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ABOUT THE AUTHOR: *We call Michael Innes (whose real name is John Innes Mackintosh Stewart) to the stand so that he may testify in his own behalf . . . "I was born just outside Edinburgh and almost within the shadow of the centenary monument to the author of WAVERLEY. Edinburgh Academy, where I went to school, had Scott as one of its founders, and Robert Louis Stevenson was a pupil there for a short time. My headmaster told me that one day I might write a KIDNAPPED or a TREASURE ISLAND; I remember his tone as one of mild censure . . . At Oxford I had a great Elizabethan scholar as my tutor; he got me a first class in English and then I went to Vienna for a year to recover. After that I had the good luck to fall in with Francis Meynell, and for him I edited the Nonesuch Edition of Florio's MONTAIGNE; this in turn got me a job as a lecturer in the University of Leeds . . . Leeds lasted five years and then, when I . . . was rather wondering about the rent, I was invited to become professor of English at Adelaide University. It was on the way out that I wrote my first mystery story. For nine months of the year, and between six and eight o'clock in the morning, the South Australian climate is just right for authorship of this sort, so I have written a good many similar stories since. I would describe some of them as on the frontier between the detective story and fantasy; they have a somewhat 'literary' flavor but their values remain those of melodrama and not of fiction proper. Sometimes I lie on the beach in the sun and wonder if I mightn't some day write something else." The "Saturday Review of Literature" has characterized Michael Innes's novels as "caviar to the general reader, but the caviar is of the very best grade, with every bead a pearl." John Strachey has nominated Michael Innes, together with Margery Allingham and Nicholas Blake, as the three "white hopes" of the contemporary English detective story. EQMM nominates Michael Innes's "Tragedy of a Handkerchief" as one of the most interesting "literary" detective stories we have ever read or published . . .*

TRAGEDY OF A HANDKERCHIEF

by MICHAEL INNES

THE CURTAIN ROSE on the last scene of Shakespeare's *Othello*, the dreadful scene in which Desdemona is smothered, the scene which Dr. Johnson declared is not to be endured. But by this audience, it seemed to

Inspector Appleby, it was going to be endured tolerably well. For one thing, the smothering was apparently to be staged in the reticent way favored by touring companies that depend on the support of organized parties of school

children. Not that the school children, probably, would take a thoroughly Elizabethan robustness at all amiss. But head-mistresses are different. If their charges must, in the sovereign name of Shakespeare, be taken to see a horrid murder, let it at least be committed in hugger-mugger in a darkened corner of the stage.

But if the audience was not going to be horrified, neither — so far — had it been gripped. Whatever currents of emotion had been liberated behind this proscenium arch, they were not precisely those intended by the dramatist. Or rather, Inspector Appleby thought, it was as if across the main torrent of feeling as Shakespeare had designed it, there were drifting eddies of private passion muddying and confusing the whole. One was familiar with something of the sort in amateur theatricals, in which the jealousies and spites of rival performers occasionally reveal themselves as absurdly incongruous with the relationships designed by the story. But it is a thing less common on the professional stage, and during the preceding act the audience had been growing increasingly restless and unconvinced. Perhaps only Appleby himself, who had dropped into this dilapidated provincial theatre merely to fill an empty evening in a strange town, was giving a steadily more concentrated attention to the matters transacting themselves on the stage. Around him were the gigglings of bored children and the rustling of stealthily-opened paper bags. Apple-

by, however, studied Desdemona's bedchamber with a contracted brow.

Othello was about to enter with a taper and announce that *It is the cause, it is the cause, my soul. . . .*

But there was a hitch. For one of those half-minute intervals which can seem an eternity in terms of theatrical time Othello failed to appear. The stage stood empty, with the sleeping Desdemona scarcely visible in her curtained and shadowy bed at the rear. And this delay was only one of several signs that all was not well behind the scenes.

Most striking had been the blow — that public indignity to which Othello subjects his wife in the fourth act. The crack of an open palm across a face is a thing easily simulated on the stage; the assailant makes his gesture, his victim staggers back, and at the same time someone watching from the wings smartly claps his hands together. But on this occasion there had been the sound of *two* blows: one from the wings and one from the stage itself. And as Desdemona fell back it had been just possible to discern first a cheek unnaturally flushed and then a trickle of blood from a nostril. Almost as if *Othello* were the brutal pot-house tragedy which some unfriendly critics have accused it of being, the hero had given his wife a bloodied nose. . . . And the ensuing twenty lines had been uncommonly ticklish, with Desdemona playing out her shock and horror while covertly dabbing at her face with a handkerchief. No doubt an actor may be car-

ried away. But an Othello who allowed himself this artistic excess would be decidedly dangerous. What if he permitted himself a similar wholeheartedness when the moment for smothering Desdemona came?

Still staring at the empty stage, Inspector Appleby shook his head. There had been other hints that private passions were percolating through the familiar dramatic story. *Othello* is a tragedy of suspicion, of suspicion concentrated in Othello himself — the hero who, not easily jealous, is yet brought by the triumphant cunning of the villain Iago to kill his wife because of a baseless belief in her adultery. But among the people on this stage suspicion was not concentrated but diffused. Behind the high dramatic poetry, behind the traditional business of the piece, an obscure and pervasive wariness lurked, as if in every mind were a doubtful speculation as to what other minds knew. Desdemona, Appleby could have sworn, was more frightened than Shakespeare's heroine need be; Iago was indefinably on the defensive, whereas his nature should know nothing but ruthless if oblique attack; Iago's wife, Emilia, although she played out the honest, impercipient waiting-woman efficiently scene by scene, was perceptibly wishing more than one of her fellow-players to the devil. As for Michael Cassio, he was harassed — which is no doubt what Cassio should chiefly be. But this Cassio was harassed behind the mask as well as across it. Appleby, knowing

nothing of these strolling players without name or fame, yet suspected that Cassio was the company's manager, and one despairingly aware that the play was misfiring badly.

On one side of Appleby a small girl massively exhaled an odor of peppermint drops. On the other side an even smaller boy entertained himself by transforming his program into paper pellets and flicking them at the audience in the seats below.

And now here was Othello at last — a really black Othello of the kind fashionable since Paul Robeson triumphed in the part. Only about this fellow there had been a faint flavor of minstrel from the start and it had long been plain that there was nothing approaching great acting in him. Yet the theatre fell suddenly silent. The man stood there framed in a canvas doorway, the customary lighted taper in his hand. His eyes rolled, fixed themselves, rolled again. His free hand made exaggerated clawing gestures before him. As far as any elevated conception of his rôle went, he was violating almost every possible canon of the actor's art. And yet the effect was queerly impressive — startling, indeed. The child on Appleby's left gulped and regurgitated, as if all but choked by peppermint going down the wrong way. The boy on the right let his ammunition lie idle before him. From somewhere higher up another child cried out in fright.

Othello stepped forward into a greenish limelight which gave him the appearance of a rather badly de-

composed corpse.

Some forty-five seconds behind schedule, the unbearable scene had begun.

*It is the cause, it is the cause, my soul, —
Let me not name it to you, you chaste
stars! —*

It is the cause. . . .

The mysterious words rolled out into the darkness of the auditorium. And, of course, they were indestructible. Not even green limelight, not even an Othello who made damnable faces as he talked, could touch them.

*Yet I'll not shed her blood,
Nor scar that whiter skin of hers than
snow. . . .*

To the dreadful threat Desdemona awoke. Propped up on the great bed, she edged herself into another lime-light which again offended all artistic decorum.

Will you come to bed, my lord?

With mounting tension the scene moved inexorably forward. Othello — who at least had inches — was towering over the woman on the bed.

*That handkerchief which I so loved and
gave thee
Thou gavest to Cassio. . . .*

The Tragedy of the Handkerchief, this play had been contemptuously called. And the French translator, Inspector Appleby remembered, had preferred the more elevated word *bandeau*. . . .

*By heaven, I saw my handkerchief in 's
hand.*

*O perjured woman! thou dost stone my
heart,*

*And makest me call what I intend to do
A murder, which I thought a sacrifice;
I saw the handkerchief. . . .*

The limelights faded, sparing the susceptibilities of the schoolmistresses. It was just possible to discern Othello as taking up a great pillow in his hands. His last words to Desdemona rang out. There followed only horrible and inarticulate sounds. For, as if to give the now appalled children their money's worth after all, the players in their almost invisible alcove were rendering these final moments with ghastly verisimilitude: the panting respirations of the man pressing the pillow home; the muffled groans and supplications of the dying woman. And then from a door hard by the bed-head came the cries of Emilia demanding admission. Othello drew the bed-hangings to, reeled backwards like a drunken man, plunged into rambling speech as Emilia's clamor grew:

*My wife! my wife! what wife? I have
no wife.*

From despairing realization his voice swelled in volume, swelled into its vast theatrical rhetoric, and from behind the hangings the dying Desdemona could be heard to moan anew.

*O, insupportable! O heavy hour!
Me thinks it should be now a huge
eclipse*

*Of sun and moon, and that the affrighted
globe
Should yawn at alteration. . . .*

Emilia was calling again. Othello drew the hangings closer to, staggered to the door and unlocked it. The woman burst in with her news of disaster and in rapid colloquy Othello learned that his plot for the death of Cassio had failed. Again his voice rang out in despair:

*Not Cassio kill'd! then murder's out of
tune,
And sweet revenge grows harsh. . . .*

And suddenly there was absolute silence on the stage. Othello and Emilia were standing still — waiting. Again, and with a different note of anxiety, Othello cried out:

And sweet revenge grows harsh. . . .

Inspector Appleby shivered. For again there was silence, the repeated cue producing nothing. It was now that Desdemona should call out, that Emilia should wrench back the hangings upon the heroine's death-agony and her last sublime attempt to free her lord from blame. But only silence held the boards.

With a swift panicky bump the curtain fell, blotting out the stage.

"Their names?" asked Inspector Appleby. "We'll stick to Shakespeare for the moment and avoid confusion. And I think Cassio is the man who runs the show?"

The sergeant of police nodded. He

was uncertain whether to be relieved or annoyed that a Detective-Inspector from Scotland Yard had emerged helpfully but authoritatively from the audience. "That's so, sir. And here he is."

Chill drafts blew across the stage. The great curtain stirred uneasily, and from behind it there could still be heard the tramp and gabble of bewildered children being shepherded out. Here amid the scenes and tawdry properties everything showed shadowy and insubstantial. The dead woman lay on what had seemed a bed and beneath its grease paint her face showed as black as Othello's. The players, still in costumes, wigs and beards to which theatrical illusion no longer attached, hovered in a half-world between fantasy and fact. And Cassio stood in the midst of them, his hand nervously toying with the hilt of a rapier, his weak and handsome face a study in despair. Inspector Appleby nodded to him. "This is your company?" he asked. "And Desdemona's death means pretty well the end of it?"

Cassio groaned. "That is so. And it is an unimaginable disaster, as well as being" — he glanced fearfully towards the bed — "unspeakably horrible and painful."

"In fact, if somebody wanted to smash you, this would have been a thoroughly effective way of going about it?"

The actor-manager looked startled. "It certainly would. The sort of audience we get will never book a seat

with my company again. But I don't think —"

"Quite so. It is a possible motive but not a likely one. Now, please tell me of the relationships existing between your different members."

The man hesitated. "I am myself married to Bianca."

A fellow, thought Appleby, *almost damned in a fair wife*. Aloud he said: "And the dead woman was actually married to Othello?"

"Yes. And so too are Iago and Emilia."

"I see. In fact, your private relations are quite oddly akin to those in the play? And you may be said to be an isolated community, moving from town to town, with the rest of your company not much more than extras?"

Cassio licked his lips. "That is more or less true. We can't afford much."

"You certainly can't afford murder." Appleby's glance swept the players who were now ranged in a semicircle round him. "I suppose you know that your performance this evening was all at sixes and sevens? Even the children were at a loss." His finger shot out at Othello. "Why did you strike your wife?"

"Yes, why did you strike her?" Emilia had stepped forward. Her eyes, though red with weeping, snapped fire. "And why did you murder her, too?"

"Strike her?" Othello, his face a blotched pallor beneath its paint, had been glaring at Iago; now he swung round upon Iago's wife. "You foul-

mouthed —"

"That will do." Appleby's voice, although quiet, echoed in this resonant space. "There were six of you: Othello and Desdemona, Iago and Emilia, Cassio and Bianca. Your emotional relationships were a sordid muddle and tonight they got out of hand. Well, I'm afraid we must have them into the limelight. And if you won't confess to what was troubling you, I expect there are minor members of your company who can be informative enough."

"But this is outrageous!" It was Bianca who spoke — a beautiful girl with every appearance of self-control. "You can't bully us like that, no matter what has happened." She looked defiantly at the still figure on the bed and then turned to her husband. "Isn't that so?"

But it was Iago, not Cassio, who answered. He was a dark man with a constantly shifting eye and a lip which twitched nervously as he spoke. "Certainly it is so. In interrogating possible witnesses in such an affair the police are bound by the strictest rules. And until a solicitor —"

"Rubbish!" Unexpectedly and with venom Emilia had turned upon her husband. "Let the man go his own way and it will be the sooner over."

"But at least there are the mere physical possibilities to consider first." Cassio was at once agitated and reasonable. "Just when did the thing happen? And is it possible therefore to rule anyone out straight away?"

Inspector Appleby nodded. "Very

well. Opportunity first and motive second . . . At line 83 Desdemona was alive." Appleby glanced up from the text which had been handed to him. "And at line 117 she was dead. Throughout this interval she was invisible, since at first she was lying within heavy shadow and subsequently the bed-hangings were drawn to by Othello. It is clear that Othello himself may simply have smothered her when the action required that he should appear to do so. But there are other possibilities.

"The bed is set in a recess which is accessible not from the main stage alone. Behind the bed-head there is only a light curtain, and it would thus be accessible to anybody behind the scenes who was passing forward towards the wings. Othello ceased to have Desdemona under his observation at about line 85. There are then nearly twenty lines before Emilia enters. These lines are taken up partly by Othello in desperate soliloquy and partly by Emilia calling from 'without.' When Emilia does enter it is by the door close by the bed-head. And it follows from this that Emilia could have smothered Desdemona during these twenty lines, some five or six of which she had to speak herself. It would be a procedure requiring considerable nerve, but that is no convincing argument against it.

"A third possibility, however, remains. After Emilia has entered, and until the moment that Desdemona cries out that she has been murdered, there are some twelve broken lines,

with a certain amount of time-consuming mime increasing the suspense. During this period any other actor, standing near the wings, might have slipped to the bed-head and committed the murder. So the position is this: Othello and Emilia are definitely suspects, so far as opportunity goes. And so is anybody else who could have approached the bed-head unobserved during the twelve lines after Emilia's entry."

"Which rules me out." Cassio spoke without any apparent relief and it was clear that with him the disaster which had befallen his company overshadowed everything else. "I was on the opposite side with the electrician when we heard the cue for Emilia's going on. I just couldn't have made it."

"But your wife could." And Emilia, who had broken in, turned with venom on Bianca. "For I saw you not far behind me when I stepped on stage."

"No doubt you did. And I saw your husband." Bianca, still perfectly calm, turned a brief glance of what was surely cold hatred on Iago. "I saw him standing in the wings there and wondered what he was about."

Iago's lip twitched more violently than before. Then he laughed harshly. "This will get the police nowhere. And what about all the other conventional questions, like who last saw the victim alive?"

Suddenly Othello exclaimed. "My God!" he cried, and whirled upon Emilia. "You know whether I smoth-

ered her. Everyone knows what your habit is."

"What do you mean?" Emilia's hand had flown to her bosom and beneath the grease paint she was very pale.

"When waiting to come on you have always parted the curtain at the bed-head and had a look at her and perhaps whispered a word. I can't tell why, for you weren't all that friendly. But that's what you always did, and you must have done it tonight. Well, how was it? Was she alive or dead?"

"She was alive." It was after a moment's hesitation that Emilia spoke. "She didn't say anything. And of course it was almost dark. But I could see that she — that she was weeping."

"As she very well might be, considering that her husband had actually struck her on the open stage." The police sergeant spoke for the first time. "Now, if you'll —"

But Appleby brusquely interrupted. "Weeping?" he said. "Had she a handkerchief?"

Emilia looked at him with dilated eyes. "But of course."

Appleby strode to the body on the bed and in a moment was back holding a small square of cambric, wringing wet. "Quite true," he said. "And it was right under the body. But this can't be her ordinary handkerchief, which was blood-stained as a result of the blow and will be in her dressing-room now. So perhaps this is —"

Cassio took a stride forward. "Yes!" he said, "it's the love-token — Oth-

ello's magic handkerchief which Desdemona loses."

And Inspector Appleby nodded sombrely. "Sure," he said slowly, "*there's some wonder in this handkerchief.*"

Remorselessly the investigation went on. Cassio was the last person in whose hand the handkerchief was seen — but on going off-stage Cassio had tossed it on a chair from which anyone might have taken it up. And it seemed likely that a Desdemona overcome with grief had done so.

Emilia's story then was plausible, and if believed it exonerated both Othello and herself. What followed from this? It appeared that of the rest of the company only Iago and Bianca had possessed a reasonable opportunity of slipping from the wings to the bed-head and there smothering Desdemona in that twelve-line interval between Emilia's going on-stage and the play's coming to its abrupt and disastrous end. But further than this it was hard to press. Appleby turned from opportunity to motive.

Othello and his wife Desdemona, Iago and his wife Emilia, Cassio and his wife Bianca: these were the people concerned. Desdemona had been murdered. Cassio was not the murderer. And upon the stage, just before the fatality, there had been perceptible an obscure interplay of passion and resentment. What situation did these facts suggest?

Not, Appleby thought, a situation which had been common property

long. For it was unlikely that the company had been playing night after night in this fashion; either matters would have come to a head or private passions would have been brought under control at least during the three hours' traffic on the stage. Some more or less abrupt revelation, therefore, must be the background of what had happened tonight.

Three married couples living in a substantially closed group and with the standards of theatrical folk of the seedier sort. The picture was not hard to see. Adultery, or some particularly exacerbating drift taken by a customary promiscuity, was the likely background to this Desdemona's death. And Appleby felt momentarily depressed. He turned abruptly back to them. Detective investigation requires more than the technique of reading fingerprints and cigarette ends. It requires the art of reading minds and hearts. How, then, did these people's emotions stand now?

Othello was horrified and broken; with him as with Cassio — but more obscurely — things had come to an end. Well, his wife had been horribly killed, shortly after he had struck her brutally in the face. In a sense, then, Othello's immediate emotions were accounted for.

What of Iago? Iago was on the defensive still — and defensiveness means a sense of guilt. He was like a man, Appleby thought, before whom there has opened more evil than he intended or knew. And in whatever desperation he stood, he seemed

likely to receive small succor or comfort from his wife. Emilia hated him. Was it a settled hate? Appleby judged that it had not that quality. It was a hatred, then, born of shock. Born of whatever abrupt revelation had preluded the catastrophe.

There remained Bianca, Cassio's wife. She, perhaps, was the enigma in the case, for her emotions ran deep. And her husband was out of it. Cassio was the type of chronically worried man; he expended his anxieties upon the business of keeping his company financially afloat, and emerged from this only to play subsidiary rôles. As a husband he would not be very exciting. And Bianca required excitement. That hidden sort did.

The analysis was complete. Appleby thought a little longer and then spoke. "I am going to tell you," he said quietly, "what happened. But only the principal actors need remain."

There was a sigh from the people gathered round. Like shadows they melted into the wings — some with the alacrity of relief, others with the shuffle of fatigue. It had grown very cold. The curtain stirred and swayed, like a great shroud waiting to envelop those who remained.

"It began with Desdemona's seduction, or with the revelation of it. Is that not so?" Appleby looked gravely round. There was absolute silence. "Is that not so?" he repeated gently. But the silence prolonged itself. And Appleby turned to Othello. "You struck her because of that?"

And abruptly Othello wept. His

blotched black face crumpled. "Yes," he said, "I struck her because I had discovered that."

Appleby turned to Iago. "You seduced this man's wife. And the result has been wilful murder. But did you know the truth was out? Or was it you yourself who smothered her to prevent confession and disclosure?"

Iago stepped back snarling. "You've got nothing on me," he said. "And I won't say a word."

From this time forth I never will speak word. . . . But Appleby was now facing Emilia. "Your husband had betrayed you. You had discovered he was sleeping with this man's wife. Did you, in the frenzy of your jealousy, smother her?"

Emilia's face had hardened. "These accusations mean nothing. Nobody knows who smothered her. And you will never find out."

There was a pause. Appleby turned slowly to Bianca. "And you?" he asked. "For how long had you been Iago's mistress? And what did you do when you found he had cast you off?"

"Nothing! I did nothing! And she's right. Nobody saw. Nobody can tell anything."

"And so the mystery will be unsolved?" Appleby nodded seriously. "It is not impossible that you are right. But we shall know in the morning." He turned to Cassio. "Did Desdemona have a dressing-room of her own? I'll just look in there before I go."

"They probably won't hang her,"

Appleby said next day to the police sergeant. "It was a crime of sudden impulse, after all. And of course there was provocation in the adultery she had discovered." He paused. "Will it be any consolation to her in prison to know that she has made history in forensic medicine? I suppose not."

The sergeant sighed. "It's been neat enough," he said, "and something quite beyond our range, I must admit. But how did you first tumble to its being Emilia?"

"It was because she changed her mind about whom to blame. At first she had resolved to plant it on Othello, simply as the likeliest person. 'And why did you murder her, too?' she had asked him. But later on she told a story that pointed to either Bianca or her own husband, Iago. Desdemona, she said, had been alive and weeping when she looked through the curtain at the bed-head. And that, of course, let Othello out, as he had no subsequent opportunity for the murder.

"I asked myself what this change of front meant. Was it simply that Emilia had no grudge against Othello and altered her story in order to implicate her unfaithful husband whom she now hated? Somehow, I didn't think it was that. And then I recalled a gesture she had made. Do you remember? It was when Othello revealed that she was accustomed to draw back the curtain behind the bed and speak to Desdemona before going on-stage."

The sergeant considered. "I seem to

remember her hand going to her bodice. I thought it a bit theatrical — the conventional gesture of an agitated woman."

Appleby shook his head. "It wasn't quite that. What you saw was a hand flying up to where something should be — something that was now lost. And that something was a handkerchief. I saw the truth in a flash. *She had lost a handkerchief — a tear-soaked handkerchief — while smothering Desdemona.* And my guess was confirmed seconds later when she made her change of front and declared that she had seen Desdemona alive and weeping. For of course her change of story came from a sudden feeling that she must somehow account for the presence of the handkerchief beside the corpse."

"I see." The sergeant shook his head. "It was clever enough. But it was dangerous, being an unnecessary lie."

"It was fatal, as it turned out. But first I saw several things come together. A man may weep, but he won't weep into a small cambric handkerchief. Emilia showed signs of weeping, whereas another suspect, Bianca, was entirely self-controlled. So what had happened was pretty clear. Emilia had discovered her husband's infidelity and had been under strong stress of emotion. She had snatched up the handkerchief — Othello's magic handkerchief — perhaps while running to her dressing-room, and there she had wept into it. When her call came she thrust it into

her bodice. Later, when she yielded to an overwhelming impulse and smothered Desdemona, the handkerchief was dropped in the struggle and the body rolled on top of it.

"But how could all this be proved? Perhaps, as those people said, it couldn't be, and we should never get further than suspicion. But there was one chance — one chance of proving that Emilia had lied.

"A substantial proportion of people are what physiologists call secretors. And this means, among other things, that there is something special about their tears. From their tears, just as well as from their blood, you can determine their blood-group. Well, I had Desdemona's blood on one handkerchief and I had tears on another. I went straight to your local Institute of Medical Research. And they told me what I hoped to learn. *Those tears could not have come from a person of Desdemona's blood-group.*"

The sergeant sighed again. "Yes," he said, "it's neat — very neat, indeed."

"And we shall certainly learn, as soon as the law allows us to make a test, that the tears could have been Emilia's. And as Bianca, who has allowed herself to be blood-grouped, is ruled out equally with Desdemona, the case is clear."

Inspector Appleby rose. "Incidentally there is a moral attached to all this."

"A moral?"

"The moral that one savage old critic declared to be all there is to

learn from Shakespeare's play. Housewives, he said, should look to their linen. In other words, it's dangerous to drop a handkerchief — and particularly in the neighborhood of a dead body."

ABOUT THE STORY: Many detective-story writers have used the theatre as a backdrop to murder. Sometimes the murder occurs on the stage, sometimes backstage, and sometimes in the audience. There is a glamor about theatricals, both amateur and professional, and about the people associated with the footlights, that lends itself to melodrama; love, hate, passion, revenge, ambition — all are the stuff as drama is made on. If all the world's a stage, and all the men and women merely players, then there are countless detective-story plots still to be drawn from the heartache and the thousand natural shocks that thespians are heir to.

The general background of Michael Innes's "Tragedy of a Handkerchief" may therefore lack novelty but the author's treatment of the theatrical theme is distinguished on at least three counts. To the best of our recollection no previous detective story has been based on Shakespeare's "Othello" — and now that Mr. Innes has put "Othello" to his own rich uses, we can't help wondering why no one thought of it before. "Othello" is one of the most perfect literary springboards for make-believe murder that becomes murder in fact. All truly classic ideas have that natural simplicity which we come to associate with the inevitable. Having moulded "Othello" to his detective-story needs, Mr. Innes then showed his mettle: he did not hesitate to incorporate generous portions of Shakespeare's own dialogue, interlarding some of the finest writing of all time with straight detective-story "stuff"; and he dared to borrow Shakespeare's own character-names for his own strolling players. Not many modern writers would have had the courage to "use" Shakespeare so abundantly.

Mr. Innes did something else worthy of comment: he took one of the commonest of detective-story clues and gave it a freshness that transformed it from the hackneyed to the unhackneyed. The lowly handkerchief has long been considered too trite for contemporary usage — it is in the same class with the torn-off button, cigarette ashes, and similar commonplace clues. Yet Mr. Innes deliberately made a handkerchief his chief "gimmick," endowing it with "magical" properties, and proving once more that even the oldest and most banal of physical clues can be resurrected and reanimated. There is no such thing as a device being too old-fashioned — not in the hands of an imaginative craftsman . . .



Raoul Whitfield, a much too neglected member of the Hammett-Daly-Chandler hardboiled school, and author of such fine tales as DEATH IN A BOWL and GREEN ICE, spent some of his youth ful years in the Philippines. There he collected the material he later used in his Jo Gar stories, which were published under the pseudonym of Ramon Decolta. Although he was much too young at the time, he managed to enlist in the Air Corps in World War I. On his return from France he was sent to Pittsburgh by Andrew Carnegie (whose wife was a Whitfield) to learn the steel business, but he soon gave up the prospect of becoming an industrial magnate for a career he liked infinitely better — writing. He sold his first story in 1923. His most prolific years were between 1924 and 1934 when the "Black Mask" writers were proving that something new had been added to the detective story. Because of a long illness he wrote much less between 1934 and 1945, when he passed away at the age of 47.

Raoul Whitfield always wrote very easily and quickly, and with a minimum of correction. He had a particular talent for starting with a title and writing around it. His wife has said that once he had the title, he had the story. He would place neat stacks of chocolate bars (which he ate by the thousands) to the right of his typewriter, and a picket fence of cigarettes to his left. He wrote and chain-smoked and ate, all in one unified operation. He could be surrounded by a cocktail party going on at full blast — and keep right on writing.

In the early 1920s Whitfield met Hammett in California — but more of that significant meeting when we bring you another of Raoul Whitfield's stories in the near future. Meanwhile, here is an excellent example of Whitfield's work during that fabulous decade when "Black Mask" and its clan bestrode the detective world like a Colossus . . .

BLUE MURDER

by **RAOUL WHITFIELD**

THERE WAS TOO much color in the room and the rug wasn't right. One of the oils was very bad; it had been hung so that it hit Don Free in the eyes as he came in. The maid gesticulated vaguely towards a tricky look-

ing divan and moved almost soundlessly from the room. Don Free went over and stood near the oil that was so bad. He said thoughtfully: "Lousy."

When he heard the footfalls he turned his back to the painting. Mary

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Reynolds came into the room looking more beautiful than when he had seen her last. He went towards her and they shook hands. Her fingers were cool and she was pale.

"I'm frightened," she said very softly.

Free grinned, his gray eyes on hers. "What — again?" he asked. "It's only been about four months since the last fright."

She didn't smile, "Damn men," she said almost tonelessly. "I'm in trouble again, Mr. Free."

She walked to the divan and let her slender body drop on it. There were a lot of cushions and she leaned back, relaxed. Her brown eyes followed Free as he moved nearer.

"What's it about this time?" he asked. "You don't think you've killed a man, do you?"

She tried a faint smile, but it wasn't much of a success. The color in the room dulled her brown hair and eyes, but she was too beautiful to be hurt much by it.

"It's a woman," she said quietly. "She's going to kill me."

Free's thin lips smiled and his gray eyes narrowed. "Did she say so?" he asked.

Mary Reynolds shook her head and the frightened expression showed more clearly in her eyes.

She replied tonelessly: "I'm frightened, and I sent for you. I can trust you."

Free nodded. "Sure," he said. "But we're not getting anywhere. What's it about?"

She shrugged. "A woman is going to kill me," she said very softly. "I don't want to be killed."

Free offered her a pack of cigarettes; she shook her head. He lighted one and inhaled.

"Life's funny like that," he said. "I know two other people who don't want to be killed."

She closed her eyes and shivered.

"When a man says he's going to kill somebody — he doesn't always mean it. A woman's different."

Free slit his gray eyes on the brown hair of the girl. After a little silence he spoke quietly.

"There's a man in this?"

Her mouth got hard and her eyes looked less hurt. "— yes," she replied. "There's always a man in everything."

Free sighed and closed his eyes. When he opened them Mary Reynolds was looking over his head. There was bitterness in her stare.

"I took your advice and left the city, after that blackmail attempt that you stopped. I didn't like it, so I came back. I've been going around a little. I've met some people. Jerry Gorton is one of them."

Free widened his eyes a little. "Gorton," he said thoughtfully. "He has a couple of nice places."

She nodded, the bitterness in her eyes. "We got along pretty well for a few weeks. One of his places was giving him trouble, and I got him to close it up. I like him."

The expression she put in the last three words meant something to Free.

"You love him," he corrected.

She shrugged. "Maybe — it's hard to tell. Anyway, about ten days ago a girl came along. She came back from some place. Chicago, I think. I met her at the *Sun Club*. She didn't like me. She did like Jerry. I could see what was coming, and I used things — all the things that a woman with money can use. She didn't have the money. So she lost."

