. Chief, the lid is off the private hell of one of those three. You're going to look down into it. I want to warn you."

The policeman leaned forward, and his fingers curled around his brief case. He said:

"There's evidence here that will arrest Paul Purcell. But not enough to convict him. I wrote you to tip him off hopin' to scare him, Ames. Murderers convict themselves by tryin' to cover things up at the last minute, but that he'd try to kill you, knowin' I was hot on his trail—"

"Paul convinced himself he and

his brother should own this farm. Is is unlikely he'd kill me and himself—if that got the estate for Adam? Which it would."

"Not for those who know Paul Purcell," Danows declared. "It's what he'd do. Anyhow if he dies, that closes the case."

Ames swayed in his chair. Danows leaped for him, caught him crying:

"What's wrong?"

"Nothing," said John Ames. "I—"

"Sally, Sally! Never a chance for us," he thought.

"I don't want the case closed, chief. You'll remember—the alcohol? The wine? It's important. It's vital. It means—"

The policeman's hand tightened on Ames' shoulder comfortingly. "You're all in," he soothed. "You leave it to me. It's my job. I'll handle it."

He was eager to get to the other house, to take charge. Ames sank back in the rocker. Danows fairly ran from the kitchen.

Quiet, so quiet in the old house. Something missing. The clock ticked, but another noise—familiar, comforting—that sound was absent. Ames caught his breath. He knew now what he was listening for.

His mind raced. The clock ticked off ten minutes.

Paul had died. Shadows were moving across the lighted windows. Everyone in the house was coming downstairs.

Paul had died without making a confession. Ames read it in the dejected attitude of Danows as his silhouette appeared against the lighted oblong of the tenant-house door, and in the slowness with which he crossed the barnyard.

Dr. Foster entered the kitchen first. He looked keenly at his surviving patient, and gave a reassur-

ing nod. Mike the patrolman came next, then Sally, who walked to the chair nearest Ames and sat down wearily, without meeting his eyes. She had thrown on a house dress. Adam was in clean overalls, but Lizzie had put on a blue silk gown with a pattern of small white flowers. The fallow face was drawn and hollow-eyed from the vigil, but color lay sharp along her cheekbones, like rouge carelessly applied.

"Bring your father his chair, Sal," she ordered, though in a gentler tone than Ames had ever heard from her lips. "I'll run get him a cushion. Put the kettle on the stove for coffee, and cut that apple pie that's in the pantry."

"We're too busy to eat—" began the doctor.

"Won't be when ye see the victuals," Lizzie snapped tartly. "Guess I know what menfolk want. Adam's upset, and he's going to be comfortable."

She marched up the back stairs, briskly, and was back in a minute or two with a big soft cushion, almost a pillow, except that it was covered in faded silk instead of ticking. Ames remembered seeing it in the linen closet when he examined the house. Lizzie pushed it behind Adam's back, firmly and swiftly, with the efficient gentleness that a trained nurse would have used. Adam sank back gratefully, and Lizzie pulled her own favorite rocker beside his chair.

Adam looked straight ahead. He did not seem to know where he was, or care. Sally touched his hand, but his fingers remained lax and unresponsive.

"I'll bring him round," Lizzie whispered. "Can't the rest of ye leave us for a spell?"

Danows shook his head impa-

tiently, and lifted the brief case from the table.

"Get on with it, then," retorted Lizzie, low-voiced and acidly. "Kill him, too." She leaned protectingly toward Adam.

"Don't ye listen," she commanded. "Guess you and I knew Paul best. He was out of his head, that's what he was. No one is goin' to blame you, Adam. They shan't!"

In a mutter Adam answered: "I blame myself. He was my brother, and I never guessed—"

He stroked Lizzie's work-gnarled hand and drew a long breath, with an appealing glance at Danows.

"Let's clear it up," the chief said. "Mr. Ames, Paul never so much as muttered one word, Dr. Foster tells me. We found an empty vial down in the bedclothes. I followed your tip, but nothin' over at the tenant house smelled of alcohol—except the empty wine bottle and the vial. That's right, isn't it, doctor?"

Foster cleared his throat.

"Precisely," he said. "There was a faint odor of alcohol on Paul's lips, which might have been caused either by wine or the poison, but no suspicious odor clinging to his night-gown or the bedding. My opinion is that Paul drained the vial before taking it from his lips. The bottle is small."

"He lived over two hours, even if he never recovered consciousness," Ames demurred. "Wouldn't the whole bottleful have killed him within a few minutes?"

"Certainly, if the bottle was full," Foster pointed out. "How much was in it, Lizzie?"

"'Bout empty. Had to shake it to git my last dose."

"That answer your question?" Foster.

"No," said Ames. "The bottle in

this house was full, last night. A murderer had plenty of poison available. It seems to me the fact that I've pulled through, that Paul was so long dying, and that my aunt died of a dose just large enough to be fatal is significant, doctor. I'm only a student, but isn't it true that aconite is so powerful that a fatal dose may be absorbed through the skin—particularly the thin, moist mucuous membrane of the lips?"

Foster smiled indulgently.

"Quite true," he agreed. "You mean that if aconite were spilled on the pillowcase, a sleeping person whose lips were in contact with the spot might poison himself?"

"Yes, sir. And since the lips are moist, he would still poison himself even if the aconite had dried on the pillowcase," Ames said. "I've had over two hours to think it over, and I'm convinced that's what happened to me. If the poison were absorbed, only a little more than a fatal dose could enter the system. Death itself would prevent."

"Quite true," Foster agreed. "But I thought of that, in this case and your aunt's. There was no stain, wet or dry, on the bedding. I searched, and Danows searched again, in view of your tip."

"Bedding, laundry basket, and house," said Danows. "Foster's the coroner. He and I figure a guilty man took the quick way out. I guess the cases are closed, all right, but I'd appreciate the co-operation of everyone in clearing up a few loose ends."

He cleared his throat. "Day before yesterday Mr. Ames suggested that Phil's shotgun had been tampered with. I found that to be a fact—there was a brand-new safety catch in an old gun. The inference was that someone had removed the

old safety catch, and after Phil shot himself, put in the new one during the excitement while the body was being carried back to this house.

"I immediately checked all orders for safety catches that the manufacturer had received from this section. I found a letter in the files from Phil Ames. It was entirely typewritten, including the signature, but when I examined the paper for fingerprints, I found—not those of Philip Ames, but those of Paul Purcell!"

Adam groaned. Lizzie whispered:

"Don't ye take on. 'Tain't your fault. None of it. I'll stand by ye, Adam."

"I'd done enough work on the case to identify the fingerprints and the type," Danows explained. "The typewriter here is accessible to everyone. I assume that Paul wrote in Phil's name, and intercepted the package at the mailbox when the rural carrier left it.

"Meanwhile I received the report of the autopsy on Frank, also undertaken at Mr. Ames' suggestion. The poison in the stomach was not arsenic only, but a mixture of arsenic and boron. It took a lot of time to run that down, but the mixture was the same as that used in a special poison spray for bean beetle."

Suddenly, fiercely, Adam clutched Sally's hand. His gray head lifted, eyes wide with horror.

"Yes, Adam," Danows said gently. "It was that package of special bean spray that Paul bought."

"He bought it, and he used it. All of it," Adam said bleakly. "I told him 'twouldn't be no better'n plain calcium arsenate, and it weren't."

"It's as deadly to humans," said Danows. "That was my case against Paul Purcell up to tonight. It was circumstantial, I'll admit, but it

pointed to him very strongly. By his death he confesses—"

"Shet up, you!" Lizzie burst out. "It's our Paul you're crucifyin'. Jabbin' him with needles. Pryin' into his dyin' moment. Ain't you got no decency? Ye ain't! None of ye ain't."

She swung on Ames.

"Ye starved him and worked him blind—or your folks did!"

"You that call yourself doctor!" She looked at Foster. "You wagged your lying tongue about him and us, and you"—Lizzie faced Danows—"torture Adam now Paul's gone where you can't git at him. I'm sick of it. Ye hear me!"

Her voice dropped. The hand roughened by work closed gently on Adam's bowed shoulder.

"Twenty years I've looked after you, Adam," she said for his ear alone. "I brought up Sally for ye. Ye've wanted nothin' my two hands could fetch. They can cut me in pieces b'fore I'd hurt ye, but they're hurtin' ye worse. Shall I stop them, Adam? Shall I speak out? 'Cause I can end this jawin', and the hurtin'."

"Do as ye think fit, Lizzie," Adam muttered. His head dropped in his hands.

"Look at him," Lizzie lashed at the four other men. "Hope ye like what ye've done!" Her thin chest rose and fell. She went on with bitter self-restraint.

"The day Phil Ames was brought home, he was put here in the kitchen with the shotgun beside him. I left to get water to wash his face, and when I came back, Paul was on hands and knees right there in that corner, hunting something."

She pointed.

"I said, 'What ye lookin' for, Paul?' and he swore at me, 'None

of your damn business.' Said 'damn,' right out. And he picked up a little piece of steel and put it in his pocket."

Danows shouted, "Why didn't you tell me that at the time?"

"Ye never asked me," Lizzie retorted acidly.

"Paul must have dropped the safety catch—"

"I dunno what 'twas," declared Lizzie. "It was a little part from something, and it wasn't from no farm machinery that I've ever seen."

"Can't you identify it positively as a shotgun part?"

"Nope. Never used a gun."

"Well, even so, your testimony as an eyewitness corroborates the circumstantial evidence," Danows declared with satisfaction.

"That ain't all," Lizzie resumed sharply. "I spoke to Ames yesterday. Warned him to git, 'cause I feared this. That frayed sleeve I spoke of was on Paul's shirt."

"She means Paul loosed the bull at me," Ames explained. "The cases all point to Paul."

"Satisfied to close them?" Danows asked.

Ames had no chance to answer, for Adam rose, ashen of face, but with the expression of a man who has decided precisely what must be done.

"It is enough for me," he said. "Come, Sally. Come and pack. You and I must go." He took out a billfold and passed it to Danows. "You were my neighbor. Bury my brother. Try"—Adam's lips tightened—"to quiet the tongues that will tear him. He was short-tempered. He brooded some. But he'd never have done—what he did—in his right senses. I'm goin' to remember him as he seemed to me—before today."

He made a step toward the door. Sally rose swiftly and was at his side. In the sudden silence the tick of the clock echoed their tread.

"Adam!" Lizzie cried out. "Sally don't know where nothing is! I'll pack for you! I ain't leavin' you!"

He turned. He said:

"I oughtn't to ask it. I won't ask it. You ain't a Purcell. You ain't called on to share our trouble."

"Guess I will, though. And gladly," Lizzie announced briskly. "Don't you pester yourself about me, Adam. Always have looked after you. Stop now? Huh!"

She thrust herself vigorously out of the rocking chair, opened the kitchen door with a withering glance at Ames and the three other men, and added:

"Come along, Adam. Why, Sally ain't sure which is your shirts, even. Let me fix ye some coffee. You set down and I'll tend to everything, just as usual."

Adam halted. He said:

"Lizzie, you're mighty kind. I appreciate it, but I can't ask you with us. You ain't kin. It wouldn't be right. I ain't so religious, like Paul was. He'd ha' said the brand of Cain was on Sally and me, Lizzie. I wouldn't put it so strong, but I'm going to keep movin' on, and movin' on, fast as folks find out we're the Purcells. You got no reason to bear that, Lizzie. I don't really want you along."

"Adam Purcell, you can't kick me out like that!"

He stared an instant, said heavily: "That's so. I forget. I owe ye a month's wages. Danows will pay."

"Wages!" Lizzie shrilled. "You think of payin' me when—"

She checked herself. The color left her face; the familiar, bitter lines returned to the compressed

mouth and the pinched forehead. With hands twisted in the bosom of the flowered silk dress she walked from the open door to her rocking chair, and sat down. She said:

"Then go, Adam Purcell!"

He was turning. Sally glanced at Ames. Her lips silently formed the word:

"Good-by."

Ames rose and pushed the kitchen door shut. He said:

"Not yet. Adam, don't go like that. You don't understand. Lizzie *wants* to share your trouble. She's in love with you, Adam."

The farmer stared blankly at the young man and the elderly woman.

"No, she ain't. Why, she's an old maid!" he said.

Lizzie sat still, so still she did not seem to breathe. Suddenly, with a heave and twist, she swung the rocking chair around, turning her back on them all.

"That's where you're wrong. That's where we all went wrong," said John Ames. "There's another thing we've overlooked. We've been shouting here. You all have been in and out, for hours. Yet where's my dog? Why hasn't Mac come dashing down to see what all the excitement's about? This house has been too silent."

Danows locked the outer door. He ordered:

"Keep everyone here, Mike. Come upstairs, Ames."

"I want Sally to come with us," Ames requested.

He led the way to his aunt's room, with the police chief and the girl behind. On the comforters at the foot of the bed Mac lay, nose outstretched, paws rigid. He did not stir as Ames touched him.

"Dead," Ames said. He stroked the inky head, his voice choked. "Of

aconite. He always slept on my pillow. He was on the pillow all evening, before I came to bed. For hours. His mouth was against the pillowcase. Just as Paul's was, in the other house. For as many hours as Paul's. I stayed awake. I lay on my back, most of the time. That's why I'm alive."

Danows bent swiftly and sniffed at the pillowcase. "But there's no stain on this, no odor of alcohol!" he protested.

"And there's no dog's footprints on it either, though Mac had muddy feet," Ames pointed out. "Lizzie changed the pillow slips, chief. Just a quick, simple bit of housekeeping, yet how it puzzled us. In Aunt Mary's case, and Paul's case, she changed the pillow slips before she cried out she'd discovered a body. This time she came upstairs, talking of Adam's comfort and apple pie? Don't you remember? I didn't think anything of it."

Chief Danows stared at Ames. "She went for something that was in the linen closet!" he gasped. "It didn't take her half a minute to come here, change 'em and muss them up—"

"But she couldn't get new pillowcases that Mac's feet had muddied." Ames nodded. "And that's our proof. Don't look for the poisoned pillow slips in the usual places. Try the water tanks, and the washing machine in the tenant houses. Lizzie was always washing. Once placed in water, the aconite will dissolve. Do you get it, chief?"

"Lizzie hangs a clean, innocent pillowcase on the line. She uses the same methods over and over, as murderers will. She got Paul to handle that letter paper when it was blank. Then she typed the letter herself. She got Aunt Mary to touch the

aconite bottle. As for the shotgun, a farm woman does know enough about them to change a safety catch, if she wants to study a little. You can't pin those early crimes on her, but find a pillowcase—even if it's already soaking in water—and this case is ironclad. The water will have aconite in it, and the print of Mac's paws will prove the pillow came from my bed. You can find that up here, somewhere."

Danows swore under his breath and ran for the bathroom. Ames reached out and found Sally in his arms. He pressed her face to his shoulder, tightly; she held as though they might yet be torn apart.

"Steady," he whispered. "Take it, Sally. It'll pass."

"But why? Why did she kill so many?"

He said gently: "For Adam, dear. She believed Adam wanted the farm. It was the biggest gift she could make."

Danows raced down the stairs ahead of them. He whirled Lizzie around, chair and all, as they entered the kitchen, shaking a dripping pillowcase faintly marked with the print of a dog's paws in her face. Lizzie's lips were locked. She clung tight to the chair arms. But at the sight of Ames and Sally arm in arm a spasm of pain more than physical crossed the pinched face.

"Ye fool!" she snapped at Danows. "Course I done it. Done it all. Ye was so dumb ye never guessed. Jest like a man. Take everything a woman does for ye with your eyes tight shut. I fixed Phil's shotgun and expected ye to convict Paul for it, but you said a 'accident.' Men are jest blind fools."

"But why'd you frame Paul?" Danows shouted. "Why'd you kill him?"

"Because he wasn't the marryin' kind," Lizzie flared. "Took me ridin'. Stopped because a few folks snickered. I was through with Paul Purcell right then and there. Adam said over and over this farm ought by rights to be his. He never had gumption enough to do anything to get it. I had the gumption."

Lizzie commenced to rock. Her eyes blazed.

"It was easy," she declared acidly, and looked across at Adam. "You and Paul never noticed that pipe you laid from the well had been cracked by frost. I did, but much I cared what kind of water a lazy Ames drank. When I was castin' around how to git rid of a man that wouldn't hunt, I remembered that pipe.

"Paul bought the bean poison, and Paul used all of it—except that when he threw the bag away there was still enough powder in the bottom for me."

The thin lips curled.

"My aunt was no loafer," Ames interrupted.

"Old maid, weren't she?" Lizzie retorted. "Much *she* had to live for." The work-gnarled hands trembled on the chair arm. Lizzie caught Ames' quick glance, and started. "Yes, my hands look jest like a man's," she snapped. "I put Paul's shirt under my skirt when I went to the barn yesterday, but you was too spry for the bull. You got some gumption yourself, young man. When you dug that body up, I knew I had to work quick. I had to give Mr. Danows a nice case to satisfy him, and get the estate for Adam, and—"

She faltered, and John Ames said:

"You knew Paul would never marry you, but you believed Adam would, if you could disgrace him and set everyone against him. You were

sure he'd marry you out of simple loyalty, but he was too straightforward and honest. You were sure he'd never turn you out. What you got for Adam would be half yours. That's where we went wrong. You had nothing to gain by murder as far as the law went, yet half of what Adam got would actually be yours."

"Don't you tell me my ideas," Lizzie flared. "Git out! All of ye. Leave me be. I *do* things, 'stead of jawin' about 'em. I took poison when I turned my back!"

Dr. Foster and Danows leaped toward her. John Ames unlocked the outer door, and pulled Adam and Sally gently outside. He had looked into the hell of a warped, frustrated soul.

"Leave me be!" It was Lizzie's only plea, and he hoped that she would die as she wished.

Outside the house was cold, keen air and the light of stars.

"She was mad," Sally whispered.

"We call it madness," Ames agreed, low-voiced. "But perhaps only because it is energy and desire above the normal comprehension. I don't think names matter. She wanted to please your father. To give him what she thought he wanted, she would do anything."

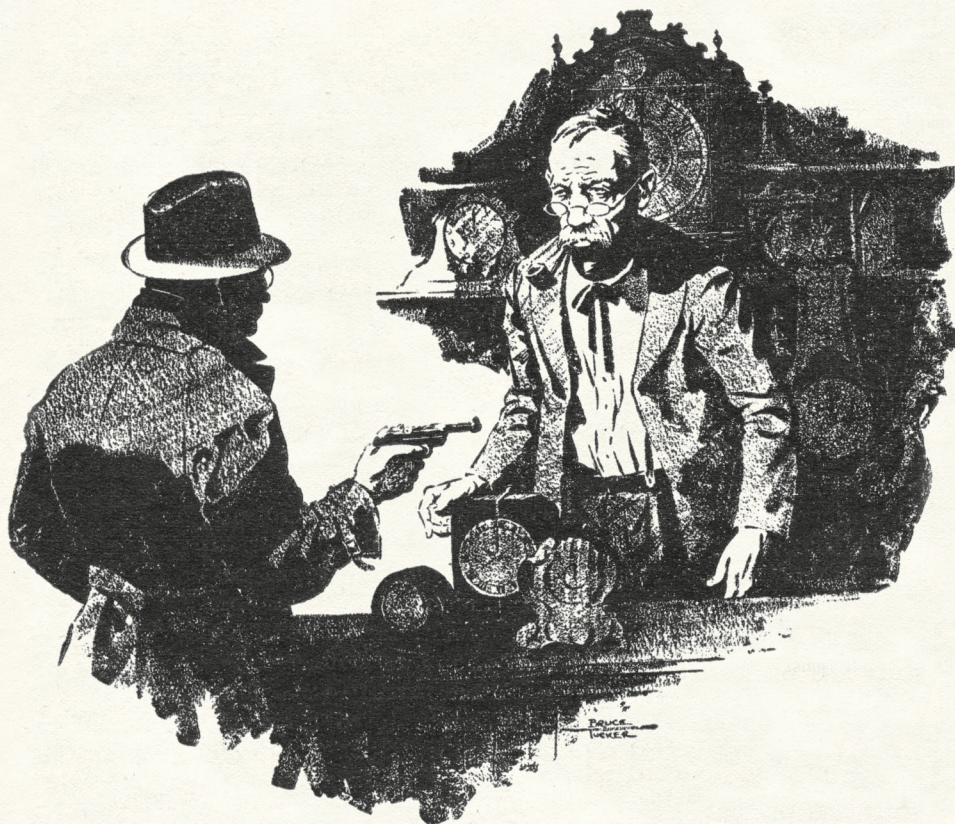
Adam plodded on, head bowed. Ames checked his stride, and Sally lingered beside him.

"You promised to go fishing with me some day," he said. "I want you to. I want you and your father to stay here. We must not blame the land, or people. Will you stay, Sally?"

"I want to stay, John. I want to see you when father doesn't need me."

He touched her hand. He said:

"Of course. I understand. Good night, dear."



TIME WILL TELL

by ROBERT ARTHUR

It was ironical, thought Lucas Lane, that a hundred faces had been turned blankly toward the murder, a hundred pair of hands upraised as if in horror at the deed, and yet in all the hundred not one hand had been able to prevent the killing, not one face had had eyes to see or mouth to tell of it.

Lucas Lane stood and gazed in abstraction at the body, lost in the fancy that had occurred to him. The hundred clocks that adorned the floor, the shelves, the counters at the rear of old Hans Wetzel's little shop ticked and tocked with busy, mo-

notonous regularity, marking off the seconds as they fled, just as they had ticked to mark the moment when the murderer's gun had spoken and life had left the shriveled, hunch-backed figure of Hans Wetzel.

The clocks ticked on, but Hans Wetzel lay where he had fallen—behind the curtain that separated the front and rear halves of the store, hands stretched out as if grasping at something that he had not been able to catch or hold. His head was pillowed on the worn pine boards, and blood had flowed from the wound between his eyes, curling in-

a thick line across the floor to a point just short of a dark knot in one of the planks, so that from above the blood and the knot made an ugly, enigmatic question mark.

Lucas Lane, from the full gaunt height which nature had bestowed upon him, without giving him the bulk and width necessary to proportion it properly, stared down at the body and the dried line of blood, and the question mark was mirrored in his mind.

Who?—it asked. *Why?* It did not have to ask *when*. That appeared already plain. The hundred clocks, hurrying *tick-tock, tick-tock* toward the ultimate end of time, had answered that question almost before it could be asked.

The assistant medical examiner straightened up from the end of the counter, capped and put away his fountain pen, and folded up the "Dead On Arrival" report he had been making out.

"I guess that's all I need, inspector," he said. "The body temperature is no sure index of time of death, as you know, of course. He could have died at midnight, easily enough. He could have died an hour later, too, or an hour earlier. Or two hours either way. He was old, the shop may have been chilly last night, he may have lost heat quickly—or it may have been warm, and he may not. How can we tell?"

"Thanks." Lucas Lane nodded absently. "The wagon can remove him now, as far as we're concerned. There's nothing he can tell us, though it would help a lot if he could."

The assistant M. E. looked past him at the hundred ancient clocks which had been Hans Wetzel's pride, his pets, his toys, his children. The dim little shop was old, too, though not so old as they—old and musty,

with the smell of vanished years thick in the air. The noonday autumn sun fell in a single splotch on the floor, coming through the tiny show window, but it was enough to warm the cramped interior and bring out sharp and clear the smell of old pine, the clean scent of oil, the lingering odor of furniture polish used on some of the clock cases.

"Time will tell," he quoted vaguely, indicating the clocks with a gesture of one chubby hand. "Too bad it can't, eh, inspector? If only all these timepieces could tell you something of what happened last night. 'Turn backward, turn backward, O time, in thy flight.'" He spoke the line awkwardly, as if it were seldom that poetry intruded into his business, "and tell us what happened in here last night."

Lucas Lane nodded. It was the same thought that had occurred to him. It had probably occurred to all the men who had been on the case since the beat cop, finding the shop locked that morning quite contrary to custom, had first peered intently in the window, then hurried around to the alley in the rear to stare into the back half of the little store. And after that, having seen what lay among the clocks, hastened to phone headquarters.

But the clocks ticked onward, and an ancient Swiss grandfather broke out into a slow, even sonorous chiming of the hour of twelve. An English long-case Smallwood hurried to imitate it, and as if the first chime had been a signal, several score others took up the announcement. Chimes tinkled sweetly, ancient bells struck, an artificial cuckoo popped out and seemed to direct its call mockingly at Lucas Lane.

Then, as suddenly as it had begun, the tintinnabulation ceased, with one

laggard bringing up the procession with a single silvery sweet stroke that hung in the air like a tiny voice.

For no apparent reason, the assistant M. E. shivered and hurried out. And Lucas Lane returned his moody gaze to the silent witnesses of the murder, that could only tell of the present and foretell the future, but could never throw light on the vanished past.

No, that was not quite true. For as he had already reflected, they had answered one question at least. They had told when Hans Wetzel had died.

At midnight, they said, Hans Wetzel had ceased to be aught than a crumpled figure on a bare board floor. For each night at midnight, before turning out the light in his little horological shop and mounting the narrow stairs to his two tiny rooms above, Hans Wetzel wound his clocks.

They were museum pieces, all of them, and only for sale if he liked you. They all ran. A good percentage of them—more than half, anyway—needed to be wound once each day. The rest, eight-day, thirty-day, and one specimen of a four-hundred-day clock, needed less attention.

Twenty of the one-day clocks had stopped. The rest, more than thirty, ticked busily. The twenty had stopped at various hours, most of them around six or seven that morning, but that indicated nothing for they had, of course, a slight reserve of power to provide for irregularities in the hour of winding. The fact that they had stopped meant they had not been wound. That the others still ran showed clearly they had been.