Free nodded his head slowly. His gray eyes were half closed.

"Four days ago a man called up and said that if I didn't stay away from Jerry I'd be hurt. I laughed at him. He said: 'Hurt bad.' Then he hung up. I saw Jerry last night. We danced and drank a bit. This afternoon I had another call. If I see him again — that will be the last time."

Free whistled softly. "Where did he call from?" he asked.

"Grand Central — a booth." Her voice was low.

Free nodded. "He sounded as though what he said was meant?"

She pressed upper, even teeth over her lower lip. "Very — much," she said a little unsteadily.

Free inhaled and was silent for a short time. Then he said:

"A little while ago you said a woman was going to kill you. The man didn't say who was going to kill you."

She shook her head. "The woman told Jerry she'd kill me," she said tonelessly.

Free whistled again. "He told you that?"

She nodded. "He was smiling when

he told me," she said. "But I think he was a little worried. He said it was just the way she'd talk. It didn't mean anything. But he was worried."

Free said: "What's the girl's name?"

Her eyes were half closed. "Cray," she replied softly. "Ellen Cray."

Free went over near a small table and tapped the ashes from his cigarette. He came back and stood looking down at Mary Reynolds. She had her eyes closed and she looked very beautiful. She was slender and doll like, without being too much that way.

"Know where she lives?" he asked.

She said: "It's a large apartment house down around Fifteenth Street, just off Tenth Avenue. Almost a whole block. Hudson Courts. You can hear the trains on Tenth."

Free nodded. "I know the place — there's a big court inside. Grass and stuff. Fairly cheap apartments. Right off Death Avenue —"

He checked himself. "You've been in her place?"

She nodded. "She was being nice one night, just to see how things stood. Then she stopped being nice. Jerry was along."

Free said: "What's she do?"

Mary Reynolds shrugged. "She has an income," she replied. "Something like that — very small."

Free went back to the small table and squashed his cigarette. When he faced her again he was smiling.

"What do you want *me* to do?" he asked.

She sat up and cupped her nice chin in the palms of her hands. The

light in the room did things with her hair.

"I don't want to be hurt," she said slowly. "I want to be around with Jerry."

Free said: "Have you told him about the phone calls?"

She nodded. "He laughs about them — says they're just a scare. But he called up last night and broke a date we had. Said he was called out of town."

Free frowned. "Think he loves you?" he asked.

She looked hurt. "I love him," she said. "He *could* love me. But he can't be let alone too much."

Free grinned. "Don't I know!" he breathed. "Well, I'll have to drop some stuff I'm doing. It'll cost you three hundred to start."

She started to rise, but he shook his head. He gave her a card on which was written: *Donald Free — Investigations.*

"You can send the check to the office," he said. "The address is in the phone book."

She nodded. "Well?" she asked.

He looked at his watch. "It's five-thirty. I'll see if she has a record and look up a few other things. Might go down and have a talk with her. You going out tonight?"

She said "Yes, I'm going out."

Free looked at her narrowly. "Date with Gortion?"

She shook her head. "I'm going to the *Sun Club*," she replied.

Free smiled a little grimly. "That's his place — the nicest," he stated.

"It's new and swanky. I suppose he'll be there."

She said a little huskily. "I suppose so."

Free nodded. "What time will you get there?" he asked.

"About eleven — I'm dining late," she replied. "I've got to see him, Mr. Free."

He smiled. "Sure, and it's Free," he said. "Don't get there before eleven. Don't recognize me. If anything important happens — I'll phone you."

She stood up and the fear came back in her eyes again.

"It may be bluff," she breathed.

Free nodded. "Yeah," he agreed. "Or she may love Gortion as much as you."

He shook hands with her and turned towards the doorway that led to the apartment foyer. The oil near the doorway wasn't so bad, but it wasn't good.

"Is he worth it?" he asked as he moved.

She said flatly. "I think so. I can make him stop the worst things. Might get him out of the business. I want to try. It would take a little time. And now she comes along —"

She broke off. The maid came up to Free and handed him his light gray hat. He said:

"Well — we'll see. Don't forget the check."

He smiled at her and went outside. The elevator dropped him swiftly to the street level. He reached Park Avenue and hailed a cab. When he'd

given the Center Street address he sat back and lighted a cigarette. He let his body sway with the cab. Somewhere downtown he said a little grimly:

"Two women after the same man — it's a pretty good reason for trouble."

The cab driver stopped for a red one, twisted his head, grinned at Free.

"I just got a tip they finished off Joey Faley — he's had the finger on him a long time. When they want to get a fellow in this town — they just seem to go ahead and get him."

Free nodded his head. When the cab started again he said very softly:

"When they want to get a fellow — or a gal."

Tony Letterman came into the room and sat on the bench beside Free.

"It's like this," he said in his thin-voice, running fingers over the buttons of his uniform. "She may be a bad child and she may not. No record — no fingerprints — no pinches. But her name is just on the outside of things. She had an hour with the D.A. about six months ago. There was a party at her place — somewhere in the village. A gambler named Jones was shot there. He was supposed to have shot himself. Did it with her .38, if he did it. She had a permit for the gun."

"About a year and a half ago her car was stolen. It was used in a bank stickup, up state. She got it back. Two years ago we tried to get into her

safe deposit box because she knew a fellow named Anderson. Not the fairy tale guy. This one did clever things with checks. We didn't get at her safe deposit box because she had Max Siler as a lawyer. A few months later he quit being a lawyer and went down to Leavensworth. After this shooting at her place she went West. Maybe she's still there. She's a good looking red-head with — well, here you are."

Free looked at the picture, handed it back. "Thanks, Tony," he said. "How's the wife?"

The cop swore and looked disgusted. "She ran away with a guy," he said. "She took to writing bad poetry, and this guy was an editor. He published the stuff and that got her."

Free stood up. "Do you mind much?" he asked.

The cop shook his head. "Hell, no," he replied. "She was getting to be a damned nuisance, Free."

Free smiled a little. "A lot of them get that way," he said. "And then, some of them don't."

The cop nodded. "That's the trouble — it's hard to figure ahead."

Free waved a hand and went outside. He hailed a cab and gave the address of Hudson Courts. When they got there he paid up and watched a freight train move slowly along Tenth Avenue. Then he went inside. The place was a bad imitation of something a lot nicer. He said to a uniformed man at the phone:

"Miss Cray — Mr. Gortion calling."

When the man repeated the name he heard Ellen Cray's voice say: "Send him up."

The elevator operator stood near the desk and said: "Twelve thirty-eight."

Free went into the elevator. When he got out he was in a long, barren corridor. Everything was stone and metal. He could hear the clang of the engine bells. Twelve thirty-eight was at the end of the corridor. He pressed the door buzzer; there were footfalls. The door opened and the smile on the girl's face went away.

Free said: "Sorry — had to see you. Jerry isn't along."

He walked past her and into a cheaply furnished living-room. There was an odor of garlic in the place, and half a tall cracked-ice drink was in a glass on a glass-topped table. The girl closed the door and followed him into the room.

She was nicer than he had expected, but she wasn't anything like Mary Reynolds. Her hair was very red and short; she had a nice figure. Her eyes were blue, too small and too hard. Her mouth was good; she stood looking at him with her lips slightly parted.

She didn't speak.

Free smiled. "My name's Free," he said quietly, pleasantly. "I have a detective agency. I'm very clever. Mary Reynolds is a client of mine. She's received two telephone calls from a man, one threatening to hurt her, the other threatening to kill her — if she doesn't stay away from Jerry

Gortion. You have told Gortion that you will kill Mary Reynolds if they don't stop seeing each other. It's all down in black and white — and ready for the police. That's in case Mary Reynolds is hurt or killed. I thought you should know. May I smoke?"

Her blue eyes were very small and her body was tense. Her hands were clenched at her sides. She said:

"Of course."

Her voice was hard, a little husky. Free offered her a cigarette and she took one. He lighted one for her and one for himself. She said grimly:

"I won't be framed. I was joking when I told Jerry I'd kill her. He knew that. That woman may have a lot of enemies. If anything happens to her — I won't be framed."

Free shrugged. "Saying you won't — that won't help things any," he said. "She's been threatened. You've said you'd kill her. The fact that you've had a car in a bank robbery, a man shot in your apartment, and a mix-up over your safe deposit box —"

She tilted her head back, closed her eyes and pressed her lips tight over the white paper of the cigarette. She laughed nastily. Free said:

"Love's a swell thing. You let Mary Reynolds alone, or fight fair. Do all the little woman tricks you want, but don't be rough. That's all."

She opened her eyes, took the cigarette from her lips. Her eyes and voice were hard.

"I've never threatened her — you can't call my saying I'd kill her, the way I did, a threat."

Free smiled grimly. "I think we can — so just be good."

She shook her head. "I don't think Jerry will like this much — her sending you here."

Free continued to smile. "She didn't send me here," he said. "I thought that up myself — it's one of the things I'm paid for. And you'd better leave Gortion out of it."

She turned her back and walked a few feet away from him. She stopped and faced him again.

"She's a fool," she said bitterly. "I know Jerry better than she does. If he thinks two women are fighting for him — he'll walk out on both of us."

Free shrugged. "I'm not interested in the sentimental side of this. I just came over to tell you not to hurt Mary Reynolds."

She smiled. "Hurt her?" There was surprise in her tone. "Of course I won't hurt her. She's probably a charming person."

Free narrowed his eyes. "Probably," he agreed.

He turned towards the entrance of the apartment. As he moved slowly across the room she turned her body, so that she could watch him. He stopped near her, bowed slightly.

She looked at him and said in a loud, hard voice:

"Oh, Sam —"

The lock of a door clicked and a door opened behind Free. He turned his body and faced a short, broad-shouldered man with a red face and gray hair and eyes.

The girl said: "Take a look at Free.

He's clever and he has a detective agency."

The broad-shouldered one smiled, showing good teeth.

"Yeah!" he replied. "That's fine."

Free nodded. "Keep your hands out of your pockets, Sam," he said pleasantly.

The man had bushy eyebrows which he raised. "Nothing in my pockets I need right away," he replied. His voice was low and lazy.

Free said: "Good."

Ellen Cray spoke softly. "This man sent up a different name. He practically forced his way in here. He's insulted me, Sam."

The gray-haired one's eyes got small. "Yeah?" he said. He looked hard at Free. "You shouldn't have done that, Mr. Free."

Free let his right hand swing slowly at his right side. He didn't speak. An engine on Death Avenue made clanging sounds, and there were boat whistles from the Hudson.

The girl said: "All packed, Sam?" He nodded, smiling. "The stuff's at the station. It won't be long now."

Free watched the gray-haired one's hands. "Which station?" he asked.

The girl made sound blowing smoke from between her lips. She said:

"He insulted me, Sam. He said I was a crook."

The gray-haired one let his head drop forward just a little. He raised his left hand and pointed a finger at Free.

"You shouldn't have done that,"

he said slowly and carefully.

His right hand made swift movement. Free swung his body so that he faced him directly. He said: "No!" sharply and ripped at his hip pocket. The gray-haired one's right hand came up, with nothing in it.

The girl's breath, behind Free, made sharp sound, and there was a quick swish of air. Free jerked his head to one side, felt battering pain over the left ear. The room became black and far away, and he was falling. There was a great roaring in his ears, and then he knew nothing.

When he sat up his head was aching and the objects were distorted. Things didn't clear up very rapidly and he lay down again, rolling over on his back. After a few minutes things got better. He took it slowly, rising and walking shakily to the nearest window. It was better when he got it opened. The room was hot.

His head was cut and swollen; after a few minutes he found the bathroom and used cold water on it. There was a small bedroom and he went into it. Odds and ends, empty bottles, paper, were about. But no personal things remained. He went back into the living-room and looked around. He said thickly:

"Furnished place — rented that way. Had her stuff out, or hasn't had anything here for some time. Gone, of course."

He went over and stood near the window. The odor of garlic was strong; it came from the outside. He

turned his back, looked at the cracked ice in the tall glass. His hat was lying on the carpet near a wall, and it looked as though it had been kicked there. He went over and lifted the glass, tasting the liquor carefully. It seemed something like bad Scotch and he downed it.

He waited several minutes more, closed the window and went over and picked up his hat. He put it on carefully and breathed thickly: "Blackjack — and the kid knows how to use it."

He closed the apartment door carefully and without making much noise, went down in the elevator, got a cab and gave the office number. At Forty-first and Seventh he got out and paid up. When he entered the small, outer room of the office, Beth Liner looked up from the book she was reading, widened her dark eyes.

"What's happened?" she asked. "You look as though a truck hit you."

He frowned at her. "It felt almost as bad," he replied. "Get Harry Sayne for me, Beth."

She stared at him. "What in hell happened?" she asked.

He smiled faintly and walked into his office. "Get Harry right away — tell him to come over fast," he said. "A woman blackjacked me."

Beth Liner swore again. "A woman?" she called.

Free sat down heavily in the chair behind his desk. He touched his head gingerly.

"I didn't say a lady," he replied. "Have you got Harry yet?"

She tried three numbers and got Harry. Then she came into the office, went close to Free and looked at his head. She swore slowly and softly. Free said:

"I'd like to know why she slugged me, Beth. It was a funny play."

Beth Liner went into the washroom and came back with a wet towel. She fussed around with his head until Harry Sayne came in. Sayne was short, stocky and sad-faced. His eyes and hair were brown and his hands were big. He looked at Free narrowly.

"Accident?" he asked.

Free nodded. "I wasn't looking where *she* was going," he said grimly. He smiled at Beth. "Thanks, Kid — run along outside and keep the crowd out of here."

She nodded. "Feel all right?" she asked.

He grinned. "Swell."

She went outside and Harry Sayne sat down. Free lighted a cigarette.

"It's something about Mary Reynolds," he said slowly.

Sayne looked thoughtful. "The million-dollar baby with all the good looks," he said after a few seconds. "The one you turned your ex-boss up for."

Free nodded. "They had her framed into thinking she'd killed a guy," he said. "I got her unframed. Now it's something else. She likes a fellow named Jerry Gortion."

Sayne widened his brown eyes and parted his lips. "Gortion," he repeated. "The swanky spot owner. The *Sun Club* and —"

"That's it," Free interrupted. "Well, Mary likes him and another girl likes him. The other one told Jerry she'd kill Mary if Mary didn't stay at home and read books. Mary didn't. She's had two phone booth calls from some man. He says she'll get herself killed if she doesn't be good. So she sent for me. I went down to see the other girl. Her name's Ellen Cray. She was sore at first, then nice. Then she called some fellow in and told him she'd been insulted. He made a hip pocket reach and while I was doing the same thing the girl black-jacked me. When I came back they were both gone. So was my Colt. So was their personal stuff in the apartment."

Sayne sighed. Free looked at his cigarette.

"Mary Reynolds is going to the *Sun Club* tonight — at eleven. You'd better be there. I'll be there. I suppose Gortion will be there."

Sayne frowned. "The Cray girl won't," he breathed.

Free smiled grimly. "Why not?" he asked. "I got into her apartment under false pretenses. I insulted her, and she slugged me. Would I have her pinched and make a fool of myself?"

"She might be worried about something else," Sayne said.

Free half closed his eyes. "I don't hit women," he breathed.

Sayne shrugged his broad shoulders. "Maybe *she* doesn't know that," he replied.

Free frowned. "Anyway, you be around. Ever seen Mary Reynolds?"

"I've seen pictures of her," he said. "I'll recognize her."

Free nodded slowly. "The Cray girl has red hair, cut short. Small blue eyes. Nice figure. Thin lips but a good mouth. The fellow that she called in is built something like you. Red face, gray hair and eyes. Stay somewhere near Mary Reynolds, if you can."

Sayne said: "Nothing will happen to her there."

Free smiled grimly. "Nothing ever happens to anybody anywhere," he said cheerfully. "But you and I'll be over there to watch nothing happen."

Sayne stood up. "Need another gun?" he asked.

Free shook his head. "Got a couple at home. But I liked the one they grabbed."

Sayne frowned. "Fool play — slamming you down," he muttered. "Puts the Cray girl in bad. Maybe she figured on scaring you off."

Free shook his head again. "Not that, and I'm not sure it was a fool play. Just can't figure what she did it for."

Sayne looked at the carpet. "Might just have got sore and wanted to hit," he suggested. "Women are like that, once in a while."

Free nodded. "The point is, Harry, that Mary Reynolds' life has been threatened unless she takes certain advice. She isn't taking it. That's where we come in."

Sayne said: "Right — eleven at the *Sun Club*. I've got a card."

Free smiled. "Easy on the drinks —

they're a dollar and a quarter a lift."

Sayne grinned. "And the Scotch is good." He waved a hand and went from the room. Free heard him say something to Beth, and heard Beth swear her usual reply. The outer door slammed and Beth came back into the room. She said huskily:

"You used to be able to handle agency stuff without getting knocked around, Free."

He grinned at her. "Times change," he replied. "Everything will be fine when the election's over."

She was serious. "The Reynolds girl again?" she asked.

He nodded. "Again," he said. "She's a sweet child, and not too dumb. But even the bright ones can get hurt."

She looked at his head. "Yes," she agreed. "Why did a woman slam you, Free?"

His smile went out of his gray eyes. "I insulted her," he replied. "I told her she shouldn't have Mary Reynolds killed."

Beth Liner widened her eyes a little. "What's she want to kill Reynolds for?" she asked.

Free shook his head. "It's supposed to be a man," he replied. "Both of 'em like him."

Beth pursed her lips and whistled. "Bet it's the first time that ever happened," she said.

Free grinned. "Love's swell," he said. "For the agency."

She was serious again. "If you don't get knocked around too much."

He put his hat gently on his head.

"Lightning strikes only once in the same—"

She cut in sharply. "A bullet in the stomach hurts more than a crack over the ear."

He stood up and mussed her dark hair. "Business is business," he told her. "I'm going home and get some sleep and a gun."

Her eyes were almost closed. "You'll need both," she replied. "When women start hitting—"

She broke off and he chuckled. "It's only an accident when they land," he said.

Her smile was hard. "Look out for the *next* accident," she said sharply.

He nodded and went into the outer office. "That's what I'm being paid for," he replied.

The *Sun Club* was a three-story house, just off Fifth Avenue, in the lower Sixties. There were two dance-floors, above the street level, and two bars. One of the bars, the one on the upper floor, was reached by a narrow corridor. It was at the rear of the swanky speakeasy, and was done modernistically. The walls were done in copper plates and the indirect lighting was all blue. Music from the dance orchestras reached the blue room only faintly. The bar was small and curved. There were no windows. The room was seldom more than half filled; when Free entered it there was only one couple inside. It was ten minutes of eleven; he had not seen Sayne on the way up. At the bar he ordered a Scotch and soda.

The bartender said: "You aren't McHaig, are you?" He didn't look at Free as he said it.

Free said: "Yeah, McHaig."

The bartender fizzed soda into the yellow stuff.

"Jerry said to tell you he and the lady would be in here most of the time," he stated casually.

Free looked puzzled. "Jerry?" he asked in a rising tone.

The bartender looked up and at him. His blue eyes narrowed a little. "Jerry Gortion," he said.

Free said: "Oh, sure."

He lifted the Scotch and soda from the blue lighted, copper bar, and was sipping it when Harry Sayne came into the room. They looked at each other without any sign of recognition, and after a few seconds Sayne turned and went into the narrow corridor. Free watched him go and then turned to the bartender.

"Know that fellow?" he asked.

The bartender shook his head. "I've been here only three nights," he explained. "But I had a hunch on you."

Free grinned. He said: "That fellow looked like an old friend of mine. Think I'll find out. Go easy on my drink."

The bartender chuckled. "I don't do the stuff," he replied.

Free nodded. "It's a good habit," he said.

At the end of the corridor, which led to a foyer separating it from the large room which held the dance-floor and tables, Sayne was lighting a ciga-

rette. Free stopped directly behind him and spoke softly.

"Gortion is expecting a dick named McHaig. From the National Agency. Gortion and the Reynolds girl will be in the blue barroom most of the time. If you spot the Cray girl — tip me off."

Sayne yawned and strolled across the foyer. Free went back into the blue lighted room. The bartender said:

"Right or wrong?"

Free shook his head. "Wrong," he replied. "This blue light in here does tricks."

The bartender grunted. "It's lousy," he agreed. "But it's different, I guess. That's what people want — something different."

A tall, thin man with a scraggly mustache came slowly into the room. Behind him a voice said:

"It gives me the shivers, Jerry — let's stay some other place."

The bartender looked past Free and nodded, smiling. A pleasantly deep voice said:

"You'll get used to it, dear."

Free finished the upper half of his drink and turned slightly. Gortion was pulling out a chair for Mary Reynolds, who looked very lovely in a blue evening dress. Gortion was medium in size, with dark hair and eyes. He was handsome in a too smooth way. The hair of his head and mustache was perfectly combed, slick. His back was to Free as he sat down; Mary Reynolds' eyes met Free's. She said:

"I don't like blue. I don't think I'll ever get used to this room."

Gortion's voice held an amused note. "Of course you will," he said. "And it's the quietest room in the spot."

The bartender was looking at Free, his eyes narrowed again. A waiter went to Gortion's side and took the order. Free leaned against the copper bar, sidewise. The dance orchestra on the same floor was playing a tango. Gortion moved his chair nearer Mary Reynolds and they talked in a low tone, their heads close. The other couple in the room rose and went slowly towards the dance-floor.

The tall, thin man with the scraggly mustache stood at the bar a short distance from Free and talked to the bartender about the weather. The waiter served Gortion and Mary Reynolds with two drinks that might have been gin fizzes. He left the room, and as he passed into the corridor Sayne came back in. His eyes met Free's, went away from them. He nodded very slightly.

The orchestra music died away, then came into the blue room again. It was fast tempo this time. Free stood with his back to the bar, lifted his glass. From the direction of the floor foyer, the room separating the corridor from the dance-floor, there came the raised voice of a man.

"Put that gun away — don't be a fool!"

Sayne turned quickly and went into the corridor. A woman's voice shrilled words, and a man said sharply:

"Stay here — and put that gun away!"

Gortion shoved his chair back and looked towards the corridor. The tall, thin man beside Free was facing the room entrance, his face expressionless. Above the beat of the music Free heard Sayne say:

"Wait — don't go in there —"

The tall, thin man beside Free started towards the corridor. Mary Reynolds was tense in her chair; her eyes held fear. Gortion moved around the table, the fingers of his hands twitching. There was scuffling sound in the corridor. Free dropped his right hand towards his right hip pocket. The lights went out.

From behind the bar a radio screamed. The sound filled the room — it was the racket of a radio coming in with full power. It drowned all other sound. Free let his body drop a little, got the Colt from his right pocket. The roar of the radio was deafening. When the first shot crashed through it he thought he heard Mary Reynolds cry out. There was a second shot. The room was black — the corridor lights were out.

Free swore grimly. The roar of the radio was cut suddenly, and the bartender's voice said:

"What the hell —"

A flashlight beam struck into the room from the corridor. Somewhere back of the flashlight voices sounded. The music had stopped. Free straightened and watched the beam of light strike the body on the floor. A voice from the corridor said:

"What's the matter with the lights? What's wrong in here?"

Jerry Gortion spoke in a hard tone. "Fuse out, or the switch thrown over. Come in with that light."

Harry Sayne came in with the flashlight. Free stood looking down at the body. He slipped the Colt back in his pocket. Gortion called:

"Don't let anyone leave the club, Menzies! Get the lights on!"

Sayne leaned down and rolled the girl's body over. There was silence in the room. Gortion said huskily:

"Good —! it's Ellen Cray!"

The lights, blue and dull, were suddenly on. A voice from the corridor said:

"Someone threw over the switch, here in the corridor. What's the big idea?"

The tall, thin man standing near the body of Ellen Cray spoke softly.

"I'm McHaig, from the National Agency. You people in this room stay here."

The bartender swore, and when Free turned the white-coated one was looking at him grimly. McHaig went to the corridor and called sharply:

"Anders!"

A voice said: "Right, Mac."

McHaig said: "Anyone get past you?"

The voice replied: "No — I'm on the stairs."

McHaig said: "Stay there, and don't let anyone go down."

He turned and leaned over the body. When he straightened he said

very quietly: "The girl's dead. One in the head and one in the belly."

Mary Reynolds lowered her head and covered her white face with palms. Her body shivered. Gortion spoke in a steady, hard voice.

"Who shot her — from the corridor —"

Harry Sayne's eyes met Free's. Free nodded.

"See anything, Harry?" he asked.

Sayne turned and looked towards the corridor. A voice outside said:

"I think I can tell you something. I tried to stop her."

McHaig spoke steadily. "Come in here. Anders — keep the rest out of here. Tell Bailey to stick down below and not to let anyone inside or outside."

When the broad-shouldered, red-faced man came in Free said quietly: "Hello, Sam."

The man looked at him. "Hello," he said grimly. "You *here*, too, eh?"

He looked down at the body of Ellen Cray. McHaig said to Free:

"Who are you?"

Free smiled very slightly. "Don't know. I have an agency. Miss Reynolds is a client of mine. Her life was threatened and I was here to sort of watch things."

The bartender spoke softly. "I thought you were McHaig. You said you were."

Free looked down at the body, which was only a few feet beyond the corridor. He said slowly:

"Did I? My middle name's Craig.

I must have been thinking of that."

McHaig looked at Gortion, then bent over the dead girl again. When he stood up he said:

"She got one over the right eye, and the other in the belly. She was heading for this room. That means she was shot —"

Gortion frowned as McHaig broke off. Free lighted a cigarette and said:

"What started that radio racketing like that? Who got the lights out anyway?"

Gortion wet his lips with the tip of his tongue. He ran lean fingers over his slick hair. Mary Reynolds was looking at Free. Gortion spoke slowly, steadily.

"It's a tough break for the *Club*. I think I've got enough protection, but we've got to be quiet. Go out and tell the others a short circuit made the racket that sounded like shots, McHaig. Make them believe it. Tell them it had something to do with our cooling system. I'll call Ben Risdon at the Precinct and see if the right things can be done quietly."

Free's eyes were looking beyond the right, outstretched hand of the dead girl. He said:

"She was coming for Miss Reynolds — there's the gun."

McHaig followed his gaze, went over and picked up the gun, using a handkerchief.

"I'm a private dick, and I won't fool with it," he said. "What beats me is who —"

He stopped and looked around the room, his eyes on the eyes of each

person a few seconds. Free said:

"Well, she was coming for Miss Reynolds. Whoever got her wouldn't have to worry too much."

Gortion lighted a cigarette, his fingers steady.

"Why not?" he asked. "You don't shoot a woman because she gets excited. None of us knew she had a gun. And it was black in here."

McHaig said: "It was pretty sweet shooting, if you ask me. And what gets me is why —"

He broke off. The broad-shouldered one who had been with Ellen Cray when she had slugged Free down spoke thoughtfully:

"She had it in for this one." He jerked his big head towards Mary Reynolds. "And this one —" he gestured towards Free — "made her sore when he tipped her that he was wise to it. She had a few drinks and got the gun. I came along, trying to stop her."

Free smiled grimly. "But she was too strong for you," he said with sarcasm. "And if someone hadn't been a swell shot in the dark — Miss Reynolds would have been on the floor."

The broad-shouldered one frowned at Free. Mary Reynolds closed her eyes and shivered. She was very pale and beautiful. Gortion said sharply:

"Ellen must have been almost insane. She was trying for Miss Reynolds, but she was murdered —"

He broke off, looked at Free. His eyes went away from Free's and to Mary Reynolds'.

"You called Free in?" he asked.

"You didn't say anything to me about it."

The girl nodded her head a little. Her eyes looked frightened.

"I called him in," she said. "I was afraid."

Free said in a hard tone: "Well, it's all right now. You've got Gortion, and the other one's out of it."

Gortion's right hand clenched. He faced Free.

"I don't like the way you say that," he said sharply. "I had to make a choice between two women. I made the choice. But Ellen didn't know what she was doing. Someone murdered her. I want to know who did it."

Free shrugged. He looked at Mary Reynolds.

"My job was to see that you didn't get hurt," he said coldly. "Ellen Cray was trying to hurt you. She failed. I suppose that lets me out."

McHaig said to Gortion. "My back was to the gun flash. The radio was making a hell of a racket. Free was behind me somewhere."

Gortion nodded. "Free will stay in here," he said in a hard tone. "Men-zies!"

A short, dapper man stood at the end of the corridor. His face was pale blue in the light of the room. His lips twitched nervously.

"Call Ben Risdon and tell him to hurry over here with a couple of the boys. Quiet like. Keep the others out of here, and don't let anyone in or out of the *Club* until Ben gets here. We'll —" his eyes went around the blue

room—"stay right in here until Ben comes over."

Menzies said: "Okey." He went along the corridor, answering questions and getting the others out into the foyer.

Sayne looked down at the body of Ellen Cray. It was blue in the reflected lighting. Gortion said steadily:

"I don't carry a gun. You can't shoot a person with a gun if you haven't got one."

Free said softly: "I *carry* a gun. It's loaded. If a person's just been shot dead—the fellow with the loaded gun didn't do it."

Gortion's eyes were cold. "Maybe," he said very slowly.

Mary Reynolds stared down at the body of Ellen Cray.

"She's all—blue—" Her voice was thin and shaken.

Free said "Blue murder." His words were followed by silence.

Gortion broke in. "I want to know about the light switch and a few other things. Poor kid."

He leaned over Mary Reynolds who had lifted her hands to her face again. Sayne said to Free:

"I tried to stop her, in the corridor. I didn't see the gun in her fingers, but I'd heard this fellow talking, trying to stop her."

He gestured towards the big, broad-shouldered one. Free looked at the man.

"What's your name?" he asked. "She called you Sam, before she slammed me down."

The big man looked towards the

modernistic copper walls that were reflecting blue light. He said huskily:

"My name's Blue. Sam Blue."

Gortion straightened and his eyes met Free's. He said softly:

"Blue murder."

The big man's eyes, half closed, were fixed on Gortion. "I tried to stop her," he breathed.

Gortion said: "Sure," in a hard, low tone.

Free nodded. "You didn't stop her, but someone else did," he said. "She was coming for Miss Reynolds, and she was stopped. Maybe that makes it all right."

Gortion closed his eyes and stood very still. The dance orchestra started playing again. Gortion spoke just above a whisper.

"Maybe," he said.

Ben Risdon was a short, red-haired man with a close-clipped, red moustache. He had blue eyes and big hands. His wrists were thick. Two uniformed officers were inside the room. Risdon said in a cheerful voice:

"I get it like this. The Cray girl was strong for you, Jerry. You liked her, but not enough to quit liking Miss Reynolds. Miss Reynolds was threatened. You knew the Cray girl hated her but you didn't think she'd try to kill. You thought the threats were bluff. But you got McHaig to stick around, anyway. And Miss Reynolds got Don Free to stick around. Free looked the Cray girl up, told her she'd been mixed up in a few things and warned her. He got a slam on the

head. And Blue, here—”

The police lieutenant looked narrowly at Sam Blue.

“You were just a friend. Sympathetic because the Cary girl was losing her man. You came up here with her, but you tried to stop her from using the gun. That it?”

Blue said thickly: “That’s it.”

Risdon nodded. “Sayne here was working with you, Free. The Cray girl got past him in the corridor there. The lights went out and the radio back of the bar opened up with full power. There were two shots. The room was black, and yet none of you seem to be able to locate the flashes. The sound of the gun was only partially drowned by the radio racket. It didn’t seem to be on top of any of you.

“The Cray girl apparently had her back to the corridor, which means she was shot from the room. Sayne and Blue were in the corridor, behind the girl as she came in. They didn’t see gun flashes. Gortion, Miss Reynolds, Free, McHaig and the bartender — you were in the room. The Cray girl was between you five and the other two, when she went down. No exit from the room but by the corridor. No windows. Nothing but the copper walls. Right?”

Gortion said: “It looks that way.”

Free said: “One thing, Risdon. The girl might have reached the room, turned, facing the corridor. She might have known the light switch was out there. She might have got the dose from the corridor.”

The bartender cleared his throat.

“I got to tell you,” he said. “I got a switch on the lights, back of the bar. When I heard what was being said, knew that the Cray girl was coming in, I reached for the switch. Mr. Gortion had told me that McHaig was coming, and he’d hinted why. It’s got around some, anyway. Things like that do. My hand hit the radio switch, opened it up. It heats up quick and it was set wrong. My hand went on up and I got the lights out. Then the radio racketed. And I ducked back of the bar.”

Free said: “Why didn’t you say that before?”

The bartender shrugged. “I figured this would be a better time.”

Free smiled a little. “The switch in the corridor was thrown over,” he said. “Someone called that it had been, anyway.”

Blue spoke huskily. “I did that. I was trying to get the lights on. When they didn’t come on I thought something was wrong. I left the switch where I pulled it.”

Free whistled softly. “How’d you know where the switch was?”

Blue grinned. “I worked here for a few months.”

Risdon swore very gently. He looked at Gortion. Gortion said:

“I guess he did. Menzies handles that sort of stuff. I’ve been away now and then.”

Free looked at Blue. “If you knew that switch — you’d have known it was on when your fingers touched it. Even if the lights were out, you’d have known you were throwing it off.”

Blue grunted. "Hell," he said. "I didn't think of all that. And it might have been changed."

Sayne said: "Blue was behind the girl. She passed me, and he was behind me. The shots sounded as though they came from the room. I thought they were from the Cray girl's gun. I thought she'd got Miss Reynolds."

Risdon nodded. He looked at the bartender.

"What's your name?" he asked.

The bartender said: "Dick Evans. I figured someone was coming in with a gun, and I wanted to get the room dark. The radio racket was accidental."

Risdon nodded and went closer to the bar. Evans was behind it.

"Try it now," Risdon said. "Hit the radio switch, then the light switch."

Evans raised a hand and hit the radio switch. His fingers went on up and the lights went out. The radio came in with a roar. It filled the room. Music blurred and boomed into one screaming note. Risdon shouted:

"Cut it!"

The radio died and Risdon said: "Leave the lights off." There was silence except for the breathing of those in the room. Risdon spoke thoughtfully. "It gets the corridor lights, too, and that makes it black. All right, switch them on."

The lights came on. Risdon said: "I've looked at the guns. McHaig's and Free's are loaded all the way. So is the Cray girl's. Gortion didn't have a gun. Evans didn't have one on him.

The gun back of the bar is full up. Blue didn't have a gun and Sayne's is loaded all the way. Loaded guns and no guns — a girl between them going to kill another girl and getting killed herself. But who did the job —"

He broke off, frowning. One of the two uniformed officers said:

"We've been over the room twice, Lieutenant. Not a weapon around."

Risdon nodded. "No powder burns on the girl's clothes. She got it from a distance — a short distance, anyway."

He looked intently at Mary Reynolds. "You haven't been searched," he said. "Did you kill her?"

Mary Reynolds shivered. She stood up. Her evening dress was sheer and simple, and tight fitting.

"I did not kill her," she said slowly, shakily. "I haven't a gun. I knew Mr. Free would be here. I was with Jerry, I was frightened, but I couldn't use a gun if I had one."

Risdon looked narrowly at the sheer white dress.

"Walk around a bit," he ordered.

She moved around. Risdon said: "Okey — you can sit down."

He lighted a cigarette and looked at McHaig.

"Any ideas, Mac?" he asked.

McHaig scowled. "I figure the gun was Maxim-silenced, to cut down on the flash. But the second shot should have shown some flash. The radio was roaring and crackling. The room isn't so big, but it isn't so small either. I think she got it from this room."

Risdon said: "Yeah, maybe. How

about you, Free?"

Free smiled. "How much difference does it make?" he asked. "She'd threatened Miss Reynolds. She was going for her with a gun. She was stopped."

Gortion's eyes were very small. "Damn it, Free," he breathed. "I could have knocked her down, or got in the way. She didn't have to be killed. You talk as though —"

He stopped. Free shook his head. "I didn't do the job," he said slowly. "And it looks as though the guessing is going to be tough."

Risdon frowned. "I'll keep the guns, for a better examination. When the coroner's man gets here you people can go. But you're all under suspicion. It might be better for the one who did the job to come through. It was shooting in defense of this girl. You'd probably get off."

Free grinned. "Probably," he said.

Gortion spoke coldly. "I might prosecute. Someone was pretty quick on the trigger."

Menzies came along the corridor and said in a soft voice:

"Some men from the coroner's office here."

Risdon sighed. "Bring them along. The party is in here."

A few minutes later two men came in. The one who looked like a minister nodded to Risdon, looked at the body, looked at Risdon again.

"Who did the job, Ben?" he asked.

The police lieutenant shrugged. "Unknown person," he replied. ".38 or .45, eh? Let me know the caliber."

The coroner's man said: "Sure, it might help."

Gortion said slowly: "I hate a woman killer. Even if Ellen had gone a little crazy —"

He stopped. Menzies spoke from the corridor.

"There's a fellow downstairs by the name of Bryant Carter. A check for five hundred. He said you'd say okey."

Gortion looked at Ellen Cray's body. "Okey," he said dully. Menzies went away.

Gortion turned and looked at Free. He kept his eyes narrowed on Free's as the body was taken away. Then he said to Mary Reynolds:

"You go along to the ladies' parlor. Take a rest on the divan."

He helped her to her feet, went to the corridor with her. His lips were close to her right cheek. She went along the corridor alone and Gortion came back into the room. He said heavily:

"I feel like a louse. There's always been women, but this is the first killing."

Free said: "How about a drink?"

McHaig spoke quietly: "I want to have a look around the place."

He went out and Sayne went out after him. Free said:

"Scotch and soda."

Gortion sat down at the table where he had been seated. Risdon spoke to the uniformed officers.

"Go down and out the back way, boys. I'll handle the rest of it."

They went out. Gortion ordered

whiskey straight. Risdon said he wasn't drinking.

Free waited until Gortion was lifting his glass. He faced the man, leaning against the bar. Risdon was near a copper wall at one end of the room. Free looked at Gortion and said:

"That was good hunting, Gortion. Only there was a slip-up."

Gortion put his glass down and stared at Free.

"What do you mean?" he asked.

Free smiled. "You feel too badly about the Cray girl being out of the way," he said slowly. "Mary Reynolds is worth a million or so, and you're in the hole for a quarter of a million. You've been in the hole for a few weeks. A few of us know that. Things were getting pretty desperate. And Ellen Cray knew stuff about your rackets that Mary Reynolds didn't know. Also, Ellen loved you. She wouldn't have let you marry Mary Reynolds without a fight. A hell of a fight. She was in the way. If she went to Mary — Mary might have been forced to believe some things. That wouldn't have helped you any."

Gortion's body was tense. He said in a hard, steady voice:

"What the hell are you getting at?"

Free sipped some Scotch and soda. Risdon and Blue were very quiet. Free said:

"You kept the Cray girl on edge. Maybe you suggested the gun thing. You told her you were going to leave her and marry Mary Reynolds. You got McHaig in here to protect Mary. You told Mary about it. You didn't

mind if Mary Reynolds had me on the job. You thought you had an airtight set-up. You wanted Ellen Cray out of the way, finished."

Gortion's face twisted. "You — damn liar!" he breathed.

Free shook his head.

"Mary Reynolds is very beautiful. She wouldn't have been hard to take. You could have used her money. So you kept at the Cray girl — kept hinting that you were going to leave her. That Mary Reynolds had you. You tipped her that you'd be in here tonight, with Mary. She came in to kill Mary, and that was all right with you. You had your man Evans back of the bar. He knew what to do.

"I was suspicious of you from the beginning, Gortion. You were worried enough to hire a private dick for Mary Reynolds, yet you brought her right in here. You picked a table facing the corridor. You didn't have a gun on you."

Gortion stood up, his lips jerking. Free said:

"If I walked over there and stood where Ellen Cray was standing when she got hit — *I'd* get hit, too! You could lean over and shove that button under the slant of the copper sheathing. That would make the contact, the gun would let loose —"

Gortion's face was white with rage. He said hoarsely:

"You're crazy, Free! As crazy as Ellen Cray was when she —"

Free shook his head. "Evans did what he was supposed to do — slammed the radio on and got the

lights off. That was so you could shove the button that made the electrical contact. You knew just where Ellen Cray was—in a line with the gun. The first bullet caught her low. She was falling when the second one got her over the eye. The gun's back of the copper sheathing, at the far end of the room. That's why we didn't see the flash. The button's down there, near your chair. The bullets came through the slant space of the copper. Sit down, Gortion. Sit down and like it!"

Gortion swore hoarsely, reached for his glass. He flung it at Free's head, rushed in. Free stepped to one side and struck heavily with his right fist. Gortion went down, rolled over on his back. Risdon said sharply:

"Careful, Evans!"

The bartender's eyes showed fear. He said very heavily:

"— ! I figured we —"

He stopped. Blue said: "Jeeze — I knew he hated her, but I didn't figure he had it fixed."

Risdon went over to the copper-sheathed wall near the table. His gun was in his right hand; his left hand fingers moved beneath the slanted edge of the copper strips.

Free said: "Easy when you touch the button, Risdon! There may be more bullets in the gun."

Risdon said: "Yeah, here it is." He went to the far end of the room and got his eyes close to the sheathing slant. At intervals he turned and looked at Blue and the bartender. Gortion moved his arms and groaned.

Risdon said: "Yeah, here's the gun. The blue light makes it hard to see. Nicely mounted in back — just about enough room for the lead to get through. Well —"

He turned away and looked at the bartender. Evans stood swaying from side to side. Gortion tried to sit up. Risdon looked at Free.

"That was nice guessing," he said.

Free shook his head. "I had him figured for it," he replied. "The lights out and the radio racket were too smooth. There was the gun flash that wasn't seen. We were all in here. And Gortion had the reason for wanting the Cray girl dead."

Gortion sat up and held his head in his hands. He groaned. Risdon said:

"Well, go down and call the boys, will you, Free?"

Free nodded. "I'll phone and then see my client," he replied. "I'll break it to her gently."

Gortion said: "—damn women —"

Free nodded to Risdon. He went out and along the corridor, thinking of what he would say to Mary Reynolds. A uniformed hat-check girl smiled at him. He looked thoughtful and she said:

"The gentlemen's room is downstairs."

He said: "Swell. Thanks." The orchestra was playing a dreamy waltz. On the way down the stairs he passed two girls who were nice to look at. One said: "He kills me — what a guy!" They both laughed, and Free lighted a cigarette and went on down.

There are some readers who will insist that the tale told by the fourth man is purely supernatural—and those readers will be right. Yet, there are other readers who will insist that the tale told by the fourth man is one of natural murder—if murder can ever be referred to as natural. And those readers may also be right. Admittedly, "The Fourth Man" is a borderline story: its curious events lie in the strange no-man's land that exists between the natural and the supernatural, between the normal and the abnormal, where at best the boundary line is shadowy and shifting . . . If all this sounds like double-talk, it is frankly meant to sound that way. Detective-crime stories, including those of the supernatural, are by their very nature, by the deeper demands of their form and technique, a kind of literary double-talk: the authors always say one thing but mean something else. It is not double-talk, however, to remind you that "The Fourth Man" is one of the very few stories by Agatha Christie which, to the best of your Editor's knowledge, has never previously been published in the United States—and that fact alone should make you eager to waive any purism of classification. . . .

THE FOURTH MAN

by AGATHA CHRISTIE

CANON PARFITT panted a little. Running for trains was not much of a business for a man of his age. For one thing his figure was not what it was and with the loss of his slender silhouette went an increasing tendency to be short of breath. This tendency the Canon himself always referred to, with dignity, as "My heart, you know!"

He sank into the corner of the first-class carriage with a sigh of relief. The warmth of the heated carriage was most agreeable to him. Outside the snow was falling. Lucky to get a corner seat on a long night journey. Miserable business if you didn't. There ought to be a sleeper on this train.

The other three corners were already occupied, and noting this fact Canon Parfitt became aware that the man in the far corner was smiling at him in gentle recognition. He was a clean-shaven man with a quizzical face and hair just turning gray on the temples. His profession was so clearly the law that no one could have mistaken him for anything else for a moment. Sir George Durand was, indeed, a very famous lawyer.

"Well, Parfitt," he remarked genially, "you had a run for it, didn't you?"

"Very bad for my heart, I'm afraid," said the Canon. "Quite a coincidence meeting you, Sir George. Are you going far north?"

"Newcastle," said Sir George laconically. "By the way," he added, "do you know Dr. Campbell Clark?"

The man sitting on the same side of the carriage as the Canon inclined his head pleasantly.

"We met on the platform," continued the lawyer. "Another coincidence."

Canon Parfitt looked at Dr. Campbell Clark with a good deal of interest. It was a name of which he had often heard. Dr. Clark was in the forefront as a physician and mental specialist, and his last book, *The Problem of the Unconscious Mind*, had been the most discussed book of the year.

Canon Parfitt saw a square jaw, very steady blue eyes, and reddish hair untouched by gray, but thinning rapidly. And he received also the impression of a very forceful personality.

By a perfectly natural association of ideas the Canon looked across to the seat opposite him, half-expecting to receive a glance of recognition there also, but the fourth occupant of the carriage proved to be a total stranger — a foreigner, the Canon fancied. He was a slight dark man, rather insignificant in appearance. Hunched in a big overcoat, he appeared to be fast asleep.

"Canon Parfitt of Bradchester?" inquired Dr. Campbell Clark in a pleasant voice.

The Canon looked flattered. Those "scientific sermons" of his had really made a great hit — especially since the Press had taken them up. Well, that was what the Church needed —

good modern up-to-date stuff.

"I have read your book with great interest, Dr. Campbell Clark," he said. "Though it's a bit too technical here and there for me to follow."

Durand broke in.

"Are you for talking or sleeping, Canon?" he asked. "I'll confess at once that I suffer from insomnia and that therefore I'm in favor of the former."

"Oh! certainly. By all means," said the Canon. "I seldom sleep on these night journeys and the book I have with me is a very dull one."

"We are at any rate a representative gathering," remarked the doctor with a smile. "The Church, the Law, the Medical Profession."

"Not much we couldn't give an opinion on between us, eh?" laughed Durand. "The Church for the spiritual view, myself for the purely worldly and legal view, and you, doctor, with widest field of all, ranging from the purely pathological to the — super-psychological! Among the three of us we should cover any ground pretty completely, I fancy."

"Not so completely as you imagine, I think," said Dr. Clark. "There's another point of view, you know, that you left out, and that's rather an important one."

"Meaning?" queried the lawyer.

"The point of view of the Man in the Street."

"Is that so important? Isn't the Man in the Street usually wrong?"

"Oh! almost always. But he has the thing that all expert opinion must

lack — the personal point of view. In the end, you know, you can't get away from personal relationships. I've found that in my profession. For every patient who comes to me genuinely ill, at least five come who have nothing whatever the matter with them except an inability to live happily with the inmates of the same house. They call it everything — from housemaid's knee to writer's cramp, but it's all the same thing, the raw surface produced by mind rubbing against mind."

"You have a lot of patients with 'nerves,' I suppose," the Canon remarked disparagingly. His own nerves were excellent.

"Ah! and what do you mean by that?" The other swung round on him, quick as a flash. "Nerves! People use that word and laugh after it, just as you did. 'Nothing the matter with so and so,' they say. 'Just nerves.' But, good God, man, you've got the crux of everything there! You can get at a mere bodily ailment and heal it. But at this day we know very little more about the obscure causes of the hundred and one forms of nervous disease than we did in — well, the reign of Queen Elizabeth!"

"Dear me," said Canon Parfitt, a little bewildered by this onslaught. "Is that so?"

"Mind you, it's a sign of grace," Dr. Campbell Clark went on. "In the old days we considered man a simple animal, body and soul — with stress laid on the former."

"Body, soul and spirit," corrected

the clergyman mildly.

"Spirit?" The doctor smiled oddly. "What do you parsons mean exactly by spirit? You've never been very clear about it, you know. All down the ages you've funk'd an exact definition."

The Canon cleared his throat in preparation for speech, but to his chagrin he was given no opportunity. The doctor went on.

"Are we even sure the word is spirit — might it not be *spirits*?"

"Spirits?" Sir George Durand questioned, his eyebrows raised quizzically.

"Yes." Campbell Clark's gaze transferred itself to him. He leaned forward and tapped the other man lightly on the breast. "Are you so sure," he said gravely, "that there is only one occupant of this structure — for that is all it is, you know — this desirable residence to be let furnished — for seven, twenty-one, forty-one, seventy-one — whatever it may be! — years? And in the end the tenant moves his things out — little by little — and then goes out of the house altogether — and down comes the house, a mass of ruin and decay. You're the master of the house, we'll admit that, but aren't you ever conscious of the presence of others — soft-footed servants, hardly noticed, except for the work they do — work that you're not conscious of having done? Or friends — moods that take hold of you and make you, for the time being, a 'different man' as the saying goes? You're the king of the castle, right enough, but be very sure the 'dirty rascal' is there too."

"My dear Clark," drawled the lawyer. "You make me positively uncomfortable. Is my mind really a battleground of conflicting personalities? Is that Science's latest?"

It was the doctor's turn to shrug his shoulders.

"Your body is," he said drily. "If the body, why not the mind?"

"Very interesting," said Canon Parfitt. "Ahl Wonderful science — wonderful science."

And inwardly he thought to himself: "I can get a most arresting sermon out of that idea."

But Dr. Campbell Clark had leaned back again in his seat, his momentary excitement spent.

"As a matter of fact," he remarked in a dry professional manner, "it is a case of dual personality that takes me to Newcastle tonight. Very interesting case. Neurotic subject, of course. But quite genuine."

"Dual personality," said Sir George Durand thoughtfully. "It's not so very rare, I believe. There's loss of memory as well, isn't there? I know the matter cropped up in a case in the Probate Court the other day."

Dr. Clark nodded.

"The classic case, of course," he said, "was that of Felicie Bault. You may remember hearing of it?"

"Of course," said Canon Parfitt. "I remember reading about it in the papers — but quite a long time ago — seven years at least."

Dr. Campbell Clark nodded.

"That girl became one of the most famous figures in France. Scientists

from all over the world came to see her. She had no less than four distinct personalities. They were known as Felicie 1, Felicie 2, Felicie 3, etc."

"Wasn't there some suggestion of deliberate trickery?" asked Sir George alertly.

"The personalities of Felicie 3 and Felicie 4 were a little open to doubt," admitted the doctor. "But the main facts remain. Felicie Bault was a Brittany peasant girl. She was the third of a family of five, the daughter of a drunken father and a mentally defective mother. In one of his drinking bouts the father strangled the mother and was, if I remember rightly, transported for life. Felicie was then five years of age. Some charitable people interested themselves in the children and Felicie was brought up and educated by an English maiden lady who had a kind of home for destitute children. She could make very little of Felicie, however. She describes the girl as abnormally slow and stupid, taught to read and write only with the greatest difficulty, and clumsy with her hands. This lady, Miss Slater, tried to fit the girl for domestic service, and did indeed find her several places when she was of an age to take them. But she never stayed long anywhere owing to her stupidity and also her intense laziness."

The doctor paused for a minute, and the Canon, recrossing his legs, and arranging his traveling rug more closely round him, was suddenly aware that the man opposite him had

moved very slightly. His eyes, which had formerly been shut, were now open, and something in them, something mocking and indefinable, startled the worthy Canon. It was as though the man were listening and gloating secretly over what he heard.

"There is a photograph taken of Felicie Bault at the age of seventeen," continued the doctor. "It shows her as a loutish peasant girl, heavy of build. There is nothing in that picture to indicate that she was soon to be one of the most famous persons in France.

"Five years later, when she was 22, Felicie Bault had a severe nervous illness, and on recovery the strange phenomena began to manifest themselves. The following are facts attested to by many eminent scientists. The personality called Felicie 1 was indistinguishable from the Felicie Bault of the last twenty-two years. Felicie 1 wrote French badly and haltingly, spoke no foreign languages, and was unable to play the piano. Felicie 2, on the contrary, spoke Italian fluently and German moderately. Her handwriting was quite different from that of Felicie 1, and she wrote fluent and expressive French. She could discuss politics and art and she was passionately fond of playing the piano. Felicie 3 had many points in common with Felicie 2. She was intelligent and apparently well educated, but in moral character she was a total contrast. She appeared, in fact, an utterly depraved creature — but depraved in a Parisian and not a provincial way. She knew all the Paris *argot*, and the

expressions of the chic *demi monde*. Her language was filthy and she would rail against religion and so-called 'good people' in the most blasphemous terms. Finally there was Felicie 4 — a dreamy, almost half-witted creature, distinctly pious and professedly clairvoyant, but this fourth personality was very unsatisfactory and elusive, and has been sometimes thought to be a deliberate trickery on the part of Felicie 3 — a kind of joke played by her on a credulous public. I may say that (with the possible exception of Felicie 4) each personality was distinct and separate and had no knowledge of the others. Felicie 2 was undoubtedly the most predominant and would last sometimes for a fortnight at a time, then Felicie 1 would appear abruptly for a day or two. After that, perhaps, Felicie 3 or 4, but the two latter seldom remained in command for more than a few hours. Each change was accompanied by severe headache and heavy sleep, and in each case there was complete loss of memory of the other states, the personality in question taking up life where she had left it, unconscious of the passage of time."

"Remarkable," murmured the Canon. "Very remarkable. As yet we know next to nothing of the marvels of the universe."

"We know that there are some very astute impostors in it," remarked the lawyer drily.

"The case of Felicie Bault was investigated by lawyers as well as by doctors and scientists," said Dr.

Campbell Clark quickly. "Maitre Quimbellier, you remember, made the most thorough investigation and confirmed the views of the scientists. And after all, why should it surprise us so much? We come across the double-yolked egg, do we not? And the twin banana? Why not the double soul — or in this case the quadruple soul — in the single body?"

"The double soul?" protested the Canon.

Dr. Campbell Clark turned his piercing blue eyes on him.

"What else can we call it? That is to say — if the personality is the soul?"

"It is a good thing such a state of affairs is only in the nature of a 'freak,'" remarked Sir George. "If the case were common, it would give rise to pretty complications."

"The condition is, of course, quite abnormal," agreed the doctor. "It was a great pity that a longer study could not have been made, but all that was put an end to by Felicie's unexpected death."

"There was something queer about that, if I remember rightly," said the lawyer slowly.

Dr. Campbell Clark nodded.

"A most unaccountable business. The girl was found one morning dead in bed. She had clearly been strangled. But to everyone's stupefaction it was presently proved beyond doubt that she had actually strangled herself. The marks on her neck were those of her own fingers. A method of suicide which, though not physically impossi-

ble, must have necessitated terrific muscular strength and almost super-human will power. What had driven the girl to such straits has never been found out. Of course her mental balance must always have been precarious. Still, there it is. The curtain has been rung down forever on the mystery of Felicie Bault."

It was then that the man in the far corner laughed.

The other three men jumped as though shot. They had totally forgotten the existence of the fourth among them. As they stared towards the place where he sat, still hunched in his overcoat, he laughed again.

"You must excuse me, gentlemen," he said, in perfect English that had, nevertheless, a foreign flavor.

He sat up, displaying a pale face with a small jet-black mustache.

"Yes, you must excuse me," he said, with a mock bow. "But really! in science, is the last word ever said?"

"You know something of the case we have been discussing?" asked the doctor courteously.

"Of the case? No. But I knew her."

"Felicie Bault?"

"Yes. And Annette Ravel also. You have not heard of Annette Ravel, I see? And yet the story of the one is the story of the other. Believe me, you know nothing of Felicie Bault if you do not also know the history of Annette Ravel."

He drew out a watch and looked at it.

"Just half an hour before the next stop. I have time to tell you the story

— that is, if you care to hear it?"

"Please tell it to us," said the doctor quietly.

"Delighted," said the Canon. "Delighted."

Sir George Durand merely composed himself in an attitude of keen attention.

"My name, gentlemen," began their strange traveling companion, "is Raoul Letardeau. You have spoken just now of an English lady, Miss Slater, who interested herself in works of charity. I was born in that Brittany fishing village and when my parents were both killed in a railway accident it was Miss Slater who came to the rescue and saved me from the equivalent of your English workhouse. There were some twenty children under her care, girls and boys. Among these children were Felicie Bault and Annette Ravel. If I cannot make you understand the personality of Annette, gentlemen, you will understand nothing. She was the child of what you call a *fille de joie* who had died of consumption abandoned by her lover. The mother had been a dancer, and Annette, too, had the desire to dance. When I saw her first she was eleven years old, a little shrimp of a thing with eyes that alternately mocked and promised — a little creature all fire and life. And at once — yes, at once — she made me her slave. It was 'Raoul, do this for me.' 'Raoul, do that for me.' And me, I obeyed. Already I worshipped her, and she knew it.

"We would go down to the shore

together, we three — for Felicie would come with us. And there Annette would pull off her shoes and stockings and dance on the sand. And then when she sank down breathless, she would tell us of what she meant to do and to be.

"See you, I shall be famous. Yes, exceedingly famous. I will have hundreds and thousands of silk stockings — the finest silk. And I shall live in an exquisite apartment. All my lovers shall be young and handsome as well as being rich. And when I dance all Paris shall come to see me. They will yell and call and shout and go mad over my dancing. And in the winters I shall not dance. I shall go south to the sunlight. There are villas there with orange trees. I shall have one of them. I shall lie in the sun on silk cushions, eating oranges. As for you, Raoul, I will never forget you, however great and rich and famous I shall be. I will protect you and advance your career. Felicie here shall be my maid — no, her hands are too clumsy. Look at them, how large and coarse they are."

"Felice would grow angry at that. And then Annette would go on teasing her.

"She is so ladylike, Felicie — so elegant, so refined. She is a princess in disguise — ha, ha."

"My father and mother were married, which is more than yours were,' Felicie would growl out spitefully.

"Yes, and your father killed your mother. A pretty thing, to be a murderer's daughter."

"Your father left your mother to rot,' Felicie would rejoin.

"Ah! yes.' Annette became thoughtful. '*Paure Maman*. One must keep strong and well. It is everything to keep strong and well.'

"I am as strong as a horse,' Felicie boasted.

"And indeed she was. She had twice the strength of any other girl in the Home. And she was never ill.

"But she was stupid, you comprehend, stupid like a brute beast. I often wondered why she followed Annette round as she did. It was, with her, a kind of fascination. Sometimes, I think, she actually hated Annette, and indeed Annette was not kind to her. She jeered at her slowness and stupidity, and baited her in front of the others. I have seen Felicie grow quite white with rage. Sometimes I have thought that she would fasten her fingers round Annette's neck and choke the life out of her. She was not nimble-witted enough to reply to Annette's taunts, but she did learn in time to make one retort which never failed. That was a reference to her own health and strength. She had learned (what I had always known) that Annette envied her her strong physique, and she struck instinctively at the weak spot in her enemy's armor.

"One day Annette came to me in great glee.

"Raoul,' she said. 'We shall have fun today with that stupid Felicie.'

"What are you going to do?"

"Come behind the little shed and I will tell you.'

"It seemed that Annette had got hold of some book. Part of it she did not understand, and indeed the whole thing was much over her head. It was an early work on hypnotism.

"A bright object, they say. The brass knob of my bed, it twirls round. I made Felicie look at it last night. "Look at it steadily," I said. "Do not take your eyes off it." And then I twirled it. Raoul, I was frightened. Her eyes looked so queer — so queer. "Felicie, you will do what I say always," I said. "I will do what you say always, Annette," she answered. And then — and then — I said: "Tomorrow you will bring a tallow candle out into the playground at twelve o'clock and start to eat it. And if anyone asks you, you will say that it is the best *galette* you ever tasted." Oh! Raoul, think of it!

"But she'll never do such a thing,' I objected.

"The book says so. Not that I can quite believe it — but, oh! Raoul, if the book is all true, how we shall amuse ourselves!"

"I, too, thought the idea very funny. We passed word round to the comrades and at twelve o'clock we were all in the playground. Punctual to the minute, out came Felicie with a stump of candle in her hand. Will you believe me, Messieurs, she began solemnly to nibble at it? We were all in hysterics! Every now and then one or other of the children would go up to her and say solemnly: 'It is good, what you eat there, eh, Felicie?' And she would answer. 'But, yes, it is the

best *galette* I ever tasted.' And then we would shriek with laughter. We laughed at last so loud that the noise seemed to wake up Felicie to a realization of what she was doing. She blinked her eyes in a puzzled way, looked at the candle, then at us. She passed her hand over her forehead.

"'But what is it that I do here?' she muttered.

"'You are eating a candle,' we screamed.

"'I made you do it. I made you do it,' cried Annette, dancing about.

"Felicie stared for a moment. Then she went slowly up to Annette.

"'So it is you — it is you who have made me ridiculous? I seem to remember. Ah! I will kill you for this.'