Which plainly indicated that Hans Wetzel's murderer had interrupted him in the midst of his mid-

night clock winding. In fact, the key to an ancient grandfather lay beneath his crumpled body, where he had dropped it as he fell.

But there was little help in knowing this. Anyone could have rapped on the door of the little shop the previous night, gotten Hans Wetzel to let him in, then shot the old German, turned out the lights, locked the store behind him as he left, and gone his way leaving no clues.

Or—Lucas Lane stared gloomily at the rear door of the shop, leading out into the alley behind. Any amateur thief could have picked the lock, and it would have been child's play to find a skeleton key to fit it. The murderer might have entered silently and hidden, to wait until Hans Wetzel came behind the curtain to wind his clocks, and then, as he was part way through, stepped out and killed him.

The men from the morgue wagon came then, and carried out the mortal remains of Hans Wetzel. Lucas Lane sighed.

"Jernegan," he said.

Sergeant Jernegan, a methodical, melancholy man, was at his side.

"Yes, inspector?"

"Bring in those four you rounded up—Wetzel's son, and the old German who says he left his jewelry with Wetzel. The lawyer, too. And the lad who claims he only stopped in to have Wetzel look at his watch. And you haven't picked up a trace of anyone else who might have been in the shop last night, have you?"

"No, sir." Jernegan shook his head. "We questioned the lady who lives across the street—Mrs. Hegelbauer, who seen his light go out just about twelve. We talked to the clerk in the delicatessen under her. The beat cop told us all he knew. We canvassed everybody who

might've noticed anyone go in or out during the evening. The delicatessen clerk and Mrs. Hegelbauer across the street had the best view, and since they seem to spend most of their time watching what goes on outside, we got most of our dope from them.

"Putting everything together, we figure he had four visitors in the evening, and we got the approximate times they arrived. We've found those four, and they all say they was here, and the times they admit to are close enough to the times as given us so that we think we've got 'em all. That don't prevent, of course, somebody we ain't learned about having been here."

"No," Lucas Lane agreed, "but we have to work with what we've got. So we'll assume we have them all. Send them in, Jernegan."

Jernegan went out, ducking his head as he went through the front of the shop to avoid the little brass ring that dangled from the pull of the dusty overhead bulb, twinkling in a beam of sunshine. Lane reflected that if fate really wanted to help him, it would have had one of the observant neighbors hear the pistol shot that killed Wetzel. But with an El at each end of the block, and trains roaring past every few minutes, the murderer would of course have timed his shot so that the report would be drowned in the thunder of the passing cars.

Then the four Lane wanted came in, with a clumping of feet, from the squad sedan outside in which they had been waiting.

They entered in single file and found places awkwardly as Lane stared at them. They were, respectively, Fritz Bernstein, a recent refugee from Germany; Frederick Wetzel, the dead man's businesslike son; Yasha Milberg, a typical pool-

room hanger-on; and Carl Helmuth, a well-known lawyer, a stout-bodied man with a Prussian haircut and gold-rimmed eyeglasses.

The inspector stared for a moment at the little slip of paper on which Jernegan had jotted down all the data he had assembled. Then he straightened.

"Mr. Bernstein," Lucas Lane said, soft-voiced, and the bearded little man nodded frightenedly. "You were in this shop last night at seven o'clock."

"Yah," Bernstein agreed, bobbing his head agitatedly. "Das is right."

"You told Sergeant Jernegan"—Inspector Lane glanced briefly at the pad in his hand, then put it away—"that when you left Germany, you managed to bring with you a number of precious stones, jewels, which were the only wealth you had. Knowing no one in this country, but hearing that Hans Wetzel had a wide reputation for honesty, you brought those gems to him and asked him to help you sell them, in order to get funds to support yourself and your invalid wife.

"Hans Wetzel took the stones and said that he would help you after he had a chance to look them over and estimate their value. That's correct, isn't it?"

The aged refugee nodded again, emphatically.

"Yah," he gulped. "Yah, Herr Inspector."

"Now," Lucas Lane continued, "last night you came here to ask Hans Wetzel to advance you some money on the stones for living expenses, and he told you he had not had time to examine them yet, and couldn't advance you any money until he did. They were still in his safe, there"—Lucas Lane gestured toward a crude strong box behind the counter—"and he promised to

examine them just as soon as he could, telling you to come back to-night. After that you left. Is that correct?"

"Ach, yah!" Fritz Bernstein agreed with pathetic earnestness.

"Maybe you were worried about your gems?" Lucas Lane suggested. "Maybe you suspected Hans Wetzel meant to cheat you of them? Maybe you came back later, to demand them from him, and when he wouldn't give them up, you killed him and took them!"

The refugee shrank back upon himself.

"Ach, nein, nein!" he cried, his face working. "I trusted Herr Wetzel! Come back I didn't!"

For the moment Lucas Lane dropped that line. Today the stones were gone.

"What," he asked, his tone mild again, "was Mr. Wetzel doing when you entered last night?"

The old man looked up, made a quick gesture with his hands.

"Ach," he said, in his difficult English, "he vas—you say figs—he vas figs a vatch. He hang id away before he talk to me."

He pointed to the repaired-watch board behind the counter where a score of old timepieces hung from little hooks. Lucas Lane nodded.

"And then he said he'd look at your jewels as soon as he could?"

The bearded man nodded. "He zay as zoon as he figs ein clog," he announced.

"As soon as he had fixed a clock," the tall detective inspector murmured. "Quite so. He didn't say what clock, did he?"

Bernstein shook his head.

Lucas Lane sucked the inside of his cheek thoughtfully. Then he turned to the second of the four, Frederick Wetzel, the dead man's son.

Frederick Wetzel was the younger of two sons, who were partners in a modern jewelry store. Trained by their father, three years before they had left him to open their own store. Though they had invited him to come with them, he had declined, preferring to remain where he had been for thirty years, though the clock-repair business scarcely paid its own expenses any more in these days of electrics and cheap alarms.

Lucas Lane quickly established that old Hans Wetzel's son had come at seven forty-five, to spend a few sociable minutes and to leave with his father an old Swiss watch that had been brought into the sons' store for repairs—business that they turned over to him whenever the repairs seemed likely to prove delicate or difficult.

"When you arrived," Lucas Lane asked, staring thoughtfully all about the little shop, as if to refresh his memory of its details, "what was your father doing?"

"Finishing supper," the tall, blond young man told him. "He gets his own meals. He'd just gone up to his rooms to get some wurst and rye bread and a bottle of beer out of the icebox. He brought it down to eat, as usual, and he was tidying up when I came in."

Inspector Lane nodded. They had found the empty beer bottle and a few crumbs in a trash basket.

"Then he wasn't working on a clock—the clock he had told Mr. Bernstein he had to fix before looking at the jewels?"

Frederick Wetzel shook his head.

"There was a clock on the counter—that one there," he stated, and pointed to an old electric clock that was at one end of the counter, giving off a faint humming that indicated it was running. "But he wasn't working on it. Maybe he in-

tended to. Though I don't think it likely because he hated those electric things. He always would ask what happened when the lights went out. Did Father Time stop, too? He never sold them, and—"

He interrupted himself to stride to the counter, to peer at the small tag affixed to the clock.

"Mrs. Gruber," he read aloud. "That's probably Mrs. Adolph Gruber, his old friend. If it was her clock, he might have agreed to repair it as a special favor. Though I don't think he did it before . . . before he died, because it's wrong. It says a quarter to eight now. Father was always insistent that any clock he fixed must keep time before he released it. This one still seems to be broken."

"And there's nothing more you can tell us?" Lucas Lane asked, without much hope.

Wetzel shook his head. Inspector Lane turned. It was the sallow youth, Milberg's, turn now.

Milberg's story was that he had stopped in at approximately eight forty—Frederick Wetzel had left between eight and eight ten—merely to ask old Hans to glance at his watch, a cheap American make, which had stopped running.

"What was he doin' when I came in?" he repeated Lucas Lane's question. "He had a clock—that clock"—he pointed to the erring electric on the counter—"in his hands and he was lookin' at it as if it was somebody he didn't like. An' when I handed him my watch an' ast him to look at it, he practically thrun it back at me. He sorta waved his hand like it and the clock was the same thing, an' said, 'Bah! Trash!' Then something about honest clocks and watches that I didn't hear, since I was goin' out then. Heck, you'd thunk to hear him—"

Lane cut the youth's remarks short.

"That's enough," he announced, and turned to the last of the four, the stoutish, bespectacled lawyer with the stiff *en brosse* haircut.

Carl Helmuth gave his information in a stolid but precise voice. He had been engaged recently in finding out about a small estate a sister of Hans Wetzel, recently dead, had left in Berlin. He had dropped in—at ten exactly, he announced—to say that there was no hope of getting any of the value of it out of Germany under the present laws.

This, the attorney said, had taken a bare ten minutes. At ten after ten he had left. He had been the last man known to have seen Hans Wetzel alive. Of Hans' movements thereafter nothing was known, save through the testimony of the clocks that said he had died at midnight, and the further testimony of Mrs. Hegelbauer, who lived above the delicatessen across the street. She had told Sergeant Jernegan that, glancing out of her windows just about midnight, she had seen the light in the front of Wetzel's little horological shop go out.

Lucas Lane considered these things a moment, then he asked Helmuth the same question he had asked the others. What had Wetzel been doing when he entered?

The lawyer pursed his lips, as if considering his words so that the answer would be legalistically correct.

"He had the electric clock, the one there, in his hands," he said after a moment. "As I came in, he put it down and put away a screwdriver, or some other tool. I gathered that he was just about to start work on it, or perhaps had just finished. We

then discussed our business, shook hands, I said good night, and left."

"You didn't see any jewels in evidence, or a cash box?"

"None."

"Mm-m-m." Lucas Lane bit the inside of his cheek again, then tugged at the lobe of his ear. Neither gesture helped much to stimulate thought. "He repaired a watch, he ate supper, he was preparing to repair an electric clock—though judging from the fact that it now says seven thirty, he didn't succeed, it seems, in fixing it—"

For a long moment Lucas Lane paused, his mouth open as if a word had formed that remained unuttered. Then he went on, in a normal tone.

"All commonplace enough. He didn't have Mr. Bernstein's jewels out, or we could theorize that someone came in, saw them, and killed him on the spur of the moment for them."

"Perhaps he took them out after I left," Helmuth, the lawyer suggested. "He died, after all, at midnight. As I went out, I saw him bending over, getting something out from behind the counter. It might have been the box with the jewels. In that case—"

Lane's eyebrows lifted. "Yes, so it might. A chance intruder. Well, that seems the only solution we have to offer at the moment. Assuming, that is, that all of you gentlemen have sound evidence that you were elsewhere than here at midnight?"

He stared at them, levelly, and they all squirmed a bit uneasily.

"Me," Fritz Bernstein began to mumble, "I was home, in bed. Mine frau—"

Lucas Lane stopped him with a gesture, and looked at the dead man's son. Frederick Wetzel smiled ruefully.

"I guess," he said, "I was at a midnight show last night. I have the ticket stub, but—"

"We'll take your word for it," Lucas Lane told him blandly, "for the moment. And you, Mr. Milberg?"

The pimply youth squirmed.

"I was shootin' pool," he said sullenly. "Up the street three blocks. John's Pool Parlor. I can find a dozen—"

"We will ask them," Lucas Lane's tone was smooth. "And Mr. Helmuth?"

"I was in my apartment," the lawyer told him. "My servant will testify. Except for a ten-minute walk for fresh air. From eleven fifty-five to five after twelve. The doorman of my building, which is five blocks from here, will testify. It leaves me with no alibi, but ten minutes is scarcely sufficient time in which to commit a murder, under the circumstances. Do you not agree with me?"

"I quite agree," Lucas Lane conceded. "And still we seem to be no further advanced."

His eyes rested meditatively upon the electric clock, humming busily on the counter. It now read seven fifteen, though every other running clock in the place indicated that the correct hour was twelve forty-five.

"In fact," he mused, "like this erring timepiece here, we seem actually to be progressing backward. But if we wait long enough, eventually the clock will indicate the right time. And perhaps if we probe deep enough, our research will bring forth the right answer as to which of you four last night murdered Hans Wetzel."

They stirred, uneasily, as if wishing to protest, yet none of them wanting to speak first lest he bring

suspicion upon himself. Lucas Lane's eyes seemed to fix them all at once.

"Sergeant Jernegan"—his voice was soft in the silence—"are you ready to arrest the guilty man?"

Sergeant Jernegan gulped audibly.

"Yes, sir!"

"You know which he is, of course?"

Jernegan shuffled his feet.

"No, sir!" he blurted out at last. "All of 'em could've done it. They could've gone away, and come back again at midnight, killed him, turned out the light, gone out the back way. Them alibis. I bet I could crack 'em all like they was pecan nuts. But, gosh, inspector, I dunno *which*."

Lucas Lane let his eyes move from face to face. Finally he spoke.

"Mr. Helmuth," he asked, "did Hans Wetzel know that you are a secret agent?"

Helmuth paled.

"That is not so!" he exclaimed.

"It is so," Lane told him coolly. "I had the fact from headquarters twenty minutes ago, along with the fact that Mr. Milberg once was in the State reformatory, Mr. Wetzel once arrested for reckless driving, and that nothing is known of Mr. Bernstein. That you have been serving foreign interests is known to our Secret Service, and they passed the word along to our department."

"Why, you—" the lawyer began, in an excess of anger, and stepped forward, but retreated as Sergeant Jernegan moved toward him.

"And Hans Wetzel was an ardent American," Lucas Lane told him. "Somehow he discovered your anti-American activities. He threatened to expose them. He had a wide influence among German-Americans,

and your business would have suffered severely. You were afraid of exposure. So last night, as a final resort, you killed him.

"Sergeant Jernegan!"

Sergeant Jernegan almost had the satisfaction of smacking a hard fist against a square jaw. Not quite. Helmuth dropped his fists in time, and the sergeant only had the pleasure of snapping on the handcuffs.

Later, Sergeant Jernegan delivered to Inspector Lane the small chamois sack of jewels that had been taken from behind some unused legal tomes in the lawyer's office. Lane ran them through his fingers.

"He took them to make it look like robbery, of course," he mused aloud. "Clever, wasn't it, to kill poor old Hans Wetzel at ten o'clock, and convince us the murder occurred at twelve? By winding half the clocks before he left, and leaving Hans there, among them, as if he had died while doing it—"

Sergeant Jernegan shook his head in bafflement.

"I guess I got it clear, how you explained it, inspector," he muttered. "How he knew Wetzel's habit and figured out the dying-at-midnight alibi. How he killed him, put him there, then went out, leaving the door to latch behind him. Yeah, and I see how he could've left a length of black thread running through the ring on the light pull, and doubling back out underneath the front door, so that when he went out for his walk at midnight he could hurry over, walk past the shop, catch the thread and pull the light out, pull the thread free and stuff it in his pocket, then hurry back to his apartment. So that Mrs. Hegelbauer saw the light go out at midnight, the usual time for Wetzel to turn it out.

"Yeah, and I see how smart it was of him, like you say, to tell the whole truth all the way through, except for the one point about killing Wetzel before he left right after ten o'clock. So that two things—the fact we thought Wetzel died at midnight, and a complete lack of any evidence against him—would've cleared him, even though we knew about the possible motive you sprung on him, if you hadn't known it was him. But—"

"But what?" Lucas Lane asked.

"But I'm gonna go nutty if you don't quit stalling and tell me how you *knew* the evidence was phony, and that Hans Wetzel really died at ten o'clock, not at twelve."

"Oh, that," Lucas Lane murmured. "Hans Wetzel told me."

"Hans Wetzel!" Sergeant Jernegan gaped at him.

"Hans Wetzel and the electric clock that was running backward," Lucas Lane elucidated. "You see, Helmuth told the exact truth. When he came in, Wetzel was just finishing repairing the thing. It was an old one, outmoded, but it belonged to a friend, so he fixed it.

"He connected it up, I guess, while Helmuth talked. Then perhaps Helmuth drew his gun. Somehow Wetzel knew he was going to be killed. He had no way of calling help, or of letting us know who killed him. So he did the only thing he could."

"But what *could* he do?" Jernegan demanded. "Why, there ain't nothing—"

"He let us know the exact moment at which he died," Lucas Lane said. "He started the electric clock in his hands. You know how those early electrics went—you had to spin a little knob on the back to get the

motor going. But if you spun it the wrong way, the clock went *backward*.

"So Wetzel spun it the wrong way as he set the clock down, with Helmuth's gun staring in his face. He set it going backward. You remember how, as we looked at it, it kept *losing* time instead of gaining it?"

"Jeepers," Jernegan muttered. "Creepers."

"Exactly," Lane agreed with, with melancholy satisfaction. "While every other clock in the place was going ahead, the electric was going backward, away from the hour of the killing. When I first looked at it, it said eight o'clock. That was when it was really twelve. Half an hour later, it was seven thirty.

"Now assuming that when the electric started, it indicated the same hour as all the rest, it had either started backward at ten o'clock this morning—which would take it back to eight while the others were going ahead to twelve—or it *had started backward at ten o'clock last night, when Helmuth was in the shop!*"

"Well, punch my time clock!" Jernegan ejaculated. "Sure. By running backward, the clock was able to tell you the time it was started, which old Wetzel wanted you to know was the time he died. And ten o'clock meant Helmuth."

"Exactly," Lucas Lane told him. "Which was what Wetzel hoped for. It was a slim reed, but it was all he could give us to go on. You know, Jernegan, I think I'll have to give the M. E. credit for this case. It was he who set me thinking properly when he went poetic and said: '*Turn backward, turn backward, O time, in thy flight, and tell us what happened in here last night.*'"

"Which, after all, you know, is exactly what did happen."



DEATH MUSIC

by BEN CONLON

It was the sound of music—loud, shrill, eerie—that awakened Jim Cantrell.

For a brace of seconds he was muddled, uncertain, wavering on the line that separates the world of reality from the deep, mysterious domain of sleep. Then—because

that was one of the assets of his business—he snapped into action fast; he yanked the chain of the night-table lamp, tumbled out of bed, pulled on his shoes, threw a dressing gown over his pajamas, and shuffled out into the semigloom of the hallway.

It was swing music that he heard, music as modern as the newest mechanical death-bird that soared over the Westwall laying eggs of destruction on soldiers using the latest slang but grappling with the most ancient hate lusts of man. Like all that, too, it was age-old, primitive, barbaric, a weird tumult of tom-toms and reeds and brasses, with a xylophone obbligato that rattled like the chalky bones of dancing skeletons.

It was as creepy, as incredible, as this odd setting that Jim Cantrell found himself in, this dank, castle-like, almost medieval mansion of Daniel Forsythe; the *late* Daniel Forsythe, now lying in his coffin in the great drawing-room downstairs. It was shameful, this, someone tuning in on a hotcha night spot. In a house of death, at close to 3 a. m.

Cantrell's resentment rose hotly as the brasses blared anew. Or maybe it was because of the melody—or cacophony—brayed out from the room of Harvey Forsythe, the very man who had hired him to come to this house tonight "in case something might happen." The summons had seemed screwy enough at the time; but now, with Harvey Forsythe so utterly immune to decency that he could sit and listen to music like this while his own father lay dead in the room immediately beneath him—

Indignantly, Cantrell rushed down the hallway, tried Harvey Forsythe's door. Locked.

Cantrell looked up at the transom opening. No light in the room.

"Harvey!" he called.

No answer. The music toned down a trifle. A woman's husky-sweet night-clubbish voice cut through it:

"Ro-ol-l-l out the barrel,
We'll have a bar-rel of fun-n-n—"

Cantrell could hear folks coming out of their rooms on his own and the topmost floor. He turned and saw old Daniel Forsythe's niece, the pert and youthful Molly Carver, wearing some light negligée that clung to her oomph-girl form; right behind her saw her fiancé, Dr. Francis Galusha, and a second later caught a glimpse of old Forsythe's business partner, Curtis Benton, coming out of his second-floor room.

"What the devil is this?" Benton demanded with flippant crustiness.



"Probably drunk again!" a new voice cut in, the voice of Molly's hard-boiled Aunt Amelia. Aunt Amelia was in a quilted robe. She scudded down the hallway like a square-rigger with all canvas set. And, as usual, she took command. "Dozed off in his chair, I reckon; knocked against the radio and started it, or—"

"All right! All right!" Molly Carver cut in peevishly. "So what? No use in blowing your top, Aunt Amelia. We'll just get the key from Marie and go in and turn it off."

"From Marie!" Aunt Amelia came back. "Yeah. Where is she? She's not here."

She surveyed the group. Snively, the butler, had joined the excited gathering now. "If some of these men would break down the door,"

Aunt Amelia went on acidly, "instead of moping around—"

"Right. I'll force it open," Jim Cantrell said. He glanced about for Marie—Marie had been a sort of housekeeper in the Forsythe country home for years—and finding her still absent, stepped close to Harvey Forsythe's door, hurled his hundred and eighty pounds against it. The lock smashed. Cantrell was half catapulted into the dark room.

"Watch out for yourself!" Aunt Amelia snapped. "Harvey has moody fits of temper after he's been drinking."

Cantrell disregarded the warning of the old termagant, groped about. A blade of light from the corridor picked out the mother-of-pearl push button in the wall. Cantrell clicked on the lights—and gasped.

Harvey Forsythe's contorted figure lay in a tangle of covers on the bed. His face was purplish, his eyes protruded from their sockets.

Cantrell snapped off the radio and started across to the big, old-fashioned four-poster, but Dr. Galusha was ahead of him. The physician lifted an arm, felt for a pulse.

"As dead as the early Roman emperors," Galusha announced. He had a cultivated accent and what some folks judged to be a smart-Aleck manner. "Still warm, but dead. Oh, quite." He peered down at the corpse. "Hm-m-m! Strangled. In other words, we have a murder case on our hands!"

Jim Cantrell looked over the heads of those in the hallway and saw David Watrous coming down the stairway. Watrous—really the "Co." of the chemical house of Forsythe, Benton & Co.—was fully dressed, and had his usual air of calmness. His mouth gaped, though, when

Snively, the butler, told him what had happened.

Snively was pasty-faced, nervous. His long nose was twitching like a rabbit's, his small, weak gash of a mouth trembling. "It's 'orrible, Mr. Watrous!" he was saying. "Simply 'orrible!" Thousands of miles of leaping salt water and twenty-odd years in the States had failed to dilute his cockney accent. "W'en I 'eard the wireless set on, I never dreamed of anything as 'orrible as this!"

Watrous had regained full control of himself. His grainy gray eyes were cold. "Of course it's tragic, Snively," he said, "but I don't see that getting hysterical will help any."

Curtis Benton had walked into the bedroom and was looking meaningly at the open window. "Do you think—" he started to ask Cantrell.

Loud-voiced Aunt Amelia cut into his question. "Not much to think about *this*!" she snorted. "Any fool could figure it out. Someone who hated Harvey—one of the many, I might add—climbed up that porch outside, strangled Harvey, probably knocked against the radio in the dark room and turned it on somehow; and right now is making his escape while you men are gabbling like a bunch of high-school girls. If—"

"I'll ask all of you to vacate this room at once," Jim Cantrell interrupted. "I want to question everybody in this house. Snively, where's Marie? Seems as though that infernal racket would have awakened her. She sleeps right on the next floor above, doesn't she?"

"Y-yes. Yes, sir." Snively nodded his head. "I'll dash up and rap on 'er door, sir."

He started toward the stairway—

just a bit too eagerly, Cantrell thought, somehow.

Cantrell stepped out of the room, clamped a big hand on the butler's shoulder, whirled him around. "Wait a minute. You needn't go up."

"But—" Snively tried to pull away. His voice had a quavery stridency. "Let me go up—"

He tried to pull away again, and this time Cantrell shoved him back roughly from the stairway.

"Would you mind going up, Dr. Galusha?" Cantrell asked. "Marie's been acting strangely. Possibly with death in the house, and then this ungodly squawking of the radio at this hour, and her nerves on edge, she may have fainted."

"Righto!" Dr. Galusha started up the stairway.

A moment or two later, Cantrell heard a door above crash in, heard a light snap on. There was a pause, an ominous pause—

Molly Carver rustled close to Cantrell. "Like one of those spooky movies, eh, Jim?" she said. "And a chance for you to distinguish yourself."

Cantrell was sober-faced. "Yeah." He resented this air of lightness. He had observed that though this was a house of death, it was not a house of sadness. No tears had been shed over the demise of the aged Daniel Forsythe; none were being shed over the murder of old Daniel's only son, Harvey.

He noted that Molly's spaniel-brown eyes were very bright, that her ginger-colored hair was unruffled. Cantrell's mind was a snarl of suspicions. Plenty of motive here for the murder of Harvey Forsythe: Neither Snively, the butler, nor Marie, the housekeeper, had ever liked Harvey any better than Harvey had liked them. Quite possibly

they hated him more than the other servants did, for Snively and Marie lived in the same house with him and caught the brunt of his domineering moods more than the other servants did—the chauffeur who lived over the garage with his wife, the maid; the gardener and the cook, who also lived in an outbuilding of the big estate. Yet any of the Forsythe servants might well hate Harvey—the more so since it was generally known that Harvey had planned to sell the estate after his father's death and enjoy the conveniences of a city hotel.

Even the pert and pretty Molly Carver would have had a motive; as Daniel Forsythe's only niece, and with old Daniel's only son out of the way, the vast Forsythe fortune—

Cantrell struggled to purge unfounded suspicions from his mind. Yet, unwillingly, his mind kept functioning along sinister lines. Young Dr. Galusha was cultured, but almost penniless, folks said; with Harvey gone, Galusha, as the husband of Molly Carver—

"Oh, Cantrell!" Galusha's calm voice came from the head of the stairway. "Slip up here a second, like a good chap, will you?"

Jim Cantrell addressed the small assemblage in the hallway. "I'll ask you—in fact, I'm ordering you—to remain here in a group until I return."

Aunt Amelia sniffed audibly. Snively, the butler, slid out of the way almost like a snake gliding from a path as Cantrell mounted the stairs.

Galusha led the way along the top hallway, turned into Marie's room with Cantrell on his heels.

Marie, the housekeeper, a mountain of a woman, was lying on her back in her clean metal bed. Her eyes were wide open, staring un-

blinkingly at the central dome which Galusha had snapped on. Her mouth was partly open.

"Good heavens!" Cantrell exclaimed.

Dr. Galusha smiled superiorly. "Get that peach-pit odor? Sort of like almonds, eh? Prussic acid. Death was instantaneous, practically. Prussic doesn't stall around. It kills at once."

His smile broadened. "Damn that smug smile!" Cantrell thought.

"I think your mystery is about solved, Sherlock," Galusha snickered. "Certainly this woman had a motive for killing Harvey Forsythe. Hate is the strongest of motives. And remorse—or fear—often grips a killer after the crime to such a degree that suicide results, more particularly in the case of a woman. And she was strong enough to do the job on Harvey. Or do you believe," Galusha asked, "that the case is more involved than I make it?"

"Let's go back to the middle floor," the detective snapped.

Jim Cantrell decided not to telephone the police at the nearby town of Middleville. After all, it was past three o'clock. He could not expect them to arrive till almost four. Clues could grow cold in the

interim. And anyhow, Jim Cantrell had a particular yen to solve this case on his own. Here was his chance; he didn't want anyone else gumming it up.

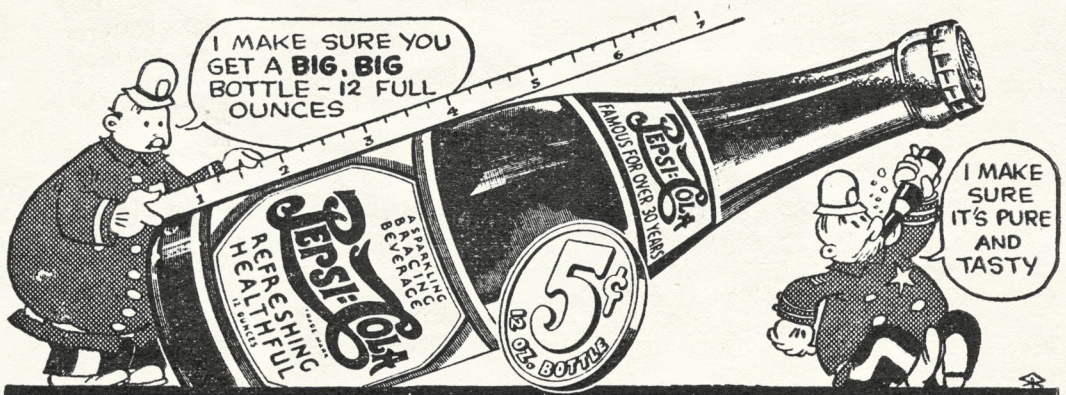
He said to the group: "I will ask all of you to descend to the library. I'll be with you there as soon as I can."

With everyone downstairs—each one would be keeping tabs on the others; there would be no trickery—Cantrell made a minute inspection of Harvey Forsythe's room, in fact of every room on the second and third floors of the house.

From Harvey's room he gazed down upon the deep lawn of the estate, its statuary skeleton-white in the moonlight. The murderer might have left tracks somewhere on the edge of that lawn. Crabby old Aunt Amelia had been right—at least in one of her deductions; someone had climbed up that porch outside of Harvey's room, and strangled Harvey. But as to making his escape—

The detective gazed down at the contorted face of Harvey Forsythe. Who could have hated Harvey Forsythe enough to have strangled him in his bed?

Personally, Cantrell's belief was that a certain amount of Harvey's supposed meanness was just a mis-



interpretation of his stupidity. For stupid Harvey had certainly been. In college, Cantrell recalled, Harvey had been nicknamed "Saphead" Forsythe; the term had been current then. Harvey and Cantrell had been graduated together, Cantrell to study law and later open a private detective agency, Harvey to mope through life as a rich man's son. Too much money, perhaps. Most certainly, too much drinking.

Yet Jim Cantrell was thinking, too, about Harvey Forsythe's good points. When he had called in Cantrell to spend the night—the night before old Daniel's funeral was to be held from the great house—he would not name whom he suspected among the relatives and friends who were up for the funeral; obviously he had a suspicion that something was not quite right, that something menaced his safety, but wouldn't actually taint the name of any man or woman by being definite about it. "It may be just a fancy of mine," he told Cantrell. "But this sort of thing is right up your alley. You're a good deal sharper than I am, and you might run into something. Whatever fee you name will be O. K. with me."

Yet Jim Cantrell was not thinking of fees as he wandered through the rooms of the mansion. Some strange ichor had washed into his blood; he was not just a house guest now, he was a man hunter—and hot on a trail.

"Like one of those spooky movies," Molly Carver had said. Cantrell recalled the phrase as he went through the rooms. There was something of moss and mold about this old place; a patina of age over everything. Daniel Forsythe had liked old things. Old oak doors, old chests and ship models. Old servants. Old China and old paintings

and musty old books, and silver that had not been used since a governor of the State had been entertained at the Forsythe mansion in the '90s.

Jim Cantrell descended to the ground floor, clicked on his flashlight, and spent a few minutes inspecting the ground beneath Harvey Forsythe's window. He was bitter-eyed and his face was set in bony lines as he rejoined the group in the library.

"I will ask every person here to remove his shoes," he said. "Or *her* shoes, as the case may be," he added.

Strangely enough, there was no protest—from the men. Dr. Galusha was the first to sit down and unlace his shoes. David Watrous went about the task in a dignified way—as he did everything. Curtis Benton and Molly Carver—who kicked off her mules almost flippantly—looked at Cantrell oddly. Snively, the butler, was oily about it, as usual. But Aunt Amelia was fiery-eyed.

"Such rot!" she exploded. "I won't follow such a silly order! Of course, it's plain that you want to compare our shoes with the prints left outside by the probable murderer, but—"

"There can't be any 'but' here," Cantrell rapped out tersely. "I must insist that you remove your shoes."

Aunt Amelia's face took on hard lines. "If you think I wrung that little whippersnapper's neck, you're crazy!" she stormed. "I could have done it, and there were times that I'd have liked to! And I'm strong enough to have done it, and I've climbed the Matterhorn, so I guess shinning up the pillars of that little porch wouldn't faze me, but— Oh, hell! Look over the shoes, if you must make the both of us appear ridiculous!"

She unlaced her broad, mannish shoes with strong, efficient fingers, and almost threw them at Cantrell. "You dope!" the old battle-ax ranted. "Haven't you enough brains to figure out that any one of us here could have committed this murder in other shoes, and not necessarily the ones we've given you?"

Cantrell smiled slightly. "I have," he said.

"Don't you see," Aunt Amelia followed up quickly, "that any one of us, if we had made any footprints outside, would have *hidden* those shoes and put on others? Don't you see that even if you found the murder shoes bunked away somewhere in this house, you couldn't convict any of us by this crazy trick you're pulling now? Why, I'd like to bet a hundred dollars that none of those shoes fit the footprints outside!"

"I'd bet much more than that myself," Cantrell agreed calmly. "In fact, I'm telling you definitely that none of the shoes I've taken will fit the footprints outside."

"Then what in the name of—"

Cantrell smiled into the face of the choleric Aunt Amelia, then turned his back on her and addressed Snively, the butler.

"Would you like to make a confession, Snively?" he asked.

Snively cowered in his chair. "Before God," he said, "I didn't 'ave a thing to do with them murders, sir!"

"I know you didn't," Cantrell told him.

Aunt Amelia's snort this time was like that of a frenzied wild mustang.

"Positively, I never saw or heard such a crazy crackpot in all my born years!" she exclaimed.

Cantrell was smiling again. "I'll tell you how Harvey Forsythe was

murdered," he said. "It will be rather surprising to all of you here—except the killer, of course."

He turned to face the butler once more. "Snively, while I was poking around upstairs, I discovered that the set of silver—the one used when the governor was a house guest here many years ago—was missing from the storeroom. The chest was loaded with old kitchen utensils, instead. And the silver was all packed and craftily hidden in the clothespress of Marie's room. I think I can understand why you were so eager to go up and find her when she didn't appear in response to the radio music, rather than have any of the rest of us surprise her packing up that stolen silver, perhaps?"

"That's true, sir." Snively's voice was quavery. "I ain't denyin' it, not at a time like this. Yes, since we was to be given our notice by Mr. 'arvey—and no extra pay, neither, and we workin' 'ere so many years—I was goin' to get away with that silver. It was my idea. I forced Marie into it. We could get it out o' here durin' the funeral in the mornin', an' I 'ad a ready sale for it."

His voice cracked. He broke down and sobbed.

"Well, that's that," Cantrell said. "Those tears, by the way, are the first I have seen in this house of death."

He went on: "The murderer, a very resourceful person, came to this house with highly ingenious plans to commit a perfect crime. Before strangling Harvey Forsythe, that killer wanted a goat—some logical person to blame the murder on. And who could be better than a dead person, a supposed suicide through fear or remorse?"

"The killer picked on poor Marie, knowing that Marie really had a

motive, so took the life of Marie—with prussic acid. Whether it was forced into her mouth, or slipped into a drink, I don't know, and it doesn't matter much. But it killed Marie instantly. And that was the first part of the plan. Marie could scarcely utter an outcry if prussic acid were forced into her mouth. Isn't that right, Dr. Galusha?"

"That could be correct. Quite so," the physician conceded.

"O. K. After disposing of Marie and locking her in her room, to be discovered later as a suicide, the killer had to get into Harvey Forsythe's room, kill him, and escape, leaving either no clue, or a false clue. Accordingly, the killer came downstairs while the rest of us were sleeping, padded down quietly in stocking feet. Going to the casket of Daniel Forsythe, in the next room, that person removed the coffin lid and the flowers that covered it, easily slipped off the elastic-sided shoes from the feet of the corpse, and put them on. The guilty person decided that if any footprints were to be found, the prints would be from a strange pair of shoes."

There were exclamations of surprise from the group of listeners. Cantrell went on relentlessly:

"It was a simple matter to leave the house quietly by the front door, climb up the porch pillar, get into Harvey Forsythe's room and strangle him as he slept. The killer then showed considerable cleverness by turning on the radio in Harvey's room, locking the door, slipping downstairs again, replacing the elastic-sided shoes on Daniel Forsythe's corpse, and putting the flowers back carefully, all in time to get upstairs again when the radio commenced to play."

"But wouldn't a radio play almost

as soon as it was switched on?" Curtis Benton asked.

"Modern models would," Cantrell told him. He pointed to the costly set at the end of the library. "That one, for instance, would play almost as soon as you turned it on. But certainly not the old piece of junk that was in Harvey's room. In spite of the costly cabinet, it's one of the oldest type; the type that came in right after the battery sets. You may recall how long it took for the tubes to warm up in those ancient sets, and the tubes were old, anyhow. The killer knew radios, gauged things so as to be back in bed—'sleeping'—and be as disturbed as the rest of us when the radio roused us. If tracks were found outside, presumably they'd be the tracks of some stranger who had killed Harvey; some stranger who bumped against the radio in the dark room and accidentally turned it on. In that case, Marie's supposed suicide could have been explained in many ways—unemployment, anything. But if no tracks registered, then Marie would have most certainly been judged to be the murderer."

"But who could have turned on the radio?" Curt Benton asked.

"I'll leave that to you, Benton," Cantrell retorted crisply. "It was either the corpse of Daniel Forsythe that played the radio . . . or it was *you!* For only the shoes of the corpse—and *your* shoes contain pollen!"

Benton went plaster-pale. "Pollen? Why—"

"Pollen!" Cantrell repeated grimly. "When you took off that blanket of lilies from the casket—a floral tribute you had sent, incidentally, Benton—you fairly powdered the floor with pollen. It got on your socks, and then in the shoes

that you took from the corpse that I examined a few minutes ago in the drawing room—and then in the shoes that you gave me so confidently."

There was utter silence in the big room as Cantrell went on: "That pollen was tracked into Harvey's room when you took off the shoes there to get downstairs quietly. It was tracked into your own room. Oh, I realize you know many things, Benton, but you've always lived in the city, and flowers didn't interest you very much, except perhaps to send to a woman. Pollen grains are persistent little things. They contain a granular protoplasm with oily particles—which is why they are clinging to your socks right now, and if you want my magnifying glass to look at them—"

The detective dodged the two quick shots that Benton fired from the small revolver he had snapped from his pocket. Then, diving low, Cantrell tried to get Benton by the shins and pull him off balance. The third shot—which grazed the flesh of Cantrell's right leg—didn't stop him. He had Benton fairly well in hand even before David Watrous' big fist knocked the murderer senseless.

Dr. Galusha ran upstairs, came

back down with an instrument case.

"This is my game, fixing you up, old fellow," he said to Cantrell. "But I'd say that your game, surely, would be doing—well, just what you've done so efficiently. I'd never have suspected Benton. No motive, so far as I could see, and—"


"It just had to be Benton," Cantrell said. "No one else of you had pollen in your shoes, because no one else of you was shoeless in the drawing room where the casket is. And as for motive, don't forget that without Harvey Forsythe—who with old Daniel's death would become head of Forsythe, Benton & Co.—a clever man like Benton would have cleaned up a fortune with this new material the firm makes to put in gas masks. Poor Harvey was a gentleman, but he was a bungler in business. Benton didn't want him gummings things up, and he was cold enough to kill him—or anyone else who got in his way."

Cantrell felt a hearty thwack on the shoulder. He turned. Strong-faced Aunt Amelia was looking at him. There was no smile on that battle-ax map of hers, but there was admiration in her eyes.

"By heck, you got brains, young man!" she said. "Damned if you haven't got brains!"

CURTISS

Butterfinger



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WORLD?

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IN PURE
DEXTROSE
THE SUGAR
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ONE LAST NIGHT

by CORNELL WOOLRICH

The night was dark-blue, and a big silver dollar for a moon was stuck into it up above. He was only two years older—and that was young enough yet—but the walk along the road out to the dance pavilion seemed longer than it used to be, maybe because he was walking it alone and not with her.

A car racketed by, going the same way he was, bulging with girls and fellows all piled in pell-mell, on their way to the Saturday-night

dance. Every Saturday night they still came from miles away, as he used to with her. Only she was doing it with somebody else now.

He wouldn't talk to her, he wouldn't even let her see that he was there. He'd just stand quietly by for a few minutes, looking at her once again. Then he'd take that away with him.

He passed under some kind of skinny tree, with its branches all sticking out without any leaves on

them, and the moon shining down through them made a lot of horizontal stripes show up across his body, as if he were wearing a convict's suit. He side-stepped quickly, as though the illusion had frightened him, and brushed his hands slowly down his clothes, as if he were trying to rub the phantom stripes out. Then he went on quickly, with his head lowered a little. Yes, it seemed a longer walk than it used to be.

The pavilion looked the same, as it slowly came around the last turn of the road into sight. The same russet glow like a smoky sunset or a harvest moon gleaming out from under its low eaves. The same semicircle of darkened cars parked around its entrance. The same wind sighing through the trees, dropping scattered notes of music as it went, like raindrops shaken off the boughs.

When somebody else's arms are around
you,
Do you ever think of me?

He stopped a minute there by the roadside looking at it, then he went up the graveled walk, past the parked cars with their sly red cigarette embers winking here and there and their stifled gusts of laughter, to the entrance and inside.

The music turned loud and the lights turned bright. The same quadron girl was there behind the hat counter and the same colored ticket taker was by the inner doors, watching the dancers through the crack.

They both looked at him and they recognized him right away, but they didn't smile right away. She took his hat and kind of looked it over, and then she said:

"You've been away quite a spell, Mr. Burke, sir."

He just said yes with the lids of his eyes. Then he looked down at the check she'd given him and his face changed. "Not *that* number!" he cried out sharply. "Oh, gee, don't give me *that* number, tonight of all nights!"

It was a thirteen. "It's the only one I've got left," she said. "They plumb cleaned me out of checks."

"Give me a blank, then," he said.

She looked around her alcove helplessly. Finally he took out a metal pencil he had hooked to his inside coat pocket, and darkened out the thirteen—so vigorously that the lead wore down to the quick, and he had to give the barrel a twist to bring some more out. She gave a little admiring quirk of her head, as though she'd never seen a pencil like that before.

He turned the check over on its blank side when he'd finished and took it up from the counter that way, and dropped it into his pocket. "This way I get an even break at least," he said. "It's still there underneath, though," he added softly, as he went in.

The floor was packed with dancers, but then in another minute, as he found a place on the side lines and stood watching, it seemed to him that it emptied by magic without the music stopping, and there was no one on it any more but a girl in a filmy green dress, dancing alone, holding her arms up to a ghostly partner.

Kathleen.

She was so beautiful she hurt the eyes.

There was some girl or other standing at his right, and a man standing at his left. He heard a guarded voice remonstrate: "Don't stand there, honey; move over this way," and the girl wasn't next to him any more. He heard a slurring

breath say, "Jailbird," and the man on the other side of him wasn't there any more, either. There was no one around him, he was by himself in the middle of an empty space, in all that crowd. But there was no one in the place except her, anyway, so what difference could that make?

They were doing fancy dances now, and the affair was nearing its end. The shag or something, he didn't know what it was called. That was the man she was going to marry, that empty space between her two arms. He was a banker's son, he had all kinds of dough, a swell house to move her into, probably a car waiting outside to take her home in, and the only stripes he'd ever worn ran up and down in pencil lines, not across in bars. He had everything already, and now he was going to have her, too.

"But I'm going to have this last night with her; he's not getting that," he said to himself suddenly. "One more walk home through the moonlight, like we used to." He put his hand to his inside coat pocket to take out a cigarette, and he touched the sleek, slippery, rounded cylinder of the mechanical pencil clasped to its lining.

They moved by close to him on the outer edge of the floor. His legs, the man's, were spiraling in fancy steps; he was the fatuous kind that wanted everyone to see how good he was. He wasn't satisfied with just holding heaven in his arms. And suddenly one of his legs shot unmanageably out from under him and he went crashing down on top of it, twisted it beneath him in some way.

She'd stepped clear just in time, and she stood by for a minute starting to laugh as they all were. But then they saw that he couldn't get up again, had to be helped up, and

a small crowd gathered around him. Two of the men put their arms around him and he hobbled painfully out into the vestibule between them, and she went with them.

Then in a few minutes she came back again to let everyone know how he was. "It's started to swell; I think he's sprained it. One of the boys has driven him in to see a doctor. It's the right one, you know, and he can't put it down on the accelerator. He asked me to stay and enjoy myself, but I'm afraid I'll have to find somebody else to take me home."

The man who had been waiting there on the side lines pushed his way through the little group standing around her and said in a quiet voice: "I'll take you home, Kathleen, just like I used to." It didn't ask, it told.

You could hear a pin drop. She didn't wait to smile, like the two attendants outside in the entry; she smiled right away and said, "Hello, Denny."

A man said to her, "I'll take you home—"

A girl offered, "Kathleen, you can come with us—"

They didn't say it, but you could almost hear it beating in the air around her from all sides: "Kathleen, don't. Look out. Be careful."

Another girl said, "Kathleen, can I talk to you alone a minute?" and drew her a step away, while he stood there alone in the crowd. He didn't hear what the girl was whispering to her, but he didn't have to; he could have told what it was word for word. "Kathleen, take my advice, don't go alone with him. He's been in jail, so I heard; he's probably not the same as he was. And these men that feel they've been thrown over are dangerous; sometimes they turn on you when you least expect it."

She came back again and looked at all of them in turn, and then at him. "Shall we go now, Denny?" she said, and slipped her arm through his. And he knew it was they had made her do it, not he; she was that kind of girl.

In the vestibule she left him for a moment to get her bottle-green cloak and a little old-fashioned draw bag with her powder and things in it. The check-room girl smiled when he handed her back the blacked-out "13" for his hat, and rebuked, "Now you see?"

The night was dark-blue and the silver-dollar moon hadn't tarnished any, and they walked down the road under it side by side.

"I suppose you're used to riding it these days," he said. "But this'll be the last time with me, and I wanted you to walk it with me like we used to."

"Like we used to," was all she said.

They walked a long way without saying anything after that. "I only came back just to look at you once more, watch you at one of the Saturday-night dances. Tomorrow I'm going away again for good."

"That's the best," she agreed wistfully. "They're such fools."

A car came whistling up behind them, tore past, tapered to a coast on the road ahead. It was full of people either from the dance they had just left or somewhere else. A voice called back: "Want a lift, you two?"

She threw up her arm for a minute in ready acceptance, perhaps caught off guard by the invitation; then, as he quickly made a restraining gesture toward her, canceled it again.

"No, don't; finish it out with me alone."

"All right," she consented.

He called down to them for her, "No, we're doing all right."

It may have sounded more brusque than he had intended it to. The car picked up speed and disappeared in the distance with a red blink.

They came to a log bridge thrown over a ridiculous trickle of water and he laughed and said, "The Mississippi's still here, I see." Then a little farther on, as the road bellied out in a great loop and the trees began to thicken, they came to a place where a little footpath started aside through them.

"Here's our old short cut," she said. "Aren't we going to take it?"

"It goes in pretty deep. Aren't you afraid to go through there alone with—a jailbird at this hour of the night?"

"They've hurt you, Denny," she said gently. "You mustn't take it out on me; I haven't done anything to you. You see, you're an old friend, and my friends don't stop being my friends whether they've been in jail or not. And I'm not afraid to go through the woods at night with one of my friends."

"All the harm that would ever come to you from me," he said, with a touch of ancestral brogue coming out under the stress of emotion, "would give you small cause to worry."

It got so narrow in places they had to go single file. Sometimes she went first, swinging her bag blithely around by the little loop that held it, and he'd tread behind her. Sometimes he took the lead, to sweep low-hanging branches out of her way, and she followed. Sometimes the moon came through in silver splashes, sometimes it was dark like in a tunnel.

He stopped and said: "Here's that place where we kissed good-by. I still remember the tree. Let me just once more, for the last time."

She stood beside him and turned

her face toward him and their forms blended for a moment in the shadows.

"That was a salute to the past, a ghost kiss," she let him know.

"It felt like it," he said ruefully.

She laughed, and swung the little bag around some more on the end of its cord. Something tinkled faintly, nearby but treacherously vague as to direction.

The bag fell motionless. "What is it?" he asked, sensing her silent dismay.

"My key! My key to the house flew out." She backed her hand to her mouth. "Oh, what'll I do now?"

"We'll get it; don't get excited."

He struck a match, crouched down with it, started circling slowly around her. She stood in one place, peering down, shifting slowly in company with the little flame.

"The thing must have opened without my noticing it."

"It's all right; it's got to be around here some place," he said soothingly. "I'll have it for you in a minute." He was on his second match now, widening the circle around her with each circuit.

"It sounded to me as though it went over this way."

"Stay there where you are, otherwise we'll get balled up," he warned.

She had already gone off away from him, however, looking on her own, ferns rustling against her dress.

They moved around in absorbed silence for a few moments. "Oh, why did that have to happen? I should have been more careful," she said once. And another time, "Find it yet?" And then presently: "You wouldn't think a thing like that could disappear so completely right under our noses, would you?" Each time her voice sounded a little less distinct.

His back was aching from the

strain. "I'm on my last match. Don't you think we'd better let it go? I know it's a shame to wake them up, but—"

"But you don't understand. They're both over at Hartsdale for the night. I won't be able to get in without it. Denny, we've got to find it!"

"I wish I had one of those pocket lights," he said.

Apparently preoccupied, she didn't answer. He had to bend over closer than before, now that he had no more matches to rely on. It was agonizing. He straightened finally, in defeat.

"Kathleen, it's no go. I'll have to climb in through one of the upper-story windows and let you in that way."

She didn't answer.

She hadn't said anything for the past several minutes, he noticed that only now.

He made his voice louder. "Kathleen, there's no use looking any more. Come on, we'll have to go."

She didn't answer.

He turned and went after her, but when he got to where he thought she'd be, she wasn't there.

"Kathleen," he called.

Not a sound. He turned and went over another way.

"Kathleen, where are you?" he called, puzzled.

The trees and the night were still.

He went back to their starting point, the tree of the last kiss. "Where the devil did she go, anyway?" he said out loud, the way a man does.

He raised his voice to a full-bodied shout now, that she couldn't fail to hear. "Kathleen!" Silence lay around him. "What's she doing, kidding me?" He added hands to it, at the sides of his mouth, but it couldn't come out any louder than

before. "Kathleen!" She couldn't be that far away, not to hear that. And yet—she was. "Kathleen!" His voice cracked with the pressure he put on it.

Suddenly, fright, like a cold, black shower blotting out the moon. Nameless fear all over him. He lost his head for a minute, in the first flush of it, started to pound the call out in rapid succession like the beating of an alarm drum.

"Kathleen! Kathleen! Kathleen!"

II.

His cries burgeoned out under the trees, while he ran this way and that, grazing their trunks, stumbling over their roots, getting stung by their twigs.

Then he stood stock-still, and wiped off his forehead, and pulled himself together. "She couldn't get lost. Not even if she tried to. She's lived around here all her life, she's passed through here a thousand times before. What's the matter with me, anyway? She's played a joke on me, that's what it is. She picked it up herself without telling me, and gave me the slip, went on the rest of the way home alone. Maybe I frightened her by kissing her. Or maybe she wanted to avoid the final parting scene at her door, afraid I was going to reproach her for ditching me. I'll probably catch up with her just ahead. Or else I'll see the light in her bedroom window when I get to her house."