"She spoke in a very quiet tone, but Annette rushed suddenly away and hid behind me.

"'Save me, Raoul! I am afraid of Felicie. It was only a joke, Felicie. Only a joke.'

"'I do not like these jokes,' said Felicie. 'You understand? I hate you. I hate you all.'

"She suddenly burst out crying and rushed away.

"Annette was, I think, scared by the result of her experiment, and did not try to repeat it. But from that day on her ascendancy over Felicie seemed to grow stronger.

"Felicie, I now believe, always hated her, but nevertheless she could not keep away from her. She used to follow Annette around like a dog.

"Soon after that, Messieurs, employment was found for me, and I

only came to the Home for occasional holidays. Annette's desire to become a dancer was not taken seriously, but she developed a very pretty singing voice as she grew older and Miss Slater consented to her being trained as a singer.

"She was not lazy, Annette. She worked feverishly, without rest. Miss Slater was obliged to prevent her doing too much. She spoke to me once about her.

"'You have always been fond of Annette,' she said. 'Persuade her not to work too hard. She has a little cough lately that I do not like.'

"My work took me far afield soon afterwards. I received one or two letters from Annette at first, but then came silence. For five years after that I was abroad.

"Quite by chance, when I returned to Paris, my attention was caught by a poster advertising Annette Ravelli with a picture of the lady. I recognized her at once. That night I went to the theatre in question. Annette sang in French and Italian. On the stage she was wonderful. Afterwards I went to her dressing-room. She received me at once.

"'Why, Raoul,' she cried, stretching out her whitened hands to me. 'This is splendid. Where have you been all these years?'

"I would have told her, but she did not really want to listen.

"'You see, I have very nearly arrived!'

"She waved a triumphant hand round the room filled with bouquets.

"The good Miss Slater must be proud of your success."

"That old one? No, indeed. She designed me, you know, for the Conservatoire. Decorous concert singing. But me, I am an artist. It is here, on the variety stage, that I can express myself."

"Just then a handsome middle-aged man came in. He was very distinguished. By his manner I soon saw that he was Annette's protector. He looked sideways at me, and Annette explained.

"A friend of my infancy. He passes through Paris, sees my picture on a poster, *et voilà!*"

"The man was then very affable and courteous. In my presence he produced a ruby and diamond bracelet and clasped it on Annette's wrist. As I rose to go, she threw me a glance of triumph and a whisper.

"I arrive, do I not? You see? All the world is before me."

"But as I left the room, I heard her cough, a sharp dry cough. I knew what it meant, that cough. It was the legacy of her consumptive mother.

"I saw her next two years later. She had gone for refuge to Miss Slater. Her career had broken down. She was in a state of advanced consumption for which the doctors said nothing could be done.

"Ah! I shall never forget her as I saw her then! She was lying in a kind of shelter in the garden. She was kept outdoors night and day. Her cheeks were hollow and flushed, her eyes bright and feverish.

"She greeted me with a kind of desperation that startled me.

"It is good to see you, Raoul. You know what they say—that I may not get well? They say it behind my back, you understand. To me they are soothing and consolatory. But it is not true, Raoul, it is not true! I shall not permit myself to die. Die? With beautiful life stretching in front of me? It is the will to live that matters. All the great doctors say that nowadays. I am not one of the feeble ones who let go. Already I feel myself infinitely better—infininitely better, do you hear?"

"She raised herself on her elbow to drive her words home, then fell back, attacked by a fit of coughing that racked her thin body.

"The cough—it is nothing," she gasped. "And hemorrhages do not frighten me. I shall surprise the doctors. It is the will that counts. Remember, Raoul, I am going to live."

"It was pitiful, you understand, pitiful.

"Just then, Felicie Bault came out with a tray. A glass of hot milk. She gave it to Annette and watched her drink it with an expression that I could not fathom. There was a kind of smug satisfaction in it.

"Annette too caught the look. She flung the glass down angrily, so that it smashed to bits.

"You see her? That is how she always looks at me. She is glad I am going to die! Yes, she gloats over it. She who is well and strong. Look at her—never a day's illness, that one!

And all for nothing. What good is that great carcass of hers to her? What can she make of it?"

"Felicie stooped and picked up the broken fragments of glass.

"I do not mind what she says," she observed in a sing-song voice. "What does it matter? I am a respectable girl, I am. As for her. She will be knowing the fires of Purgatory before very long. I am a Christian. I say nothing."

"You hate me," cried Annette. "You have always hated me. Ah! but I can charm you, all the same. I can make you do what I want. See now, if I asked you to, you would go down on your knees before me now on the grass."

"You are absurd," said Felicie unasily.

"But, yes, you will do it. You will. To please me. Down on your knees. I ask it of you, I, Annette. Down on your knees, Felicie."

"Whether it was the wonderful pleading in the voice, or some deeper motive, Felicie obeyed. She sank slowly on to her knees, her arms spread wide, her face vacant and stupid.

"Annette flung back her head and laughed—peal upon peal of laughter.

"Look at her, with her stupid face! How ridiculous she looks. You can get up now, Felicie, thank you! It is of no use to scowl at me. I am your mistress. You have to do what I say."

"She lay back on her pillows exhausted. Felicie picked up the tray and moved slowly away. Once she

looked back over her shoulder, and the smouldering resentment in her eyes startled me.

"I was not there when Annette died. But it was terrible, it seems. She clung to life. She fought against death like a madwoman. Again and again she gasped out: 'I will not die—do you hear me? I will not die. I will live—live——'"

"Miss Slater told me all this when I came to see her six months later.

"My poor Raoul," she said kindly. "You loved her, did you not?"

"Always—always. But of what use could I be to her? Let us not talk of it. She is dead—she so brilliant, so full of burning life. . . ."

"Miss Slater was a sympathetic woman. She went on to talk of other things. She was very worried about Felicie, so she told me. The girl had had a queer sort of nervous breakdown and ever since she had been very strange in manner.

"You know," said Miss Slater, after a momentary hesitation, "that she is learning the piano?"

"I did not know it and was very much surprised to hear it. Felicie—learning the piano! I would have declared the girl would not know one note from another.

"She has talent, they say," continued Miss Slater. "I can't understand it. I have always put her down as—well, Raoul, you know yourself, she was always a stupid girl."

"I nodded.

"She is so strange in her manner I don't know what to make of it."

"A few minutes later I entered the Salle de Lecture. Felicie was playing the piano. She was playing the air that I had heard Annette sing in Paris. You understand, Messieurs, it gave me quite a turn. And then, hearing me, she broke off suddenly and looked round at me, her eyes full of mockery and intelligence. For a moment I thought— Well, I will not tell you what I thought.

"*'Tiens!*' she said. 'So it is you—*Monsieur Raoul.*'

"I cannot describe the way she said it. To Annette I had never ceased to be Raoul. But Felicie, since we had met as grown-ups, always addressed me as *Monsieur Raoul*. But the way she said it now was different—as though the *Monsieur*, slightly stressed, was somehow very amusing.

"'Why, Felicie,' I stammered. 'You look quite different today?'

"'Do I?' she said reflectively. 'It is odd, that. But do not be so solemn, Raoul—decidedly I shall call you Raoul—did we not play together as children?—Life was made for laughter. Let us talk of the poor Annette—she who is dead and buried. Is she in Purgatory, I wonder, or where?'

"And she hummed a snatch of song—untunefully enough, but the words caught my attention.

"'Felicie,' I cried. 'You speak Italian?'

"'Why not, Raoul? I am not as stupid as I pretend to be, perhaps.' She laughed at my mystification.

"'I don't understand—' I began.

"'But I will tell you. I am a very

fine actress, though no one suspects it. I can play many parts—and play them very well.'

"She laughed again and ran quickly out of the room before I could stop her.

"I saw her again before I left. She was asleep in an armchair. She was snoring heavily. I stood and watched her, fascinated, yet repelled. Suddenly she woke with a start. Her eyes, dull and lifeless, met mine.

"'Monsieur Raoul,' she muttered mechanically.

"'Yes, Felicie. I am going now. Will you play for me again before I go?'

"'I? Play? You are laughing at me, Monsieur Raoul.'

"'Don't you remember playing for me this morning?'

"She shook her head.

"'I play? How can a poor girl like me play?'

"She paused for a minute as though in thought, then beckoned me nearer.

"'Monsieur Raoul, there are things going on in this house! They play tricks upon you. They alter the clocks. Yes, yes, I know what I am saying. And it is all her doing.'

"'Whose doing?' I asked, startled.

"'That Annette's. That wicked one's. When she was alive she always tormented me. Now that she is dead, she comes back from the dead to torment me.'

"I stared at Felicie. I could see now that she was in an extremity of terror, her eyes starting from her head.

"'She is bad, that one. She is bad, I

tell you. She would take the bread from your mouth, the clothes from your back, *the soul from your body*. . . .

"She clutched me suddenly.

"I am afraid, I tell you—afraid. I hear her voice—not in my ear—no, not in my ear. Here, in my head—' She tapped her forehead. 'She will drive me away—drive me away altogether, and then what shall I do, what will become of me?'

"Her voice rose almost to a shriek. She had in her eyes the look of the terrified beast at bay. . . .

"Suddenly she smiled, a pleasant smile, full of cunning, with something in it that made me shiver.

"If it should come to it, Monsieur Raoul, I am very strong with my hands—very strong with my hands.'

"I had never noticed her hands particularly before. I looked at them now and shuddered in spite of myself. Squat brutal fingers, and as Felicie had said, terribly strong. . . . I cannot explain to you the nausea that swept over me. With hands such as these her father must have strangled her mother. . . .

"That was the last time I ever saw Felicie Bault. Immediately afterwards I went abroad—to South America. I returned from there two years after her death. Something I had read in the newspapers of her life and sudden death. I have heard fuller details tonight—from you. Felicie 3

and Felicie 4—I wonder? She was a good actress, you know!"

The train suddenly slackened speed. The man in the corner sat erect and buttoned his overcoat more closely.

"What is your theory?" asked the lawyer, leaning forward.

"I can hardly believe——" began Canon Parfitt, and stopped.

The doctor said nothing. He was gazing steadily at Raoul Letardeau.

"*The clothes from your back, the soul from your body*," quoted the Frenchman lightly. He stood up. "I say to you, Messieurs, that the history of Felicie Bault is the history of Annette Ravel. You did not know her, gentlemen. I did. *She was very fond of life*. . . ."

His hand on the door, ready to spring out, he turned suddenly and bending down tapped Canon Parfitt on the chest.

"*M. le docteur* over there, he said just now that all *this*"—his hand smote the Canon's stomach, and the Canon winced—"was only a residence. Tell me, if you find a burglar in your house what do you do? Shoot him, do you not?"

"No," cried the Canon. "No, indeed—I mean—not in this country."

But he spoke the last words to empty air. The carriage door banged.

The clergyman, the lawyer, and the doctor were alone. The fourth corner was vacant.



William Faulkner's story, "An Error in Chemistry," won a Second Prize in EQMM's First Annual Contest. The protagonist in this tale was Uncle Gavin, a county attorney in the back country of the deep South. At the time we published the story, we pointed out the affinity between William Faulkner's Uncle Gavin and Melville Davison Post's Uncle Abner. Both are avuncular detectives referred to only by the title "Uncle"; both are seen through the eyes of similar "Watsons"—young, anonymous nephews. We also remarked that these parallels seemed all the more extraordinary since Faulkner probably never read an Uncle Abner story in all his life—possibly never even heard of Uncle Abner. Be that as it may, we were under the impression that "An Error in Chemistry" represented the first story written by William Faulkner about his character Uncle Gavin; but as has been true so often in the past, despite our most careful efforts, we find ourselves wrong again. Digging back into Faulkner's earlier stories, we came upon "Smoke" and who should turn up as the protagonist but a county attorney in the deep South named—Gavin Stevens! There is no doubt that Gavin Stevens and Uncle Gavin are one and the same detective-character—which destroys part of the analogy we drew between Uncle Gavin and Uncle Abner. But you will agree with us still that Gavin Stevens and Uncle Abner retain their more important kinships: both characters possess a certain grandeur; both are imbued with an inordinate sense of justice; both are stalwart men, thoroughly American in spirit and style. It is a great pleasure to bring you another of William Faulkner's wonderfully fine stories.

SMOKE

by WILLIAM FAULKNER

ANSELM HOLLAND came to Jefferson many years ago. Where from, no one knew. But he was young then and a man of parts, or of presence at least, because within three years he had married the only daughter of a man who owned two thousand acres of some of the best land in the county, and he went to live in his father-in-law's house, where two years later his

wife bore him twin sons and where a few years later still the father-in-law died and left Holland in full possession of the property, which was now in his wife's name. But even before that event, we in Jefferson had already listened to him talking a trifle more than loudly of "my land, my crops"; and those of us whose fathers and grandfathers had been bred here

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looked upon him a little coldly and a little askance for a ruthless man and (from tales told about him by both white and Negro tenants and by others with whom he had dealings) for a violent one. But out of consideration for his wife and respect for his father-in-law, we treated him with courtesy if not with regard. So when his wife, too, died while the twin sons were still children, we believed that he was responsible, that her life had been worn out by the crass violence of an underbred outlander. And when his sons reached maturity and first one and then the other left home for good and all, we were not surprised. And when one day six months ago he was found dead, his foot fast in the stirrup of the saddled horse which he rode, and his body pretty badly broken where the horse had apparently dragged him through a rail fence (there still showed at the time on the horse's back and flanks the marks of the blows which he had dealt it in one of his fits of rage), there was none of us who was sorry, because a short time before that he had committed what to men of our town and time and thinking was the unpardonable outrage. On the day he died it was learned that he had been digging up the graves in the family cemetery where his wife's people rested, among them the grave in which his wife had lain for thirty years. So the crazed, hate-ridden old man was buried among the graves which he had attempted to violate, and in the proper time his will was offered for probate. And we learned

the substance of the will without surprise. We were not surprised to learn that even from beyond the grave he had struck one final blow at those alone whom he could now injure or outrage: his remaining flesh and blood.

At the time of their father's death the twin sons were forty. The younger one, Anselm, Junior, was said to have been the mother's favorite — perhaps because he was the one who was most like his father. Anyway, from the time of her death, while the boys were still children almost, we would hear of trouble between Old Anse and Young Anse, with Virginius, the other twin, acting as mediator and being cursed for his pains by both father and brother; he was that sort, Virginius was. And Young Anse was his sort too; in his late teens he ran away from home and was gone ten years. When he returned he and his brother were of age, and Anselm made formal demand upon his father that the land which we now learned was held by Old Anse only in trust, be divided and he — Young Anse — be given his share. Old Anse refused violently. Doubtless the request had been as violently made, because the two of them, Old Anse and Young Anse, were so much alike. And we heard that, strange to say, Virginius had taken his father's side. We heard that, that is. Because the land remained intact, and we heard how, in the midst of a scene of unparalleled violence even for them — a scene of such violence that the Negro servants all fled the house and scattered for the night

— Young Anse departed, taking with him the team of mules which he did own; and from that day until his father's death, even after Virginius also had been forced to leave home, Anselm never spoke to his father and brother again. He did not leave the county this time, however. He just moved back into the hills ("where he can watch what the old man and Virginius are doing," some of us said and all of us thought); and for the next fifteen years he lived alone in a dirt-floored, two-room cabin, like a hermit, doing his own cooking, coming into town behind his two mules not four times a year. Some time earlier he had been arrested and tried for making whiskey. He made no defense, refusing to plead either way, was fined both on the charge and for contempt of court, and flew into a rage exactly like his father when his brother Virginius offered to pay the fine. He tried to assault Virginius in the courtroom and went to the penitentiary at his own demand and was pardoned eight months later for good behavior and returned to his cabin — a dark, silent, aquiline-faced man whom both neighbors and strangers let severely alone.

The other twin, Virginius, stayed on, farming the land which his father had never done justice to even while he was alive. (They said of Old Anse, "wherever he came from and whatever he was bred to be, it was not a farmer." And so we said among ourselves, taking it to be true, "That's the trouble between him and Young Anse: watching his father mistreat the

land which his mother aimed for him and Virginius to have.") But Virginius stayed on. It could not have been much fun for him, and we said later that Virginius should have known that such an arrangement could not last. And then later than that we said, "Maybe he did know." Because that was Virginius. You didn't know what he was thinking at the time, any time. Old Anse and Young Anse were like water. Dark water, maybe; but men could see what they were about. But no man ever knew what Virginius was thinking or doing until afterward. We didn't even know what happened that time when Virginius, who had stuck it out alone for ten years while Young Anse was away, was driven away at last; he didn't tell it, not even to Granby Dodge, probably. But we knew Old Anse and we knew Virginius, and we could imagine it, about like this:

We watched Old Anse smoldering for about a year after Young Anse took his mules and went back into the hills. Then one day he broke out; maybe like this, "You think that, now your brother is gone, you can just hang around and get it all, don't you?"

"I don't want it all," Virginius said. "I just want my share."

"Ah," Old Anse said. "You'd like to have it parceled out right now too, would you? Claim like him it should have been divided up when you and him came of age."

"I'd rather take a little of it and farm it right than to see it all in the

shape it's in now," Virginius said, still just, still mild — no man in the county ever saw Virginius lose his temper or even get ruffled, not even when Anselm tried to fight him in the courtroom about that fine.

"You would, would you?" Old Anse said. "And me that's kept it working at all, paying the taxes on it, while you and your brother have been putting money by every year, tax-free."

"You know Anse never saved a nickel in his life," Virginius said. "Say what you want to about him, but don't accuse him of being forehanded."

"Yes, by heaven! He was man enough to come out and claim what he thought was his and get out when he never got it. But you. You'll just hang around, waiting for me to go, with that damned meal mouth of yours. Pay me the taxes on your half back to the day your mother died, and take it."

"No," Virginius said. "I won't do it."

"No," Old Anse said. "No. Oh, no. Why spend your money for half of it when you can set down and get all of it some day without putting out a cent." Then we imagined Old Anse (we thought of them as sitting down until now, talking like two civilized men) rising, with his shaggy head and his heavy eyebrows. "Get out of my house!" he said. But Virginius didn't move, didn't get up, watching his father. Old Anse came toward him, his hand raised. "Get. Get out of my

house. By heaven, I'll. . . ."

Virginius went, then. He didn't hurry, didn't run. He packed up his belongings (he would have more than Anse; quite a few little things) and went four or five miles to live with a cousin, the son of a remote kinsman of his mother. The cousin lived alone, on a good farm too, though now eaten up with mortgages, since the cousin was no farmer either, being half a stock-trader and half a lay preacher — a small, sandy, nondescript man whom you would not remember a minute after you looked at his face and then away — and probably no better at either of these than at farming. Without haste Virginius left, with none of his brother's foolish and violent finality; for which, strange to say, we thought none the less of Young Anse for showing, possessing. In fact, we always looked at Virginius a little askance too; he was a little too much master of himself. For it is human nature to trust quickest those who cannot depend on themselves. We called Virginius a deep one; we were not surprised when we learned how he had used his savings to disencumber the cousin's farm. And neither were we surprised when a year later we learned how Old Anse had refused to pay the taxes on his land and how, two days before the place would have gone delinquent, the sheriff received anonymously in the mail cash to the exact penny of the Holland assessment. "Trust Virginius," we said, since we believed we knew that the money needed no name to it. The sheriff had

notified Old Anse.

"Put it up for sale and be damned," Old Anse said. "If they think that all they have to do is set there waiting, the whole brood and biling of them. . . ."

The sheriff sent Young Anse word. "It's not my land," Young Anse sent back.

The sheriff notified Virginius. Virginius came to town and looked at the tax books himself. "I got all I can carry myself, now," he said. "Of course, if he lets it go, I hope I can get it. But I don't know. A good farm like that won't last long or go cheap." And that was all. No anger, no astonishment, no regret. But he was a deep one; we were not surprised when we learned how the sheriff had received that package of money, with the unsigned note: *Tax money for Anselm Holland farm. Send receipt to Anselm Holland, Senior.* "Trust Virginius," we said. We thought about Virginius quite a lot during the next year, out there in a strange house, farming strange land, watching the farm and the house where he was born and that was rightfully his going to ruin. For the old man was letting it go completely now: year by year the good broad fields were going back to jungle and gully, though still each January the sheriff received that anonymous money in the mail and sent the receipt to Old Anse, because the old man had stopped coming to town altogether now, and the very house was falling down about his head, and nobody save Virginius ever stopped there. Five or

six times a year he would ride up to the front porch, and the old man would come out and bellow at him in savage and violent vituperation, Virginius taking it quietly, talking to the few remaining Negroes once he had seen with his own eyes that his father was all right, then riding away again. But nobody else ever stopped there, though now and then from a distance someone would see the old man going about the mournful and shaggy fields on the old white horse which was to kill him.

Then last summer we learned that he was digging up the graves in the cedar grove where five generations of his wife's people rested. A Negro reported it, and the county health officer went out there and found the white horse tied in the grove, and the old man himself came out of the grove with a shotgun. The health officer returned, and two days later a deputy went out there and found the old man lying beside the horse, his foot fast in the stirrup, and on the horse's rump the savage marks of the stick — not a switch: a stick — where it had been struck again and again and again.

So they buried him, among the graves which he had violated. Virginius and the cousin came to the funeral. They were the funeral, in fact. For Anse, Junior, didn't come. Nor did he come near the place later, though Virginius stayed long enough to lock the house and pay the Negroes off. But he too went back to the cousin's, and in due time Old Anse's will was offered for probate to Judge

Dukinfield. The substance of the will was no secret; we all learned of it. Regular it was, and we were surprised neither at its regularity nor at its substance nor its wording: . . . *with the exception of these two bequests, I give and bequeath . . . my property to my elder son Virginius, provided it be proved to the satisfaction of the . . . Chancellor that it was the said Virginius who has been paying the taxes on my land, the . . . Chancellor to be the sole and unchallenged judge of the proof.*

The two other bequests were:

To my younger son Anselm, I give . . . two full sets of mule harness, with the condition that this . . . harness be used by . . . Anselm to make one visit to my grave. Otherwise this . . . harness to become and remain part . . . of my property as described above.

To my cousin-in-law Granby Dodge I give . . . one dollar in cash, to be used by him for the purchase of a hymn book or hymn books, as a token of my gratitude for his having fed and lodged my son Virginius since . . . Virginius quitted my roof.

That was the will. And we watched and listened to hear or see what Young Anse would say or do. And we heard and saw nothing. And we watched to see what Virginius would do. And he did nothing. Or we didn't know what he was doing, what he was thinking. But that was Virginius. Because it was all finished then, anyway. All he had to do was to wait until Judge Dukinfield validated the will, then Virginius could give Anse his half—if he intended to do this. We were di-

vided there. "He and Anse never had any trouble," some said. "Virginius never had any trouble with anybody," others said. "If you go by that token, he will have to divide that farm with the whole county." "But it was Virginius that tried to pay Anse's fine that time," the first ones said. "And it was Virginius that sided with his father when Young Anse wanted to divide the land, too," the second ones said.

So we waited and we watched. We were watching Judge Dukinfield now; it was suddenly as if the whole thing had sifted into his hands; as though he sat godlike above the vindictive and jeering laughter of that old man who even underground would not die, and above these two irreconcilable brothers who for fifteen years had been the same as dead to each other. But we thought that in his last coup, Old Anse had overreached himself; that in choosing Judge Dukinfield, the old man's own fury had checkmated him; because in Judge Dukinfield we believed that Old Anse had chosen the one man among us with sufficient probity and honor and good sense—that sort of probity and honor which has never had time to become confused and self-doubting with too much learning in the law. The very fact that the validating of what was a simple enough document appeared to be taking him an overlong time, was to us but fresh proof that Judge Dukinfield was the one man among us who believed that justice is half legal knowledge and half unhaste and confidence in himself and in God.

So as the expiration of the legal period drew near, we watched Judge Dukinfield as he went daily between his home and his office in the courthouse yard. Deliberate and unhurried he moved — a widower of sixty and more, portly, white-headed, with an erect and dignified carriage which the Negroes called "rearbacked." He had been appointed Chancellor seventeen years ago; he possessed little knowledge of the law and a great deal of hard common sense; and for thirteen years now no man had opposed him for reelection, and even those who would be most enraged by his air of bland and affable condescension voted for him on occasion with a kind of childlike confidence and trust. So we watched him without impatience, knowing that what he finally did would be right, not because he did it, but because he would not permit himself or anyone else to do anything until it was right. So each morning we would see him cross the square at exactly ten minutes past eight o'clock and go on to the courthouse, where the Negro janitor had preceded him by exactly ten minutes, with the clock-like precision with which the block signal presages the arrival of the train, to open the office for the day. The Judge would enter the office, and the Negro would take his position in a wire-mended splint chair in the flagged passage which separated the office from the courthouse proper, where he would sit all day long and doze, as he had done for seventeen years. Then at five in the afternoon the Negro would

wake and enter the office and perhaps wake the Judge too, who had lived long enough to have learned that the onus of any business is usually in the hasty minds of those theoreticians who have no business of their own; and then we would watch them cross the square again in single file and go on up the street toward home, the two of them, eyes front and about fifteen feet apart, walking so erect that the two frock coats made by the same tailor and to the Judge's measure fell from the two pairs of shoulders in single boardlike planes, without intimation of waist or of hips.

Then one afternoon, a little after five o'clock, men began to run suddenly across the square, toward the courthouse. Other men saw them and ran too, their feet heavy on the paving, among the wagons and the cars, their voices tense, urgent, "What? What is it?" "Judge Dukinfield," the word went; and they ran on and entered the flagged passage between the courthouse and the office, where the old Negro in his cast-off frock coat stood beating his hands on the air. They passed him and ran into the office. Behind the table the judge sat, leaning a little back in his chair, quite comfortable. His eyes were open, and he had been shot neatly once through the bridge of the nose, so that he appeared to have three eyes in a row. It was a bullet, yet no man about the square that day, or the old Negro who had sat all day long in the chair in the passage, had heard any sound.

It took Gavin Stevens a long time, that day — he and the little brass box. Because the Grand Jury could not tell at first what he was getting at — if any man in that room that day, the jury, the two brothers, the cousin, the old Negro, could tell. So at last the Foreman asked him point blank:

"Is it your contention, Gavin, that there is a connection between Mr. Holland's will and Judge Dukinfield's murder?"

"Yes," the county attorney said. "And I'm going to contend more than that."

They watched him: the jury, the two brothers. The old Negro and the cousin alone were not looking at him. In the last week the Negro had apparently aged fifty years. He had assumed public office concurrently with the Judge; indeed, because of that fact, since he had served the Judge's family for longer than some of us could remember. He was older than the Judge, though until that afternoon a week ago he had looked forty years younger — a wizened figure, shapeless in the voluminous frock coat, who reached the office ten minutes ahead of the Judge and opened it and swept it and dusted the table without disturbing an object upon it, all with a skillful slovenliness that was fruit of seventeen years of practice, and then repaired to the wire-bound chair in the passage to sleep. He seemed to sleep, that is. (The only other way to reach the office was by means of the narrow private stair which led down from the courtroom, used only by the presid-

ing judge during court term, who even then had to cross the passage and pass within eight feet of the Negro's chair unless he followed the passage to where it made an L beneath the single window in the office, and climbed through that window.) For no man or woman had ever passed that chair without seeing the wrinkled eyelids of its occupant open instantaneously upon the brown, irisless eyes of extreme age. Now and then we would stop and talk to him, to hear his voice roll in rich mispronunciation of the orotund and meaningless legal phraseology which he had picked up unawares, as he might have disease germs, and which he reproduced with an ex-cathedra profundity that caused more than one of us to listen to the Judge himself with affectionate amusement. But for all that he was old; he forgot our names at times and confused us with one another; and, confusing our faces and our generations too, he waked sometimes from his light slumber to challenge callers who were not there, who had been dead for many years. But no one had ever been known to pass him unawares.

But the others in the room watched Stevens — the jury about the table, the two brothers sitting at opposite ends of the bench, with their dark, identical, aquiline faces, their arms folded in identical attitudes. "Are you contending that Judge Dukinfield's slayer is in this room?" the Foreman asked.

The county attorney looked at them, at the faces watching him.

"I'm going to contend more than that," he said.

"Contend?" Anselm, the younger twin, said. He sat alone at his end of the bench, with the whole span of bench between him and the brother to whom he had not spoken in fifteen years, watching Stevens with a hard, furious, unwinking glare.

"Yes," Stevens said. He stood at the end of the table. He began to speak, looking at no one in particular, speaking in an easy, anecdotal tone, telling what we already knew, referring now and then to the other twin, Virginius, for corroboration. He told about Young Anse and his father. His tone was fair, pleasant. He seemed to be making a case for the living, telling about how Young Anse left home in anger, in natural anger at the manner in which his father was treating that land which had been his mother's and half of which was at the time rightfully his. His tone was quite just, specious, frank; if anything, a little partial to Anselm, Junior. That was it. Because of that seeming partiality, that seeming glozing, there began to emerge a picture of Young Anse that was damning him to something which we did not then know, damned him because of that very desire for justice and affection for his dead mother, warped by the violence which he had inherited from the very man who had wronged him. And the two brothers sitting there, with that space of friction-smooth plank between them, the younger watching Stevens with that leashed, violent glare, the elder as

intently, but with a face unfathomable. Stevens now told how Young Anse left in anger, and how a year later Virginius, the quieter one, the calmer one, who had tried more than once to keep peace between them, was driven away in turn. And again he drew a specious, frank picture: of the brothers separated, not by the living father, but by what each had inherited from him; and drawn together, bred together, by that land which was not only rightfully theirs, but in which their mother's bones lay.

"So there they were, watching from a distance that good land going to ruin, the house in which they were born and their mother was born falling to pieces because of a crazed old man who attempted at the last, when he had driven them away and couldn't do anything else to them, to deprive them of it for good and all by letting it be sold for nonpayment of taxes. But somebody foiled him there, someone with foresight enough and self-control enough to keep his own counsel about what wasn't anybody else's business anyway so long as the taxes were paid. So then all they had to do was to wait until the old man died. He was old anyway and, even if he had been young, the waiting would not have been very hard for a self-controlled man, even if he did not know the contents of the old man's will. Though that waiting wouldn't have been so easy for a quick, violent man, especially if the violent man happened to know or suspect the substance of the will and was satisfied and,

further, knew himself to have been irrevocably wronged; to have had citizenship and good name robbed through the agency of a man who had already despoiled him and had driven him out of the best years of his life among men, to live like a hermit in a hill cabin. A man like that would have neither the time nor the inclination to bother much with either waiting for something or not waiting for it."