He started running down the footpath. He was lying to himself, or he would not have gone so fast, still bucking briars and branches as before, and stumbling as he ran—panting, "Kathleen!" every once in a while, without much volume to it any more.

The trees burst open and there

was the road again, its futile detour over with, and there was her house, not far down it from here, on the other side. He kept on running along the side of the road, just jogging now, the few remaining yards, and then he ran across it to the white picket fence that stood around her place. Past the mailbox like a dove-cot on its skinny support, and in at the gate that still had one hinge defective like two years ago.

The window of her bedroom, on the upper left-hand corner, was dark. Only the moon swam on its black pane. He ran up on the porch just the same, and rattled the doorknob hectically and pounded his way all over the panel.

"Kathleen!" he called futilely. "Kathleen! Are you in there?" It was so easy to see she wasn't. "Kathleen, don't joke. Are you in there?"

At last he turned and came down off the porch and turned again and looked hopelessly upward at the blank windows. Then he went out through the gate once more, and stopped by it to slap the gatepost smartly with his open hand, in his turmoil and distress.

He crossed back again to the wooded side of the road and followed it to where the footpath went in, and started back along that at a trot.

"Kathleen!" he called futilely. "Kathleen!" It died away among the trees, and the crashing, blundering course of his running died out after it, as though he were chasing his own voice.

He came back to the tree of their parting, with the glow of the moon higher up on the trunk now as the orb sank lower in the sky. He beat around the spot in ever-widening circles that carried him far away from it. But she wasn't in here any more, she couldn't be. She would

have heard him shout, she would have come out to him long ago. She had gone back the other way, toward the pavilion, instead of on toward her house. Perhaps to find some other girl to stay with for the night, now that she'd lost her key. But why walk off like that without a word? He knew it wasn't so, she hadn't; but he wouldn't admit it to himself yet, he had to find out for sure first. It was the only rational explanation left, and he couldn't face the night without one.

Finally he started back that way himself. There were scratches on his face from twigs and brambles, and his hair was down in front of his eyes, and his hat was gone, and the lower end of his tie was out. Still he weaved along from side to side hoarsely exclaiming, "Kathleen!" from time to time. Not loudly any more, for she never answered. Just to show that he wanted her. And once, just before he emerged at the lower end of the short cut, the thought came to him: "Why are you so frightened? What is it you *feel* already about this, that tells you she won't be at the pavilion either?" He didn't know, he couldn't answer.

The log bridge thudded hollowly with the hurried passage of his footsteps. When he came to the pavilion, only one car was left in front of it, and though a little music still sounded, the orange glow was dimmed to just a wan reflection coming now from far inside it.

He ran in through the unlighted vestibule and out on the barren, gleaming dance floor. A single bulb shone nakedly down over it. A scrubwoman was working her way along one side, doing more kneeling and observing than scouring. A man and a girl were sitting at the piano together; he was doing the playing and she was holding a gin bottle for

him. The check-room girl, dressed to go home, was trucking deftly by herself in the middle of the floor. The doorman was standing there shouting his encouragement and approval from the side line.

Burke came flinging in on them, and everything stopped—the piano playing and the shouts of praise and the dancing and even the mopping up. He had to wait a minute to get his wind back, he'd been running so long and steadily, and they didn't make a sound, any of them, while he stood there with his chest going up and down, and the assorted scratches on his face, and his hair stringy over his forehead.

"Have you seen her?" he panted finally. "Did she come back here?"

The man at the piano got up, pocketed his own gin, came down off the musician's platform.

"Who?" he asked curtly.

"Kathleen Leary."

"What were you doing out with her, Burke?" The man's voice wasn't friendly.

His own girl answered him. "He took her home, while you were driving Larry Kirby to the doctor. We all told her not to—"

The check-room girl and the doorman had edged together in the face of this white crisis.

The man said, in a confidential aside: "Go out and get me my coat, Sam. Bring it just the way it is." But he didn't look at the doorman; he kept looking steadily at Burke.

The scrubwoman took a mesmerized half turn on her cleaning rag and the water in it went *splop!* into the pail.

"Then she didn't come back here?" Burke asked. "We got separated out there, you know in that patch of woods between the creek and her house. I've been out to her house already and she wasn't there either."

His voice wavered, steadied again. "Something's happened to her—"

The other girl drew in her breath with a shudder, closed her eyes, murmured commiseratingly, "Oh, Jodey."

"Yeah, something has," the man answered Burke. His voice was so rough it was like sand ground between his teeth. The doorman had brought back his coat, was holding it out toward him. He didn't take it from him, he took a gun out of its pocket instead. "Go outside and ring up Sheriff Myers' office, honey-pie," he said matter-of-factly to his girl. "He's done something with her. You can see they had a fight, look at the scratches all over his face. I'll hold him here. Get over there by the door, Sam."

Burke said, almost dazed with astonishment: "No, don't. Wait. What is this? I told you we got separated—"

The other man just looked at him with a sort of hard contempt. "What did you think, that by coming back here and handing us that, you could get away with it?" He made a scoffing sound deep down in his larynx. "Men don't lose the girls they're taking home that easy." He made the sound again. "She's not my girl; if she was, I wouldn't stand waiting this long with a gun all ready in my hand, for Myers to get here. She's Larry Kirby's girl, he's the one I feel sorry for."

Burke tried to keep his voice reasonable. "Why, you're full of that gin. Don't do this to me. You're accusing me without a— You grew up around here as well as me. Don't you know what that means in these parts? I've got a record; I've been in jail once already—"

"Don't talk to *me*," the other man said stonily. "I'm not an officer; I'm just doing my duty the way any man

would. If Kathleen Leary turns up unharmed, you've got nothing to worry about."

A whisper reached Burke's ears from over by the door. "He got the thirteen tab tonight for his hat. Hm-m-m, *man!*"

"Stay out there where you are till they get here, honey-bunch," the man with the gun told his companion, as the swing doors bulged gently against Sam's back once or twice.

Burke wanted to fling the gun up out of position, wrench it away from him, bolt for one of the two windows on either side of the bandstand, jump out into the night. He could have made it; the other man's reflexes were slowed up with gin. He knew he mustn't, that was the worst thing he could do. He fought the urge down, kept himself from it by gripping and twisting the hem of his coat in his hands. And he knew now, too, what that formless fear was that had assailed him almost from the moment he had first lost her. An instinctive sense of jeopardy, of doom—his own, not hers—that he hadn't been able to recognize at the time.

That soft drawly whispering was sounding by the door again.

"Go on, tell him, child."

"Hm-m-m. Don't pay for me to go mixing up in it."

The man with the gun didn't take his hard little buckshot pupils off Burke, but he asked, "What is it, Leah?"

"I don't want to get Mr. Burke in no more trouble than he is already, Mr. Allen," she said timorously. "Only that pencil that one of the gentlemen picked up from where Mr. Kirby fell—the one they said they thought maybe was to blame—it just come to me now, I saw Mr. Burke use it on his way in."

"What've you got to say about that, Burke?"

"Yes, it's mine. I rolled it at his feet."

"Well, we'll tell *that* to Myers when he gets here, too."

Burke flared out tormentedly: "D'you realize while you're standing around here making a fool of yourself over me, she may be lying out there somewhere, hurt or unconscious?"

"You'd know more about that than I would," was the suggestive answer. "We'll get going as soon as Myers gets here."

III.

Myers got there with a flourish of the swing doors that pushed Sam cavalierly out of the way. A shaggy deputy in a khaki shirt was with him.

"Well, now, what's this about little Kathleen Leary?" the sheriff demanded authoritatively.

Allen motioned for his coat, dropped his gun back in its pocket now that Burke was safely surrounded. "This fellow took her out of here while I was driving Larry Kirby down to the doctor. Then he showed up about twenty minutes, half an hour ago, the way you see him now, asking if we'd seen her. I reckon it's up to us to ask *him* that, don't you?"

"I agree with you there!" said Myers aggressively. "Wait a minute. Aren't you that Burke that used to live hereabouts? Somebody told me you were in jail."

Burke moistened his lips. "That has nothing to do with this," he said defensively, looking down at the floor.

"How'd you get in that condition?"

"Looking for her."

"What'd you do to make her run away from you like that?"

"She didn't run away. She dropped her key and we both started to hunt for it, and when I looked up, she was gone."

The sheriff slashed his hand at him disparagingly. "Oh, now, don't give me that. A girl don't just up and disappear from a fellow while she's on her way home with him. Well, we can't stand here all night. Let's get out there quick as we can and see what's to be seen."

"I phoned her mother and father at Hartsdale already," Allen's girl said virtuously. "And I phoned Larry, too, and told him about it. He and a lot of the men are coming out to help look for her. He feels *terrible*. Why, their wedding was only a month off." She seemed to want to rush matters toward their worst possible conclusion.

They left in a welter of confusion, everyone talking at once.

"Look after him, Birdsall," Myers said to his deputy. "He's staying with us until we find out what this is."

Something clinked, and Burke protested with restrained heat:

"Wait a minute. You can't put that thing on me; I haven't been guilty of anything."

"He's right, Birdsall," said Myers juridically. "We have nothing against him yet. Just keep your hand on his shoulder."

Allen was arguing with his excitement-thirsting girl. "No, you can't come with us, sugar-lump; only men'll be along. Hush up. What kind of talk is that?" And interrupting himself to take sips from his gin bottle.

"Oo-oo, and to think I borrowed a safety pin from her in there just before she left here tonight!"

"Ain't going to be so good for him, child," Sam told Leah.

"If they do, it'll be the first white one they've had around here in 'most twenty year'."

Burke was taken in the sheriff's car with the two officials. Allen bundled his protesting girl into his own car, to drop her off at her house before joining in the Roman holiday.

The lights of the search party that had preceded them out there could already be seen twinkling in and out among the trees like fire-flies, from all the way down at the log bridge when they rumbled across it. As they neared the footpath, a line of parked cars strung along the side of the road came into view ahead. The sheriff braked behind the last one, and Burke got out between him and the deputy.

"Now take us in there to where you say you last saw her," Myers ordered. That "you say" gave a glimpse of what his opinions on the matter already were. "Stand back, you men. You shouldn't have begun until I got here; I'm in charge of this. Here, give us one of those lanterns."

They went in, Burke midway between the two, with Birdsall's hand still hooked about his arm to keep him from bolting off into the darkness. The little footpath that had been so lonely and quiet before in piebald moonlight and shadow seemed to be alive with people now. Every few minutes they passed someone, either going in or coming out or half submerged in the underbrush ferreting around, some with lights, some without. A cur that someone had brought was yapping around, too, and raising nothing but false alarms at every squirrel or titmouse it discovered.

"Why'd you bring her through here?" Myers said coldly, as they

trudged Indian file. "Funny place to bring a girl in a party dress and dancing slippers."

Why say that she had suggested it? They wouldn't have believed it, anyway. "It was the shortest way to her house."

"That's what you told her, too, I've got an idea."

Larry Kirby confronted them suddenly, one foot a shoeless bandaged club, supporting himself on a pair of crutches to keep it clear of the ground. He was taking it hard; apparently he was one of those men who can cry easily. His face was contorted in a weeping grimace, though without any tears.

"You oughtn't to be in here on that foot, Larry," Myers said considerably. "We'll take care of it for you."

"I can't sit still out there on the road; I've got to find her!" He turned poignantly dramatic, swung himself directly before Burke on his two crutches. "Where's my girl?" he shouted in venomous anguish. "I'll get you, if you've done anything to her!"

They led Burke on past him, his head lowered in silent denial.

They reached the tree where he had lost her twice, the first time to another man, the second—to the night itself.

"Here's where she dropped her key and we started to look for it."

The sheriff was the sheriff. "How are you so sure of that, just where it was? You didn't have a light like we have."

"We were standing right—" He checked himself too late. He couldn't tell them all he'd kissed her.

"Oh, you were *standing*. How'd you come to be standing still in such a God-forsaken place?"

"I mean we were walking along by here."



"Look. There's blood on it."

"Now wait a minute. First you say you were standing, then you say you were walking along. You're starting to lie your way around in it already."

Burke pointed to the lantern-lighted ground. "Look! See? There're still some of the matches

I used trying to find it. There, and there, and there."

Birdsall called out vindictively: "Some of these ferns up this way are bent and broken and flattened out like there could very well have been wrestlin' going on on top of 'em."

"She did that herself," Burke said.

"She was moving around through them, looking up that way."

Myers ignored him, went and examined them for himself, but then shook his head. "Not positive enough. There's been so many of these fools swarming all over the place before we got here."

A distant shout was raised, so far off it sounded faint where they were, but they all stiffened to attention.

"That sounds like something now. Send him over here to me, whoever he is," Myers called out commandingly.

Burke could feel the blood slowly draining out of his face and neck, and leaving a cold, prickling feeling in its wake.

It took no little time for the envoy to make his way back to them, and he came quadruply accompanied. "We found her bag. Look. Isn't this hers? This powder gadget has her initials on it. It was dangling from a bush."

They'd all seen it already, but someone finally gave it voice in the dead hush that had fallen; someone had to be the first to put it into words. "Look. There's blood on it."

Burke's neck strained out, whipcorded.

"Kathleen!" he yelled harrowingly for the last time that night, as though that were both their death cries in one, his and hers. And the night brooded dark around him.

"Hang onto him, Birdsall," Myers barked. "Where was it found? Show us the place."

There was a sudden concerted surging after them in the one direction, as the beating-about was abandoned where it had been going on until now. The sporadic lanterns started to converge, like rays toward a single point, from all over the woods.

It was far across the woodland. It was nearly at the other side of it, where the fields and the meadows set in once more. It was just a bush now, without the bag on it any more.

Myers began to spatter orders like a machine gun. "Anything that happened to her, happened right around here! Now spread out, and be careful where you put your feet! Anyone without lights drop out of this! There's too many of you fellows here."

Discoveries began to come in sickening succession. Burke recoiled, psychically if not physically, at each additional one.

"Hey, Myers! Here's a dark stain on this moss."

"Wait a minute! Over this way! Look at this piece of light-green stuff I found! I thought it was a leaf first, but it's a torn scrap of thin dress goods."

And then in catastrophic culmination, the ubiquitous cur started yapping.

"Ar-r, there goes that blamed mutt again!" somebody said disgustedly. "Don't pay any attention to him. Hey, Parker, call your dog off!"

Unheeded whistling and commands of "Here, Spot!" mingled with the frenzied barking. "He won't come away this time. I better go and see—"

The yapping died abruptly. There was a sudden, tense, waiting silence all around under the trees; it seemed to get to all of them at once. Those who were bending, straightened up; those who were moving about, stood still; those who were standing still turned inquiringly in that direction.

Then the voice of the dog's owner, calling out low, almost furtively, in contrast to the previous hubbub: "Myers. Y'better come where I am." That told the story.

They all drew into a tight little

knot around the man and the colored dog—and her.

So beautiful she had hurt the eyes only a little while ago. She still hurt the eyes—she was so horrible now. A welter of bloodied, battered inanimateness nestled hidden within the dark-green cloak, like a shroud, that the mongrel had pulled open with his teeth.

IV.

They said the things that men say at such a time, in husky, bated voices. The ineffectual, paltry, anticlimactic things. The knot began to contract still more, bunching up, passing over her entirely to try to close around a different center. Myers saw it coming first. He was no slouch, for a rural official. He breathed warningly across his shoulder to the deputy:

"They're turning sour. Get him out of here quick. Back to the car as fast as you can."

He started to work his gun free, backing away a step at a time to cover their retreat. Birdsell clicked his manacle and the arrest had become an actuality; it was almost a benefit, now, compared to the worse thing that was impending.

They were like a troop of dangerous, lowering apes, hesitant only because they hadn't found a leader yet to give them their voice. Myers' own voice sounded, throbbing with a sort of forced calmness.

"Now wait a minute, you men. Easy, now; take it easy. Now, none of that. We have no proof this man did it yet. Stand back. I'll fire at the first one of you that—"

And then suddenly the lacking leader—Allen, arriving with a gun on him, and his disappointment at being delayed changing to a fierce, ginny glee as he took in the situation at a glance. "She's Kirby's girl.

Look at her there! Are you going to let him get away with that? Don't pay any attention to Myers. I've got a gun of my own here. Spread out, you fools; get around behind them, cut them off!"

A shot blasted out, echoing like a roll of thunder under the trees. Abruptly it turned into a headlong foot race through the woods. The deputy and his prisoner, handcuffed together, bent double, speeding along in the lead, risked dashing their brains out at any moment if a tree should come between them. Myers, midway between them and the pack, was stopping and turning every few steps to hold them back with a flourish of his gun or an actual warning shot over their heads.

They made the car by the grace of moments. Myers jumped for the running board at their heels. The car was already in motion, swerving out into the road, as he caught on. Flashing lanterns and dark figures came streaming out across the roadway in their wake.

"Shoot for their tires, get their tires!" Allen's voice. They did a couple of times, and missed. They had cars of their own, but they didn't attempt to pursue in them. It would have been too obvious and flagrant out here, on the open highway; they preferred the anonymity of the woods to avenge a murder by another murder.

Neither of the three could speak, prisoner or captors, they were breathing too hard. Finally, as they neared the lights of the village, Myers panted:

"Drive straight through, don't stop till we get him to jail at Glen River." He added apprehensively: "This'll come up again in a night or two, and the next time it does, it'll be the real thing."

When they had him safely there

in a cell, Myers lingered a moment, looking at him while the turnkey held the gate. "You sure got yourself in a mess, friend."

The moon that had seen Kathleen Leary die was still peering in through the barred window opening. It should have been red, but it was still only silvery white.

Burke raised his head suddenly, said: "Look. I'm not afraid to die. Matter of fact, I care less now than ever before. But why should I die for something I didn't do?"

Myers said, crisply but not unkindly: "It's not part of my duties to convict you ahead of time. All I can point out is: people that don't *do* something, don't get in the position you're in right now."

"I may live to be tried, or I may only live until tomorrow's sun goes down. That's why I want to ask you to do something for me while I'm still alive. Send for Bill Bailey. Will you do that for me?"

"Who's Bill Bailey, one of your crook pals down in the city?"

"You'll laugh when I tell you. He's the dick I had to report to when I was first let out on parole. But he's a lot more than that, too. He's the squarest shooter I ever ran across. He never jumps on a guy when he's down."

"What makes you think he'd bother about a jailbird?"

"He told me if I was ever in trouble, and didn't deserve it, to let him know and he'd stand by me. And he said if I was ever in trouble, and did deserve it, he'd track me down and make it so hot for me I'd wish I'd been born dead!"

Myers had one more question to ask him. "What do you expect him to be able to do for you that the rest of us can't, especially not knowing any of the circumstances?"

All Burke said was, "You don't know Bill Bailey!"

"Well, seeing that he's a police official himself, and not just some pal of yours, I don't mind getting in touch with him for you. He'll have to be a magician to do anything for you in the fix you're in now. Where can I reach him?"

Burke told him, and the thrifty sheriff said:

"O. K., I'll give him a ring before the day phone rates go into effect."

"Just tell him Denny Burke's in jail for killing that girl he used to talk to him about so much, and says he didn't do it, and wants to see him."

V.

Bill Bailey was slim and of medium height, and looked as if he might be easy to handle in a physical encounter. He wasn't, as more than one adversary had found out to his cost. He had alert black eyes, crackling with intelligence, and all his movements were quick and impatient, so much so that he seemed out of place in the South. He'd lost his drawl, too, but one of his tricks was to reassume it at times, perhaps to give a misleading impression of languor.

He dropped lithely off the rear platform of the local, without waiting for it to stop, around sundown the day after Kathleen Leary's murder. Even ordinary locals didn't stop here, just the caterpillar type that halted at every other telegraph pole along the way. The sun was glaring crimson all around him, made him squint.

Birdsall edged over, said, "You Mr. Bailey from the city?" In the car he confessed ruefully: "I lost ten bucks to Myers. I didn't think you'd come. He didn't either, but we couldn't both be on the same end

of the bet, so we tossed for it. All for the sake of a jailbird, too!"

Bailey gave an apologetic shake of his head. "I was just born soft-hearted, I reckon. But my own curiosity got the better of me. Why, he used to 'most say his prayers to her every night!"

"Well, he said 'em to her last night in a different way."

They stopped at Myers' office first. Myers, like his subordinate, expressed surprise that the detective had actually answered Burke's summons for aid.

"Well, suh," Bailey explained deprecatingly, "there wasn't much doing down my way right now, anyway. And I did try pretty hard to straighten him out while he was re-po'ting to me. Man hates to think he's wasted his time. Course, when he told me he was coming up here—"

"He *told* you he was coming up here?" Myers exclaimed in surprise.

"Sure 'nough he told me. I was the one staked him to the trip. He wouldn't have gotten very far 'thout telling me. I may try to straighten out the ones that seem worth it, but I don't give them their own heads, not for years and years."

They got back in the car and, at Bailey's request, drove to the undertaker's in the village where the girl's

body was, before he interviewed the prisoner.

Later, when they got to the jail, Myers led the way to the far end of the rickety cell deck.

"He's in here. Do you want to talk to him alone?"

Bailey nodded. "It may help him to talk freer. I'll just hear what he has to say. It won't take very long, especially if I think he's lying. In that case, I'll still be in time to take the 7:10 back."

When the cross-barred gate had been relocked behind him, Myers said, "Just let us know when you're through, Mr. Bailey," and sauntered back along the corridor to the front.

"So now they've got you for murder," Bailey said. "Bet you wish you were back where they just had you in for holding up a filling station."

"No," said Burke doggedly. "Because then I knew I *had* done it; this time I know I haven't."

"I saw her at the undertaking parlor before I came here. She looked pretty again. Don't know how they did it, but you sure couldn't notice—anything. Well, hardly, anyhow."

Burke looked up relievedly. "I'm glad," he said gratefully. "I want to remember her like she was, dancing so sweet and pretty."

"Hold out your hand," Bailey said



casually. There was suddenly a little lock of auburn hair lying in Burke's palm. "That's hers," Bailey said. "I snipped it off her, lying there on the slab. I thought you might want some little thing like that to remember her by."

Burke raised it a little higher toward his face with both hands, as if it were something very precious. "Thanks," he breathed. His eyes misted a little in tenderness, looking at it.

The interview was suddenly over. Bailey gripped him by the shoulder, turned his back on him. "Comin' out, gents," he called through the grate.

"Gee, that was fast," Myers remarked surprisedly, when they were out of earshot once more. "Did he tell you anything at all?"

"The whole thing. But not in words. You've got the wrong man."

Bailey had supper at the sheriff's house. He was staying now, he'd made that plain. Myers remarked when the meal was over:

"I don't take no stock in that fellow's innocence. He may have convinced you, but he hasn't me. You trying to argue she strayed away from him while they were looking for the key, and some vagrant or hobo lurking in there set upon her? Why, your man's own story won't allow for that. He tells us over and over he didn't hear a sound, not a whisper. He claims she just disappeared like a puff of wind."

Bailey raised his hand, silencing the flow of argument. "I don't think a vagrant did it. If she'd been alone in there, it'd be a different matter. But whoever saw her couldn't help but see this boy Burke, too, the way he was lighting matches, calling back and forth to her. What vagrant's going to set on a girl when

he knows there's a husky young fellow along with her? She was killed by somebody that knew her."

Myers nodded vigorously. "That's what we say, too, but we go the whole hog and say that somebody was Burke, and nobody but him! And I take it you mean someone who knew her, outside of him."

"Exactly. Someone who knew her—besides Burke."

"How could it be done at all, without him hearing it?" said Myers disgustedly. He poured some more blackberry brandy for his guest, but it was easy to see the latter had lost caste in his eyes.

"Why couldn't it be? It's not a physical impossibility." Bailey used the side of a fork to diagram on the cloth. "Once you accept my theory, it's easy enough to reconstruct it. Now look. There's no road along the far side of those woods, where she was found lying. She knew those woods pretty good, from passing through them all her life. She didn't get lost, therefore, and stray all the way over there by accident. Neither is it likely she went looking for her key that far away. My idea is somebody followed them in, unnoticed, by the very same footpath they used themselves, spied on them, saw something he didn't like or that enraged him, and instead of coming out like a man and tackling Burke, waylaid her when she began drifting away from him, stunned her with an unexpected blow to the head so that she didn't even cry out, and then carried her out of earshot all the way over to where she was found and struck her repeatedly with something in an ungovernable rage."

"With what?" interrupted his host sharply. "No lethal object was found around there."

"Probably a large, fiat rock of some kind. I noticed a small wood-

land stream near there, studded with them. He probably dropped the murder stone into its bed after he'd finished, so the natural action of the water would cleanse it of all traces." He stopped a moment, then went on: "It's capable of variation in details, of course. He mayn't have followed them; he may have been coming the other way, toward them along the footpath, and been just in time to see something that he resented."

"Suppose he did stun her at first, as you say," scoffed Myers, "how is it she didn't revive by the time he got her over to the far side of the woods, at least long enough to let out one good scream? Mean to say Burke wouldn't have heard that, even in the distance?"

"He might have held something over her mouth until Burke was out of the woods entirely. Remember, Burke went chasing clear up to her house first off, to see if she was there. The murderer may have counted on his doing that. And that suggests something else to me. I think the final act, the murder itself, was a deliberate afterthought, perpetrated to frame Burke."

Myers just rolled his eyes at the ceiling, as though his patience were being taxed beyond endurance.