They stared at him, the two brothers. They might have been carved in stone, save for Anselm's eyes. Stevens talked quietly, not looking at anyone in particular. He had been county attorney for almost as long as Judge Dukinfield had been Chancellor. He was a Harvard graduate: a loose-jointed man with a mop of untidy iron-gray hair, who could discuss Einstein with college professors and who spent whole afternoons among the squatting men against the walls of country stores, talking to them in their idiom. He called these his vacations.

"Then in time the father died, as any man who possessed self-control and foresight would have known. And his will was submitted for probate; and even folks way back in the hills heard what was in it, heard how at last that mistreated land would belong to its rightful owner. Or owners, since Anse Holland knows as well as we do that Virge would no more take more than his rightful half, will or no will, now than he would have when his father gave him the chance. Anse knows that because he knows that he would do

the same thing — give Virge his half — if he were Virge. Because they were both born to Anselm Holland, but they were born to Cornelia Mardis too. But even if Anse didn't know, believe, that, he would know that the land which had been his mother's and in which her bones now lie would now be treated right. So maybe that night when he heard that his father was dead, maybe for the first time since Anse was a child, since before his mother died maybe and she would come upstairs at night and look into the room where he was asleep and go away; maybe for the first time since then, Anse slept. Because it was all vindicated then, you see: the outrage, the injustice, the lost good name, and the penitentiary stain — all gone now like a dream. To be forgotten now, because it was all right. By that time, you see, he had got used to being a hermit, to being alone; he could not have changed after that long. He was happier where he was, alone back there. And now to know that it was all past like a bad dream, and that the land, his mother's land, her heritage and her mausoleum, was now in the hands of the one man whom he could and would trust, even though they did not speak to each other. Don't you see?"

We watched him as we sat about the table which had not been disturbed since the day Judge Dukinfield died, upon which lay still the objects which had been, next to the pistol muzzle, his last sight on earth, and with which we were all familiar for years — the

papers, the foul inkwell, the stubby pen to which the Judge clung, the small brass box which had been his superfluous paper weight. At their opposite ends of the wooden bench, the twin brothers watched Stevens, motionless, intent.

"No, we don't see," the Foreman said. "What are you getting at? What is the connection between all this and Judge Dukinfield's murder?"

"Here it is," Stevens said. "Judge Dukinfield was validating that will when he was killed. It was a queer will; but we all expected that of Mr. Holland. But it was all regular, the beneficiaries are all satisfied; we all know that half of that land is Anse's the minute he wants it. So the will is all right. Its probate should have been just a formality. Yet Judge Dukinfield had had it in abeyance for over two weeks when he died. And so that man who thought that all he had to do was to wait —"

"What man?" the Foreman said.

"Wait," Stevens said. "All that man had to do was to wait. But it wasn't the waiting that worried him, who had already waited fifteen years. That wasn't it. It was something else, which he learned (or remembered) when it was too late, which he should not have forgotten; because he is a shrewd man, a man of self-control and foresight; self-control enough to wait fifteen years for his chance, and foresight enough to have prepared for all the incalculables except one: his own memory. And when it was too late, he remembered that there was an-

other man who would also know what he had forgotten about. And that other man who would know it was Judge Dukinfield. And that thing which he would also know was that that horse could not have killed Mr. Holland."

When his voice ceased there was no sound in the room. The jury sat quietly about the table, looking at Stevens. Anselm turned his leashed, furious face and looked once at his brother, then he looked at Stevens again, leaning a little forward now. Virginius had not moved; there was no change in his grave, intent expression. Between him and the wall the cousin sat. His hands lay on his lap and his head was bowed a little, as though he were in church. We knew of him only that he was some kind of an itinerant preacher, and that now and then he gathered up strings of scrubby horses and mules and took them somewhere and swapped or sold them. Because he was a man of infrequent speech who in his dealings with men betrayed such an excruciating shyness and lack of confidence that we pitied him, with that kind of pitying disgust you feel for a crippled worm, dreading even to put him to the agony of saying "yes" or "no" to a question. But we heard how on Sundays, in the pulpits of country churches, he became a different man, changed; his voice then timbrous and moving and assured out of all proportion to his nature and his size.

"Now, imagine the waiting," Stevens said, "with that man knowing

what was going to happen before it had happened, knowing at last that the reason why nothing was happening, why that will had apparently gone into Judge Dukinfield's office and then dropped out of the world, out of the knowledge of man, was because he had forgotten something which he should not have forgotten. And that was that Judge Dukinfield also knew that Mr. Holland was not the man who beat that horse. He knew that Judge Dukinfield knew that the man who struck that horse with that stick so as to leave marks on its back was the man who killed Mr. Holland first and then hooked his foot in that stirrup and struck that horse with a stick to make it bolt. But the horse didn't bolt. The man knew beforehand that it would not; he had known for years that it would not, but he had forgotten that. Because while it was still a colt it had been beaten so severely once that ever since, even at the sight of a switch in the rider's hand, it would lie down on the ground, as Mr. Holland knew, and as all who were close to Mr. Holland's family knew. So it just lay down on top of Mr. Holland's body. But that was all right too, at first; that was just as well. That's what that man thought for the next week or so, lying in his bed at night and waiting, who had already waited fifteen years. Because even then, when it was too late and he realized that he had made a mistake, he had not even then remembered all that he should never have forgotten. Then he remembered that too, when it was too late, after the

body had been found and the marks of the stick on the horse seen and remarked and it was too late to remove them. They were probably gone from the horse by then, anyway. But there was only one tool he could use to remove them from men's minds. Imagine him then, his terror, his outrage, his feeling of having been tricked by something beyond retaliation: that furious desire to turn time back for just one minute, to undo or to complete when it is too late. Because the last thing which he remembered when it was too late was that Mr. Holland had bought that horse from Judge Dukinfield, the man who was sitting here at this table, passing on the validity of a will giving away two thousand acres of some of the best land in the county. And he waited, since he had but one tool that would remove those stick marks, and nothing happened. And nothing happened, and he knew why. And he waited as long as he dared, until he believed that there was more at stake than a few roods and squares of earth. So what else could he do but what he did?"

His voice had hardly ceased before Anselm was speaking. His voice was harsh, abrupt. "You're wrong," he said.

As one, we looked at him where he sat forward on the bench, in his muddy boots and his worn overalls, glaring at Stevens; even Virginius turned and looked at him for an instant. The cousin and the old Negro alone had not moved. They did not seem to be listening. "Where am I

wrong?" Stevens said.

But Anselm did not answer. He glared at Stevens. "Will Virginius get the place in spite of . . . of. . ."

"In spite of what?" Stevens said.

"Whether he . . . that. . ."

"You mean your father? Whether he died or was murdered?"

"Yes," Anselm said.

"Yes. You and Virge get the land whether the will stands up or not, provided, of course, that Virge divides with you if it does. But the man that killed your father wasn't certain of that and he didn't dare to ask. Because he didn't want that. He wanted Virge to have it all. That's why he wants that will to stand."

"You're wrong," Anselm said, in that harsh, sudden tone. "I killed him. But it wasn't because of that damned farm. Now bring on your sheriff."

And now it was Stevens who, gazing steadily at Anselm's furious face, said quietly: "And I say that you are wrong, Anse."

For some time after that we who watched and listened dwelt in anticlimax, in a dreamlike state in which we seemed to know beforehand what was going to happen, aware at the same time that it didn't matter because we should soon wake. It was as though we were outside of time, watching events from outside; still outside of and beyond time since that first instant when we looked again at Anselm as though we had never seen him before. There was a sound, a slow, sighing sound, not loud; maybe of

relief— something. Perhaps we were all thinking how Anse's nightmare must be really over at last; it was as though we too had rushed suddenly back to where he lay as a child in his bed and the mother who they said was partial to him, whose heritage had been lost to him, and even the very resting place of her tragic and long quiet dust outraged, coming in to look at him for a moment before going away again. Far back down time that was, straight though it be. And straight though that corridor was, the boy who had lain unawares in that bed had got lost in it, as we all do, must, ever shall; that boy was as dead as any other of his blood in that violated cedar grove, and the man at whom we looked, we looked at across the irrevocable chasm, with pity perhaps, but not with mercy. So it took the sense of Stevens' words about as long to penetrate to us as it did to Anse; he had to repeat himself, "Now I say that you are wrong, Anse."

"What?" Anse said. Then he moved. He did not get up, yet somehow he seemed to lunge suddenly, violently. "You're a liar. You —"

"You're wrong, Anse. You didn't kill your father. The man who killed your father was the man who could plan and conceive to kill that old man who sat here behind this table every day, day after day, until an old Negro would come in and wake him and tell him it was time to go home — a man who never did man, woman, or child aught but good as he believed that he and God saw it. It wasn't you that

killed your father. You demanded of him what you believed was yours, and when he refused to give it, you left, went away, never spoke to him again. You heard how he was mistreating the place but you held your peace, because the land was just 'that damned farm.' You held your peace until you heard how a crazy man was digging up the graves where your mother's flesh and blood and your own was buried. Then, and then only, you came to him, to remonstrate. But you were never a man to remonstrate, and he was never a man to listen to it. So you found him there, in the grove, with the shotgun. I don't even expect you paid much attention to the shotgun. I reckon you just took it away from him and whipped him with your bare hands and left him there beside the horse; maybe you thought that he was dead. Then somebody happened to pass there after you were gone and found him; maybe that someone had been there all the time, watching. Somebody that wanted him dead too; not in anger and outrage, but by calculation. For profit, by a will, maybe. So he came there and he found what you had left and he finished it: hooked your father's foot in that stirrup and tried to beat that horse into bolting to make it look well, forgetting in his haste what he should not have forgot. But it wasn't you. Because you went back home, and when you heard what had been found, you said nothing. Because you thought something at the time which you did not even say to yourself. And when

you heard what was in the will you believed that you knew. And you were glad then. Because you had lived alone until youth and wanting things were gone out of you; you just wanted to be quiet as you wanted your mother's dust to be quiet. And besides, what could land and position among men be to a man without citizenship, with a blemished name?"

We listened quietly while Stevens' voice died in that little room in which no air ever stirred, no draft ever blew because of its position, its natural lee beneath the courthouse wall.

"It wasn't you that killed your father or Judge Dukinfield either, Anse. Because if that man who killed your father had remembered in time that Judge Dukinfield once owned that horse, Judge Dukinfield would be alive to-day."

We breathed quietly, sitting about the table behind which Judge Dukinfield had been sitting when he looked up into the pistol. The table had not been disturbed. Upon it still lay the papers, the pens, the inkwell, the small, curiously chased brass box which his daughter had fetched him from Europe twelve years ago — for what purpose neither she nor the Judge knew, since it would have been suitable only for bath salts or tobacco, neither of which the Judge used — and which he had kept for a paper weight, that, too, superfluous where no draft ever blew. But he kept it there on the table, and all of us knew it, had watched him toy with it while he talked, opening the spring lid and

watching it snap viciously shut at the slightest touch.

When I look back on it now, I can see that the rest of it should not have taken as long as it did. It seems to me now that we must have known all the time; I still seem to feel that kind of disgust without mercy which after all does the office of pity, as when you watch a soft worm impaled on a pin, when you feel that retching revulsion — would even use your naked palm in place of nothing at all, thinking, "Go on. Mash it. Smear it. Get it over with." But that was not Stevens' plan. Because he had a plan, and we realized afterward that, since he could not convict the man, the man himself would have to. And it was unfair, the way he did it; later we told him so. ("Ah," he said. "But isn't justice always unfair? Isn't it always composed of injustice and luck and platitude in unequal parts?")

But anyway we could not see yet what he was getting at as he began to speak again in that tone — easy, anecdotal, his hand resting now on the brass box. But men are moved so much by preconceptions. It is not realities, circumstances, that astonish us; it is the concussion of what we should have known, if we had only not been so busy believing what we discovered later we had taken for the truth for no other reason than that we happened to be believing it at the moment. He was talking about smoking again, about how a man never really enjoys tobacco until he begins to believe that it is harmful to him,

and how non-smokers miss one of the greatest pleasures in life for a man of sensibility: the knowledge that he is succumbing to a vice which can injure himself alone.

"Do you smoke, Anse?" he said.

"No," Anse said.

"You don't either, do you, Virger?"

"No," Virginius said. "None of us ever did — father or Anse or me. We heired it, I reckon."

"A family trait," Stevens said. "Is it in your mother's family too? Is it in your branch, Granby?"

The cousin looked at Stevens, for less than a moment. Without moving he appeared to writhe slowly within his neat, shoddy suit. "No, sir. I never used it."

"Maybe because you are a preacher," Stevens said. The cousin didn't answer. He looked at Stevens again with his mild, still, hopelessly abashed face. "I've always smoked," Stevens said. "Ever since I finally recovered from being sick at it at the age of fourteen. That's a long time, long enough to have become finicky about tobacco. But most smokers are, despite the psychologists and the standardized tobacco. Or maybe it's just cigarettes that are standardized. Or maybe they are just standardized to laymen, non-smokers. Because I have noticed how non-smokers are apt to go off half cocked about tobacco, the same as the rest of us go off half cocked about what we do not ourselves use, are not familiar with, since man is led by his pre- (or mis-) conceptions. Because you take a man who sells

tobacco even though he does not use it himself, who watches customer after customer tear open the pack and light the cigarette just across the counter from him. You ask him if all tobacco smells alike, if he cannot distinguish one kind from another by the smell. Or maybe it's the shape and color of the package it comes in; because even the psychologists have not yet told us just where seeing stops and smelling begins, or hearing stops and seeing begins. Any lawyer can tell you that."

Again the Foreman checked him. We had listened quietly enough, but I think we all felt that to keep the murderer confused was one thing, but that we, the jury, were another. "You should have done all this investigating before you called us together," the Foreman said. "Even if this be evidence, what good will it do without the body of the murderer be apprehended? Conjecture is all well enough —"

"All right," Stevens said. "Let me conjecture a little more, and if I don't seem to progress any, you tell me so, and I'll stop my way and do yours. And I expect that at first you are going to call this taking a right smart of liberty even with conjecture. But we found Judge Dukinfield dead, shot between the eyes, in this chair behind this table. That's not conjecture. And Uncle Job was sitting all day long in that chair in the passage, where anyone who entered this room (unless he came down the private stair from the courtroom and climbed through the window) would have to

pass within three feet of him. And no man that we know of has passed Uncle Job in that chair in seventeen years. That's not conjecture."

"Then what is your conjecture?"

But Stevens was talking about tobacco again, about smoking. "I stopped in West's drugstore last week for some tobacco, and he told me about a man who was particular about his smoking also. While he was getting my tobacco from the case, he reached out a box of cigarettes and handed it to me. It was dusty, faded, like he had had it a long time, and he told me how a drummer had left **two** of them with him years ago. 'Ever smoke them?' he said. 'No,' I said. 'They must be city cigarettes.' Then he told me how he had sold the other package just that day. He said he was behind the counter, with the newspaper spread on it, sort of half reading the paper and half keeping the store while the clerk was gone to dinner. And he said he never heard or saw the man at all until he looked up and the man was just across the counter, so close that it made him jump. A smallish man in city clothes, West said, wanting a kind of cigarette that West had never heard of. 'I haven't got that kind,' West said. 'I don't carry them.' 'Why don't you carry them?' the man said. 'I have no sale for them,' West said. And he told about the man in his city clothes, with a face like a shaved wax doll, and eyes with a still way of looking and a voice with a still way of talking. Then West said he saw the man's eyes and he looked at his nos-

trils, and then he knew what was wrong. Because the man was full of dope right then. 'I don't have any calls for them,' West said. 'What am I trying to do now?' the man said. 'Trying to sell you flypaper?' Then the man bought the other package of cigarettes and went out. And West said that he was mad and he was sweating too, like he wanted to vomit, he said. He said to me, 'If I had some devilment I was scared to do myself, you know what I'd do? I'd give that fellow about ten dollars and I'd tell him where the devilment was and tell him not to never speak to me again. When he went out, I felt just exactly like that. Like I was going to be sick.'

Stevens looked about at us; he paused for a moment. We watched him. "He came here from somewhere in a car, a big roadster, that city man did. That city man that ran out of his own kind of tobacco." He paused again, and then he turned his head slowly and he looked at Virginius Holland. It seemed like a full minute that we watched them looking steadily at one another. "And a Negro told me that that big car was parked in Virginius Holland's barn the night before Judge Dukinfield was killed." And for another time we watched the two of them looking steadily at each other, with no change of expression on either face. Stevens spoke in a tone quiet, speculative, almost musing. "Someone tried to keep him from coming out here in that car, that big car that anyone who saw it once would

remember and recognize. Maybe that someone wanted to forbid him to come in it, threaten him. Only the man that Doctor West sold those cigarettes to wouldn't have stood for very much threatening."

"Meaning me, by 'someone,'" Virginius said. He did not move or turn away his steady stare from Stevens' face. But Anselm moved. He turned his head and he looked at his brother, once. It was quite quiet, yet when the cousin spoke we could not hear or understand him at once; he had spoken but one time since we entered the room and Stevens locked the door. His voice was faint; again and without moving he appeared to writhe faintly beneath his clothes. He spoke with that abashed faintness, that excruciating desire for effacement with which we were all familiar.

"That fellow you're speaking of, he come to see me," Dodge said. "Stopped to see me. He stopped at the house about dark that night and said he was hunting to buy up little-built horses to use for this — this game —"

"Polo?" Stevens said. The cousin had not looked at anyone while he spoke; it was as though he were speaking to his slowly moving hands upon his lap.

"Yes, sir. Virginius was there. We talked about horses. Then the next morning he took his car and went on. I never had anything that suited him. I don't know where he come from nor where he went."

"Or who else he came to see,"

Stevens said. "Or what else he came to do. You can't say that."

Dodge didn't answer. It was not necessary, and again he had fled behind the shape of his effacement like a small and weak wild creature into a hole.

"That's my conjecture," Stevens said.

And then we should have known. It was there to be seen, bald as a naked hand. We should have felt it — the someone in that room who felt what Stevens had called that horror, that outrage, that furious desire to turn time back for a second, to unsay, to undo. But maybe the someone had not felt it yet, had not yet felt the blow, the impact, as for a second or two a man may be unaware that he has been shot. Because now it was Virge that spoke, abruptly, harshly, "How are you going to prove that?"

"Prove what, Virge?" Stevens said. Again they looked at each other, quiet, hard, like two boxers. Not swordsmen, but boxers; or at least with pistols. "Who it was who hired that gorilla, that thug, down here from Memphis? I don't have to prove that. He told that. On the way back to Memphis he ran down a child at Battenburg (he was still full of dope; likely he had taken another shot of it when he finished his job here), and they caught him and locked him up and when the dope began to wear off he told where he had been, whom he had been to see, sitting in the cell in the jail there, jerking and snarling, after they had taken the pistol with

the silencer on it away from him."

"Ah," Virginius said. "That's nice. So all you've got to do is to prove that he was in this room that day. And how will you do that? Give that old Negro another dollar and let him remember again?"

But Stevens did not appear to be listening. He stood at the end of the table, between the two groups, and while he talked now he held the brass box in his hand, turning it, looking at it, talking in that easy, musing tone. "You all know the peculiar attribute which this room has. How no draft ever blows in it. How when there has been smoking here on a Saturday, say, the smoke will still be here on Monday morning when Uncle Job opens the door, lying against the baseboard there like a dog asleep, kind of. You've all seen that."

We were sitting a little forward now, like Anse, watching Stevens.

"Yes," the Foreman said. "We've seen that."

"Yes," Stevens said, still as though he were not listening, turning the closed box this way and that in his hand. "You asked me for my conjecture. Here it is. But it will take a conjecturing man to do it — a man who could walk up to a merchant standing behind his counter, reading a newspaper with one eye and the other eye on the door for customers, before the merchant knew he was there. A city man, who insisted on city cigarettes. So this man left that store and crossed to the courthouse and entered and went on upstairs, as anyone might

have done. Perhaps a dozen men saw him; perhaps twice that many did not look at him at all, since there are two places where a man does not look at faces: in the sanctuary of civil law, and in public lavatories. So he entered the courtroom and came down the private stair and into the passage, and saw Uncle Job asleep in his chair. So maybe he followed the passage, and climbed through the window behind Judge Dukinfield's back. Or maybe he walked right past Uncle Job, coming up from behind, you see. And to pass within eight feet of a man asleep in a chair would not be very hard for a man who could walk up to a merchant leaning on the counter of his own store. Perhaps he even lighted the cigarette from the pack that West had sold him before even Judge Dukinfield knew that he was in the room. Or perhaps the Judge was asleep in his chair, as he sometimes was. So perhaps the man stood there and finished the cigarette and watched the smoke pour slowly across the table and bank up against the wall, thinking about the easy money, the easy hicks, before he even drew the pistol. And it made less noise than the striking of the match which lighted the cigarette, since he had guarded so against noise that he forgot about silence. And then he went back as he came, and the dozen men and the two dozen saw him and did not see him, and at five that afternoon Uncle Job came in to wake the Judge and tell him it was time to go home. Isn't that right, Uncle Job?"

The old Negro looked up. "I looked

after him, like I promised Mistis," he said. "And I worried with him, like I promised Mistis I would. And I come in here and I thought at first he was asleep, like he sometimes —"

"Wait," Stevens said. "You came in and you saw him in the chair, as always, and you noticed the smoke against the wall behind the table as you crossed the floor. Wasn't that what you told me?"

Sitting in his mended chair, the old Negro began to cry. He looked like an old monkey, weakly crying black tears, brushing at his face with the back of a gnarled hand that shook with age, with something. "I come in here many's the time in the morning, to clean up. It would be laying there, that smoke, and him that never smoked a lick in his life coming in and sniffing with that high nose of hisn and saying, 'Well, Job, we sholy smoked out that corpus juris coon last night.'"

"No," Stevens said. "Tell about how the smoke was there behind that table that afternoon when you came to wake him to go home, when there hadn't anybody passed you all that day except Mr. Virge Holland yonder. And Mr. Virge don't smoke, and the Judge didn't smoke. But that smoke was there. Tell what you told me."

"It was there. And I thought that he was asleep like always, and I went to wake him up —"

"And this little box was sitting on the edge of the table where he had been handling it while he talked to Mr. Virge, and when you reached

your hand to wake him —”

“Yes, sir. It jumped off the table and I thought he was asleep —”

“The box jumped off the table. And it made a noise and you wondered why that didn’t wake the Judge, and you looked down at where the box was lying on the floor in the smoke, with the lid open, and you thought that it was broken. And so you reached your hand down to see, because the Judge liked it because Miss Emma had brought it back to him from across the water, even if he didn’t need it for a paper weight in his office. So you closed the lid and set it on the table again. And then you found that the Judge was more than asleep.”

He ceased. We breathed quietly, hearing ourselves breathe. Stevens seemed to watch his hand as it turned the box slowly this way and that. He had turned a little from the table in talking with the old negro, so that now he faced the bench rather than the jury, the table. “Uncle Job calls this a gold box. Which is as good a name as any. Better than most. Because all metal is about the same; it just happens that some folks want one kind more than another. But it all has certain general attributes, likenesses. One of them is, that whatever is shut up in a metal box will stay in it unchanged for a longer time than in a wooden or paper box. You can shut up smoke, for instance, in a metal box with a tight lid like this one, and even a week later it will still be there. And not only that, a chemist or a smoker or tobacco seller like Doctor West can tell what made

the smoke, what kind of tobacco, particularly if it happens to be a strange brand, a kind not sold in Jefferson, and of which he just happened to have two packs and remembered who he sold one of them to.”

We did not move. We just sat there and heard the man’s urgent stumbling feet on the floor, then we saw him strike the box from Stevens’ hand. But we were not particularly watching him, even then. Like him, we watched the box bounce into two pieces as the lid snapped off, and emit a fading vapor which dissolved sluggishly away. As one we leaned across the table and looked down upon the sandy and hopeless mediocrity of Granby Dodge’s head as he knelt on the floor and flapped at the fading smoke with his hands.

“But I still don’t . . .” Virginius said. We were outside now, in the courthouse yard, the five of us, blinking a little at one another as though we had just come out of a cave.

“You’ve got a will, haven’t you?” Stevens said. Then Virginius stopped perfectly still, looking at Stevens.

“Oh,” he said at last.

“One of those natural mutual deed-of-trust wills that any two business partners might execute,” Stevens said. “You and Granby each the other’s beneficiary and executor, for mutual protection of mutual holdings. That’s natural. Likely Granby was the one who suggested it first, by telling you how he had made you his heir. So you’d better tear it up, yours,

your copy. Make Anse your heir, if you have to have a will."

"He won't need to wait for that," Virginius said. "Half of that land is his."

"You just treat it right, as he knows you will," Stevens said. "Anse don't need any land."

"Yes," Virginius said. He looked away. "But I wish. . . ."

"You just treat it right. He knows you'll do that."

"Yes," Virginius said. He looked at Stevens again. "Well, I reckon I . . . we both owe you. . . ."

"More than you think," Stevens said. He spoke quite soberly. "Or to that horse. A week after your father died, Granby bought enough rat poison to kill three elephants, West told me. But after he remembered what he had forgotten about that horse, he was afraid to kill his rats before that will was settled. Because he is a man both shrewd and ignorant at the same time: a dangerous combination. Ignorant enough to believe that the law is something like dynamite; the slave of whoever puts his hand to it first, and even then a dangerous slave; and just shrewd enough to believe that people avail themselves of it, resort to it, only for personal ends. I found that out when he sent a Negro to see me one day last summer, to find out if the way in which a man died could affect the probaton of his will. And I knew who had sent the Negro to me, and I knew that whatever information the Negro took back to the man who sent him, that man

had already made up his mind to disbelieve it, since I was a servant of the slave, the dynamite. So if that had been a normal horse, or Granby had remembered in time, you would be underground now. Granby might not be any better off than he is, but you would be dead."

"Oh," Virginius said, quietly, soberly. "I reckon I'm obliged."

"Yes," Stevens said. "You've incurred a right smart of obligation. You owe Granby something." Virginius looked at him. "You owe him for those taxes he has been paying every year now for fifteen years."

"Oh," Virginius said. "Yes. I thought that father. . . . Every November, about, Granby would borrow money from me, not much, and not ever the same amount. To buy stock with, he said. He paid some of it back. But he still owes me . . . no. I owe him now." He was quite grave, quite sober. "When a man starts doing wrong, it's not what he does; it's what he leaves."

"But it's what he does that people will have to hurt him for, the outsiders. Because the folks that'll be hurt by what he leaves won't hurt him. So it's a good thing for the rest of us that what he does takes him out of their hands. I have taken him out of your hands now, Virge, blood or no blood."

"I understand," Virginius said. "I wouldn't anyway. . . ." Then suddenly he looked at Stevens. "Gavin," he said.

"What?" Stevens said.

Virginius watched him. "You talked

a right smart in yonder about chemistry and such, about that smoke. I reckon I believed some of it and I reckon I didn't believe some of it. And I reckon if I told you which I believed and didn't believe, you'd laugh at me." His face was quite sober. Stevens' face was quite grave too. Yet there was something in Stevens' eyes, his glance; something quick and eager; not ridiculing, either. "That was a week ago. If you had opened that box to see if that smoke was still in there, it would have got out. And if there hadn't been any smoke in that box,

Granby wouldn't have given himself away. And that was a week ago. How did you know there was going to be any smoke in that box?"

"I didn't," Stevens said. He said it quickly, brightly, cheerfully, almost happily, almost beaming. "I didn't. I waited as long as I could before I put the smoke in there. Just before you all came into the room, I filled that box full of pipe smoke and shut it up. Bût I didn't know. I was a lot scarerder than Granby Dodge. But it was all right. That smoke stayed in that box almost an hour."



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THE LONG WORM

by STUART PALMER

FUNNY THING," observed the Inspector, "but I was reading somewhere only the other day that one of those turkey-buzzards out in Texas can smell a dead body ten miles away." He looked up from his desk. "Oh, hello Hildegard! What brings you here?"

There was an indignant sniff from his self-invited visitor, a maiden schoolteacher whose general appearance suggested an up-ended broom among whose straws exotic flowers had bloomed. Miss Hildegard Withers came immediately to the point. "It's a new murder case, then?"

"As if you didn't know!"

"Oscar, I swear that I only dropped in to ask you to buy a ticket to our school pageant. But if, in the words of the master, *'the game is afoot. . .'*"

Her head cocked hopefully. "Do you need any help?"

He was amused. "This time, dear lady, the regular police have landed and have the situation well in hand. It's all over but the shouting. However, there are a couple of angles that might interest the amateur criminologist. You see, we've run into another Lizzie Borden case. Only this time no one's going to get away with it, because this isn't Fall River in the Gay Nineties, and all the police in town aren't conveniently off on a clambake."

"Do go on!" Miss Withers sat down expectantly. "I'm all ears!"

With some difficulty the Inspector withheld himself from making the obvious wisecrack. "You remember the old jingle, about how Lizzie

Borden took an axe —?"

"And gave her father forty whacks, and when she saw what she had done she gave her mother forty-one?"

"Right. Well, our modern Lizzie, whose name happens to be Janet Wayne, didn't use an axe, she gave it to her father and stepmother with a pistol, and then tried to make it look like something else. She's a cold sort of fish —"

"Wait a minute, Oscar! On my way in here just now I saw a girl being rushed down the hall, handcuffed to one of your plainclothesmen. She was a tall, thin girl — all eyes and mouth and muddy-blonde hair. Could that have been Janet?"

"That was her. But before you go getting sympathetic over the wench, have a look at her handiwork." He picked up some flashbulb photos, still moist and curling, and handed them over. The first showed the body of a spare, handsome, slightly bald man sprawled over a desk on which lay, in addition to the usual leather-bordered blotter and ornate onyx pen set, an automatic pistol. "Milo Wayne got it right through the wishbone, about half an inch from the heart. It was nice shooting."

The next picture was a reverse angle, including the corner of the desk and pointing down to the carpet where lay the body of a lush, raven-haired girl tumbled into an awkward heap. "Dear me," observed the schoolteacher thoughtfully, "I didn't think anybody actually wore trans-

parent negligées like that, except in the pin-up drawings."

"She was shot in the mouth, and died instantly," Inspector Piper went on. "It all happened in the library of the Wayne apartment up at the Cherrywood, on upper Fifth. We can set the time within a minute or two, because the people in the apartment downstairs heard what they later realized must have been the shots. That was at six-thirty, just as they were going out for dinner. They admit remarking about it, but you know how New Yorkers like to mind their own business. They put it down to a slamming door or a backfire or something. But anyway, it wasn't until after a quarter of seven that Janet Wayne phoned the switchboard downstairs and asked to have the police called."

"The point being — what did the girl do during those fifteen minutes?" Miss Withers frowned. "The original Lizzie said that she had been out in the haymow, eating pears and looking for some sinkers to put on a fishing line that she didn't even possess."

"Uh huh. And the Wayne girl's story isn't much better. I mean the latest of her umpteen different stories. She claims that she must have fainted at the sound of the shots, and didn't come to for awhile. That sounds a little queer for a normal healthy modern American girl in her middle twenties. From all the evidence she was alone in the apartment with the two victims from around five o'clock on. That's the time her boy-friend

delivered her at the door. He went right back down in the elevator, the operator says, so he's out of the picture."

"And the police theory is that Janet Wayne made an orphan out of herself. I see. And with what motive, pray?"

"She was miffed. Jealous of a younger, prettier stepmother who could wind old Milo Wayne around her little finger. . . ."

Miss Withers started. "Oh, I think I must have read something in the Sunday supplements some time ago. Wasn't the stepmother Ilya Pagano the singer? I heard her do *Carmen*, or try to, last season."

"That's her." Piper reached for a handful of news clippings which littered his desk. "Here's one headed 'World's Most Forgiving Husband Holds Out Open Arms Again'. That was after Ilya eloped with her voice coach, and then wired frantically from Mexico City for funds to come home on. There seem to have been several other incidents along that line — Milo Wayne had to cover a lot of bad checks that Ilya had passed in Miami gambling houses, he had to square a nasty hit-and-run case upstate, and once Ilya even announced that she was going to divorce him and marry a Eurasian poet who wanted to start a new religious cult on her alimony. She made a habit of getting into jams and then running back to hubby to have him kiss it and make it well. No matter what she did, Milo Wayne always took her back. His

arteries were hardening, but his heart was soft — for his wife, anyway."

Miss Withers looked wistful. "I wonder what it is that those Latin women have?"

"A lot of crust and no conscience, mostly. Though she must have been one of the three or four most beautiful women in New York. Anyway, you can see how the daughter felt, a big plain girl who had to sit back and watch her father make an old fool of himself, over and over again. The way we figure it, Janet came home this afternoon and had an argument with her father about money — probably wanted a bigger allowance or something. Undoubtedly she knew that Ilya was digging the old man for all he had. He was clipped in the market slump last September, as we've found out, so he no doubt refused her. So the girl flew off the handle, ran and got the gun that everybody knew he kept in his bedroom, and let him have it.

"So then Ilya, who'd been taking a beauty sleep in her own bedroom, heard the shot and came rushing to see what was the matter. Janet probably ducked down behind the desk and then when her stepmother was close enough she stood up and let her have a slug right in the face. Then she wiped off the gun and put it into her father's hand so it would have his prints and look like murder and suicide."

"But what about your famous nitrate test?"

The Inspector hesitated. "Just be-

tween you and me, the paraffin test for proving whether or not anybody has fired a gun recently is vastly over-rated. With a revolver and old-fashioned black powder, it's a cinch. But this was a .38 automatic, using modern smokeless ammo. Anyway, it's not the ballistics evidence that pays off in this case, it's the handwriting. You see, Janet couldn't let well enough alone. She had to go and write a suicide note, in a rough copy of her father's handwriting, and put it on the desk. That was what she was doing in that fatal fifteen minutes. It was a little too scrawled and rough to pass muster, but it went — "*Kitten, I just can't go on any longer,*" and it's signed '*Milo Wayne*'. The catch to that is that Wayne called his wife 'kitten' and nobody else, so if he was going to bump her off and then kill himself he certainly wouldn't have addressed the note to her."

Miss Withers had to agree with that. "And the rest of Janet's story?"

"Oh, she claims that when she came in she went directly to her bedroom, which is a small one at the far end of the apartment, to fix up her face. After a while she heard angry voices and a shot, and the rest is all a blur until she woke up, went to the library, and found the bodies."

"But what about the servants?"

"Today's Thursday, and the colored couple were both up at a wedding on 125th Street. No, Janet was absolutely alone with her victims. She hasn't even tried to claim that she saw some dark, foreign-looking intruder rush

out of the place. She —" He turned toward the doorway. "Yes, sergeant?"

"There's a Professor Liggett out here wants to see you about the Wayne case."

Inspector Piper hesitated. "Give him the brusheroo."

"But he says he's Janet Wayne's boy-friend."

"Okay. I'll brush him off personally."

In a moment there stalked into the room a very tall, somewhat underfed young man, his pale gray eyes behind their thick lenses looking very angry indeed. "Am I to understand that you're in charge down here?" he demanded of the Inspector.

"Of the Homicide Bureau, yes."

"Then I want to tell you that I'm going to take immediate action in this matter. Janet Wayne is innocent until proved guilty, and you can't do this to her!"

"Young man," observed the Inspector pleasantly but firmly, "you ought to learn that it never pays to tell a cop he can't do anything, especially when he's doing it. Now if you have any further statement to make which will help us on this case, speak up. Otherwise, get out."

Professor Liggett took a deep breath. "I —" he began.

"Are you engaged to Miss Wayne?"

"Yes, but —"

"You were with her this afternoon until five o'clock?"

Liggett nodded. "We were walking, in Central Park. Is there any law against that?"

"Not that I know of," the Inspector told him dryly. "Unless you walked on the grass, and there isn't much of that at this time of year."

"Do you and your young lady usually choose a raw, sleety November afternoon for a stroll?" Miss Withers queried.

Professor Liggett looked annoyed and sullen, even after the Inspector had belatedly introduced them. He jammed both fists into the pockets of his well-worn topcoat and glared belligerently. "We wanted to be alone. We had things to talk about."

"You two have been engaged for some time?" Miss Withers asked.

"Too long!"

"Ah, me. Young lovers' quarrels!" sighed the schoolteacher. "You must have quarrelled, because otherwise you would have gone on and dined together instead of bringing the girl home at five. What was the matter, wouldn't Janet consent to marry you?"

"Nothing of the sort!" exploded the professor. "I don't see that it is any of your business, but Janet wanted to elope and I don't like to do things that way. Besides, I haven't a dime in the world except a small salary from the Foundation, and I'm putting most of that into the work of the committee to internationalize atomic research. I was one of the physicists at Oak Ridge, and the mere existence of the Frankenstein monster that we created there makes everything — but I won't go into that. I came here to insist that you

tell me why you're holding Janet, and on what charges?"

"Janet Wayne," said the Inspector slowly, "is in technical custody as a material witness in the murder of her father and stepmother. No formal charges have as yet been made —"

"Then I demand that you either arrest her or turn her loose!"

"You demand a lot," Piper told him, not at all unpleasantly. "What you are asking is that instead of merely holding the girl while we investigate, we officially arrest her, with all the fuss that means. We'll have to turn loose on her the newspapers with their sob-sisters and photographers, we'll have to let all the high-priced criminal lawyers start a free-for-all to see who'll represent her in court. Is that what you want?"

Professor Liggett, suddenly looking younger and less sure of himself, started to shake his head. "I didn't —"

"I didn't really think you did." Piper grinned. "Good night, young man." There was a moment of silence, and then Professor Liggett turned and went out of the room.

"Very clever," observed Miss Hildegard Withers.

"Oh, it was just knowing how to handle him, that's all."

"I didn't mean that. I was referring to the manner in which the professor just possibly handled you. Without seeming to do so, he has presented you with enough evidence to cinch the case against the girl. They spent the afternoon walking in Central Park, ignoring the weather, with

Janet insisting on matrimony and with her young man refusing to go ahead without money. So they disagreed, and her first thought on arriving home was to fix her face, so she must have been crying. It was a logical time for her to make an appeal to her father, and if he did refuse her, then she had a better motive than the original Lizzie. But tell me, Oscar, what happens next? Do you take the girl into the back room and give her a third degree, with lights blazing into her eyes, and all your loudest detectives shouting at her until she breaks down and confesses?"

The Inspector testily crumpled up a perfectly good perfecto into his ashtray. "I wish you'd once and for all get it out of your head that we're a bunch of roughnecks down here at Centre Street! We know the Wayne girl is guilty, and we can get a confession out of her without any third degree at all. As a matter of fact —" he paused, and then reached for the phone. "You can listen to this. Hello? Give me Captain Forrest. Johnny? How's the prisoner? I thought she'd be. Well, here's the program. Have a policewoman strip off all the rest of her personal property, her rings, shoes, hairpins and all that, and put her into jail clothes. Make sure the uniform doesn't fit her. . . ."

"But Oscar," began Miss Withers. "I don't —"

He waved her into silence. "Then, Johnny, take her and give her the whole works, the process. Physical exam, psychiatric once-over, photo-

graphing, and fingerprinting, with a good long tedious wait at each stage. Then finally send her over to the Woman's Detention Building and dump her into the bull-pen. That's it. Okay."

Then he hung up, turning triumphantly toward his ancient friend and sparring-partner, who was shaking her head. "Cruel and unusual punishment, if I ever saw it!" she complained.

"So's murder cruel and unusual. But don't worry. We won't leave Janet in the bull-pen, along with the night's roundup of floozies, alcoholics, and shoplifters, for more'n an hour or two. Then as a special favor we'll see that she's taken out of the big cell and doubled up with one of the quiet, older women prisoners — some motherly old girl who's up for a minor offense. By that time little Janet's nerves will be jumping so that she can't help pouring out her soul, especially to somebody who's also outside the pale. Only of course her cellmate —"

Miss Withers began to understand. "Her cellmate will actually be a policewoman?"

"Right. And let me tell you there'd have been a different last chapter to the story of the original Lizzie Borden if she'd got the same kind of psychological working over instead of being handled with kid gloves."

Miss Withers said that she wasn't inclined to argue about that, or about the guilt of Janet Wayne. "If she didn't do it, who did? I imagine that

the end justifies the means. But, Oscar, there is just one thing wrong with your little scheme. It won't work!"

"Won't it, now? I bet you —"

"Oscar, I've seen your police-women. I doubt very much if any one of them has the histrionic ability to play the part of a member of the criminal classes. And as far as the girl's unbending her heart to any of them — they're just about as motherly as a cement sidewalk."

The little Irishman took on a stubborn expression. "You're always complaining that the police department uses hide-bound methods, and then when I get a really good idea —"

She beamed. "It is a good idea, Oscar. Except about the police-woman. But do you know, I just had an inspiration! Suppose —"

The cell into which a laconic wardress shoved unhappy Janet Wayne, sometime after midnight, was at the end of the row, so that the screams and hysterical laughter from the female alcoholics in the bull-pen echoed only faintly. The barred door clanged shut, and the girl hesitated for a moment and then tottered forward and flung herself down on one of the room's two iron cots.

The woman who had been drowsing on the other bed suddenly sat up and pushed a lock of frowsy pinkish hair back from her forehead. She was well past middle-age, and in the semi-darkness her eyes were the only part of her that seemed young and alive and

real. "Well!" she wheezed hoarsely in welcome. "As I live and breathe! If I'd knowed you was coming I would of baked a cake."

There was no answer from the girl. "Now buck up, dearie. The bulls been stiff-arming you for a while? Come on, where's the old Moxie? Here, have one of my coffin-nails."

Janet Wayne looked up and saw that she was being offered a crumpled pack of cigarettes. She shook her tousled head. "My name's Martha," the older woman continued cheerily, as she set fire to her own cigarette, inhaled deeply, and then gestured with the burning tip. "I betcha you've read about me in the fact-crime magazines? Cyanide Martha, they calls me. Quite a monicker, ain't it? You're sure lucky to be tossed in with me, dearie, because I can wisen you up to all the angles. Go on, have a fag. I can get more. I can get most anything from the trusties in this joint — I been in often enough to know 'em all."

Ten minutes later, in spite of herself, the girl was smoking one of the proffered cigarettes, drawing so hard that the glowing circle of fire moved perceptibly toward her pale lips. She smoked and listened. After awhile she even accepted a meager gulp from the bottle of raw red bourbon which her cellmate produced from beneath the hard mattress. "Go on, drink hearty," urged the older woman. "You don't need to worry about there being any cyanide in that panther-sweat, it's hundred-proof."

Janet lay there, in the scratchy and ill-fitting jail uniform, listening to the interminable story of Cyanide Martha, who in her many encounters with the masculine sex seemed to have come off second-best every time. "The whole lot of 'em should be stepped on and squashed," she insisted. "Like you'd step on a spider. There's not a woman in here who isn't in trouble because some grifter took a powder and left her holding the bag. No woman ever got into a jam except through a man. Take back in Bible times. Take Eve —"

"Eve?" Janet repeated blankly.

"Sure, girlie. It was a man-snake, wasn't it, that passed her the apple? And I'll bet my second-best girdle that it was something in a pair of pants that drove you to doing whatever got you tossed into the clink-crool"

Janet didn't rise to that, and the amiable harridan cocked her head. "You don't need to tell me, I'm wise to them. Boy-friend or ball-and-chain?" Still there was silence. "Then maybe it was your brother, or even your old man. My pop was a heller, but luckily he drank himself to death years ago. . . ."

"Why don't you sign off?" the girl finally interrupted, in a dull voice. "That isn't true about men. When a man does something terrible, it's almost always the fault of a woman. Why, I —" She broke off, relapsing into a stony silence.

"You're just a punk kid," Cyanide Martha told her, holding the cig-

arette stiffly at arm's length and choking a little. "Wait until you've batted around as long as I have, you'll be smartened up to the lowdown on men. I'll never forget something that happened in Frisco when I was about your age. It was when Little Hymie, my heartthrob was tied up with the MacGillicuddy mob —"

Janet Wayne listened politely to the rest of the story, which was full of machine guns, stool pigeons, and fast black sedans. From time to time she nodded encouragingly, but she did not speak. In the semi-darkness the older woman did not notice the odd expression which had become fixed on the girl's pale, drawn face. Finally the story came to its gory end. Janet stood up suddenly and went over to rattle a tin cup against the grating. With surprising promptness the wardress stalked up to see what was the matter.

"If it isn't too much trouble," the girl said, "I'd like to go back to the bull-pen. It's so much quieter there."

Her cellmate rose up indignantly. "What a way to talk!"

"Please save it," Janet said quietly. "Your impersonation is as synthetic as — as your hair." She turned back to the patient wardress. "How about it?"

"Well!" The older woman came toward the door. "Perhaps I should be the one to go!"

That was okay with Janet. "I'd like some sleep," she said. "And you can tell that Inspector —"

A few minutes later Cyanide

Martha, née Hildegard Withers, came down the hall a free though very unhappy woman. The wardress said "Your stuff's in the office, if you want to change back."

The schoolteacher most emphatically said. "And by the way," she pleaded, "is it absolutely necessary that the Inspector hear all the details of this little fiasco? Can't you just report that the scheme failed?"

The wardress disinterestedly said that it wasn't her job to make reports anyway, and that Miss Withers could tell the Inspector anything she wanted to. This promise was the only bright spot on the schoolteacher's otherwise clouded horizon. Perhaps, she admitted to herself, she had laid it on a bit thick. Once more correctly attired and with the awful pink wig disposed of, she hastened out of the grim and ominous confines and headed homeward. She did not look forward with any great amount of pleasure to the interview which she must eventually have with Inspector Oscar Piper, but if only he was in a good mood tomorrow morning —

Her luck, it seemed, was in after all. When early next morning she appeared at Centre Street, feeling a little like a naughty fifth-grader sent up to the principal's office for punishment, she heard hearty masculine laughter through the door of the Inspector's inner office. Things — and that meant the Wayne case — must be progressing to his satisfaction, in spite of everything. She marched in,

a little more confident now, through the deserted reception room, and opened the inner door after the briefest of knocks.

There was a circle of nearly a dozen detectives and uniformed men around Piper's desk, and they seemed to be having the time of their lives. They were, to the man, breathless and shaking with laughter, which died swiftly away to silence as they saw who it was that stood in the doorway.

"Haven't the police of our city anything better than to stand around and tell smoking-room stories?" she demanded primly.

But the Inspector beckoned to her genially. "Come in, Hildegard, come in. Just the girl I wanted to see. How'd you make out last night? Everything go okay?"

She hesitated. "It was only so-so," she admitted. "But I — I won't say it was entirely wasted. However, Oscar, if you don't mind I'd like to make my report to you in private."

"Sure thing." He waved his hand. "Okay, boys, you can go back to work." The policemen obediently trooped out of the room, trying to look as grave and serious as possible, though one or two of the younger officers were still sniggering and one fat sergeant hugged his stomach as if he had cramps.

Inspector Piper waited until the door had closed behind them. "Well, Hildegard? Did you find Janet a tough nut to crack? Lucky we sent you instead of one of those cement-faced policewomen, huh?"

"Well, Oscar," she began. "I—"

And then she saw that the Inspector wasn't listening. He had leaned over toward a complicated device, resembling a portable sewing machine, which stood on his desk, still in its carrying case. He pressed a button, and a wire began to run between two rollers, with a muffled whirring sound. Suddenly the room was filled with the tinny, highly amplified sound of a voice, and with a horrible sinking feeling beneath her corset stays Miss Withers realized whose voice it was. ". . . Cyanide Martha, they call me. Quite a moniker, ain't it? You're sure lucky to be tossed in with me, dearie. . . ."

"Oscar Piper!" the schoolteacher cried. "Of all the low, despicable tricks, to put a microphone in that cell last night!"

"Something just out," the Inspector told her over his shoulder, with a boyish pride. "It makes a sound recording on a wire. Listen!"

He started the devilish thing up again. ". . . there's not a woman in here who isn't in trouble because some grifter took a powder and left her holding the bag. . . ."

"Turn it off, Oscar!"

But the wire ran through again, slowed up as the instrument blared forth with ". . . I'll never forget something that happened out in Frisco when I was about your age. It was when Little Hymie, my heart-throb, was tied up with the Mac-Gillicuddy mob. . . ." The Inspector's head was buried in his arms, and

he made sounds indicating that he was either choking to death or laying an egg. The schoolteacher finally managed to find a cord leading from the playback machine to a wall socket, and ripped it out. Then she sat grimly down upon the edge of a chair, waiting in an unaccustomed silence.

It took some time for the Inspector to regain full control of himself. "Hildegard, you win a cigar for that performance. No, you smoke coffin-nails, don't you?" He gulped again. "Tell me, just between ourselves, where did you pick up all that stuff about Little Hymie and the Frisco mob, and where did you get the idea that you were talking in the slang of the rackets?"

She hesitated. "I—well, Oscar, sometimes I take magazines and books away from my pupils, when I catch them hidden behind their geography books," she confessed. "It has occurred to me that perhaps they were a little dated."

Inspector Oscar Piper shook his head slowly and wonderingly. "Today," he said, "makes up for a lot of things. It sort of evens up the score. That's why I just couldn't resist letting some of the boys come in and listen to the recording. You've needled most of us at one time or another, but now the shoe is on the other foot —"

"Perhaps it is." Miss Withers' unnatural meekness disappeared. "And the other foot is in your mouth! Because while you and your cohorts

were laughing yourselves sick over my well-meant mistakes of last evening, *I solved the Wayne murders!*"

The Inspector was hardly listening. "I know, Hildegarde. Your dander is up. But don't overplay your hand. That girl didn't confess a thing to you, she didn't even tell you anything!"

"She told me — indirectly — that she is too smart to commit a pair of murders such as those! Anyway, the trouble with the police mind is that it always tries to put two and two together to make four, when it can just as easily make twenty-two. The solution of this mystery doesn't depend on ballistics or handwriting or clues or alibis this time, it is purely a question of psychology — or human nature, if you like that better. If you, or any one of your officers, had thought to ask why Ilya Wayne was dressed as she was when she died —"

"I told you. We figured she'd been taking a nap, until she was wakened by the shot."

"Napping, in a sixty-dollar black lace *négligée*? No, Oscar. It's all quite clear to me, but I can't convince you here. If it were only possible for us to reenact the crime up in the Wayne library, and to have Janet there —"

The Inspector was faintly remorseful. "I guess it would be possible," he admitted. "As a matter of fact, we're taking Janet Wayne up there for some routine spot questioning a little later on. I guess after all the razzing you've taken this morning

it'd only be fair to let you tag along. Not that I think you're barking up the right tree this time. . . ."

"Thank you anyway. And could Professor Liggett be there?"

The Inspector smiled. "Going romantic on us again? You think you can prove the girl's innocence and then stand back and watch the happy fadeout clinch, like in the movies?"

"Something like that," admitted Miss Withers. "Oscar, if I'm wrong this time, I'll — I'll eat my hat."

He observed that it looked like a fruit salad anyway. "We set the time for eleven-thirty," he said. "Want to ride up with me and the Wayne girl in the official car?"

Miss Withers thought it over and decided that she would just as soon take the subway, especially since she had an errand or two to do anyway. As the Inspector turned to the telephone and began to give orders, she quietly filched a copy of Janet Wayne's signed statement from his desk, and slipped away.

She appeared at the Cherrywood Apartments ten minutes late and somewhat flustered, to find that the inquisition was already under way. Gathered in the library of the Wayne apartment — from which, to everyone's relief, the bodies had been removed — were Janet Wayne, Professor Liggett, and half a dozen detectives, most of whom Miss Withers had already met that morning in the Inspector's office.

"I'm so sorry that I'm late!" cried the schoolteacher. "It was good of

you to wait for me." She nodded pleasantly to Janet, who looked at her blankly and then flickered a feeble smile. The girl had been permitted to resume her own clothes for the occasion, but her face was ghastly pale.

"Relax, Hildegard," the Inspector said shortly. "Nobody waited for you. It's Miss Wayne's statement. It got mislaid and we're waiting while somebody from my office runs up here with another copy."

"Oh, dear!" cried Miss Withers, reaching into her capacious handbag. "Is this it?"

The Inspector took the sheets of closely-typed paper, with a patient sigh. "Your turn'll come later," he said. "In case you have any pertinent suggestions. Now we're going to try to reenact the crime."

"It's too bad, isn't it, that you don't have the right actors?" the schoolteacher murmured. But Piper, who had stripped down to his shirt sleeves for action, was sitting at the desk facing Janet Wayne almost as her dead father had faced her.

"All right," he was saying. "We'll go back to your story. Why was it that when you came back from your walk in the park you went directly to your room without speaking to your father and stepmother?"

"They were talking in here," the girl said. "I presumed it was their business. Besides, I wanted to be alone. I didn't want them to know I'd been crying."

The Inspector nodded. "I see. Now in your statement here you say —"

The schoolteacher was so bored with this line of questioning that she withdrew into the background. A few minutes later Dr. Bream, the assistant medical examiner assigned to the case, walked in, and she drew him aside and annoyed him with hypothetical questions in a low but distinctly audible whisper.

"The woman died instantly," he told her. "Milo Wayne might have lived a few minutes, but he never moved from his chair."

The Inspector impatiently shushed them. "Now, Miss Wayne, it says here in your statement that you were lying down in your room when you heard a shot or loud noise and came running toward the library. You went in and found your father and stepmother both dead —"

Janet Wayne looked more gray and ghastly than ever. "I — I — did I say that?"

"You did!" The Inspector read over the paragraph, with a voice which was beginning to lose its note of certainty. "Wait a minute! This is a totally new statement! It has nothing in it about your fainting at all. I never read this." He ruffled the pages. "It isn't even signed!"

There was a huddle between Captain Forrest, officially in charge of the investigation, and the Inspector, who didn't like the way things were going, and said so. They were interrupted by the sudden return of Miss Hildegard Withers, who had absented herself for some minutes.

"Oh, *that* statement!" she put in.

"It's one I composed this morning. All Janet has to do is to sign it, and the case is closed!"

"Of all the nerve!" the Inspector exploded.

"Relax, Oscar. That statement was never dictated by Miss Wayne, but it's the truth. Miss Wayne hasn't felt free to give a full statement to anybody, because she naturally is reluctant to brand her own father as a murderer!"

The room was suddenly hushed, so that the sounds of Fifth Avenue traffic far below came loud and clear. Janet spoke first. "It isn't true!" she said, but she was breaking and they all knew it.

Miss Withers nodded pleasantly. "Milo Wayne was *not* the murderer, but his daughter *thought* he was. She heard a shot, and rushed in here to find them both dead. But the shot she heard was the second shot — which was fifteen minutes after the first. . . ."

"Wait a minute." It was Captain Forrest who cut in, feeling personally attacked at the suggestion that his prisoner was innocent. "Why did she hear the second shot and not the first?"

Miss Withers waved at him vaguely. "One moment. You see, it wasn't Janet who was having an argument with her father about money, it was Ilya. The reason we can only guess, but I managed to discover this morning that Ilya had been making inquiries about the cost of a Sunday night concert recital at various New

York theaters recently, so it would appear that she was set on another try at a singing career, in spite of the fact that her voice froze up into a squawk, like Ganna Walska's, whenever she faced an audience.

"She made an appeal to her husband, and she must have known that she needed all the arguments she possessed, because she wore a most revealing and transparent *négligée*. But Milo Wayne, for the first time, refused her, and she shot him in a sudden rage at finding that she could no longer wind him around her finger."

"Go on," the Inspector said. "I'm giving you rope enough to hang yourself. But I don't see how a dead man killed Ilya. Let's see you get out of that one."

Miss Withers tossed her head. "Hadn't she always flung herself on her husband's mercy when she was in trouble? It was what they call a habit pattern, and it still held after she had put a bullet in him. She realized what she had done and she stood there with the gun in her hand — lost and bewildered. She begged him to save her —"

Janet Wayne wasn't saying anything, but she nodded slowly as if she at least could understand how the impulsive girl's immature mind had worked.

"What happened next is only guesswork," Miss Withers continued. "But it's the only thing that could have happened when we know the kind of people that Milo Wayne and his wife were. He knew he was dying and that

nothing could save him, but he forgave her. He scribbled — with her help — a suicide note. Then, acting on his instructions, she placed the gun in his hand, so it would fit the suicide picture. . . .”

“I get it!” the Inspector said. “But —”

Miss Withers gripped him by the arm. “Listen. She placed the gun in his hand, no doubt facing him across the desk so she wouldn’t get too close to him and get any blood on her *négligée*. But, as Doctor Bream here admits, there is sometimes a severe muscular spasm at the moment of actual death. The gun was an automatic, and it went off. Ilya Wayne, as fate would have it, was standing in the line of the bullet!”

There was a long hush. Everyone looked at the medical examiner. “It could possibly be,” he admitted. “Wayne bled to death, and he could have been conscious for ten minutes or more.”

There was a new look on Janet’s thin eager face. The detective who had been holding her firmly by the arm during the early part of the session had now stepped back against the wall, and his place had been taken by Professor Liggett. “Poor, poor daddy,” the girl was whispering. “Even at the last he tried to make a gallant gesture —”

“I just wanta know one thing,” the Inspector said. “How come Janet heard the second shot and not the first?”

Miss Withers smiled. “Because

when the second shot was fired she was in her bedroom. And when the first was fired she was in the bathroom, with the water turned on, washing her face. There are *some* women still who use soap and water. And a shot fired in this room can be heard downstairs, but it cannot be heard in Janet’s bathroom.”

“Why in — why not?” demanded Captain Forrest. The same question was in the accusing eyes of everyone in the room.

Miss Withers shrugged. “Because just now I borrowed a pistol from the pocket of the Inspector’s coat which he had left on a chair over there, and I went down the hall and through Janet’s bedroom and into her bathroom. I fired off the gun — and none of you heard it. The thing has to work both ways, doesn’t it?”

The Inspector looked blank. “You mean you shot off a police-positive in that little bathroom?”

“If you don’t believe me you can look at the tiles, which suffered badly. I had forgotten about the *ricochet*. But I think I have proved my point.”

“Yeah.” The Inspector visibly sagged. “Any man in this outfit who refers to Miss Withers as Cyanide Martha gets busted to a bicycle beat in Brooklyn, you understand?” But something was visibly bothering him. He lowered his voice. “Hildegarde, there is just one thing —”

She nodded, and he found that he was being shoved forcibly toward the hall door. “Oscar, can’t you see that the young people want to be alone?”

At that moment, the Inspector could plainly see that Professor Liggett was only lighting a cigarette for his young lady, but he suffered himself to be ushered out. The procession of policemen filed past them, and finally Miss Withers gave a sigh of relief.

"Oscar," she said, "I'll make you a special price on tickets to our school pageant if you'll promise not to point out to anybody that my theory about the muscular spasm of death was entirely too neat, and that there was too much happenstance in Ilya's being right in the line of fire."

The Inspector didn't say anything, but a slow smile began to form itself across his face.

"Suppose," the schoolteacher continued hastily, "that you and I both

do have a pretty clear idea of the fact that Milo Wayne, during the last few minutes of his life, saw his wife as she really was — and realized that his Kitten was really a jungle cat? What if with his last ebbing strength he tricked her into putting the murder weapon into his hand — pretending to make it look like suicide, to save her — so that he could kill her and *avenge his own murder!* For the sake of his daughter, who has never had a break, does it need to come out?"

"I don't see why," Oscar Piper decided reasonably. "The guy had taken just about all anybody could be expected to take."

Miss Withers nodded. "It's a long worm," she said, "that has no turning."

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Katharine Brush is one of America's most popular magazine writers and author of that superb short story, "Night Club." About her Margaret Culkin Banning once remarked, with most accurate insight: she is "one of the people who proved that popular prose need not be sloppy or sentimental or untrue to life."

Bear that perceptive criticism in mind when you read Katharine Brush's short-short, "Silk Hat." For all its economy, "Silk Hat" is far from slight: it tells a big story in little words; it suggests many facets of human nature in remarkably few sentences. Nevertheless, many readers may question its appropriateness in a magazine devoted exclusively to detection and crime. "Silk Hat" is a detective story, and yet it is not: there is a detective in the story, and yet he does not detect. Further, "Silk Hat" is a crime story, and yet it is not: a man is killed, and yet he does not appear to have been the victim of a crime.

All this sounds almost too paradoxical for comfort: and yet, in the truest sense, there is no paradox at all.

Read the story, and when you have finished, ask yourself: even though young Kemble committed suicide, wasn't he murdered just as surely as if someone shot him in cold blood? And isn't that someone—a cruel and calculating murderer—in the story?

SILK HAT

by KATHARINE BRUSH

WITH a pass-key the superintendent unlocked the door, and they filed solemnly in: the detective, the man from the corporation that owned the apartment house, and the superintendent. Through the foyer they went without pausing, their footsteps mute on the rug, and into the big, bright living-room beyond.

The superintendent began silently switching off lights.