"You see, this person is not normal, whoever he is," Bailey explained. "She was a girl of good character, so whatever he saw was little enough excuse in itself. His real hatred was directed toward Burke. But he was a yellow coward, afraid to tackle Burke directly. So he took it out on the girl instead. Then when he had calmed down again, he could tell he'd already hurt her badly. That frightened him. It meant jail at the very least, if she had recovered, and she mightn't have recovered by that time. His natural cowardice came uppermost, and also

his unsatisfied longing to get even with Burke. He saw the way both to escape the blame for his own act and at the same time to revenge himself upon Burke. He cold-bloodedly, fiendishly, and knowingly finished what he'd begun—changed her from badly injured to beyond help—so that the other man would be accused of it and suffer for it."

The sheriff made one of his delayed, catlike jumps—which had always been enormously successful with the colored population. "And doesn't the whole thing still fit your Burke better than anyone else? He loved her, didn't he? He came back to see her, didn't he? He found her on the point of marrying another man, didn't he?"

"Absolutely not! Not in a million years! This crime wasn't Burke's type of crime! That proves it for me. His way to pay off would have been to single out the guy that he blamed for losing her and beat him up, probably with half the town looking on. Try to get this through your head, Myers. Given a certain set situation, people can only react to it according to their own characteristics. They can't vary it, no matter how hard they try. Burke's just a man that's had a tough break in outer life, but he's not all sick inside. This other man is, must be, whether the people he's living among know it or not. He's got an inferiority complex, and he's got some valid reason for it that none of you suspect. He's a victim of abnormal jealousy, because of that same complex. On top of all that he's a coward. Burke isn't. He wasn't afraid to come back here just to see her once again when the whole town knew he'd been in jail and had no use for him, was he? He wasn't afraid to step up to her in front of a couple hundred people and tell her

he was taking her home; not beg her, *tell* her! That took courage, didn't it? One man did those things. Another man, an entirely different type of man, skulked around behind the trees after her and beat her to death in the dark. One and the same man couldn't have done both things. That's elemental psychology, and in town it solves our cases for us."

"Phooey!" roared Myers. "Where you going?" he asked, as Bailey angrily shoved his chair back.

"I'm going out and look for someone who's an instinctive coward, who's got an inferiority complex, who's cursed with insane jealousy, who's subject to maniacal rages or even worse, and who's suffering from some congenital handicap or ailment that's at the bottom of everything else." He held up one hand, fingers spread. "Those five things will tell me who the man is."

Myers' derisive, stentorian laughter boomed insultingly after him as he slammed out of the house. "And when you've found him, come back and I'll still show you the guy who killed Kathleen Leary—in my jail!"

VI.

"Yes, I grew up with all of them," said the grocery-store owner. "Sure we had an old swimming hole—just us boys did, I mean. Now there's a new crop of kids using it."

"Who was the best swimmer in your day?" asked Bailey.

"Johnny Green was, I reckon."

"Who took the most chances?"

"This feller Burke. Too bad he turned out like he did."

"Who was always the last one in when the water was cold in the early spring? Who was afraid to dive in from 'way up high, always spoiled it by flinching at the last minute and did a bellywopper?"

The grocer laughed and told him. "You must have grown up around an old swimming hole yourself to know so much about it."

Bailey sauntered out of the store. Unseen by the owner, he held up his right hand, ticked off its little finger as if keeping count. "Coward," he murmured.

"Yep," said the kindly-looking man in the white coat, "when their grinders ache, they all come to me; ain't nobody else in town for them to go to."

"Scare the wits out of them all, huh?" Bailey grinned.

The dentist grinned back. "Well, you know the old saying, nobody loves a dentist. Some don't mind so much, others act up right ornery in the chair."

"Offhand, who would you say was the hardest to handle of all your patients?"

The dentist told him, then went on: "Of course, there's some excuse in his case. Doc Morgan, that's his family doctor, advised me against giving him an anæsthetic. Didn't say why; heart, maybe."

Bailey strolled out, ticked off that same little finger. "Still a coward, even grown up," he murmured.

"Who would I say, offhand, is the most popular feller comes into my place?" said the bartender, wiping the counter with his bar rag. "Well, I dunno." He mentioned a name—a name Bailey had already heard twice before. "I guess he is. The place always seems quiet when he's not in here. He's lively, convivial; know what I mean? Telling stories, buying rounds of drinks for the whole house, sort of gathering everyone in the place around him."

"In other words, he works hard at being popular."

"Well, he is popular," argued the barman.

"Well, he buys frequent rounds of drinks, you say," Bailey came back at him. "Anyone who does that is bound to be popular. The real test is *not* to buy them, and then if there's still a crowd around you, you've got something."

Outside he ticked off the third finger of the hand he was keeping score on. "Inferiority complex."

"Yassuh, boss, we is fixed mo' comfortable than mos' the colored folks he'abouts," the old mammy agreed, corncob pipe in mouth, leaning across the fence. "How come? It's acconna our misfo'tune, I reckon. You know how good sometimes comes out of evil."

"What misfortune?" asked Bailey, that sixth sense all good detectives should have warning him there was something here relevant to his purpose.

"We ain't s'posed to speak about it," she said reticently. She didn't appear inclined to give him any further information, but just then a peculiar, goatlike bleating sounded from inside the open doorway. "Dat's my li'l' boy," she said. "Hush, honey; mammy's coming. Reckon de flies must be pestering him again."

She turned and went in. Bailey promptly unlatched the gate and moved after her, unbidden. Something about that cry had sounded unnatural.

A moment later he recoiled from the doorway into the open again, horrified. The woman rejoined him presently.

"How old is he?" he asked.

"'Bout twenty-two now. He'll always be just five, like when it happened, though. We don't 'zactly like to show him to folks," she reproached him mildly.

"I'm sorry, auntie." He slipped a five-dollar bill into her hand. "Who did that to his head?"

"Please don't ax me that, boss. Bettah if it's fo'gotten. Us folks gotta guard our tongues."

"Never mind, I know already." He murmured a name, to test her reaction. It was the same one that had cropped up in the previous interviews. "Isn't that right? Isn't that who did it?" he prompted.

Her expression was an admission in itself, without the need of words. She looked fearfully up and down the road as if to make sure they weren't being overheard. "He didn't mean it," she said defensively, "just los' his temper for a minute 'cause my little boy tease him. Bash his haid with a flat stone he pick' up. His fambly gave us five thousand dollars, make us a present of this plot of ground. Strange are the ways of the Lawd."

Bailey moved slowly out to the road again, saddened and sickened. He told off the middle finger of his hand. "Subject to insane rages."

Dr. Morgan came scuffing down the stairs in leather house slippers. "Kind of late for a consultation, isn't it?" he said mildly.

"Sorry, doc, I'm not a patient, I'm an insurance investigator." Bailey hitched his chair forward confidentially. "A man whom we knew to be a patient of yours has applied to us to take out quite a heavy insurance. I've been sent down here to find out if there's any reason we shouldn't underwrite this policy—that you know of."

"Why come to me? Haven't you medical experts of your own?"

"Yes, and he's already passed the physical examination. But there are often things that don't reveal themselves in a physical examination."

"Who is it?"

Bailey mentioned the name, the name that had already occurred in his conversations with the grocer, the dentist, the bartender, the Negro mother, and Allen's girl friend. It was just a wild guess, but it worked. Morgan's face went white. He rose unsteadily to his feet, recoiled a step.

"I read the answer in your face, doctor," Bailey said, tight-lipped. "What is it, what's wrong with him?"

"I can't tell you that! Don't you know a doctor's patients are treated in strictest confidence?"

"I know, the Hippocratic oath. But unless you speak out, this thing's going through; you'll be a party to a fraud."

"Why do I have to be dragged into this? Your company has its own medical testimony to go by, the transaction should stand or fall on the strength of that."

"All right, let's skip the insurance gag. I'm a detective and here's my credentials. Now out with it."

Morgan eased his collar as though it constricted him, but his mouth remained stubbornly shut. Bailey knew there was no way in which he could force him to speak, if he didn't choose to of his own free will. He tried aspersion, to loosen his tongue.

"How much hush money have you been getting from him?"

Strangely enough, the doctor didn't flare up. "No, it isn't that," he said, almost submissively. "He did offer me money, but I refused it. He's threatened to kill me if I ever breathe a word about it. I know he would, too."

"Then you refuse to tell me just what's wrong with this man?"

"I can't. It would cost me my life."

Bailey thrust out his thumb,

tapped it. "Very well. You've given me my fifth factor. I don't need to know the exact name of his ailment, I can go ahead without that."

VII.

The sky was overcast at the time of Kathleen Leary's funeral the next afternoon. Bailey didn't attend; he had business of his own to occupy him. He visited the village tailor shop, run by a nearsighted, undersized man, on the pretext of having a new crease pressed in his trousers. While he was hanging around waiting in his shirt tail, he asked the tailor if he did any work for—mentioning that recurrent name again.

"Yeah, that's his suit there. Just come in for a cleaning job."

"Swell tweed," said Bailey, examining it idly. "Peculiar-looking buttons, too, all covered with leather. If one of them was missing, what would you do?"

"Gee, I dunno, I wouldn't be able to match them with what I got here. I'd have to phone him and ask him if he knew where he dropped it." His head disappeared momentarily behind a cloud of steam raised by the iron. "They're all in place, though, ain't they? I ain't had a chance to look it over yet."

"No," Bailey said quietly, "one of those small ones down at the bottom of the sleeve is off, that's why I asked you." He dropped it unseen into his own coat pocket, covertly edged aside the razor blade he'd just severed it with.

"Gee, I'll have to phone him right away," said the tailor worriedly; "see if he knows where he lost it. Otherwise he'll think it come off in the shop here, blame me. Can't send his suit back to him with three on one sleeve, four on the other."

Bailey made straight from there to

the house of Allen's girl, Mary Lou Davis. The women of the community had come back from the funeral by now, but there was still something strangely deserted, lifeless, about the village, he couldn't tell exactly what it was at first. Then as he hurried past the saloon in the dusk, that gave him his clue. There wasn't a soul in it. The usual array of corner loafers outside was ominously missing, too. The barman was standing by the door without a thing to do.

"Kind of slow, isn't it?" Bailey remarked in passing.

The fellow gave him a wink meant to impart secret information. "There'll be a big rush of business 'fore midnight—*after* it's all over."

Suddenly Bailey knew what the strangeness was he had detected about the village. *There had been a wholesale disappearance of the adult male population.* There wasn't an able-bodied man in sight. They seemed to have all gone off to some secret meeting, by prearrangement, right after the funeral was over.

So tonight was the night. Myers should be warned, if he didn't know already. The detective hesitated, about to turn back. But then he saw that he couldn't; he'd have to work faster than ever. He had a deadline of mob fury to work against now. The surest way of saving Burke was to prove him innocent. The only way to prove him innocent—in time—was by going ahead with what he had been about to do.

He fairly ran the rest of the way to the Davis girl's house, in the deepening twilight. She was on the porch, luckily, for every second counted. There was a deadline within a deadline to beat. The more immediate one was the tailor's phone call to his customer about that missing button.

"Where they-all tuck and disappeared to?" she complained at sight of him. "Joe just drap me like an old glove right after the funeral was over."

He had no time to waste on preliminaries. "You like excitement, don't you, Miss Davis?" he panted, drawing up short in front of the porch rail.

"Do I?" Her eyes sparkled.

"I've got some for you. But it'll take courage," he warned.

"What do I have to do?"

"Remember that dance dress Kathleen Leary had on Saturday night?"

"Sure 'nough, poor soul. Sort of wispy and trailing, like leaves all over. I've got one just like it, 'cepting it's yellow."

"Go upstairs and put it on. Fix your hair the way she wore hers, closely as you can; sort of down over one eye and loose in back. Then get some kind of thin veil and put it over your head, so your face can't be seen too clearly through it. See if you can do the whole thing in two minutes flat, there isn't much time."

"My stars!" The girl could hardly contain herself. "Where we-all goin'?"

"Into the woods where Kathleen was killed Saturday night."

"Oo-o-o," she breathed. "And what you want me to do in there?"

He thrust his face up close to hers and whispered it. This time she shrank back a step, put her hand over her open mouth, and stared at him round-eyed. She would have given anything to back out, he could tell. If he'd pressed her, she probably would have. But he was wise in the ways of human nature, this Bailey. "Sorry," he said shortly, "guess I came to the wrong party. Just forget all about it." He turned on his heel and made as if to stride off.

She came running down the steps after him, plucked at his sleeve. "Mr. Bailey, wait a minute! I'll do it. I didn't say I wouldn't, nohow. Just wait heah, I'll be down in no time."

"Make it even faster than that," said Bailey gruffly. "We've got to get there first."

Dark clouds filled the sky as they drove part of the way out in her family's car to save time. They left it just before the mouth of the short cut, off the road and well hidden from sight. Then he led her in along the same route Burke and Kathleen had taken that night. They didn't follow the path through to the other end, they left it in the middle and made their way through the woods to the far side, where Kathleen's body had been found two nights before. Bailey chose a large tree and motioned her down out of sight behind it. Then he crouched down protectively beside her.

"Who're we waiting for?" she asked breathlessly.

"You'll see. Here, take this pocket light. Now listen while I tell you just what I want you to do." And when he'd finished: "Got that straight? I'll be right here in back of you with my gun out, so don't be afraid, nothing will happen to you. Don't go too close, though."

She nodded. As their whispering died out, an oppressive silence fell over the woods all about them. They could hardly see one another's faces, it was so dark where they were ensconced. He could make out the pale gleam of her dress, that was all. Once a twig snapped, and she gave a nervous start. He quickly laid a reassuring hand on her arm to steady her, put his finger to his lips in warning reminder.

The wait probably seemed much longer than it actually was. Then

at last the hushed sound of footfalls treading the turf and moss. Someone was drawing near them in the darkness. A small stone struck a root. A bough rustled as it was swept aside.

The girl turned her veiled head toward Bailey inquiringly. He nodded, signed to her to get ready. He unlimbered his gun. A pocket light—someone else's, not the one the girl was holding—suddenly bloomed at a distance of about ten yards or so from them, and began to play slowly around on the ground. Little by little it drew nearer. It was impossible to see who was behind it, wielding it.

Bailey waited until it had drawn within five yards of them, then touched the girl on the elbow. She stood up, moved out around the trunk of the tree, paced slowly forward like someone walking in her sleep. She was holding the torch flat up against her at waist level, as per his instructions; she shifted the little catch on it and softly diffused light, like a ghostly halo or nimbus, peered upward from below, suffusing her bosom and shoulders and veiled head. She was tempering the directness of the beam by shielding it with one hand.

There was a gasp. The oncoming light, opposite her, fell to the ground, went out. Then a man's voice screamed in ungovernable terror. It was unrecognizable, it was so high-pitched, almost equine. "No! No!" the voice keened. "Not you! You're dead! Get away from me, Kathleen! I'll kill you over again if you come near me!"

The torch the girl was holding went out. Bailey jumped quickly forward in the dark, thrust her aside, in case a firearm should be brought into play. "That's enough. Get back, get behind the tree." He took

the light from her, turned it on again, pointed forward now.

Larry Kirby, the banker's son, the man Kathleen had been pledged to marry, stood writhing there in its beam, doing a dance of nameless horror, as though every muscle in his body had gone mad. Bailey put his gun away, he didn't need it after all; the man before him was held transfixed in the grip of something more powerful than any weapon could be. Right while they looked, he dropped in a threshing mass to the ground, clawing at it, foam coming from his mouth.

"Don't look," Bailey breathed to the girl. He snapped off the torch, mercifully blacking out the monstrous sight before them. "Epilepsy," he murmured. "That's what Morgan knew, and wouldn't tell me. You heard what he just said, didn't you?"

"Yes." She shuddered. "He said he killed her the other night."

"Then come on, you're my witness." He caught her by the wrist. "We've got to get to Burke before the mob does. Let him stay where he is, he'll be helpless until he gets over it."

He started running full tilt through the woods, pulling her after him by the arm. Behind them the groveling sounds, as of a hog rooting for acorns, died out in the darkness. When they had reached the road once more, they flung themselves into the car and Bailey took the wheel.

"There's a slim chance we may be able to beat them out to Glen River," he panted, "if they were slow in starting."

"How'd you know he'd come back there just now? What was he looking for?"

"A button off his suit. He thought he lost it there when he killed her, and was afraid somebody would find

it and trace it to him." Bailey palmed it out of his own pocket. "Here it is."

They roared through the village. It still had that same half-empty appearance Bailey had noted earlier.

He covered the distance to Glen River at a speed that was enough to peel the skin from their faces, but their very first glimpse of the jail was enough to show them—it was already over. Too many lights were winking from the cell openings, for such a sparsely tenanted jail. And there was an impalpable haze still hovering over it. Not fire, but dust raised by the trampling of countless feet, with perhaps the smudge given off by numerous resin torches thrown in. When they slashed up before the entrance, all the nondescript litter that marks the passage of a big, unruly crowd lay thickly about on the ground; shards of shattered glass, loose planks that had been used for battering rams, stones and bricks that had served as missiles, tattered newspapers, discarded liquor flasks.

The sheriff was standing there in the devastated doorway, coatless and with several big tears in his shirt, as though he'd been roughly handled, but otherwise apparently unhurt.

"You got here too late!" he shouted hoarsely. "They broke in and took him out five minutes ago!"

"Couldn't you hold them off?" Bailey bellowed wrathfully.

"We did the best we could! There was only three of us against fifty or sixty. They cut the phone wires, and tied me and Birdsall and the turnkey up."

"I finally got my proof the man's innocent! And this girl's my witness! Which way'd they go?" Myers pointed. "Go back where Kathleen was killed and take Larry Kirby into custody; you'll find him

in there—" The rest of it was drowned out as the car plunged on ahead in the direction the lynching party had taken.

The hum of voices coming through the thickets—and even gleeful shouts, as at a picnic or barbecue—told them where it was before they could even see anyone. The mob hadn't gone very far in off the road. Fitful lantern flashes, like fireflies, peered through the trees toward them. Bailey braked, vaulted out without opening the car door, and tore in toward the commotion, unlimbering his gun as he went.

They were milling around in a clearing, like a pack of bloodthirsty head hunters. Burke stood in the center of them all, stripped to the waist, bound to a tree with rope. He was facing them unflinchingly, head up, without uttering a sound. There was no noose around his neck. Instead, Allen, face a mask of brutal satisfaction, was slowly emptying the contents of a gasoline can over Burke's shoulders, shifting from side to side so that both of them got wetted down equally. A short distance away a group was trying out a blowtorch to make sure it was in working order. Even as Bailey came plunging through them, too quickly for them to see who it was and try to stop him, its forked, fiery tongue shot out with a deep-throated hum.

The gasoline can went hurtling in the air, Allen went sprawling out full length on the ground, and Bailey was standing there in his place, covering Burke with his own body and watchfully sweeping his gun around from side to side.

"Turn this man loose!" he grated. "Larry Kirby killed Kathleen! Get back, you hear me?"

A dull growl of resentment went

up. They started to close in on him. They were past listening to reason. Their appetite for cruelty had been whetted and couldn't be checked that abruptly. The foremost ones crouched, watching for a chance to rush in and overpower him. From somewhere in the rear he heard a voice say: "Throw your lit cigarette at him, Rufe. He's all wetted down ready to go. Let the damn stranger blaze with him if he loves him so much."

Bailey glimpsed the poised wrist just in time, sighted at it, fired; there was a yell of pain, something red looped up in the air, and the wrist flopped over.

Mary Lou Davis suddenly came wriggling through their midst, all disheveled and no longer pretty to look at, but more admirable now than she had ever been before in her life. She turned to face them at Bailey's side, held up her hands commandingly. "Call him a stranger if you like, but you can't call me one. I was born and bred here; I'm one of you, and Kathleen was my friend. You know I wouldn't lie to you. He's telling you the truth. I heard Larry Kirby say he did it. I heard him with my own ears just now. He has fits or something, that none of us knew about until now."

"Keep them going," encouraged Bailey under his breath. Gun still pointed forward, he edged around toward the back of the tree, started working on the knots that held Burke fast.

By the time Myers and Birdsall arrived, it was all over. Most of them had already slunk off, ashamed. A few lingered, brazening it out; stood around talking it over in sheepish little knots of two and three. Bailey still had his gun out, but perhaps that was just an over-

sight. Burke was sitting on a stump, slowly refastening his shirt button by button, as if still dazed by the sudden turn events had taken. Mary Lou Davis was standing with arms folded, her back scornfully turned to Allen's whining attempts to whitewash himself.

"I don't want anything more to do with you, Joe Allen," she declared in a clear, ringing voice, "after what I found out about you tonight." And then with a look at Bailey that was plainly inviting: "There are all kinds of men in this world."

"Did you get him?" Bailey asked the sheriff.

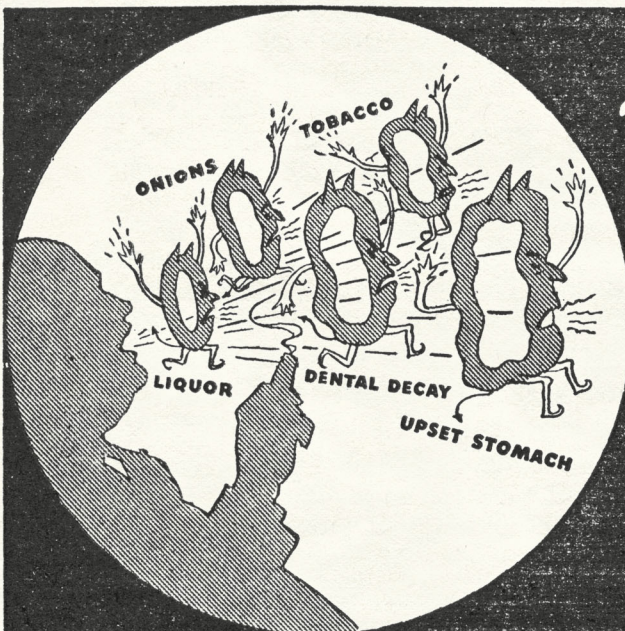
"He'd dragged himself back to his own house, from the woods," Myers said, "but when we went over there after him, we were just a minute too late. Upstairs in the bedroom, with

his own gun, when he saw us coming up to the door."

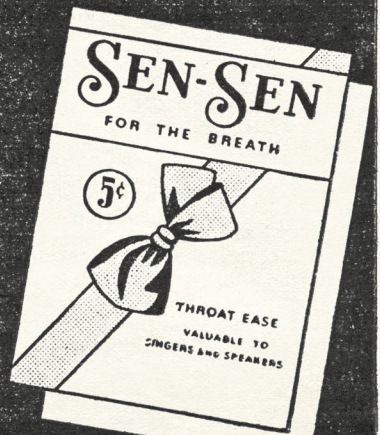
"That was probably the best thing he could do after all," Bailey said soberly. "He was just a burden to himself and a menace to others. His affliction was what caused those ungovernable rages, finally led him to murder."

"But how could he get in there on that injured foot of his?"

"He got in there tonight, and without any crutches, didn't he? Miss Davis and I both saw him with our own eyes. That was nothing except a painful little wrench, but he acted up so about it, he probably even fooled Dr. Morgan into thinking it was worse than it was. He accepted the doctor's well-meaning offer of the loan of a pair of crutches, at the time, simply to im-



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press Kathleen, arouse her sympathy. He was that kind of man. As it turned out, they came in very handy as an alibi. All he did was shove that bandaged foot into a felt slipper, as a sort of moccasin; he did the same thing tonight; I saw it on him. He got around on it fine, as long as he let his other foot carry most of the weight."

"I drove him straight home from the doc's, that night," mumbled Allen, in the faltering voice of a man who is heartily ashamed of himself, "and then I went back to the pavilion, alone."

"Sure you did," Bailey agreed. "But something must have happened before he went in the house to start that slow fuse of his anger to sputtering."

"I remember, a carful of home-bound people from the dance went by us. They were kind of ginned up and they hooted at him that he done lost his gal, they'd passed her on the road walking home with Burke."

"That was it. He couldn't rest once he'd heard that, he had to go out again—without his crutches, because he could make better time off them than on them—to see for himself. He probably waited for her outside her house first, and when she took a little longer to show up than he thought she should, he started in along the short cut to find them. He knew they'd come through there to get to her house. He was so cursed with a sense of his own inferiority, that he couldn't even trust the girl who'd promised to marry him, had to spy on her with his own eyes.

"Well, he came upon them unsuspected. He was in felt slippers, remember. Maybe he saw them stop and kiss for old times' sake. The demons in him came to the surface.

He waited until they'd drifted apart hunting her key, then he stunned her with a vicious blow to the head, caught her in his arms as she went limp, carried her soundlessly off out of reach of her escort. The exact mechanics of the thing we'll never know, because only he and she and the moon saw it, and he and she are both gone now. But it must follow the supposition I outlined to you at your house pretty closely. A hand over her mouth as soon as she started to revive, a frenzied beating while Burke was out of the woods, sudden remorse—and then deliberate murder, to frame Burke. After that he went home, changed his clothes, and then when Miss Davis phoned him from the pavilion that Kathleen was missing, he came out a second time—this time *on* his crutches—and played the broken-hearted lover all over the woods, with the whole search party for an audience. A matter of a missing button brought him back again to the scene tonight; he thought he saw Kathleen, and spoke his own confession."

He rested a sympathetic hand on Burke's shoulder. "If it's all the same to you, I'll take this man back to the city with me now; it'll be easier for me to keep him out of trouble down there."

"I'll run you both in to town in my car," offered Myers.

Burke looked up at the detective with almost doglike devotion. "No," he said. "I'd rather just walk back alone with my friend Bill Bailey."

They went down the road side by side. The night was dark and the silver-dollar moon that had seen Kathleen Leary die was hidden now. He was only two nights older, and that was plenty young enough yet. The walk did not seem long, maybe because he was with a friend who believed in him.