"Left 'em on, didn't he?" the detective said. And added in a jocular

way, "Sure! What'd *he* care!"

"Do you think," the man from the corporation began, but stopped abruptly, startled into silence by the ring of the telephone.

The detective answered. "Hello?" he said, and cleared his throat. "Hello? . . . Why, no, he—who is this? . . . What? . . . Oh, I see. Well—Kemble's dead. . . . Yeah, *dead*. That's right. Suicide. . . . Yeah. Fished him out of the river early this morning. This is Mahoney of Headquarters talking. Listen: what do you

know about him? Don't, eh? . . . I see. . . . No. No, I don't know, can't say as to that. . . ."

He hung up presently. "His tailor," he explained to the two who had listened. "Kemble's owed him for three suits since last April. *Sa-ay!* Who's the dame?"

He referred to a photograph in a giant Italian leather frame which stood on the desk in the corner. A photograph of a woman not quite young, with strange, sacrilegious eyes. A blonde woman. She was rather beautiful in a way — the New York way, sleek, lacquered. A costly woman. You thought of shops. Avenue salons. "I will have this, and this." In the photograph her mouth was black, but you knew how red it would be. Her eyebrows were big commas. Snobbish. She wore an evening gown and a rope of pearls, and in the pearls the fingers of one hand were twined, the slim first finger pointed up and curved a little, as if she indicated herself.

"I've seen her," said the superintendent. "She's been here many's the time."

"How old a fellow was Kemble?" asked the man from the corporation.

"Twenty-two, twenty-three, somewhere along there."

The man from the corporation stared harder at the picture.

"Know her name?" the detective queried of the superintendent. "She might give us the dope we need."

"No. I never heard her name."

"Well," said the detective, "let's get busy. I got other things to do

today."

Suddenly brisk, he seated himself before the desk and pulled out the nearest drawer. It was choked with papers.

He removed them by handfuls, piled them on the desk, and began to go through them. They were chiefly bills — huge bills, that made the superintendent's pale eyes bulge and drew from the detective soft, low whistles. Bills for food, for wine, for flowers, for garage rent, for a silk hat, for a jazz band. Bills marked "Please Remit" and "Overdue." Letters: "Your attention is respectfully called—" And other letters not so respectful.

"This guy," said the detective, "was cert'n'y a bird. Bought things like money grew on trees — and ain't paid a cent in six months."

"I remember when he come," put in the superintendent quickly, importantly. "I remember the day well. I showed him three apartments — this one and two cheaper. He took this, and the next day he brought a decorator, and pretty soon the stuff began arrivin'. All this stuff. All new, it was. Every bit."

"Don't know where he came from eh?" the detective asked.

"No."

"All we need to find out is who to notify. It don't take a Sherlock Holmes to guess why he did it." The detective's fat hand slapped the bills. "If there's anybody cares," he added.

He gathered up the bills and stuffed them back into their drawer and yanked out the drawer below.

There was a check book; a bank book; a stack of theater programs; a souvenir hammer from a night club in the Forties; a box of stationery, engraved; a book on Good Manners. Below all these, thrust into the back of the drawer, were newspaper clippings, together with a telegram, held by a rubber band:

George Kemble

Care of Warren's Garage

Green Falls, Indiana

Take great pleasure in informing you that contest prize twenty thousand dollars for best name for our new golf ball has been awarded you for your suggestion "Lindy" Stop Our representative en route to you bearing our check and our congratulations Stop Rush photograph and data for publicity use

UNION SPORTS PRODUCTS CO.

T. M. Somers, President

The date was not quite a year old. "My gosh!" said the detective. "What do you know about that!"

They turned to the clippings. There were pictures of George Kemble, a smiling, dark-haired boy, and small-town large-type headlines like "Kemble Wins!" and "Local Lad Makes Fortune Overnight!" There were paragraphs and paragraphs of facts. George Kemble was twenty-two years old. His parents were dead. He had been born and raised in Green Falls. At the age of seventeen he had left high school and associated himself in business with William H. Warren, pro-

prietor of Warren's Garage, South Walnut Street. He had a natural aptitude for things mechanical and he had rapidly become known as one of the best garage repair men in Lane County. . . .

The detective returned to the telegram. He read and reread it again. "Twenty grand!" he kept saying. "Twenty grand! And *any damn' fool* could've thought of that!"

The man from the corporation had the clippings in his hands. "Listen," he commanded, and his voice was low and grave and compassionate. "Listen to this: 'Lucky' Kemble, as he is now called, today told reporters that he expected to leave for New York City as soon as possible. 'That's the town for people with money,' he said!"

There was a short silence.

"And he went through it," murmured the man from the corporation, "in half a year."

"And *how!*" the detective said. And he snorted: "*Silk hat!*"

They opened the bank book, which before they had passed by. There it was. The single entry: \$20,000 no cents. They opened the check book and glanced over it, marveling. Incredible that such a sum could shrink so swiftly. . . .

"Well," said the detective finally, slamming the check book shut, "anyway, we got what we need. A wire to Green Falls, now —"

"Look here," interrupted the man from the corporation.

He had picked up a magazine lying

on the desk, and parted its leaves at the place where a pencil and several sheets of rough paper were thrust in. Here was an announcement, an offer, screaming in red from a page: "\$50,000 Cash for Ten Best Letters on 'Why I Prefer Lait's Shaving Cream.'" . . . The sheets of loose paper were covered with scrawled, half-hearted, short attempts to write such a letter. "*I prefer Lait's because*" [scratched out] "*It seems to me that of all the shaving creams on the market today*" [scratched out.] . . .

The detective stood up, folding the telegram into his wallet. "Poor dumb fool, I'd call him," he said. "He might've known he couldn't repeat. Stands to reason."

"It looks," said the man from the corporation, "as though he did know."

The detective tucked his wallet into an inner pocket and buttoned his coat with stubby fingers. He turned to go.

"What I can't see is," he said, "why, if he was such a mechanic, he didn't get busy again and *be* a mechanic. Eh?"

The question was an observation, merely. The detective did not expect anyone to answer him. And no one did — unless you count the woman in the frame, whose slim first finger pointed up, through pearls, and curved a little, as if she indicated herself.



NEXT MONTH . . .

ELLERY QUEEN'S MYSTERY MAGAZINE will include two prize-winning stories:

THE HOUSE IN GOBLIN WOOD by *Carter Dickson*

FINGERPRINTS DON'T LIE by *Stuart Palmer*

and

THE NAME ON THE WRAPPER by *Margery Allingham*

THE NINE POUND MURDER by *Roy Vickers*

PUT HIM ON A SPOT by *Arthur Somers Roche*

THE LITTLE HOUSE AT CROIX-ROUSSE by *Georges Simenon*

ABOUT THE AUTHOR: *Viola Brothers Shore staked out a claim in our heart 'way back in 1933 when she sent us the manuscript of a short story called "The Mackenzie Case," about one of our favorite female detectives, Gwynn Leith. We fell in love with the story, with the character, and in a vicarious sort of way, with the author, and have never wavered in our affection. We purchased the story, published it in the January 1934 issue of that ill-starred magazine, "Mystery League," purchased it again in 1941 and included it as one of the three great short stories about women sleuths in our definitive anthology, 101 YEARS' ENTERTAINMENT. So, when Vi submitted a story to EQMM's Second Annual Contest and won a second prize, we succumbed to that heart-warming nostalgia that comes from meeting an old, old friend after a long absence . . . Viola Brothers Shore should write the story of her own life: it would serve as a wonderful inspiration to all would-be writers — for Vi Shore learned to write, and became a successful writer and teacher of writing, the hard way. She was born in New York City in 1890; her schooling was somewhat catch-as-catch-can; she dropped out of high school in her third year to become a violinist, only to find that the necessity of earning a living killed any hope of a professional musical career. She made her sacrifices to the Great God Economo by working in an office, and even a fier she married, she continued to do her share of making ends meet. It wasn't until a fier her child was born, while she was a housewife, a mother, and in the electrical contracting business with her husband, that she finally took the fateful literary plunge: she enrolled in a short story course under Albert Frederick Wilson and a poetry course under Joyce Kilmer, both given at New York University; and for two hours each morning — from 9:30 to 11:30 — between household, business, and maternal chores, she began at last to write. . . . After you read her prize-winning story, "Rope's End," we'll quote from a long letter written to your Editor by the author — one of the most revealing letters we have ever received from a detective-story writing colleague . . .*

ROPE'S END

By VIOLA BROTHERS SHORE

IN spite of the housing shortage, JOURNEY'S END in Benedict Canyon "completely furnished, pine-paneled throughout, detached Studio

in the rear" is still For Sale. Somebody from the East may buy it, unaware that it has been rechristened ROPE'S END. The house was originally built

by a well-known writer-director at the climax of his career. After twenty years of anticlimax he hanged himself from the rafters of the little pine-paneled studio. The property was immediately snapped up by Konrad Vorak, author of the Book-of-the-Month selection, *BRIGHT BEACON*, for which Metro was said to have paid the all-time high. Vorak's housewarming was a cocktail-tea to which the Press was invited. The following morning a girl named Suzanne Sorel was found dead in the studio, with gas pouring out of the heater.

Hollywood inhaled the titivating aroma of scandal. Vorak, a bachelor, had been alone in the house with the beautiful and unfortunate redhead. But after careful investigation the authorities wrote it off as Accidental Death. With the funeral of Miss Sorel, the Mysterious Studio Death ceded the headlines to the Red Scare and the Strike Wave.

That afternoon there was another body swinging from a rafter in the little studio. The long arm of coincidence seemed overstretched. Rumor demanded a connection between the tragedies. But the one person who could have supplied it was on the Superchief, eastward bound. Lydia March had her own reasons for wishing to forget everything concerning the late Konrad Vorak and his now famous cocktail-tea. . . .

Konrad Vorak had consistently refused to speak to the Press about himself or his book. But the Publicity

Department at Metro and Lydia March, who was his agent, had exerted pressure on the new celebrity. Konrad stood outside himself and watched the author giving his first interview. He was thirty-six years old and he was wearing his first custom-made suit, of navy blue, pin-striped, which flattered his somewhat heavy figure. A young man from the *Citizen-News* was doing a pencil portrait in seven strokes—four outlining a rough square, two suggesting an eyebrow peaked at a quizzical angle, and the remaining straight line indicating the mouth. It was effective and unrevealing as the silhouette of a house without an open window.

Lydia March, in black with a silver comb in her dark pyramid of hair, presided over the tea things with an air of belonging there. The tableau spread a pleasant warmth inside Konrad. Or perhaps it was the Irish whisky at Seven Dollars a bottle. Lydia had told him to give the story color, but he was going to omit the one colorful chapter in his life. His father had been a cabinet maker and they lived behind the shop. Konrad ran errands and helped deliver an occasional bureau after school.

"Tell about the wrapping paper," Lydia prompted. Under his custom-made shirt something stirred uneasily and his eye reached for the reassurance of the high-ceilinged room with the Picasso over the fireplace, the lavish hors d'oeuvres of his Chinese houseboy, Tom Wong. He was Konrad Vorak, Author-of-the-Month. He could

afford to tell how he used to smooth out wrapping paper because his mother could not see nickels wasted on writing tablets. "Suppose Mr. Blau comes and we're short a nickel for Papa's insurance," she would say. He had no idea what would happen if Mr. Blau found a one-nickel shortage in the pickle jar, but in his first stories the giant carried a gaping briefcase and his name was Blau-blau.

"He always dreamed of being a writer," Lydia pointed out, a little possessive because she had discovered Konrad Vorak and knew him better than anybody else.

He spoke carefully about his boyhood, with measured references to the cluttered room behind the store and his sulky, foreign father and his shrill, worried mother who doled out two soda crackers for each boy and tea into which she herself measured the sugar out of one of her innumerable pickle jars. In other homes there was a sugar bowl, and jam and cookies after school, and mothers with curled hair made cocoa and said, "Do come again." It was a girl with red pigtailed who first called him Konnie Picklejar. That was when he began to know that heavy Thing crawling inside his ribs. Some day he was going to have a big house and parties with real roastbeef meat and whatever you didn't want you could leave on your plate to be thrown away. His mother used to say God keeps track of every crust, but his father would scream at her, "If you do good work you don't have to be afraid of God or the devil!"

"Don't forget the cabinet," Lydia reminded him.

The cabinet was of shiny black wood with mother-of-pearl flowers inlaid and his mother hated it because, after all the time the old man had wasted, there it stood, too old-fashioned for an American home and too new for an antique. It had a secret drawer where Konnie hid his stories. He used to dream about opening it and finding a million dollars.

One day a writer-director happened in and the cabinet caught his eye. Mrs. Vorak showed him the secret drawer and when Konnie swung his Elementary Algebra through the door, the stranger was reading his stories. Instead of scolding, his mother presented him proudly. "My boy, Konrad" — there was a shiny look in her worried gray eyes — "Maybe God wants I should have something for my old age." Konnie could hardly breathe in the presence of his Great Moment. The stranger smiled and asked, "Can you make cabinets like your father?" Konnie shook his head. "Too bad," said the famous writer-director and told him where to deliver the cabinet.

After his parents were asleep, Konrad burned a pile of wrapping paper. If you threw away a scrap of anything, some day of your life might depend on just that scrap. But as the incinerator ate up piece after piece of curling brown paper covered with crooked writing, he felt like a king burning a whole city full of writer-directors and girls with red braids and boys jingling nickels in their pockets.

And that Thing stopped pressing against his ribs. He grew to be a better trader than his father, who would fall in love with a piece of wood. Or his mother who would cry along with a woman selling her dining table. He never felt sorry for the customers. He hated them.

After his father died, the insurance bought more second-hand furniture and a new sign reading Vorak's Furniture Exchange. "You see, Konnie," his mother pointed out, "I always paid up Papa's insurance. You see the lesson?" To Konnie the lesson seemed to be that insurance was a far greater boon than a father. No more terrible fights over cabinets that didn't sell, no more money for liquor to drown the pain God had sent to punish him.

In time there was a balance at the bank, which should have relieved his mother's mind. Only she was in a place in San Bernardino and her mind was beyond the jurisdiction of the bank. For a long time she continued to worry about dining suites going out of style and complained bitterly about the nurses and cried to come home and he had a guilty feeling of having failed her as a son. But at the end she forgot who he was and told him about her little boy who wanted to be sung to sleep and about her man who was going to America to make fine cabinets.

When she died Konrad sold all the dining suites and opened a new store on Ventura Boulevard with a young assistant named Rafael and a stock of Americana bought with insurance money. Konrad Vorak told his guests

some amusing anecdotes about celebrities who had come into Konnie's Korner.

"Wait Konnie —" He thought for a tight moment Lydia was going to remind him about Charlie Adler. "Wasn't it before your mother's death that we sold those stories?"

"I wrote two stories —" He dismissed them with a brevity that passed for modesty — "and Lydia sold them."

"They had some of the fine, human quality of BRIGHT BEACON." Sometimes that look in her gray eyes stirred up forgotten memories of old Bohemian tunes in rocking-chair rhythm. But now he wanted to get on with the interview, past the place where they would ask questions.

The war years left Konnie's Korner without merchandise and customers without mileage. The Army took his helper and labeled the proprietor 4 F. Behind his blacked-out windows Konrad sat and wrote his book. On one of her trips to the coast, Lydia March found him with a rough-finished manuscript. "If what happened after that seems like a fairy story, Lydia is the good fairy," Konrad Vorak concluded gallantly and reached for his drink.

The questions began and a steel spring tightened somewhere inside him. Somebody wanted to know here he got the idea for BRIGHT BEACON. "Does anybody know where ideas come from?" he asked, coiling the cord of the Venetian blind around his finger as he had been taught to coil string for his mother's string jar.

There were stock questions about

the rapid sale of the book and about the movie, whether he was going to permit any changes in the challenging, colorful, indestructible character of Sgt. Dale Archer, ex-sailor, ex-hobo and on the last page ex-paratrooper.

Somebody asked, "Was Dale Archer a real character?"

"I hope so," he replied, but could not bring himself to smile, although he had practiced the answer many times smiling.

"I mean," persisted an earnest young reporter, "was there a real paratrooper on whom you built Dale Archer?"

He poured a drink while Lydia answered for him. "There were thousands, that's why it's a great book. Dale Archer really lived. And will go on living forever."

Liquor spilled over the top of his glass and Tom Wong mopped it up with his bar cloth. The plump lady from *The Examiner* reached for an hors d'oeuvre. *The Herald Express* moved in a body to the bar. Somebody started to tell a story. The interview was over.

Konrad raised his glass. A milestone passed. Long live Vorak the Genius. The alien Mountain among the native foothills. He felt light — free — like the time when he burned up all the wrapping paper . . .

Somebody wanted to see the studio and the party drifted down to the pine-paneled annex where the late owner had hanged himself. "Doesn't it ever *haunt* you?" one of the gossip

gleaners inquired hopefully, but a more tactful lady thought it was charming. A little dream house. Konrad had dreamed of it for years. Ever since a twelve-year-old, delivering an inlaid cabinet, had stood open-mouthed before a shelf stacked high with yellow typing paper. Today the cabinet bulged with shiny yellow and white bond and onionskin. For the rest of his life he need never smooth another piece of wrapping paper.

"Oh, look — the Inlaid Cabinet. Where is the secret drawer?" A plump columnist was disappointed to find it empty. "Not even one tiny secret locked away?"

Not where you will ever see it, dear lady. He stooped to pick a piece of string from the floor. And taking a tortoiseshell penknife from his pocket, he cut the knot from the end. Then he rolled it on his fingers and reached for the string jar. Remembering suddenly, he looked around to see whether anyone had noticed.

A redheaded girl in a purple hat was standing in the doorway. He did now know how long she had been standing there, but all redheaded women caused in him a faint, inexplicable aversion. Crossing the studio Lydia asked cordially, "You're from one of the papers?"

She shook her head. "I just drove up from San Diego to meet Konrad Vorak." It was not a foreign accent, but was vaguely tinged with some alien flavor. Lydia presented him. "This is Mr. Vorak. Miss —?"

"Suzanne Sorel," she said as though

she expected the name would mean something. Something did try to connect in the back of his mind but he had never heard that peculiarly Gallic inflection, never seen that particular shade of hair with rusty undertones.

"May I get you some tea?" Lydia asked, "or would you rather have something else?"

"I think I need something else, please, —" She smiled a little defiantly at Konrad. "I have not read your book, but I am an old friend of an old friend —"

There was a movement back to the main house, but he did not want her to follow. He had had only one friend. "Wait here," he said, "I'll bring you a drink." And taking a bottle from the bar, he told Lydia, "I'll get rid of her." She looked after him curiously.

He took himself in hand. He hadn't seen Charlie Adler since 1935. That's all he had to remember —

When he came back with the tray she was studying the paratrooper on the jacket of his book. "I was afraid to read it for fear it would be about Charlie."

"Charlie Adler?" The inflection carried surprise and a casual negation. He handed her the deeper-colored drink. He had to find out how well she had known Charlie Adler. And when. "You met Charlie abroad?"

"Oh, no. He never told you about me?" She asked it anxiously as though a great deal depended on it. "My sister and I, we have a little house in San Diego. Charlie lived with us be-

fore the war." Before the war. With a feeling of relief he drained his glass and remembered suddenly where he had seen her name. On a packet of letters tied with a red-white-and-blue ribbon at the bottom of a battered suitcase.

"The last time I saw Charlie was in 1935," he said evenly.

"Oh." She sat down forlornly on the couch.

That's all she wants, he told himself, to reminisce about Charlie. Aloud he said, "Poor Charlie . . . his mother wrote me . . ."

Her eyes filled. "For so long I tried not to think about him . . ."

He waited a decent interval. "What did he tell you about me?"

"How you wrote your first story —" There was a glint of a smile behind her eyes. "How you never threw anything away because your mother told you a piece of cord might save your life —"

Or hang you, Charlie Adler used to say . . .

Charlie Adler brought his portable typewriter into Vorak's Exchange because he was stranded in L.A. and wouldn't write home for money. When he was fifteen he had run away from his people in Boston. "They're good people," he explained to Konnie, "only they measure everything in money." He was twenty and he had a philosophy about life. Every minute that you didn't enjoy was wasted. He wanted to try everything, live everywhere, know all kinds of people.

"People!" he declaimed defiantly, "that's the Coin of the Realm!"

Konnie had dreamed adventures, Charlie had had them. His curly hair had been sun-bleached in China and in Africa. He had gray-green eyes and a sweater of the same sea color and he brought something of the sea and the East and the South into Vorak's Furniture Exchange on West Adams St. Konnie heard his own voice saying, "Why don't you move in here?"

Charlie moved in casually. But it was no casual thing to Konrad who had never talked to anyone except about buying and selling, never shared a sandwich, never known a girl except the ones who came into the store and his mother always told him, "They just want what they can get out of you."

Girls were all over the place, cleaning out the back room, making new curtains, cooking spaghetti while Charlie opened red wine and talked about coolies and recited Walt Whitman. Sometimes the parties lasted all night. Sometimes the boys would close the store and lie in bed talking. "Getting inside people and seeing what makes them tick, that's the real adventure," Charlie would say and Konrad felt himself cheated, having known so few. But exploring his meager past with Charlie, he discovered a father he had never seen through his mother's eyes.

"That's a great yarn!" Charlie pointed out triumphantly and Konnie wrote the story of a man who dreamed of making beautiful things. But in

order to provide for his family he made pine desks all his life — three drawers on each side and one in the middle. And when he died they used the insurance and got ahead.

Charlie said it was real writing — "as good as Gorki" and Konnie thought, *Maybe I'm a genius*. And that was why Charlie had picked him for a pal. He wrote another story about two boys who found their biggest adventure in finding each other. And he stopped worrying about the girls Charlie liked. A genius is above jealousy.

Of course there were times when he was afraid, thinking of the money oozing out of his savings account, times when he could feel the reproachful eyes of his mother, although she no longer recognized him when he visited San Bernardino. But then Charlie would come in with wine and market bags and the warning voices would be drowned in the sizzle of pork chops and the high, pungent laughter of girls.

Lydia March was one of the girls. She was clever and he thought of devastatingly clever things to say, as soon as she was gone. It was the same with kissing. But when she sold his stories, they had roast beef for dinner and he gave her a hammered silver locket his mother had brought from Prague. That was the night he kissed her. The night he got drunk. The night Charlie said, "I'll kill anybody who ever calls you Picklejar!"

A week later Charlie was gone. As he had come, with only the gray-green

sweater on his back and without warning. The girls in the candy store said he was hitchhiking back East. At first Konnie thought it was a joke and kept his eye on the door. He ran out to meet the mailman and snatched the phone before it rang. And nights he would dream he heard a pounding on the door, and lie awake listening to the voice of his mother — "They just want what they can get out of you" — Charlie had gotten plenty. Konrad had a record in the back of his day-book of every cent that year had cost him. He never totaled it. He wanted to forget he had been only a free ride for Charlie Adler — forget that gnawing shame inside his chest.

When his mother died he found a new store out in the valley. There were no more parties at Konnie's Korner. Lydia had gone back East and there were letters he never answered. He didn't write any more stories.

The redheaded girl was getting fuzzy. "Nothing is the same without Charlie. . . . He could walk out and change your whole life. And then walk in again. I don't know why I am talking —"

Go on talking. He had to know about the time Charlie walked in again.

"He came back on leave," she went on. "I opened the door and there he was. The same old Charlie. And still not the same . . ."

"I suppose he'd had all kinds of adventures —" Careful, now, this is the Jackpot question. "He must have

told you all about them?"

"Not a word," she replied. He felt the drink mopping up the dryness in his throat. "He wouldn't talk about anything. And I had been waiting eighteen months to hear . . ." He saw her groping in her pocket and hoped she wasn't getting maudlin. "I had been thinking about nothing but Charlie . . . Charlie . . . would he come back . . . be the same . . . feel the same . . ." She brushed the back of her hand across her cheek. "We were like strangers. On Decoration Day he packed his bag. I never heard from him again —"

The liquor spread warmly inside him. Decoration Day. She couldn't possibly know that in June Charlie Adler had walked into Konnie's Korner with his battered suitcase. Konrad was out, but Rafael told him later, "He's been overseas and shipping out again — very hush-hush. He had no place to leave his bag, so I put it on the top shelf. He'll pick it up when he comes back."

But Charlie Adler didn't come back. He was one of the mystery men the O.S.S. dropped behind the German lines. The Nazis got him and tried to make him talk. Drew Pearson had it on the air. "— an unknown little Corporal from Boston. But he was too big for the whole Wehrmacht. They broke his body but they couldn't crack his spirit. Let's remember the name of Corporal Charles Adler of Boston —"

Konrad heard the words but they refused to register. Charlie Adler

dead. No more Charlie Adler. No more sea-gray eyes looking out over the world for places to see and people to talk to. No more talk. No more anything that was Charlie Adler anywhere —

And then he remembered the suitcase. It was full of old clothes — moth-eaten — an old sea-green sweater full of silverfish. There were papers too. Some letters signed Suzanne. They must have meant something to Charlie because he had kept them tied up in a dirty red-white-and-blue ribbon. Other souvenirs — programs — a scrap of tricolor — a plaster head of Toussaint l'Ouverture. Old bills. Konrad tore them up. Charlie Adler had paid his debts. LEAVES OF GRASS and Sandburg's THE PEOPLE YES and a book with a broken lock. It was filled with Charlie's small, backhand writing. A name leaped out of a rifled page . . . Konnie . . . *I keep feeling I'll run into the guy. He must be in this somewhere . . . a real talent if he could only cut loose from that brutal upbringing. I didn't help any, blowing my top and leaving those five cock-eyed letters in the back of his daybook.*

Five letters? Where was the daybook for 1935? He found it because he never threw anything away. But the letters Charlie had left in the back — there were no letters —

At the bottom of the last page he found them in Charlie's writing — five letters — I.O.U.C.A. I.O.U. Charlie Adler. Charlie had found Konnie's record of the money Charlie cost him, and totaled the score for

Konnie Picklejar.

He had not cried when his father died. Or his mother. But he dropped his head over the daybook and his shoulders shook.

He sat up all night reading what a paratrooper learned during the first eighteen months of the war. About the enemy — about the war itself and about the men beside him. Exploring himself too, to find out what made Charlie Adler tick. What made him restless, undisciplined, unwilling to take on responsibility. Mustn't a man do something more with his life than enjoy it? *Am I enjoying this?* Something unprintable recorded his reply. *But is there any other cock-eyed thing I'd rather be doing? So what's the answer?*

Maybe Charlie Adler found it in that final adventure behind the German lines. And with that answer it was a great book. It had to be written. Some days he didn't unlatch the door. Finally Rafael came back in a striped shirt and a flowered tie and looked after the customers while Konrad wrestled with the ending. It had to top the rest, some of which was literature. The first draft was finished when Lydia looked him up. He had been thinking about her for the first time in years. She had brought along a friend and she looked prosperous and beautiful and he was conscious of being haggard and unshaved. But she was happy to see him again — delighted that Konrad was writing a book.

The friend said, "Everybody's writing a book but is it any good?"

Suddenly he was all mixed up — hot and cold, defiantly confident and full of a sinking fear. Whatever made him think he could write a book? Well, some parts were great — *sure, the Charlie Adler parts —*

"About a paratrooper, Konnie? The publishers are overstocked with war stuff—" As if it were a piece of merchandise. "But the Worldwide Weekly needs a serial — something happened to the one they had scheduled. How soon will it be finished?" When can I show it to the customer, he thought bitterly. Buyer needs merchandise. Date. Deadline. Deliver the goods. "They might pay twenty-five thousand if they like it —"

Twenty-fi— "Twenty-five thousand dollars?"

"And of course the Book Rights. Private Hargrove grossed —" He hadn't really considered the money. It just had to be written — Charlie's book — "And the movie sale, of course." She thought that was all he cared about, because he was Konnie Picklejar who saved string. The hell with all of them.

Rafael came in with a letter from Boston. "Listen," he said, "it's from your friend's mother —"

"I don't know you but Charlie often mentioned you. I suppose you heard about our Charlie? . . . They're planning a memorial service here in Boston . . . if you would care to write some kind of tribute . . . anything you can say about our boy, because you knew him. You knew our Charlie . . ."

"Poor thing," Lydia said. "To lose a son you didn't even know."

He had never thought about Charlie's people. There were things they might not want published. She might make all kinds of difficulties, this woman he had never seen. But he had seen women like her looking for bargains in the Korner, fat women in black fur coats with rings on their fingers. She would say My son — and exhibit the book proudly and pocket half the money. That was what mothers wanted — a Something for their old age. Maybe she would want more than half —

Lydia said, "You will write a memorial, won't you?"

She didn't need the money. He could buy an annuity — insurance for the rest of his life. She had no right digging her fat ringed fingers into his security —

Rafael suddenly remembered the suitcase. "Maybe there's something in it."

"There was nothing in it," he said quickly. "Only old clothes."

"Even that will make her happy," Lydia was certain. "Anything that was Charlie's —"

"I threw it out," he said. "It was full of silverfish."

That night he put it into the incinerator. And burned the letters and the books. He destroyed the souvenirs, all but the penknife which was of real tortoiseshell. He hesitated a long time about the diary but he felt better after he had burned that too. He would have to make changes in the novel — a different country and other names throughout. He would dedicate it To

Charles Adler Whose Life and Death Inspired This Tale.

He looked at the tortoiseshell trinket. Charlie had probably worn it on a keychain. The last reminder of Charlie. . . . It was an unusual knife, and good steel was hard to get.

In time it stopped reminding him of Charlie.

He meant to write Lydia about the dedication, but the magazine was already on the stands. People were calling up to congratulate him. Such realism. Such insight. Such genius.

If it became a book he would write a dedication . . .

The purple hat was askew and she took it off. "If I only knew how he felt afterwards — if he still cared . . ."

The question hung there. She sighed and picked up the book. The pages were uncut and he pretended to look for a paperknife, thinking, *She's bound to read it somewhere, but he never told her anything —*

"You were cutting a string when I came in —" She pulled the keychain from his pocket and stared at the bit of tortoiseshell. "Charlie's knife . . . I gave it to him . . . it was my father's —" His hands hung helplessly while she took it from the chain. The sun had gone down and he put a match to the gas heater. Think fast, Konrad — how you got the knife from Charlie whom you hadn't seen since 1935 —

But her mind was on the boy who had worn the knife . . . "I wasn't big enough for Charlie . . ."