MURDER IN A MORTUARY

by KENNEDY TESTER

When Mike Yenner suddenly pulled the car up to the curb and shut off the motor, the girl at his side let out a frightened gasp.

"Mike! What are you stopping for?"

He talked through the dead cigar he held clenched tightly in his teeth.

"Got some business to tend to."

She peered through the car window. They had stopped in front of a rambling building of modified Spanish architecture. A blue neon sign glowed over the entrance.

"Vernon Mortuary," she read. "Mike, are you nuts?"

"No, baby," he said very quietly. His gloved hand had taken the keys out of the ignition lock. "I like the looks of this place. Let's go in."

She gasped again. "But I don't like mortuaries," she protested in terror.

"Neither does anybody else," he grunted philosophically. "But business is business. Come on."

He led her away from the car, up the shrub-bordered walk to the front entrance. It was a dark night and there were no street lights in the vicinity. The blue neon sign cast an eerie glow upon them as they passed under it. The girl shivered. Mike threw away his cigar.

He rang the bell, and they waited in silence until the door opened.

A stout little man with curiously pouting lips peered out at them.

"How do you do?" he murmured inquiringly.

"Howdy," said Mike. "I want to make some arrangements about a funeral."

"Certainly," said the stout little man. He ushered them in.

"You wish," he said, "to make arrangements in advance of need, through our prepayment plan? If so, we can discuss the matter more comfortably in the office."

"Hell," Mike grunted. "I just want to see your caskets. I got a friend who ain't expected to live the night out."

The man tugged at his pouting lips.

"I see. May I take this opportunity to introduce myself? I am Mr. Vernon."

"Glad to know you," Mike responded. "My name is Jones. It's a very uncommon name." He laughed abruptly, then added as an afterthought: "This is Mrs. Jones."

Vernon nodded absently.

"Now, if you will just follow me," he murmured, "you can make your selection from one of the most complete lines of caskets in the city."

He led them up a thickly carpeted stairs. An overpowering sweetness assailed them.

"Flowers," said Mike succinctly.

The girl shivered and tugged at his coat.

"Mike," she whispered. "You must be crazy! You don't know anybody who's dying!"

"Shut up," he growled. "You always was a dumb number."

She followed meekly, her heavily rouged lips moving with her thoughts. Vernon swung open a pair of French doors at the head of the stairs and switched on a light. The resultant glow showed them



"Mike!" the girl screamed.

row upon row of softly illumined caskets. Mike could hear the girl's sharp intake of breath.

Disregarding her, he wandered about. Vernon talked volubly, extolling the virtues of each casket, pointing out construction details and finishes.

Mike listened and looked for fifteen minutes. Then he shrugged his shoulders and turned to the girl.

"Daisy," he said, "you pick one out."

"No!" she gasped. "I couldn't—"

"Nuts," Mike growled. "Just pick out the kind you'd like to have for yourself."

She couldn't control the frightened little cry that escaped her lips.

Vernon looked up sharply. Accustomed to all forms of emotion, the girl's reluctance to enter the room had seemed natural to him. But this man's tactlessness was going a bit too far.

"Please," he murmured, "I know it is difficult to make decisions of this nature. If you will just indi-

cate which type of casket you think most suitable, Mrs. Jones, I think your husband and I can conclude our arrangements without further embarrassment."

"That's right," Mike concurred. "Don't be so jumpy, baby."

She swallowed, and turned to look swiftly around the room.

Vernon took this opportunity to study the features of the man who seemed so careless of his wife's naturally distraught nerves. Jones was well dressed, a rather plain-looking man. The kind you see downtown every day and never notice. His eyes were a bit unusual—bright and sharp. He wore pigskin gloves, and his topcoat was of a bit too jaunty a cut. When he came too close, you got the breath of stale cigar smoke. The girl stopped before a pearl-gray casket. It was severely plain outside, but the interior was a mass of satin ruffles. She nodded mutely to Mike.

"How much is that job?" Mike inquired.

Vernon drew an envelope from the interior and opened it.

"This casket sells for two hundred and eighty-five dollars," he said. "It includes our complete service in every detail, including use of our chapel, organ music, and motor equipment."

"Nuts," Mike growled. "It ain't good enough."

His eyes swept the room. They lighted on a bronze casket, obviously the most expensive item in the room.

"How much is that?" he asked.

"That," said Mr. Vernon, "is our finest sarcophagus, made of time-enduring bronze. Its price, including our complete service, is one thousand one hundred and fifty dollars."

"That's better," Mike said. "We'll

take that. Now show us over the rest of the place."

"Gladly," Vernon purred. Though he had privately formed a dislike for Jones' gruff lack of tact, he was obviously impressed by the man's utter contempt for the expense involved in the selection he had just made. He switched out the lights and led them downstairs.

"This," he said, opening a carved oak door, "is our chapel."

He switched on more lights. A churchlike, lofty room glowed with soft color. Mike saw row on row of pews, and in the chancel a glimpse of graduated organ pipes. Vernon followed his gaze.

"That," he said proudly, "is our pipe organ. One hundred and four stops. Electrically operated. The family room is to the right of the chancel, where the entire service may be observed without subjecting the family to the gaze of the visitors here in the nave."

"It's O. K.," Mike pronounced. "Show us some more."

Vernon switched out the lights. The girl clung to Mike's arm.

"Mike," she whimpered. "I got to sit down. This place gives me the willies. It's so dark."

"In a minute, baby," he grunted. "This is interesting."

Vernon opened another door.

"This is one of our reposing rooms," he said, switching on more lights. "Here the body of the deceased lies in repose until time for the service."

Mike looked around the decorously furnished room.

"Nice place," he said. "It's sure quiet around here at night, Mr. Vernon. Don't you have any other help?"

Vernon shrugged. "Oh, certainly. But things have been very quiet for several days, and I am taking one of

my assistants' place tonight. Another will relieve me at midnight, and I shall retire. The mortuary, you see, must always be on call."

"That's right," Mike agreed. "People don't die just during business hours. Now, how about showing us the place where you do your embalming?"

"Our preparation room?" Vernon said. "Of course. We are very proud of our facilities in that line."

Vernon switched out the reposing-room lights and led them down the hall. He unlocked a door and flipped another switch.

"Mike!" the girl chattered. "When are we going to get out of this place?"

He poked her into silence with his elbow.

Vernon led them to a brilliantly lighted room. It looked like the surgery of a modern hospital, all in white spotless tile. Two porcelain-enameled tables were set on chrome-plated pedestals in the middle of the floor. Glass cases flanked one wall, and through the glass gleamed shining instruments and rows of bottles.

Mike stayed near the door. The girl walked mechanically after Vernon. When they had neared the middle of the room, Mike cleared his throat.

"Nice place," he said again.

"We have spared no expense," Vernon murmured without looking around. "It is air-conditioned, soundproofed, and equipped with the latest scientific equipment to insure careful preservation of the features."

Mike reached out for the open door, swung it shut.

It closed with a muffled jar.

Vernon and the girl swung around. The girl screamed. Mike's gloved hand had come out of his topcoat pocket. It held a blue automatic.

The look in Mike's eyes was brittle.

"Soundproof, eh?" he grunted. "That's swell. That's something I didn't figure on. Now you can scream all you want, Daisy."

She implored him with fear-filled eyes.

"Mike, what are you gonna do?"

"Yes," Vernon interposed nervously. "For God's sake, Mr. Jones, put that weapon away!"

"Shut up, you," Mike growled. "I'm gonna make Daisy talk. And how she's gonna talk!"

She stood rooted to the floor, paralyzed with horror.

"Daisy," he said, "you double-crossed me. You wrote a letter to someone telling them just where to find me. Now who did you write that letter to, and when did you mail it?"

"Mike," she choked, "I swear—"

"The hell with that," Mike said fiercely. "You ain't smart enough to double-cross anybody, baby. You wrote a letter to someone telling them just where to find me. You printed it in capital letters, with a lead pencil, on a writing tablet. But you were too dumb to notice when you tore off the sheet of paper to mail it that the pencil left little marks on the rest of the pad. I could read your letter from those faint little marks. Want me to repeat it to you, word for word?"

The girl rocked unsteadily. Then she seemed to regain her composure.

"O. K.," she panted. "I did it. I thought you were two-timing me. I thought you had grown tired of me. I wrote the letter. But I'll help you escape, Mike. I didn't mail it until this afternoon. It's not too late, Mike! They won't get it until tomorrow morning's mail."

"Who won't get it?" he persisted fiercely.

She swallowed. "The F. B. I. I sent it to the local office."

"I thought so," Mike said. "Well, the G-men won't get Mike Yenner. I've been too smart for them all along. They don't even know what I look like, and they haven't got any prints. And believe me, baby, you're never going to tell them!"

"I must have been crazy, Mike. I didn't know what I was doing!" the girl cried hysterically.

"Please," said Vernon. "Mr. Jones, or Yenner, or whoever you are, put away that gun!"

"Shut up!" Mike thundered. "What do you suppose I came here for? Daisy's going to have the best funeral this town can offer, and you're going to furnish it."

"Mike!" the girl screamed.

He grinned at her.

The automatic went up and a shot blasted the tiled room into myriad echoes. The force of the slug spun the girl around. She collapsed heavily on the floor. Vernon looked down at her sprawled body and at the widening pool of blood on the tile floor.

"You've killed her," he pronounced hoarsely.

"Sure," Mike agreed. "Double-crossing little rat. But she was my wife, and she ain't going to be tossed off into a ditch. You're going to give her the best funeral you got."

"Sure, sure," soothed Vernon, in as steady a voice as he could muster.

"Get going," Mike ordered. "We'll go up and get that bronze coffin, first. You lead the way. Any time you feel like trying any tricks, remember this .38 poking in your back."

He prodded Vernon. The latter complied without hesitation. He led Mike back up the stairs, switching on lights as he went.

He drew out a cart from an adjoining closet, and Mike helped him

transfer the heavy casket. Then they moved it to a freight elevator at the rear of the building. All this while Mike kept Vernon covered. He said nothing, and Vernon made no comment.

Together they wheeled the cart into the preparation room. Mike directed Vernon as the latter arranged the girl's lifeless form in the casket.

Vernon was sweating as he silently closed the lid of the casket. He paused to wipe his round face with a crumpled handkerchief. Mike was watching him impatiently, as though he hadn't a nerve in his body.

Vernon's lips pressed resolutely together.

"This is horrible," he said. "It's a travesty. I won't go on with it."

Mike squeezed out a derisive grin.

"You want to live, don't you, little man?" he said thickly. "Yeah, sure you do. Well, you'll do what I tell you to, or you'll wind up in one of your own coffins."

But Vernon had been able to steady himself a little. He hadn't the faintest notion who this Mike fellow was, except that his name wasn't Jones, and that he was a desperate man—perhaps insane.

"No," Vernon said defiantly. "I won't help you. You'll kill me anyway before you go away, because I saw you murder that girl. If I'm going to die tonight, I'll be damned if I'll do it with any more of your dirty work on my conscience."

Mike's stare was impersonal. He wasn't seeing the round little man whose pouty lips were compressed with the defiance of his words. He was seeing raw courage, and Mike was always impressed by that.

He laughed deep in his throat.

"You got me wrong, Vernon. I'm not a mug that kills just for fun. I never croaked anybody unless I had

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to . . . to keep on living myself. My wife . . . well, you heard her admit what she did to me. She was going to turn me in to the G-men. But you . . . what have I got against you? You ain't done nothing to me, and you ain't going to."

"I'll tell the police about you quickly enough if I ever get out of this alive," Vernon went on obstinately.

"Sure," Mike grunted. "But that don't worry me none. Plenty of guys have done the same. And what did it get them? I'm still O. K., and I never spent an hour in stir. And I never will. I'm too smart. I ain't like the mugs the G-men have run down before. I work alone, and I don't work the same kind of job twice. One time it's a bank. Next time it's a snatch, or mebbe hijacking a dope runner. And I don't stay in one place. The G-men never figure where I am ahead of time, or what kind of a job I'll pull off next. See these gloves? No fingerprints of mine down in Washington. Why, they don't even have much of an idea what I look like. Go on; describe me. What would you say I look like?"

Vernon appraised him. He was thinking that there wasn't much that was distinctive about Mike to describe. His clothes—but he'd probably be wearing something else tomorrow. His face—it was a very ordinary one, a little squarish, a little on the swarthy side. Certainly there was nothing about it your eyes could hook into. No scars, no twisted nose, nothing at all to distinguish him from any one of hundreds of men you could see on the streets very day.

"I think I'd recognize you if I ever saw you again," he told Mike.

"But you won't," Mike answered. "Because I'll be somewhere else, and

what you'll be able to tell the police here won't help much to find me in some burg hundreds of miles away. So, you see, I ain't worried about you. I ain't going to bump you off unless you make me do it. Now get that coffin up into your chapel. We're going to give Daisy a funeral. She was a swell looker, but she was dumb. Mebbe I had to knock her off; so what? I can give her a decent funeral, can't I?"

Vernon stared at Mike. There was too much sincerity in his bragging to doubt what he said. Here was a criminal who actually believed himself invulnerable—even to the point where he could indulge in every fancy that occurred to him. Vernon could see how it must have tickled his vanity—his disproportionate sense of grandeur—to bring this girl here to murder her, where he could further indulge in his whims by giving her a funeral.

Mike pulled out a watch and consulted it.

"Fifteen after eleven," he pronounced. "At twelve your assistant comes. We'll need him to help load that casket in your hearse. Then he will drive the hearse, while you sit beside me in my car. We'll go to a place up in the country I know about and give Daisy a decent burial. But if your man tries any funny stuff while he's following me in the hearse, you'll go out like a light. I'll tell him that. I got it all worked out, see?"

"What happens after that?" Vernon inquired.

Mike studied him impersonally. "I'll tie you and him up. If you yell loud enough, somebody'll likely hear you in a day or two. By that time I'll be somewhere else."

"If you'll promise—"

"Promise?" Mike laughed thickly. "The only thing you got to worry

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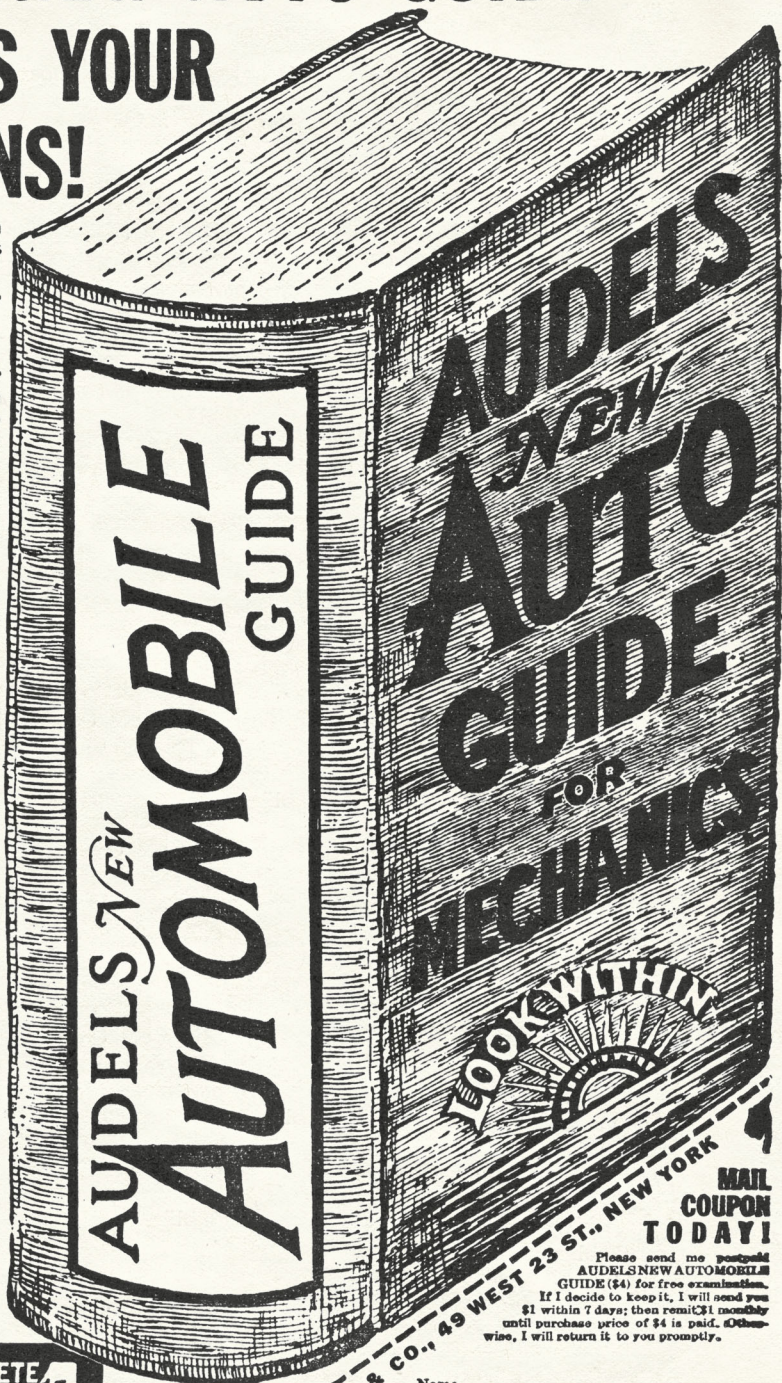
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about, little man, is yourself. Just don't let yourself make any mistakes. Say, it would be nice to have some organ music at Daisy's funeral. Can you play that thing?"

"Yes," Vernon answered. "But it's electric. I'll have to go up to the office and turn on the juice."

"I'll go with you," Mike said. "I don't want you to make any mistakes. A little organ music would be just the thing. What do you play—hymns and stuff?"

Vernon led him out of the preparation room, Mike following. The gun never left its focal point on the middle of Vernon's round body.

"Hymns, religious arias; there are some good secular ballads, too."

"Gee," Mike grunted. "That'll be swell. I didn't figure on that."

Vernon switched on the office lights, walked to a black box set with toggle switches. He flipped one.

"What's that thing?" Mike asked suspiciously.

"It turns on the juice so the organ will play," Vernon told him. "They run by electricity now. In the old days a boy used to have to pump the air by hand."

Vernon switched out the office lights, and they worked their way back to the preparation room. Then began the lugubrious job of wheeling the heavy bronze casket to the chapel. They placed it in proper position in the chancel. Then Mike had to have flowers, so they collected a few sprays from various parts of the building and displayed them about the sarcophagus.

Mike let out a breath of satisfaction. He sat down in a pew and drew a cigar from his pocket.

Vernon looked at him sharply.

"It's not customary to smoke at a funeral," he said.

Mike chuckled and put away the cigar. "O. K.," he growled. "Now

get up there behind that organ and play some music."

Vernon went to the organ.

Mike saw him sit down. There was a little hum as he flipped another switch, then a glorious burst of music filled the chapel. Mike could just see the top of Vernon's round little head as he played. Mike leaned back in satisfaction.

One piece floated harmoniously into another. They were all unfamiliar to Mike, but he knew instinctively that Daisy was getting a fine funeral. He glanced at his watch. Twenty to twelve. He could see Vernon's head nod as his hands went over the keys.

A lull in the music came suddenly as the melody died away in a whisper. Mike could hear Vernon murmuring in low tones.

"What's that you're saying?" he growled.

"I'm praying," Vernon answered, looking up. "It wouldn't be a proper funeral without a prayer for that poor girl."

Mike glowed. The versatility of this round little undertaker amazed him.

"Say, that's swell," he grunted. "Get out here in front of the casket like they do at funerals, where I can hear you."

The soft music stopped abruptly.

Vernon got up, walked to the casket. He went through a ritual he had heard so many times that he knew every word by heart.

When he had finished, Mike

looked at his watch again. It was a quarter to twelve.

"When does your man get here? A little before twelve, mebbe?" he asked.

"No," said Vernon. "Usually a little after. I've never known him to relieve anyone ahead of time."

"That's right," Mike agreed. "Human nature, ain't it? We'll have another song or two on the organ, then we'll go up and wait for him. Which door will he come in?"

"Front door," Vernon answered. "The other doors are bolted from the inside."

"Good," said Mike. "Go on and play some more."

He relaxed with his watch in one hand, gun in the other. When the music softened, as it did occasionally, he could still hear Vernon praying softly. That pleased Mike. He liked things done well.

When the clock stood at eleven fifty-five, he got up, Vernon, raising his chubby head, saw him, and the music stopped.

"Time to go up front," said Mike.

Vernon led the way, Mike's gun still trained upon him. Mike was breathing huge, satisfied breaths. There never was a crook in the whole world who did things the swell way Mike did them.

They reached the entrance vestibule. There were chairs handy and they sat down to wait. Mike was trying to hum the strain of the last piece Vernon had played.

Vernon sat very quietly, his lips

Coming Next Month—"Pete Makes the Fur Fly."
A Contacts, Inc., Novelette by Carl Clausen.

pursed up in a round pout. Little sweat beads formed slowly on his forehead.

They heard footsteps on the porch. Mike looked at his watch. It stood at a minute past midnight.

"He almost made it on time," he said.

The door opened, and a tall, angular young man entered and closed the door softly behind him before he saw Mike and the gun that was held in his gloved fist.

"Hello," said the newcomer. "What's going on here?"

He backed up a little, seemingly undecided whether to raise his hands or not. He saw Vernon sitting placidly in the chair, and Vernon's hands were not up, so the young man did not raise his.

"Bob," said Vernon, "this is Mike. He's had a little private funeral here tonight. He's going to make us take the casket somewhere out in the country. You're going to have to drive the funeral car."

"That's right," Mike expanded. "Your boss will sit with me in my car. You'll follow me in the hearse, and I'll be watching you from the rear-vision mirror. It'll just be too bad for your boss if you don't follow, and follow close."

"I'm sorry I couldn't warn you in any way," said Vernon. "But my hands have been tied, figuratively. It's too bad, Bob, but I guess we're in for it. Mike has promised to tie us up without further harm when he's through with us."

"Sure," Mike explained. "I ain't a mug that kills just to see blood spilled. You guys won't get hurt, if you don't make any mistakes."

The angular young man grinned reassuringly at Vernon.

"That's all right," he said. "We'll behave ourselves, won't we, Mr. Vernon?"

Vernon nodded. Mike stood up.

"We got a long way to go," he pronounced. "We better get busy. Where do you guys load the casket onto the hearse?"

"There's a porte-cochère opening out from the chapel onto the driveway," Vernon explained.

"Good," said Mike. "We'll take the casket there, unlock the doors, and all three of us will go back to your garage and get out the hearse."

They worked their way back to the chapel. Bob and Vernon first, Mike close behind, gun in readiness.

They removed the sprays from the casket, and wheeled it out of the chapel to a set of double doors.

Vernon fumbled with the bolt. His fingers were shaking. Mike spoke to him impatiently.

Finally the bolt came free, and Vernon sprawled face down on the floor. Mike swore, but the door burst open, and three shadowy figures appeared. Before Mike could swing his gun a hard fist knocked his arm awry and his gun spurted flame and echoing sound harmlessly.

He let his trigger finger ease off even before the gun had emptied itself. Three guns were pointed directly at him, and he could feel a fourth pressing suddenly into his back. The pistol slid from his fingers helplessly.

"That's the stuff, Mike," said the angular young man. "Here's some jewelry to wear, just to keep you from making any more mistakes."

Mike's jaw sagged. He saw the angular young man snap on a pair of handcuffs over his pigskin gloves.

Vernon got up cautiously. He was shaking shamelessly. His full lips quivered.

"Thank God," he breathed. "You made it."

Mike stared at them all. It was a

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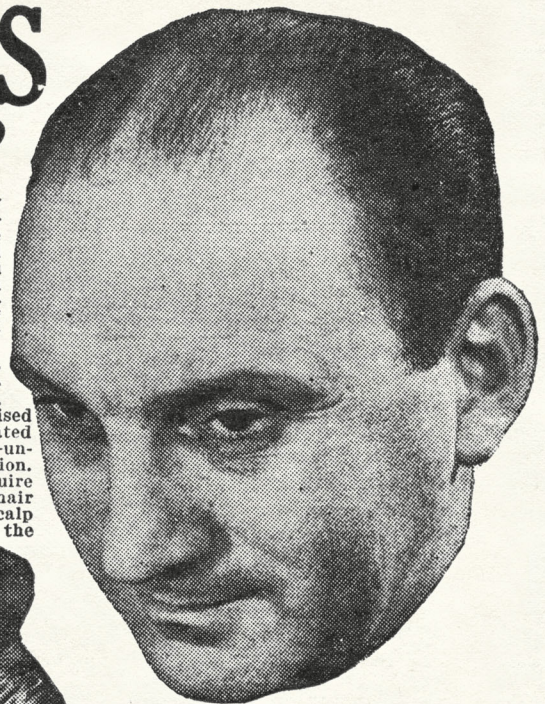
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very personal stare now. Something had gone wrong with Mike's plans, and he wanted to know how it had happened.

"I get it," he said heavily. "You're G-men. But how did you know I was here?"

"We didn't, until Vernon called us on the phone and told us to intercept his assistant and come in his place," said the angular young man.

"Don't hand me that stuff," Mike growled. "He didn't know I was coming, and he sure didn't use the phone while I was here. Unless . . . unless that was a phone switch he threw back there in the office when he said he was turning on the juice for the organ. But, hell, a guy can't make a phone call and play music, too."

"I told you that was an electric organ," Vernon explained, still shaking. "It's arranged to play either manually or mechanically. Something like the old-time player piano. I can't play a note myself."

Mike nodded bitterly. "So you wasn't playing at all. You was sitting back of that organ talking to the G-men on a telephone."

"Nice work, Mr. Vernon," said the angular young man. "You used your head."

"I bought that intercommunicating phone system a year ago," said Vernon. "We had it fixed so we could talk to the organist during a funeral, to give him his cues. The switch I flipped in the main office connected the organ extension with an outside line. I had the exchange operator get the F. B. I. office for me. She must have been plenty excited, she didn't close her key all the while I talked."

"So you wasn't praying after all," Mike choked.

"You can call it what you like," Vernon sighed. "But, man, I never prayed so hard, or so fast, in all my life!"



SILVER SWORD

by DALE CLARK

None of this would ever have happened to me if my uncle Joe wasn't such a swell guy. Why, I'd still be milking the cows on my folk's farm in Iowa, and I'd never have gone to Plymouth Business College, and to me New York would be just the place the radio programs started from.

But here I was in New York—to stay, with a job all lined up in advance for me. Uncle Joe took care of that, too.

So I at least had to try to help him out of his trouble, didn't I?

The way it started, my train pulled

into the Pennsylvania Station at 10 p. m., but Uncle Joe wasn't there to meet me. Or if he was, I missed him. If you've never been in New York, let me tell you that Pennsylvania Station is one big place. You could easily hide three or four Plymouth Business Colleges just in the odd corners of it. I had to hire a ducky in a red cap to guide me to the taxicabs.

No, I didn't go straight to my Uncle Joe's. He told me in his letter that maybe he wouldn't be able to meet the train, on account of important business engagements might

interfere, and in that case I should go to a hotel. He said the Agnew was a nearby hotel, clean and reasonable.

So I went to the Agnew, and registered, and was shown to a room. It sounds simple, but it was really very exciting to me. I had never been in New York before, and for that matter I had only spent two or three nights in my whole life in a hotel. It wasn't until I landed in this room and had time to catch my breath that I thought of something.

I thought of what a big place the Pennsylvania Station was, and how my uncle might have met the wrong train, and that he might be worried about me.

That set me to thumbing through the big Manhattan phone book. It didn't include Uncle Joe's name. However, I knew he lived in a building called the Sommerhall Apartments. That would be in the book, and perhaps someone there would take a message for my uncle.

I used the room phone—and that sounds simple, too, but actually I had some trouble making the operator understand what number I wanted. For those New York numbers are complicated. Still, I got the idea across, and got the Sommerhall Apartments, and asked to speak to Mr. Joseph Pettigrew.

A man's voice came: "Yes, hullo?"

I said, "Hello, Uncle Joe!" to see what he'd say to that, if he'd be surprised by me calling him up.

It was the other way around. I got the surprise. For he said:

"Oh, yes, Halper! Glad you called! I was wondering what kept you!"

"Wait a minute," I told him. "You've got it wrong. This is Stub—Eddie Pettigrew—your nephew from Iowa!"

I heard him chuckle. "Lieutenant Boyce is with you? Fine! Come up any time at all, and bring him along."

"But Uncle Joe—"

"O. K., Halper. In half an hour, then," he said, and the phone clicked. He'd hung up on me.

What was wrong?

I wish I knew! It sounded as if the wires were crossed up, with two entirely different conversations going on. But that couldn't be. I had a swell connection, and I could hear Uncle Joe perfectly, and I felt sure he'd heard me all right, too.

So what made him pretend I was somebody else? Who was this Halper—and Lieutenant Boyce? Those names didn't mean a thing to me. They must mean something to somebody else, though! To somebody in the same room with my Uncle Joe, listening to him talk over the phone.

Suddenly I knew my uncle was in some kind of trouble.

I didn't really stop to think after that. Not until I'd hurried out on the sidewalk in front of the Agnew Hotel, and jumped into a taxicab there, and told the driver where I wanted to go.

And then, all the way, I was thinking about *him*. Probably most families have an Uncle Joe in them—someone who is different, who goes off and makes a big success of himself, and is the one the rest all look up and turn to when things go wrong.

For years he worked in the Chicago office of his company, and he used to come out to our farm every fall for the duck hunting along the river. I remember when I was twelve years old, he gave me a swell double-barreled gun. There was the way he helped with my dad's doctor bills, and even met the mortgage

payment the year the river flooded most of our crops. And the way he laid it on the line so I could go to Plymouth Business College.

But mostly it was the kid stuff that stuck in my mind. When I was fourteen, and going to high school, he found out how I felt bad on account of Johnny Burke beating me up all the time. Johnny Burke was a town kid, and a bully, an awful mean guy to the country kids.

You know what my Uncle Joe did? He sent some money to a man who used to be a champion wrestler, and first thing I knew, I was getting his wrestling lessons through the mail. I think Uncle Joe also slipped our hired man some money, because the hired man seemed mighty willing to let me practice those holds on him up in our haymow.

You would be surprised how

Johnny Burke quit being such a bully—after I got all those wrestling lessons down pat.

Thinking about this, I didn't even notice the cab had stopped until the driver told me:

"H'yar, bud."

I paid him and went in, and it was just the kind of a building you'd expect Uncle Joe to live in. Elegant. Luxurious. There weren't any gilt mirrors or cheap statuary or ferns in the lobby—like the Agnew hotel; but just severe white walls and narrow black-framed pictures and indirect lights.

I asked the man at the desk where I'd find Mr. Joseph Pettigrew.

"Suite 421," he said. "Shall I inform him you're here, Mr.—"

"I'm his nephew, and he's expecting me," I explained. Although why



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I told this lie I still really don't know.

Anyway, a Filipino took me up in the elevator and told me to turn right along the fourth-floor hallway. I did, and knocked, and a woman opened the door.

And what a woman!

I mean she was the kind that absolutely knocks a fellow's eye out. Her hair and her brows were the dead black of India ink, especially when seen compared to her skin which was as white as snow or flour. Also she had greenish eyes, and a blood-red mouth.

It sounds like a crazy color scheme, the way I write it down on paper; but on her it looked all right, and she was really a knockout.

"Well?" She frowned at me.

I told her I was sorry. "I'm looking for Mr. Pettigrew's apartment, and I guess they gave me the wrong number downstairs." I figured it *had* to be a mistake, because Uncle Joe wasn't married. Not that I'd ever heard of in Chicago, and he'd only been transferred to the New York branch recently.

But she came back at me: "This is Mr. Pettigrew's apartment. What do you want?"

"I'm his nephew from Iowa, and I want to see him."

"You'll have to come back tomorrow," she said; "he's not in."

I asked, "Why, when did he go out?"

"Mr. Pettigrew has been out all evening," she stated.

Now, why was she trying to keep me from seeing Uncle Joe?

I put my foot in the door, quick, and I said: "I know better than that, ma'am. I talked to him over the phone just a short time ago."

Her greenish eyes widened when I said that. "Oh-h," she murmured, and then she laughed. "Well, if you talked to him—that's different. Step right in, won't you?" And she

seemed quite friendly and cordial about it.

I stepped in. There was a hallway, and then the front door of the apartment. Very elegant, as you'd know it would be after that lobby downstairs. The room even had a fireplace with a log burning in it—and not one of those fake gas logs, either; the genuine article.

She was saying: "Your uncle's really quite busy at present. While you're waiting, can I offer you a spot of Scotch?"

"No, thank you, ma'am."

"Cigarette, then?" She lifted a boxful of them from a chromium-and-glass table.

"No, thanks," I gulped.

For to tell the truth, it kind of embarrassed me to look at her. She wore such a tight and slinky sort of a dress. Not an evening gown, or cut particularly low in front—but if it had fitted her one little bit closer, the thing wouldn't have been decent.

She lifted her pencil-line eyebrows. "No bad habits at all, eh?"

"Well," I told her, "one thing I learned in Plymouth Business College was how liquor and tobacco can interfere with a man's efficiency, besides being a great expense to one just making his start in the world."

She seemed to think this was very funny; why, I don't know.

"Then," she said, laughing, "suppose you do some deep-knee bends or other healthful recreation to pass the time, and I'll tell Pettigrew you're here."

And she walked out of the room. Leaving me to wonder what *her* name was, and where she fitted in. The flip way she acted, you might think she owned the place.

But there was a woman's cloak and a hat and a handbag tossed on

the divan across the room. Hers, I guessed. And I certainly hoped Uncle Joe wasn't making the mistake of being very chummy with her. For though of course I hardly knew this green-eyed woman at all, yet I felt sure she'd be a hellor to live with.

I began to wonder what was keeping her.

Then I heard a voice—a man's hoarse, choked voice.

"Don't!" the voice begged. "Cayman, please, for God's sake—"

There was a thudding sound, like the smack of a fist into unprotected flesh. After that, a groan. And I heard a woman's titter of mirthless laughter.

I leaped across the room and jerked open the door she'd gone through.

II.

I saw it all in a flash, and I'll never forget any of it. You understand by now, I'd always looked up to my uncle Joe. A long ways up. He was almost like a superman in my eyes—although he was really rather a little and fat and bald guy, so far as appearances went.

I'd never expected to find him in a situation like this—begging for his life, was what it amounted to.

This room was a study, with bookshelves around the walls, with another fireplace and a log blazing there. Firelight flickered from the log, subdued electric glow came from a reading lamp on the desk.

The woman stood in front of a window, with the city lights behind her, and a taunting smile on her red lips. I can still see that smile, and the flash of her white teeth through it.

The men were at the desk. My uncle Joe bent back over it—bent,

because the other man had him by the throat.

"You liar! You four-flushing wind-bag!" this man was saying. "You thought you could pull a fast one, huh? Well, you're gonna pay through *this*—"

With one hand he clutched Uncle Joe's throat. Now with the fingers of the other hand he grabbed Uncle Joe's nose and twisted it.

My feet didn't make any noise on the thick rug. It was the woman who saw me first.

"Luke!" she bleated. "Behind you!"

By that time, I'd already gripped Luke's wrist and wrenched it away from my uncle's throat.

"Take it easy," I told him, "or take it out on somebody your own age, you bully!"

For he was a whole lot younger than my uncle Joe. About thirty, I judged. He wore his blond hair barbered short, in inch-long bristles; he had big shoulders and a bull neck; and when he jerked his head around to look at me, his bulging eyes were a furious blue.

"Keep out of this, punk!" he panted. "You'll get hurt!"

I asked him, "Who's going to help you?"

Uncle Joe gasped: "Stub, look out! He's got a gun!"

That was the fact. The big blond guy had let go of Uncle Joe's nose, and sneaked his hand inside the lapel of his coat, and I had a glimpse of the gun coming out of a trick holster in there.

So, as quick as I could, and as hard as I could, I twisted the wrist I had a hold on. I turned his arm, and circled behind him, while I forced his hand up and pinned it between his big shoulders. A hammer lock, it is called in wrestling.

"Drop that revolver, mister," I warned, "or there's going to be bones busted here!"

He was bent over so far his face was bumping a paperweight on the desk; I could hear the breath whistling through his teeth. A hammer lock hurts almost as bad as a toe hold, which is one of the worst pains in the world. I knew he couldn't stand it long, and he couldn't use his other arm because that was pressed down on the desk under his own weight.

He knew both these things, too, and he let the gun slip over the edge of the desk onto the floor. I jerked his arm down, and toward me, at the same time putting out my leg. He stumbled backward, and tripped over my leg, and fell on the floor.

That was my chance to scoop up the pearl-handled, short-barreled gun; which I did.

With the gun in my fist, I waved it around so as to include the woman, too.

"All right, Uncle Joe!" I said. "I'll keep them covered while you call the police."

My uncle had groped his way to a chair. He sat there, breathing loudly through his mouth. A trickle of red ran from his nostrils, down into his stubby gray mustache. His collar was loosened and torn open where the big guy had had him by the throat.

"Uh-h, ah-h, huh-h!" my uncle mumbled, all out of breath. "I . . . uh. . . I don't think . . . we'd better call the police, Stub."

And now I began to realize that it wasn't so easy and so simple as it had looked. Not on account of what Uncle Joe said, but because of the expression in his eyes.

Also, I saw how the green-eyed woman was smiling grimly, not in

the least bothered by the gun in my hand. Luke Cayman—the big blond guy—leaned against the bookshelves, and rubbed his arm, and glowered at me. He was plenty sore, but without any sign of being *afraid*.

I stared at my uncle again.

"Holy smokes!" I said. "You're going to let this ape beat up on you, and pull a gun on us, and not do anything about it?"

Uncle Joe dabbed a finger at his nose, smeared the blood all over his mustache when he did that.

"It's . . . it's nothing, Stub," he muttered. "A personal quarrel. I don't want to waste my time going to court over it."

The woman burst out laughing.

"Skip it, Pettigrew!" she jeered. "Why try to put on an act? You don't *dare* to call the cops, and you might as well tell the kid so!"

I would never have taken her word for this. But there was the stricken look in my uncle Joe's eyes, and the crushed way he let his shoulders sag.

It scared me.

"Uncle Joe," I said, "I think we'd better talk this over between ourselves, alone."

He dropped his head in what might have been meant for a half nod.

"O. K.," I said, and looked at the other two. "On your way, and close the door when you go."

Cayman scowled. "Maybe you'd like to make us go?"

Well, I could throw him out—I figured. But you can't put a hammer lock on a woman, can you?

"Suit yourself," I told him, and I walked over to the fireplace. I was thinking about when my grandparents first came to Iowa in the Indian days, and how my grandmother chased three big, tough Sioux braves out of the cabin. I took the poker from alongside the fireplace, and laid it across the blazing log.



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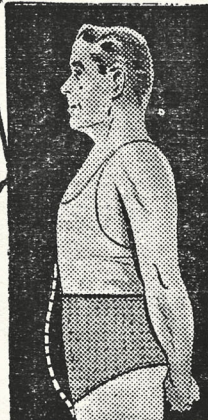
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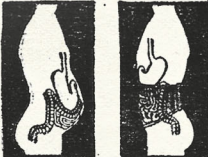
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"You got till this gets hot to make up your minds," I said.

"Why, you—"

"You'll leave doggone fast," I said, "at the end of a hot poker."

"Luke!" the woman said. "Let's get out of here! The kid's just crazy enough to try a fool stunt like that!"

Luke started toward me, stopped in front of my uncle's chair.

"Pettigrew," he said angrily, "this isn't doing you any good! I'm giving you until tomorrow to settle in full. You know my terms, and you'd better be prepared to meet them. Or else."

Uncle Joe didn't say anything.

Luke Cayman stepped closer to me, then. But not so very close—about two yards away.

"And you keep out of this, punk!" he said. "I don't like you. And I'll tell you something. There's plenty of guys in this town will beat the hell out of a fresh hick for twenty-five bucks. For a hundred I could get your leg broke. I might spend two hundred, and have 'em both cracked!" He jerked his head at the woman. "Get your wraps on, Emmaline; we're going."

She stopped in front of me on her way out.

"Luke means it," she said. "If you want to stay healthy, keep your nose clean. You won't get ahead in the world very fast on a pair of crutches, you know."

My uncle Joe had out a handkerchief; sat there holding the handkerchief to his bleeding nose after they had gone.

"Uncle," I said, "what's it all about?"

His voice mumbled through the reddening handkerchief. "Never mind, Stub. It's nothing for you to worry your head about."

"Cayman," I said, "who is he? What'd he mean by that crack about you meeting his terms, or else?"

"It's just a little business matter."

"It sounded," I said "more like blackmail."

My uncle started, gave me a quick, upward glance. I think he suddenly realized I wasn't a fourteen-year-old kid any longer.

"And what did *she* mean?" I demanded. "Why don't you dare call the police?"

He sat for a while, thinking. Of course he didn't have to tell me. He knew that. But, after all, my uncle Joe was human. He surely realized how I felt about him, what a big man he had always been in my eyes, and I don't believe he was willing to destroy all that by leaving me to think the worst.

"Why, Stub," he said slowly, "it's a long story—and if you're going to know about part of it, you ought to hear it all."

I nodded.

"I don't know quite how to begin," he said. "I don't suppose you ever heard of the Eyrie Club?"

"I never had."

"It's a gentlemen's club," he told me. "Very expensive and exclusive. Some of the biggest men in New York belong to it—well, anyway, some pretty big ones. I'm a member, although it wasn't exactly easy for me to get in. I'm explaining this so you'll understand how important it is to me. The president of the company I work for is a member. And some of the other men are among my most valuable contacts—when it comes to selling advertising campaigns, you understand."

He paused, seemed to think some more. Then:

"It's the kind of a club where the members think nothing of playing bridge at anywhere from a dime to twenty-five cents a point," he went on. "And poker for high stakes, too. You can see how a man could

easily win or lose a good deal of money in a month's time."

I stared. "How much did *you* lose?"

"I've been lucky enough to win," said my uncle Joe, shrugging. "But some of the others have been dropping quite a lot of money. So much so that the executive director of the club grew suspicious, and employed Luke Cayman to investigate. Cayman is a professional card detective—a specialist in the art of detecting card sharpers."

"On the theory"—I grinned—"that it takes a crook to catch a crook?"

The corners of a wry smile showed around the reddened cloth in my uncle's hand.

"I'm afraid so," he said ruefully. "Because Cayman has accused me of using stripped cards and marked decks."

I gasped. "You never did!"

"Of course not, Stub."

"Then," I said, "let him try to prove it."

Uncle Joe sighed. "Unfortunately, he doesn't have to."

"What?"

"In a gentlemen's club"—he shook his head slowly—"these things are handled very quietly. They don't want any publicity. There won't be any arrest, any legal action, any need to produce evidence in open court. Cayman will simply hand his proofs—his frame-up, in this case—to the directors of the club. They in turn will quietly cancel the guilty person's membership. In other words, kick him out."

"There must be other clubs," I said.

"You don't understand, Stub. Such scandals always leak out, in one way or another. There are rumors, gossip, whispers. I can't afford to be branded as a cheat and a crook in the eyes of all those men

—including the president of my own company." His voice thickened. "I'd be ruined, washed up for good. A man could never live down an episode as rotten as that."

I couldn't believe it was as bad as all that.

"Look here, Uncle Joe!" I said. "This is a free country, isn't it? Surely they can't condemn a man without giving him a chance to defend himself!"

He shrugged tiredly. "Oh, I could put up a fight. I could hire a lawyer, sue for the damage to my reputation, drag the thing into court." He waved his hand in a gesture of defeat. "Maybe, months later, I'd clear myself. But I'd lose my income during that time as a result of the scandal. In the end, it'd cost me much less money to settle with Cayman for the ten thousand dollars he demands."

"Ten thousand!" It made me dizzy just to imagine that much money—and then angry, to think of it going to Luke Cayman. Why, that was more money than we could have sold our farm in Iowa for; it was more than the lifetime savings of ordinary people.

"Uncle Joe, don't do it!" I begged. "Why don't you go straight to the club officers and tell them what Cayman is up to?"

My uncle took the bloodstained handkerchief away from his nose. "Well, when you phoned tonight, I told Cayman that's exactly what I had done. I pretended Andrew Halper, the club's executive director, was on his way up here with a bunco-squad detective."

The skin on my face burned. "And I walked in and told Mrs. Cayman I made that phone call! You should kick me all over forty acres!"

Uncle Joe felt of his nose ten-

derly. It had stopped bleeding, I saw.

"Never mind, Stub," he said. "Cayman didn't fall for it as I hoped, anyway. He pointed out he'd have to go through with the frame-up in case I notified Halper. He'd have to make me out a complete crook in order to clear himself of my charges."

I started walking up and down his study, pounding my wits to think of something.

"You could give him marked money, and have the police—"

"Huh uh, Stub," Uncle Joe interrupted gloomily. "Cayman and his wife are too smart to fall into any such elementary trap. Besides, it isn't enough to prove he's crooked; I have to establish my own innocence."

I walked and thought some more.

"Uncle," I said, "maybe you can't risk going to Mr. Halper, but if somebody else— Say! I've got an idea!"

I explained my idea, and when I was halfway through, Uncle Joe protested it would never work. "Not after Halper checked up on you."

"But if he believed it for just thirty minutes!" I said. "That's all the time we need!" And I explained the rest of my scheme.

"Well-l, we could try it," he had to admit. "But you'd better not carry that thing around with you."

I gave him Luke Cayman's gun, watched him drop it into a drawer of his desk.

III.

My uncle even thought up an improvement on the idea. He dressed himself in a soup-and-fish suit of clothes, and then we went first of all to the Wylotte, which is a downtown hotel and was where the Cay-

mans stayed. Only, of course, we weren't calling on the Caymans—yet.

My uncle whispered, "Pss-ss-st," to a bellhop, and then he asked how the bellhop would like to earn twenty dollars.

The bellhop naturally would like to!

Uncle Joe started talking about a party—and remember, he was all rigged out in the soup-and-fish. He said it was a scavenger hunt party. "You know, where they send the guests out to bring in crazy things like a milkman's horse, or a lion from in front of the public library, or else pay a forfeit."

This sounded awfully silly, but the bellhop seemed to believe it, and perhaps New Yorkers are more used to the antics of rich people.

"Well," said my uncle, "I made a fool bet I wouldn't have to pay any forfeit, and then they sent me out after a red-haired Swedish bellhop."

The bellhop said he didn't want any part of that bet. "Anyway, you won't find it around this hotel."

Did I tell you I was a carrot-top? My uncle Joe grinned and winked and jerked his thumb at me. "I got the redhead, and he can talk Swedish, too," he said, "so all I need is the use of a hotel uniform for an hour, or less. And if you can rustle up any kind of a fit for him, the twenty is yours."

Well, the bellhop rustled and brought us a paper-wrapped package and Uncle Joe slipped him the twenty.

Then we went to the other hotel—the Agnew, where I had hired a room—because that was much closer than going back to the apartment, and I had to hurry with my plan. I put on the bellhop suit, which fitted fairly closely, and didn't look too bad as long as I kept my topcoat on.



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After which, we rode in a cab to the Eyrie Club.

"Now it's entirely up to you," Uncle Joe said, with the raw edge of his nerves beginning to show. "Don't talk too much, and be sure you talk to Andrew Halper and nobody else."

I promised.

"A tall, thin man," my uncle said, "with a wen at the corner of his right eye."

I said I'd make sure of the wen.

"I'll wait here in the cab," my uncle muttered. He was afraid of a miscue, and almost wishing he'd paid the ten thousand to Cayman and had it over with. Well, I wished so, too—but that was later on.

The Eyrie Club had this name from being located on the top floor of a building overlooking Central Park. The elevator let me into a paneled foyer, with a check room for the members' wraps, and a uniformed guard to keep everybody out who wasn't a member.

I told the guard, please, I had to see Mr. Halper, and it was important.

How important, he asked.

I said it was about a large sum of money belonging to a man in the club. I didn't exactly claim I'd picked up a wallet full of bank notes, but I kind of gave that impression.

So the guard let me in through a door marked "Executive Director," and into a smaller office behind that where Mr. Halper sat behind his desk.

It was Halper, all right—with the wen at the corner of his fishy gray eye.

"Well?" he grunted.

"Mr. Halper," I said. "I work in a hotel as a bellhop. I'm supposed to be on duty right now, but I had to see you."

He nodded; because I had unbuttoned my topcoat, and he could see the uniform I had on.

"What's it about?" he asked.

"I overheard something tonight I think you ought to know about," I told him.

Mr. Halper's eye got grayer and fishier. "I thought this concerned some lost money!" he snapped.

"The money isn't lost yet, but it's going to be," I said. "What I heard was a plot to blackmail some members of this club."

"Yes? Go on!"

I hesitated. "You have to promise not to tell who told you. I could lose my job for doing this."

"It's a promise."

I said, still stalling: "It sounded like a pretty big graft to me . . . and I thought . . . well, if there was a reward—"

The wen disappeared in a wrinkling frown.

"Oh, not now," I said quickly. "Only if it turns out the way I say, and if Mr. Pettigrew wants to reward me for saving his dough."

"Pettigrew?" Halper leaned over his desk at me. "What about Pettigrew?"

I said: "I didn't understand it exactly, but I was sent up to this room with some drinks, and I couldn't help hearing them talking."

"You heard who talking?"

I said: "It's a Mr. and Mrs. Cayman in the room, sir."

He leaned back. "Oh. What did they say?"

"I didn't exactly understand it, but it was something about a card game. They were going to frame him so it'd look like he cheated."

"You heard them say all that while you were in the room?" He looked as if he wasn't going to swallow it.

"I . . . well, I listened at the door a little bit, too."

"Hm-m-m. And what made you come to me with this yarn?"

I said it was because they mentioned the club. "And Cayman said they had to be careful, their jig was up if Mr. Halper ever learned what was going on."

That fetched a growl from him.

"That's all," I said, "and I have to get back on the job. I sneaked out to see you, because it sounded like they might pull this stunt tonight, but I have to get back—"

"Hold on. What's your name?"

I couldn't tell him Stub Pettigrew, so I said, "Johnny Burke." The first name that popped into my head.

He nodded. "All right, Johnny, I'll get in touch with you if there's any reward."

So I beat it back to the cab and my uncle Joe, and as we rode along, I told him everything that had happened.

He let me off at the Agnew Hotel, and went on to take care of his part of the plan.

I changed back to my own clothes, not hurrying so much now. I had to give Uncle Joe a little time to do his part. So I walked across the city, and gave the paper-wrapped package to the bellhop again. After that, I found out from the room clerk that the Caymans were in 756.

I used an outside phone, and rang up the Sommerhall Apartments and asked for Mr. Joseph Pettigrew.

"Uncle Joe?" I asked. "All set on your end?"

"All set? Oh, yes."

I thought his voice sounded kind of funny; choked up.

"Is Halper there?" I asked.

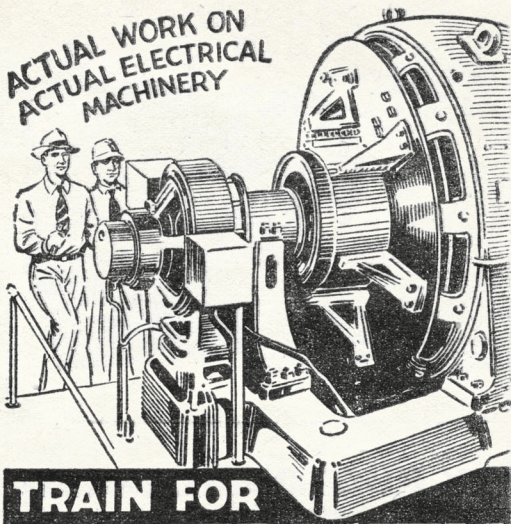
"Just came in," came the answer.

I guessed he was keeping his voice low as Halper wouldn't overhear all this, and I didn't say anything more.

I took the elevator up to the seventh floor. It was Emmaline Cayman who opened the door of 756.

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you business-college egg! Didn't Luke warn you—"

I cut her off, making my voice as trembly as I could—and that wasn't hard, with so much depending on this:

"I know, but Uncle Joe sent me! He's taken awful sick!"

Her greenish eyes opened. "Sick?"

"His heart," I said. "From being choked, and the excitement and all. He just caved in."

"He . . . is he . . . will he—"

She was scared. Really scared. I thought she figured they might slap a murder charge against Luke, if my uncle should die.

"He'll live," I said, "I guess. Only the doctor wants to hustle him off to the hospital and keep him absolutely quiet for a couple of weeks, but first he wants to see Luke."

Her India-ink brows came down. "My husband isn't here. I don't know where to get in touch with him. Someone called him on the phone, and he said he had to go out, but he didn't tell me where." Worriement was written all over her face. "What are we going to do?"

I said: "You better come over to Uncle Joe's apartment with me yourself."

That wasn't exactly what I had planned, but I hoped it'd work out just as well. I had to get one or the other of them over there, and in a hurry.

"His apartment? You mean he's at home?" She stared.

"Sure, he's home. I told you he wanted to see Luke *before* he goes to the hospital," I said, "and you better hurry."

"How long ago did it happen?"

"Just after you left," I told her, "and the doctor worked quite a while to bring him around."

She turned back into the other room—they had a suite of rooms—and came out wearing her coat, with

a peaked green hat crammed over her black hair at a slanted angle.

In the cab, I invented a lot of details about Uncle Joe's sickness. That kept the talk going until we reached the Sommerhall Apartments.

Uncle Joe's door was unlocked, according to plan, and I shooed her into the front room. "He's in bed. I'll tell him you're here."

I walked down the hall, but I didn't have to go into the bedroom. I already had the envelope in my pocket. I pulled it out, and walked back to her, and said:

"We're too late. He's gone in the ambulance, but he left this for me."

I opened the envelope. There was a note inside, and a check.

I showed her the check. "He says in the note this is to settle that deal with Luke."

She looked startled. "Luke can't take a check."

"I know, the note says so. It's a check made out to bearer, and I'm to cash it and give you folks the money."

"Well, Luke won't like this."

I said: "Be sensible. A man as sick as Uncle Joe can't go to the bank himself. You can take it this way, or you can wait until he's well."

Of course they couldn't wait. Luke Cayman had to hand in his report to Halper long before the couple of weeks would be up.

She said: "I'll ask Luke; we'll let you know first thing in the morning."

My glance moved to the study door, which was inches open. I wondered why Uncle Joe and Halper didn't come out. Certainly I had done my part, forcing her to admit they were taking ten thousand dollars, in such an underhand way they dared not indorse his check.

Could I get her to say more? I

tried. "You'll have to give me some sort of a release in writing—"

"Not much!" she snapped. "What do you think we are, fools?"

I'd been moving across the room. I reached a place where I could look in through that partly open study door. I was going to say something to her, but now my voice shriveled and dried up deep in my throat.

Because Mr. Halper wasn't hiding in that room with Uncle Joe, the way I had planned it. And Uncle Joe wasn't in there, either.

There was no one in the room at all except Luke Cayman. The big blond man lay sprawled on the floor, with his glassy eyes reflecting the blaze of the dancing fire, a ghastly grin on his lips, and a great black-looking smear over the front of his white shirt. On the rug nearby lay the pearl-handled, short-barreled revolver.

IV.

I was a better actor than I knew. Or maybe I wasn't acting at all. Thinking it over now, my action may have been purely instinctive. In the marshes along our river at home, you may wade after a wounded duck you have shot—and that duck will dive, will cling to the grasses at the bottom. The duck may drown doing this, but he prefers drowning to being caught.

Like a wounded duck, I dived. I hid my knowledge of Luke Cayman's death, because to discover him meant an influx of police and plain-clothes men. It meant questions which I could not possibly answer.

I faced Emmaline Cayman, keeping myself between her and the door so as to block her chance of glimpsing what I had just seen.

"Foolish or not," I said, "I'm supposed to ask your husband for a

signed release. You don't know where we can find him tonight?"

She shook her head.

"He didn't say who called him on the phone, or how long he'd be out?" I persisted.

"No; I told you he didn't."

"When did he get that call?"

"Oh, half an hour ago. What difference does it make? You can see him in the morning, anyway," she said.

"In the morning, then," I agreed. "Good night, Mrs. Cayman."

It was abrupt, but I had to get her out of there.

She smiled. "I'll take care of *this* until then," and she folded the check. "Just so you don't forget to call," she said, and picked up her handbag from the divan and tucked the yellow slip of paper inside. "Good night, Stub."

I drew a breath of relief when she was out of there. Then:

"Uncle Joe!" I called. "Uncle Joe!"

He wasn't there to answer me. Well, I'd known he wouldn't be.

I walked into the study and stared down at the big blond man's body, with a lump that felt as big as an orange swelling up inside my throat.

This man had been blackmailing and browbeating Uncle Joe. He had been summoned by a mysterious phone call to this apartment. My uncle was at home at the time—according to our plan; besides, he had answered my phone call. The phone was in the study, so he must have been practically standing over Cayman's dead body when he talked to me. Then my Uncle Joe had vanished into thin air.

"Murder!" I groaned.

Of course I didn't think for a moment Uncle Joe had really done it. I was merely conjecturing what the police would say.

Well, the police would find out sooner or later. Emmaline Cayman would tell her story—all about Uncle Joe's heart attack—and how in the world could I explain *that* now?

It was enough to make me beat my fists against my head in despair!

For the next few moments, I was hardly a sane man. It drove me crazy with fear to think of all the angles of this mess; and then, too, I was desperately anxious about Uncle Joe, for I couldn't imagine *what* had become of him. I'd have given ten years of my life for the sight of him walking into this apartment, so we could sit down together and decide what to do.

Only, of course, he didn't walk in. So it was up to me—alone.

Be cool now, I told myself, keep your head on your shoulders.

I switched on the desk light, added that to the dancing firelight in the room. Then I got out my handkerchief, and picked up the gun, and sniffed at it. I could tell by the smell it had been fired recently; and when I broke out the chambers, there was one empty cartridge.

Well, I had known all along Cayman must have been killed with this gun. I knew something else, that my prints and Uncle Joe's prints were on it, for we had both handled the weapon.

I wiped it with my handkerchief. Then I laid it on the floor again, and as I did so, I saw the other thing.

The silver sword.

A toy sword, it was. I hadn't noticed it before partly because it was so tiny—only as long as my little finger—and partly because it lay on the shadowed side of Cayman's body, shielded by him from the glow of the firelight.

For a moment, my heart leaped.

I almost went to the phone and called the police then and there; figuring that this sword cleared Uncle Joe, that all the police had to do was trace the thing to its owner.

On second thought, I found a hitch in this easy solution.

Can you imagine a killer accidentally dropping a toy silver sword at the scene of his crime? I couldn't. I couldn't even imagine what any sensible person would be doing with such a thing. If it had been a cigarette lighter or a penknife or a button—but it wasn't; it was just a toy sword.

I told myself the police wouldn't believe it'd been accidentally dropped. They'd think that Uncle Joe left it in a desperate, unconvincing effort to plant a false clue to divert suspicion from himself.

Well, I knew Uncle Joe hadn't left it there.

And now on third thought, a cold sweat broke out on my forehead. If this sword had been *put* beside Cayman's body, it was the murderer who put it there! Why? Because in some way or other it pointed to my uncle!

You may ask how a toy sword could possibly point to Uncle Joe. I asked myself that question, and I found an answer. Since the thing had no practical value, it's worth must be *imaginary*—in other words, it was a luck piece! For all I knew, Uncle Joe might have carried it with him always, as men do carry lucky coins or a rabbit's foot. And if that was so, this little silver sword would forge the final link to send him to the electric chair.

So I put the tiny sword in my pocket.

Being in so deep, I thought I might as well go it whole hog. That meant gritting my teeth for the ugly job of searching Cayman's pockets.

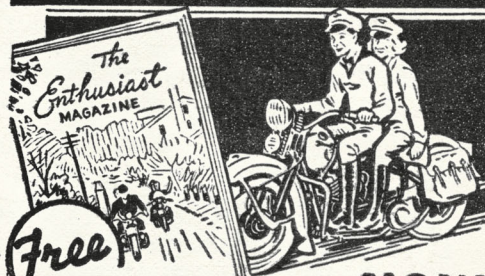


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I might have saved myself the trouble. Cayman was much too smart to carry incriminating evidence on his person.

The telephone rang. Twice, before I made up my mind to risk answering it.

"Hello?" I said.

A pause, then a woman's voice.

"Number, please?"

"What?" I asked.

"What number did you wish, sir?" she intoned.

I caught on. I was talking to the switchboard operator at the Sommerhall Apartments desk downstairs.

"Didn't this phone just ring?" I demanded.

"No, sir, no call," she said. "Are you sure it wasn't your doorbell, sir?"

A cold prickle raised on the nape of my neck. I dropped the phone into the cradle and whirled around.

It was Mr. Halper standing in the doorway, hands buried in his topcoat pockets, his eyes grim and fishy under the brim of his derby. It had been the doorbell! When no one answered, he must have tried the door and found it unlocked, and he'd stepped into the apartment.

He said, "We meet again." Cat-and-mouse stuff!

I was on the wrong end of the pitchfork, and I knew it. Being caught like this in the same room with Cayman's body— Well, my one chance was to jump him before he came down on me like a ton of bricks.

I said, "What'd you come back here for?"

It startled him. "Come back?" he echoed. "What do you mean?"

"You were here once before to-night," I told him. "Mr. Pettigrew phoned you to come over at once—"

Halper said: "He did, but I was very busy checking up on your story, and I couldn't come until now. They told me at the hotel no Johnny

Burke ever worked there as a bellhop. I suppose you've got an explanation for *that*?"

I knew I was sunk the minute I started explaining about myself.

"Mr. Halper," I said, "you might as well quit stalling and admit the truth. You were in this apartment earlier tonight, weren't you?"

His frown buried the wen at the corner of his eye in a deep wrinkle. "What gives you that idea, Burke?"

I said: "My name isn't Burke, it's Stub Pettigrew, and I'm Joe Pettigrew's nephew. I talked to my uncle on the phone before I came up here, and he told me you were here with him."

"If Pettigrew said that, he lied," said Halper, as cool as a cucumber. "And by the way, where is Joe Pettigrew?"

I couldn't answer that. And until I could answer it, I couldn't prove Halper had been in the apartment, either. He could stick by his story that he'd just arrived, and there I was stuck—with a murdered man on my hands, too.

"Well?" snapped Halper. "Where is he?"

What could I say?

Mr. Halper shrugged. "He skipped, didn't he? Leaving *this* behind him." He stared at Cayman on the floor.

"No," I said.

"You're trying to shield him. Step aside, I'm going to call the police."

I didn't step aside. What I did do wasn't particularly smart—just the instinct of the crippled duck again. I tried to keep this thing hidden a little while longer.

That's why I swung my fist to the point of Andrew Halper's chin. He went down like a calf at butchering time.

I picked him up, carried him down the hallway until I came to a bed-

room. I dropped him onto the bed, and ran into the bathroom.

Uncle Joe!

Uncle Joe lay crumpled there on the bathroom's tiled floor!

I thought for a horrible moment he was dead—until I bent over to touch his wrist, and he groaned feebly.

Behind me, Halper was stirring on the bed. I whipped all the towels off the bathroom racks, ran back, and tied Halper. I ripped the towels into strips, and fastened his wrists and ankles separately—a wrist and ankle to different rods at the head and foot of the bed.

In the bathroom again, I shook my uncle's shoulder. "Uncle Joe! Uncle Joe—"

The doorbell was ringing again. I knew it was the doorbell this time.

I got the start of my life when I opened the door. There were two big, blue-coated cops in the corridor, the biggest and reddest-faced cops I ever laid eyes on. The voice of the nearest jarred on my eardrums:

"Well, buddy, was it you fired the shot?"

V.

Terror can be a good thing. Here I was scared stiff—so absolutely stiff that I'm sure no expression at all showed on my face.

"Shot?" I echoed stupidly. It was parrot talk, stalling for time by repeating what the officer said; but he didn't know that.

He asked, "You didn't hear it?"

I grabbed at the straw and said—truthfully—that, no, I hadn't heard any shot.

"I guess nobody else did, either," the other policeman grumbled. "It's some fool's idea of a joke, looks like."

I asked him who'd reported it. They didn't know; they were squad-

car men on a radio assignment, somebody had reported hearing a shot in this building, and they were investigating. Luckily they'd already talked to a number of tenants, none of whom had heard anything—because of the soundproofed walls, of course—and they were ready to pass up the whole incident as a mistake.

"Sorry to trouble you," they said, and walked off down the corridor.

I leaned against the inside of the closed door and had a fit of the shaking willies. It'd been so darned close! Well, it was still close. Because when Cayman's death did get reported, and those officers identified me next time— But I couldn't stop to worry about that now.

Uncle Joe mumbled when I sprinkled cold water on his face.

"D-drops . . . b-blue bottle."

I found the blue bottle in the medicine chest. The label said to administer four drops in half a glass of water. I did, lifted my uncle to a sitting position on the tile floor, and fed him the water by sips.

"Uncle Joe, what happened to you?"

"I stepped into the study . . . somebody behind the door . . . slugged me—"

There was an ugly purple bruise on his head to prove it.

"But you called Halper before you were hit!"

"Downtown! I used a pay phone."

I asked: "But he was here with you, wasn't he? When you talked to me on the phone, later on?"

Uncle Joe gave me a puzzled, blank look.

"Holy smokes!" I said. "Then you didn't talk to me at all!"

"No, Stub. I came to, and I saw Cayman there. I knew I was going to be sick," he explained.

That was why he'd stumbled to this bathroom, because he knew he

was going to be sick. But he'd fainted again, had fallen and probably struck his head on the tub as he fell.

"Just take it easy, Uncle Joe," I said, reaching into my pocket and getting out the little silver sword. "Did you ever see this before?"

He shook his head.

"Keep on taking it easy," I told him, and walked out into the bedroom where I'd left Andrew Halper tied onto the bed.

Halper was gone!

I should have realized that those towels were elastic enough to have a little stretch in them; that if he worked one hand loose, the rest was easy.

But he couldn't have much of a start on me! Just the little while it'd taken to feed Uncle Joe his drops, and maybe not all of that time.

I raced through the apartment, out into the corridor, and it was closer than I'd hoped. I had a glimpse of Halper vanishing into the elevator.

There were stairs at the end of the corridor, and I took them rather than wait for the elevator to make a second trip. Took them four at a clip, slam-bang, and to hell with twisted ankles.

The two big cops were at the lobby desk, slowing me to a walk as I went past. I heard them ask if the clerk was *sure* nobody in this building had put in a police call.

Then I hit the sidewalk, looking around. No sign of Halper, up and down the street. But, a cab moving down the block.

He had to be in that cab, I figured.

There was a line of cabs drawn up in front of the building, and I jumped into the next one.

"Just follow the man who left here in the machine ahead of us," I said.

The driver nodded, slid his gears into action. I perched on the cushions in back, and fixed myself up a theory. It was Andrew Halper, I argued, who'd answered the phone when I called and asked if everything was all set.

Sure, I know what you're thinking. He'd apparently implicated himself by saying Halper had just walked in—but that was the smart part of the play! Nobody would expect him to say that about himself, would they?

I remembered what Emmaline Cayman told me about Luke getting a phone call. Halper again! He must have telephoned Luke Cayman the instant I walked out of the Eyrie Club, ordered Cayman to report to him at once.

Why? Because he was mixed up in the blackmailing scheme, getting a split out of it! I felt sure that was the solution.

When I left the club, Uncle Joe rode downtown with me *before* he called Halper. That gave Cayman time to ride uptown, and be at the Eyrie when Uncle Joe asked Halper to come to his apartment right away.

If I figured this right, both Cayman and Halper had gone to the apartment, got there ahead of Uncle Joe. How they entered the place I didn't know, but I imagined Cayman was crook enough to pick the lock. I could work out the details later, anyway.

The important thing was that Halper murdered Cayman, and slugged my uncle, and answered my phone call. Then he sneaked out, waited awhile, and reported hearing a shot to the police. That provided him with an alibi so he could appear on the scene after the time the shot had been heard, didn't it?

In the excitement of doping all this out, I didn't notice where the cab chase was taking me. Until we

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pulled up in front of the Wylotte Hotel!

It was Andrew Halper stepping out of the cab in front of us, all right.

I didn't need three guesses to tell where he was going now! I skimmed out, and went through the lobby fast, and caught an up elevator just as the doors were closing. He'd have to wait for the next elevator, so I was ahead of him already.

"Seven," I told the elevator fellow.

On the seventh floor, I walked straight past the Cayman's suite of rooms. About thirty feet farther on, an intersection of corridors gave me a corner to hide around. I crouched there on my hands and knees, peeked around the corner.

Andrew Halper appeared in less than a minute, walking fast. He stopped at 756.

Emmaline opened the door for him. I came up out of my crouch, running, as he went through the door. I got there just before he'd quite closed the door behind him—and I got there *hard*. You can't run into a door at top speed and do it gently.

Andrew Halper lay kicking on the floor as I skidded to a stop inside of 756. He'd had his back to the door as it slammed open. Well, I couldn't help that—or care to.

"We meet again," I told him. "In some funny places, huh?"

So much breath was knocked out of Halper that he couldn't answer. He just sprawled at my feet, with his wide-open mouth pumping for air.

Emmaline Cayman's eyes were green danger signals. "What's the idea?" she demanded. "Breaking in here like this? Get out before I call the house detective!"

"That would be swell," I said, grinning at her. "I suppose you want to make a big row, so your hus-

band will be sure to hear about it. Or does he already know you're entertaining Halper on the side?"

"W-what?" She was furious.

Well, I hadn't forgotten the way she laughed when Luke Cayman had my uncle Joe by the throat. I could give her the ugly news without trying to soften the blow.

"You're having an affair with this fellow," I said, "and that's why he killed Luke tonight."

I thought that would hold her. It did. Her mouth dropped open, her eyes half closed, and she grabbed at a chair to steady herself.

"Halper . . . killed . . . my husband?" she faltered. "Is that what the police—"

"Absolutely," I said. "He tried to frame my uncle Joe, but he made one bad slip."

Halper was having a hard time of it on the floor. He made choking sounds through his ragged gasps for breath, but without really saying any actual words.

"He hit my uncle too hard," I said. "Tho police were supposed to think there'd been a fight, that Uncle Joe shot Luke in the fight. Only that's out, because Joe Pettigrew is—"

"Dead?" she wailed.

"Paralyzed," I told her. "The head injury caused a blood clot on the brain. He couldn't have pulled the trigger."

Of course, Halper knew better than that. But I wasn't interested in what he knew. The thing was to wring the truth out of her before she heard his side of it.

"He was in the shake-down with Luke, wasn't he?" I asked.

She nodded slowly.

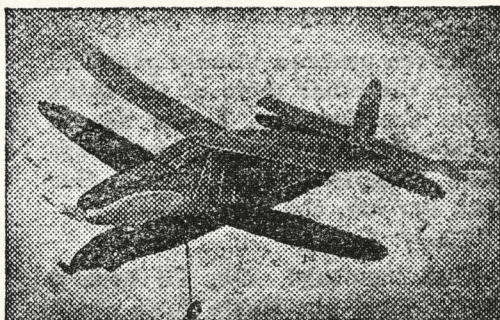
"It was Halper who phoned him tonight, wasn't it?" I asked.

She nodded again.

"And *this*," I said. "You know about this, don't you?"

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She stared at the little silver sword in the palm of my hand; stared, and swayed, and gulped.

"It was on the floor beside your husband's body," I told her. "It was—"

She ran past me, blindly panicked—into the other room of the suite. From the doorway, I saw her in there—clawing through her wraps she'd dropped onto a chair. Her coat, her hat, the handbag—

"Hey!" I said.

That handbag! Oh, I'd been a fool! She'd put Uncle Joe's check into the handbag, and I noticed that at the time. It was such a simple, natural gesture that I missed the important thing entirely.

She hadn't brought the handbag from the hotel when I called for her! It had been in Uncle Joe's apartment all the time.

"Wait a minute, Mrs. Cayman!" I shouted. "Halper didn't phone Luke! Nobody phoned him! He went back after the handbag you pretended to forget—and you were with him! *You* pulled the trigger!"

By that time she had the handbag open. Her hand came out of it, and she had a gun in her hand.

For a little gun, it made a lot of noise. It wasn't so accurate, though. Afterward we found a bullet buried in the door jamb, so she missed me at least a foot and a half.

Then I was wrestling with her, twisting the gun out of her fingers. I got the gun away easily enough. The hard part came after that, when she tried to scratch my eyes out. She was still trying when the house detective burst into the suite. She'd forgotten the hotel wasn't sound-proofed like my uncle's apartment, that her shot would be heard all over that end of the seventh floor.

My uncle Joe could hardly believe what I had to tell him. "You wouldn't think," he said, "a woman could go through with a thing as cold-blooded as that."

"She's cold-blooded enough," I said, "to go through with forty murders. And change her plans forty times along the way, if she had to."

You can see, of course, what happened. She believed Halper would marry her if she got rid of Luke; so she got rid of him, the first chance she had to get away with it.

I said: "You'd come back and find Cayman dead in your apartment, and you'd have a hard time proving you didn't kill him. I was a witness who'd have to admit Cayman fought with you, that we took his gun away from him. So she conveniently forgot her handbag when they left the apartment, so she'd have an excuse to go back there with Luke. They did go back, and they could get in because she'd slipped a gimmick into

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the door lock. While Luke kept watch, she went into the study, looking for his gun. She found it in the drawer of your desk, then called to him, and shot him when he came in."

Uncle Joe frowned, "If I'd been at home—"

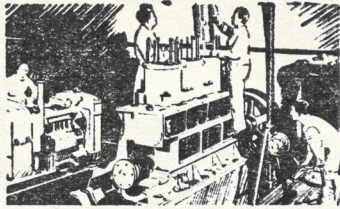
"She took care of that, too. Look," I said, "at what happens. She knew I didn't intend to stay for the night, because I didn't bring any luggage with me. All she had to do was get you out of the apartment, which she could easily have done by telephoning that Luke wanted to see you at the club. Probably she tried that, but you didn't answer the phone; you'd gone with me.

"So," I said, "she told Luke she'd left her handbag there. They went to the apartment, and she killed him. You walked in before she could escape. That's why she grabbed the paperweight off the desk and slugged you when you entered the study."

My uncle asked, "Where does Halper fit into that picture?"

"He came in afterward, when you'd stumbled into the bathroom. He found Luke Cayman dead there, but Halper was too deep in the game to risk notifying the police. They might think he killed Luke. That's why he risked answering the phone—to put you on the scene ahead of him. Then he slipped down the stairs and outside, and waited for a while before supplying the police with an anonymous tip about the shooting. Probably he used some of that time checking up on the red-haired bellhop—on me. It fixed him up with an alibi for the time of the shot he'd reported.

"Now," I said, "back to Emmaline Cayman! She'd left her handbag in the apartment, so her original plan must have been to tell the police he'd gone back after it alone. Then I popped up with a story about you having a heart attack. For all she



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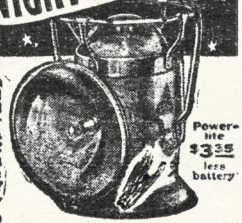
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knew, that would be true; we'd both been out, and you might have been taken ill. If so, you couldn't have killed Luke. She thought fast, and invented a mysterious phone call which had called him away. If you were in the clear, she still wouldn't be suspected as long as the police worked on that angle of the case. When I said you'd had the heart attack right in the apartment, she knew I was lying, but she had to sit tight, and pretend to believe me. If she let on she knew I was lying, she'd have given herself away then and there. And at the time she didn't know about the sword.”

“Yes,” said my uncle Joe, “and what about the infernal sword?”

“Why,” I told him, “when she grabbed the paperweight to slug you, she didn't want to leave her prints on it. Her handkerchief was in her handbag, so she had to cover her hand with something else. She used her hat.”

“Her hat!”

“It's these war fashions,” I said. “They wear things like airplanes and cannon and swords for hat decorations. The sword fell off her hat, and that's all there's to it.”

As my Uncle Joe said at this point:

“What won't they put on their heads next?”

I don't know, and I'm not worrying about it. I'm writing this all down, so as to have it clear in my mind when I talk to the district attorney tomorrow. I'm puzzling my brain how I'm going to change part of it.

The part about those two cops at the door, asking me if I fired the shot. Of course I only told them the truth. But I will pay a five-dollar prize to anybody who can figure out how I can tell the truth to the district attorney tomorrow without making him awful mad about that part of my story.

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