He was impatient to get away, to be in the other part of the house. She seemed unaware that he was moving toward the door. "I kept worrying about such stupid things . . . other girls . . . I had to know if there were other girls. . . . He kept a diary . . . he couldn't forgive me for breaking the lock. . . ."

Lydia said, "You look as if you'd seen a ghost. Did you finally get rid of her?" Of the girl who had read Charlie's diary? He was chained to her by all the linked words of BRIGHT BEACON.

The last guests left and Lydia looked at him anxiously. "Tired, Konnie?" Yes, he was tired of being Vorak — the Triton among the Minnows. He wanted to be any unknown brat with its head in its mother's lap. "You can relax now. You've arrived." How do you do. I'm Vorak the Genius-for-a-day. Hail and farewell. "I'm sure they all liked your story."

They will like Sorel's much better. Vorak is a hack. Vorak stole the best parts of Charlie Adler's diary. Vorak robbed his dead friend. Our dead hero. The Thing was strangling him.

"I'll ask Tom Wong to drive me home."

There was something he should be saying — something she expected — it had to do with plans for dinner — plans beyond dinner and including breakfast — plans made in another life by another Vorak. When she returned with her coat he was sitting in the same chair, his eyes fixed on the

same spot in the rug. "I threw a serape over Miss Sorel. I imagine she'll be out for hours."

Long afterward it came to him that Lydia was gone. They were all gone. *I didn't see her to the door*, he thought self-accusingly, *I'll have to call her tomorrow*. Tomorrow. Awareness gouged through him and he groped for a drink.

It steadied him. There were still hours in which the book would remain unread. Hours in which no finger would point at him. Hours. But this was a question of a whole life — a whole life of being Konnie Picklejar. "I'll kill myself!" he thought fiercely. He would never see those pointed fingers.

He looked around at the high-ceilinged room, the Capehart on which he had leaned while the Press waited respectfully for his words. On that chair Lydia had sat, possessively proud. Everything he had starved for all his starved life was there. It was his. But a girl in San Diego had wondered about other girls.

All his life he had hated to be laughed at. The gods must be laughing now. The thought of that Olympian laughter went to his head — lifted him for a moment to fraternity with Oedipus and Orestes. And Icarus. Vorak, too, had had his moment in the sun.

His glass crashed against the rail of the bar and he fumbled for another. *I'm drunk*, he thought and toasted mockingly, *To Vorak, Going to meet his gods dead drunk*. A clock struck

somewhere. He tilted the bottle. Vorak was beyond time. Above Time. Time, you old son-of-a- . You want me to reconsider. To crawl into a pickle jar.

There was a gas heater in the studio. He opened the connecting door. The room was filled with the sound of her breathing. The redhead who stood between Vorak and the sun. Between Vorak and everything. Even death. One shoe had slipped to the rug and the book lay open beside her. He picked it up and still she did not stir. It was Vorak who should be sleeping like that. Better than that because Vorak would have no need for waking —

The idea when it struck him, amused him. A partner. Vorak takes his last trip with a redheaded woman. With the girl who was still in love with Charlie Adler. Who wanted Vorak's place in the sun for Charlie Adler. Vorak's topper to the Olympic joke. Tomorrow he would still be Vorak the Genius. Even if he were not here to enjoy it —

He paused in the act of turning off the gas. It had to be turned off and then on again. Some part of his mind began to function with the precision of clockwork. Moving softly now, he tucked the book and the shoe under his arm. He rubbed his moist palm over the spigot of the heater, not removing but smudging the prints.

He answered all questions readily. He felt light, free, sure of himself. He had foreseen everything, provided

for everything. He knew nothing of what had happened in the studio during the night. He had fallen asleep in the armchair when Miss March left. Tom Wong had found him in the same chair the next morning. The burden of proof lay with them. They had to prove that a crime had been committed. There were no signs of crime. Lydia, arriving for breakfast, had found the studio undisturbed and the girl lying as she had left her. For a cold-blooded killing there must be premeditation. There must be motive. Let them dig out a motive for killing a girl he had never seen before.

Sitting in a restaurant booth waiting for Lydia, he heard the newspapermen in the next one discussing the case. It was being discussed in half the booths in town. He slid down so that not even the top of his head was visible.

"I don't go for this 'accidental death' after one of these Hollywood parties," the skeptical voice was saying.

"It was a lit'ry tea, strictly on the dull side." Konrad recognized the precise diction of *The Times* man. "Vorak never saw her before. She drank too much and passed out. It could happen to anyone."

"It never happens to me that a strange redhead passes out on my couch —" There was a note of wistful envy in the first voice. Konrad looked at his watch. Lydia was late. She had been strangely withdrawn — preoccupied — since the morning she ac-

cepted his contrite invitation to breakfast and discovered the body of Suzanne Sorel in the studio. It had been a shock, of course, but necessary. He needed her testimony that nothing in the studio had been disturbed. The police were more impressed by Lydia March than by Tom Wong. He took a box from his pocket and snapped the lid. It had been a new experience for Konrad Vorak, shopping for the most expensive topaz bracelet he could find. But he was a new Konrad Vorak.

"He admits he lit the gas heater —" The argument was still going on.

"But she didn't die with the heater lit. It was turned off and on again."

"Gas heaters don't turn themselves off and on."

"And top-string writers don't go around asphyxiating stray guests for the hell of it."

Konrad closed the box. Lydia was coming through the revolving door.

"What about her?" demanded the skeptic. "She covered the girl. She found the body. I don't trust any agent further than I can spit mucilage. And she's the girl friend. She had a motive."

"Sure. And the Chinese houseboy had a motive. Sorel was there to sabotage the 8th Route Army. Look, one of Sorel's pumps was found in the john. That means she got up. It was hot so she turned off the heater. It was still hot and she was still woozy, so she gave it another draydle. That's what the police think and once in a

lifetime they could be right. Her own sister is satisfied it was an accident."

"Well, the boys at Metro ought to be satisfied. His goddam tea is right up on the front page."

Konrad smiled up at Lydia. He was satisfied too.

Suzanne Sorel was buried quietly. Lydia went to the funeral. "I saw the blanket of gardenias," she told Konrad, sitting in the patio with highballs between them.

He had given the florist carte blanche. "How did it look?"

"Like an extravagant gesture," she replied in the tone that was so unlike her.

"Konnie Picklejar," he said bitterly. "I'll never live it down."

Her eyes were on her untouched glass. "I don't think we ever get away from what we are."

He changed the subject. "Have you seen the papers?"

"BRIGHT BEACON is still on the front page. It really was a stroke of luck, wasn't it."

"I wouldn't say that —" His throat was beginning to feel tight.

"Wouldn't you, Konnie?"

She was like an adversary feeling out vulnerable places. He didn't want to fence with her. "What's wrong, Lydia — nerves? Maybe a week at Palm Springs —"

"I'm going back East."

He noticed then that she was not wearing the topaz bracelet. "I had an idea you liked me enough to settle down here," he said. "As Mrs. Vorak."

She was looking down at something in her hand. "I don't think you ever realized how much I liked you. I wanted to bring out the Konnie that was locked in the secret drawer —"

He had laid a hand on her arm and felt her shudder. He withdrew it. "Sorry. Delusions of magnetism. Vorak the Great Lover."

The silver locket clanked against the metal table as she slammed down her hand. "Must you always stand off and watch yourself being Konnie Picklejar or Vorak the Genius? Don't you ever let go and feel things like other people?"

He felt small, shriveled by her anger. Small and transparent.

"I'm sorry, Konnie. But I don't think you'll want me when I tell you why I came here today." The slanting afternoon sun picked out glittering pinpoints on the raised medallion of his mother's locket. He counted the pinpoints. "Did you ever see a clock put together — so that it went on ticking — but there were pieces left over?"

Something began to tick inside his head. He drained his glass. There was nothing to be afraid of. Not a thing. "I don't know what you're talking about. What kind of pieces?"

"You said you fell asleep after I left, Saturday."

"I was out on my feet before you left. What do you think I did?"

She took a long time to answer. "Something that took you down to the studio."

"Good God, Lydia, you don't think

there was anything between Sorel and me." But he hoped that was what she did think and why she was so upset. "You know I'd never seen the girl before."

"When I found her Sunday there was a knife in her hand. Aimee Sorel said it was an heirloom. When Suzanne walked in you were cutting a piece of string with that knife."

He poured another drink. "If that's worrying you, I'll tell you how I got it."

"You needn't. I've been speaking to Aimee Sorel. Suzanne had given it to Charlie Adler." He waited to hear what else Aimee Sorel had told her. "When Charlie left the Sorels he was carrying an old suitcase. Rafael asked you about Charlie's suitcase when the letter came from Boston."

"All right," he said impatiently, "the knife was in it. I kept it to remember Charlie. What are you trying to make out of it?"

"A picture. Out of all the little pieces that were left over."

She couldn't do it. The case was closed. Everyone was satisfied.

"When I covered Suzanne she'd been cutting the pages of your book. When they took her away, there was no book. It was in your room — a new copy with the first pages cut."

He became aware of his hands and dropped them under the table where they would not betray him. "I have no idea how it got there," he said steadily. "Maybe she wandered into my room."

"And put it carefully into the book-

shelf? Besides, I know she didn't get up after I covered her."

Years ago he had been afraid of her cleverness. But now he was clever too — clever enough to have held his place in the sun. "Then you know more than the police. Her shoe was in the bathroom."

"Anybody could have put it there."

There were little darks hairs on her upper lip with drops of perspiration between them. He wondered how he could ever have wanted to kiss her. Suddenly he wanted to clash swords, beat her down and be rid of her. "Stop fencing and say what you're driving at."

"I will, Konrad. That's why I'm here. When you came up from the studio, you looked as if you'd seen a ghost. It was the ghost of Charlie Adler, wasn't it?" He moved his chair around the arc of the table. She was sitting between him and the sun. "He was a paratrooper. Dale Archer — it's almost an anagram of Charlie Adler. You couldn't bear to throw away even the letters in a name."

A strange voice came out of his throat. "Can't a man write a book about a friend?"

"You never mentioned that your book was about Charlie. What were you ashamed of, Konnie?"

The thought came to him that if he merely leaned across the table he could put a cord of fingers around her throat and draw it tight. A feeling of power flowed up from the band of fingers tightening around the brace of the table. They encountered a piece

of wrapping cord still tied to the underside. Working the knot, he lost track of what she was saying. Something about the Sorels. "—they quarreled because she'd read his diary. It was in the suitcase. Oh, Konnie, you fool, no diary could have been what your book is. You didn't have to be Vorak the Genius. You could have been Vorak the Artist who shaped gold into something beautiful."

The cord was loose in his hands. It was heavy cord — heavy enough —

"Stay where you are, Konrad." She was at the patio gate and the table was between them. "I have someone waiting outside. But I wanted to tell you first. Suzanne never got up from that couch to go to the bathroom, to turn off the gas heater, to turn it on again. She never stirred from that couch after I covered her. Because

when I covered her she had the knife in her hand. Sunday morning it was *still* in her hand — in the *same* hand — *in the same position* — the forefinger lying along the blade and the blade pointed the same way. Pointed at murder, Konrad. . . ."

The gate slammed. He was alone in the patio. Words still hung in the air. . . . "I'm sorry for you, Konnie . . . you threw away all the wrong things" . . . The locket and the bracelet lay side by side on the table but no more pinpoints glittered in the sun. The sun was imprisoned in the canyon to the west. He could feel the metal bars of the chair against his legs. He looked at the length or rope dangling from his fingers.

You never know when a piece of rope might save your life.

Or hang you.

MORE ABOUT THE AUTHOR: Here are excerpts from Viola Brothers Shore's letter to your Editor: "Dear E.Q. — I don't know why I find it so hard to get down a few words about my past — or maybe, Freud willing, I don't want to know. I suppose it's so hard to hit that note of humorous modesty through which is clearly discernible every spangle on a glittering past. Now, if you had asked me about the future —

"I got started on mysteries long ago and there was nothing mysterious about it. I loved reading them and I said to a man who shall be nameless, 'I wonder whether I could do one of those.' It seemed to me you just figured out why somebody murdered somebody and how — and then you started telling it to the reader in a way that made him think, you hoped, that somebody else did it. (I said this was all long, long ago, when the mystery yarn was still in its most-unlikely-suspect stage and before it had been psycho-analyzed.) And he said, with that touching faith which has always endeared the sex to me, I bet you could.

"So a fier a day at the Paramount Mills on Marathon Avenue I would come home and have myself a time at my desk with a character named

Gwynn Leith who solved what I called THE BEAUTY MASK MURDER. To my genuine amazement (not to mention the dumfounding of the lady agent who had advised me to put my first mystery baby back into the desk) Ray Long and Bill Lengel bought it for "Cosmopolitan." So I wrote another called MURDER ON THE GLASS FLOOR which Mary King of the Chicago Tribune Syndicate bought. And Ray Long-Richard Smith published both in book form. After which the firm went out of business and me too. I got interested in exploring other media.

"I occasionally took a whack at a short story or a short-short, a couple of which you published and one of which you included in your 101 YEARS' ENTERTAINMENT. Which was such a tonic to my ego that when I saw the announcement of your contest, I felt that old tickling sensation (wondering whether I could do one of those prize-winners). No longer being interested exclusively in Who dun it, or even How, but being very much interested in Why, I tried my hand at a Whyhedunit.

"Dear Messrs. E. Queen, in view of what you have done for me, I am happy to endorse your product. I look forward with a gourmet-drool to each issue. I won't like everything, but I'm sure to get the kick-of-the-month out of EQMM. And if I go on exploring the avenues of character study which I feel today's mystery story demands, I have to thank EQMM for stirring up my interest, giving me a market, and a good high mark to shoot at."

Now you know some of the thought processes, some of the creative gestation, that made "Rope's End" the kind of story it is — and why, no matter how high a mark we give Vi Shore to shoot at, she consistently hits a bull's-eye . . .



No detective-story writer in the business can write about children-and-crime with as much poignancy and macabre insight as the collaboration known to the world as Q. Patrick. Their studies in the morbid phases of juvenile delinquency, their understanding of that peculiar scion psychology which is twisted by an inner compulsion to kill, are positively harrowing—remember their "Portrait of a Murderer" and their prize-winning story, "Witness for the Prosecution"? As if any discriminating aficionado could ever forget . . .

Q. Patrick's latest tour de force in this field is the tale of Branson Foster—"Little Boy Lost." It is a thoroughly frightening dissection of what goes on in the head and heart of a child.

LITTLE BOY LOST

by Q. PATRICK

THE DAY his father died was chiefly memorable to Branson Foster because he was allowed to sleep in the small dressing-room off his mother's bedroom. An end was thus made to the nights in the fourth-storey attic where the little boy had lain obstinately awake, afraid of the hostile darkness, resenting the adult injustice that separated him from the mother who adored and spoiled him. It was his father who had been responsible for his exile, and now that formidable presence, whose black mustache smelt of mouthwash and the top of breakfast eggs, was gone.

His father's death brought Branson not only comfort but freedom from the fear that had haunted him since his eighth birthday. The question of his departure to a boys' boarding school had lapsed. Branny's mother had given him tearful reassurance on

that point as she kissed him goodnight and tucked him under the delicious warmth of the quilted eiderdown.

"You are the man of the house now, darling. You must stay and help your poor mummie run this silly old girls' school."

Almost certainly, the vague, bewildered Constance Foster never dreamed that her passionate adoration might be harmful for a son of nearly nine. In 1915, small English seaside resorts had not heard of mother-fixations. Nor was Dr. Sigmund Freud even a name at Oaklawn School for Girls in Littleton-on-Sea. With the death of her husband it seemed only natural to her that mother and son, sharing a common grief, should cling even closer together.

After the funeral, at which the wheezing voice of the vicar had consigned the mustache to eternal rest,

Branny's bed was put permanently in the little room adjoining his mother's. Attics, Mrs. Foster argued, were dangerous in wartime. From then on, going to bed became a pleasure rather than a terror for Branny. He could read as long as he liked and when his mother came upstairs, he could hear her gentle movements through the quarter-opened door and bask in the warm certainty of her nearness and safety. And during her frequent spells of poorliness — for Mrs. Foster considered herself frail — he could tiptoe into her room when his anxiety for her goaded him too painfully, and satisfy himself that the fragile, cherished figure in the bed was actually alive and breathing.

Almost every day of this new life brought a major or minor delight. The older girls made much of their headmistress's only son in his be-reavement. The younger girls constituted a respectful audience for whose benefit he could strut as the only male in a household of women. And as a symbol of his importance, he was permitted full use of the front stairs, strictly forbidden to housemaids, girls, and even to junior mistresses.

Each golden day reached its climax in the evening when instead of taking plain supper in the school dining-room, he had light tea alone with his mother in his father's erstwhile study. Often the meagre wartime fare would be augmented by a boiled egg, a tin of sardines, or some similar delicacy.

His mother would watch him de-

vour these with a smile half-excited, half-guilty, murmuring:

"It's naughty of me, I know, in wartime, but a growing boy really does need it."

Luckily for the finances of Oaklawn School, she did not entertain a similar sentiment with regard to the forty or fifty growing girls under her care.

The middle weeks of the summer term passed for mother and son as an idyl. Mrs. Foster looked prettier than ever in her widow's weeds which lent an air of pathos to the soft brown eyes and heightened the ethereal pallor of her perfect skin. She was careful to present the world with a decorous show of grief. But inwardly she, like her son, was happier than she had been in years. Her husband's hand, heavy as his mustache, was no longer there to suppress her natural volatility. Branny spoiled her as she spoiled him. With her son she could yield to her moods of almost childish gaiety. She could also indulge the tendency to poorliness which Mr. Foster had so unimaginatively discouraged. When the responsibilities of her position became too irksome, it was delightful to pamper a mild headache in a darkened room while Branny hovered with solicitude and *eau de cologne*.

As sole principal of Oaklawn School, Mrs. Foster dreamily muddled the accounts, allowed the servants and tradespeople to lead her by the nose, and let institutional discipline slide.

But, halcyon as this period was, it

carried in it, unknown to Branny, the seed of its own destruction. The late George Foster had bought Oaklawn School for Girls with his wife's money and had made her joint principal. But he himself had owned two-thirds of the goodwill and knowing his Constance, had anticipated just such a situation as had now arisen. He had loved the school, built it up through his own labors, and had made testamentary precautions to preserve it.

Hence the invasion of the Aunts. This started by what, in the second World War, would have been termed "infiltration."

Aunt Nellie was the first to come. There seemed nothing particularly ominous about her arrival since she appeared toward the end of the summer term, wearing dark glasses as the result of a visit to an oculist in the nearby town of Bristol. Branny had seen Aunt Nellie only once before and connected her pleasantly with strawberries and cream for tea on the lawn and a "silver penny" on her departure for India. In the dim past, an amorous purser on a P and O liner had called her a "dashed pretty woman" and the epithet had stuck, although it had long since lost any semblance of accuracy.

Aunt Nellie was discovered in the drawing room just before lunch one day. Branny's mother said:

"Come in, darling, and say how d'you do to your pretty aunt."

Branny stared at Aunt Nellie solemnly. She said, giggling:

"Not pretty with these awful glasses on, Constance. There, I'll take them off."

Branny was still unimpressed. He saw a massive woman with fluffy pinkish hair, a great deal of jewelry, light bloodshot eyes, and a high color. Since he was in love with a small, dark woman with large eyes and ivory cheeks, he had every reason to remain unimpressed. When his aunt had removed the glasses, he said gravely:

"You aren't so very pretty even now, are you?"

Aunt Nellie laughed again and said: "Now is that a gallant thing for a little pukka sahib to say?"

And being a woman, she never forgave him.

There was no silver penny this time — and no departure.

Aunt Nellie was currently without occupation or domicile. She had made the war an excuse to get away from India where she had left a dyspeptic colonel husband to his curries and concubines. Abandoning India, however, had not made her abandon its vocabulary. Everything around Oaklawn School became pukka or not pukka. Lunch became tiffin. Mrs. Foster was a memsahib, and Aunt Nellie drove the servants almost crazy by addressing them as ayahs and giving capricious orders in bastard Hindustani. Also, owing to the demands of her elaborate toilet, she spent an indecent amount of time in the bathroom.

But at first Aunt Nellie's visit was

rather a joke to Branny. Her garrulous intrusion upon his private teas with his mother was tiresome, but she brought compensatory delights. For example, he discovered the joys of exploring her bedroom and made the younger pupils goggle incredulously at the report of his discoveries there. Once, thinking Aunt Nellie safely in the bathroom, he had be-dizened himself with her cosmetics, wrapped himself in her satin peignoir, and attaching a pinkish false front to his head, had run down to the second form classroom to the hysterical delight of a bevy of little girls.

But he had paid dearly for this short-lived accolade. Aunt Nellie was lying in wait for him behind the bathroom door as he sneaked upstairs. She swooped out, a bald, outraged condor, and seized him. Snatching her property, she shook Branny till his teeth chattered, slapped his painted face several times, and banged his head against the bathroom wall so hard that Mrs. Foster, attracted by her beloved's outcries, hovered ineffectually, screaming:

"Pas sa tête, Nellie. Pas sa tête."

Nor did Branny's punishment end there. For a whole week Aunt Nellie refused implacably to eat at the same table with him and he was obliged for seven days to forego his teas with his mother and to partake once again of thick slices of bread without even jam at the "kids" table in the school dining-room.

These tribulations, however, did not greatly disturb Branny for Aunt

Nellie, despite the length of her stay, was a visitor and must, surely, depart in time. Soon he and his mother would be alone again and life would reassume its untarnished bloom.

He wrote Aunt Nellie a polite little note of apology which was frigidly accepted. In due course the teas were resumed.

It was on the second evening of his rehabilitation that Branny began to suspect Aunt Nellie was not a visitor after all. Over the teacups his aunt and his mother were discussing the French Mademoiselle who had been recalled by a telegram to her native Paris.

"It's about time, Constance," remarked Aunt Nellie, "that I started to do my war bit, *n'est ce pas?*"

And sure enough, when it came to the period for French next morning, there was Aunt Nellie to give the lesson, Aunt Nellie insisting on a far too-French French accent from her pupils and making herself ridiculous by singing little French songs which no one understood.

From that day on Aunt Nellie gave up Hindustani and interlarded every sentence with a French word or phrase and embellished them with pretty Gallic gestures.

But Anglo-Indian or Anglo-French, she seemed to have become a permanency.

As the summer term drew to a close Branny continually begged his mother to deny this dreadful possibility but she put him off by references to the school's goodwill which were

meaningless to him.

The blow really fell about the middle of the summer holidays. For several days his mother had been busy with correspondence. The zeppelin raids over London had started and parents were rushing their children from the east to safer schools in the west. It had been necessary to have a new stock of prospectuses printed.

Idly Branny picked up one of these as he stood by his mother waiting for her to finish a letter. The front page riveted his attention. Under the heading:

OAKLAWN SCHOOL
FOR GIRLS

in place of the familiar Principals, Mr. and Mrs. George H. Foster, he read:

Principals: Mrs. George H. Foster
Mrs. John Delaney
Miss Hilda Foster

Mrs. John Delaney was Aunt Nellie. Under other circumstances, that would have been sufficiently terrible. But Miss Hilda Foster was Aunt Hilda, the fabulous, almost mythical Aunt Hilda of whom the very memory was panic.

And she was coming here to Oaklawn to be joint headmistress with Aunt Nellie and his mother. The idea was beyond contemplation.

"But, mummy," he wailed, "she can't come here. This is *your* school. It was yours and daddy's."

Mrs. Foster kissed him a trifle wistfully and explained that his father had wished and willed things so.

"You'll see, Branny," she con-

cluded, "with your aunts here we'll have more time together. Time for walks in the country, picnics."

But Branny felt desolation like a stone in the pit of his stomach. He locked himself in the lavatory and cried until he was violently sick.

Aunt Hilda arrived with the first days of September, about two weeks before the beginning of the winter term. She was even more terrifying than Branny's memory of her.

Having been paid companion to a difficult lady of title, she had waited for her death and its consequent small annuity before descending on Oaklawn. She immediately showed that there is no female tyrant so absolute as one who has herself been under tyranny.

In appearance she was almost the exact opposite of Aunt Nellie. There was no false front about Aunt Hilda, either actual or metaphorical. A short, heavy woman, she wore her grayish hair back uncompromisingly from her forehead. Her manner was as uncompromising as a steam shovel. She creaked like one, too, as she moved heavily about, clucking at the inefficiencies of the establishment. She clucked over the school accounts, the tradesmen's bills. She clucked over the laxity of the domestics, and several of Branny's friends among the kitchen staff—especially those on whom he could rely for snatches of food at illicit hours—were sent away in tears. Aunt Hilda clucked disapprovingly over Mrs. Foster too, whisking away all her sister-in-law's

faint protests with an abrupt:

"Nonsense, Constance."

When the more important things in the establishment had been clucked into a state of dull efficiency, Aunt Hilda turned her attention to Branny, who, she decided, was a shockingly coddled child. First of all she banished him once again to the fear-inhabited attic bedroom. Having neither the strength of will nor the command of vocabulary to defy her sister-in-law, Mrs. Foster tried at least to soften this blow for her son by providing him with a night-light. But Aunt Hilda snapped:

"Nonsense, Constance, stop pampering the child. Besides, it's unpatriotic to waste tallow in wartime."

It was unpatriotic, apparently, to waste quite a few things on Branny. The teas stopped almost immediately and his diet was rigidly overhauled. Meat, which he loved, was almost forbidden. In place of warm slices from a new cottage loaf with butter or jam, he had to make out with thick slices of yesterday's bread scraped by Aunt Hilda's own hands with a thin film of margarine. And at breakfast, even in holiday time when there were no pupils to consider, he had to endure the agony of lumpy porridge swimming in hot milk while his aunts, good trencherwomen both, partook liberally of ham, sausages, or poached eggs and bacon.

Exasperated one morning when Constance furtively slipped a sausage to Branny from her own plate, Aunt Hilda pronounced the dreaded words:

"Constance, you are hopeless with that child. There is only one thing to do. He must go to a boys' boarding school. He needs the discipline of boys of his own age. You are turning him into a milksop."

There followed a heated argument at the end of which Constance dissolved in tears and Branny, goaded beyond endurance called his aunts "Two fat old pigs."

Oddly enough in this impasse it was Aunt Nellie who came forward with a solution which more or less proved satisfactory to all parties. She approached Constance some hours later in her bedroom where she had taken her poorliness and Branny after the storm in the breakfast teacups. Aunt Nellie argued with sweet persuasiveness. No one wanted to get rid of dear Branson, of course, but Constance must admit it was not good for a child to be the only little boy in a school for girls. Now she, Aunt Nellie, had been writing to her friends in Mysore; indeed, she flattered herself she had worked up quite a neat little Anglo-Indian connection for the school. In some cases parents had not wanted their children to be separated, it being wartime and India being so far away, and several girls could be snared for the school provided their little brothers could also be admitted. The introduction of boys into the school would not only solve the problem of Branny, it would bring the sisters proportionate financial benefits.

It was this last consideration which

won the nod of approval from Aunt Hilda, and the winter term was not too far advanced by the time Branny was sharing his attic — now pretentiously called the boys' dormitory — with the first harbinger of the male contingent.

Branny might almost have been at boarding school, so far had he been severed from his mother. They had to scheme for their meetings like guilty lovers. Since Branny could do nothing, it was Mrs. Foster who developed craft. She persuaded one of the junior governesses that she was not "strong" enough and substituted herself as director of the younger children's afternoon walk. She imagined ailments for the solitary male boarder so that she could sneak up to the dormitory for a surreptitious squeeze of Branny's hand before "Lights out."

These were, however, frugal crumbs of comfort for Branny. Life had become even bleaker than in the most flourishing days of the mustache. And with the stubborn simplification of the very young, Branny viewed the causes of this new régime and affixed all the blame for it on Aunt Hilda.

From then on he hated Aunt Hilda with a hatred that was the more bitter because there was no one with whom he could share it.

Although the admission of boys to Oaklawn had brought him no positive advantages, it did bring him a friend and ally who influenced him profoundly. This was the male boarder, a youngster of Branny's own age, who was afflicted with the name of Marmalade.

His father was the Vice-vice something-or-other of something-or-other in India and the son was Vice and Sophistication personified. A degenerate imp, as Aunt Hilda was to call him later, not without a certain approximation to essential truth.

Branny was a trifle overawed when this angelic-looking child first appeared. In fact everyone was overawed by Marmalade, as he himself chose to be called. Aunt Hilda, observing his ethereal complexion and remembering the alphabetic distinctions following his father's name, decreed an extra blanket for him and a glass of milk at midday.

This milk, intended by Aunt Hilda as a special mark of favor, produced an unexpected result. For Marmalade had a passionate and whimsical hatred for milk and when it became plain that milk was to be forced upon him willynilly, this hatred transferred itself to Aunt Hilda as the instigator of his misery. In a short time his loathing outrivalled and outshone even that of Branny.

Indeed, Marmalade was obsessed with Aunt Hilda. He brewed malice against her with every breath and being a talented boy both with pencil and in doggerel rhythm, he mightily convulsed Branny with his verses and sketches. Outwardly he was honey-sweet to her but behind her back the angel was transformed into a monster. He invented innumerable names for her, among which the few printable ones were "blackbeetle," "hellwitch,"

and "the female gorilla."

There is nothing like hatred to breed hatred in others. Branny and Marmalade fanned each other to a pitch of frenzy and in this new alliance with a boy of his own age against the Arch-Enemy, Branny forgot some of his hunger for his mother.

Gradually and imperceptibly Marmalade led the more timid Branny into action. It started with a terrifying, tiptoed investigation of Aunt Hilda's bedroom. The yield was less exotic than that of Aunt Nellie's room. There were some severe black dresses with whalebone collar-supports which Marmalade promptly removed; a coroneted handkerchief sachet, doubtless the gift of the titled lady whose declining years had been cheered; some entrancing thick bloomers over which the two boys giggled; and several pairs of formidable stays.

The nearest approach to feminine daintiness was a bottle of *eau de cologne*. Following Marmalade's lead, Branny spat into it long and dribblingly.

The most intriguing object was a key hidden in a small drawer. After frantic detective work it was found to open a small medicine closet on the shelf above Aunt Hilda's bed. Its contents were disappointing too. Apart from a few household medications, there was an enema tube, whose purpose was unknown even to the sophisticated Marmalade, and a small bottle labeled brandy.

Marmalade pointed to it in delight. "Look, man. I bet the old

blackbeetle guzzles brandy all night. Bet she gets drunk as a geyser, man."

This allegation, though fascinating, was incidentally quite unfounded. Aunt Hilda was the soberest of mortals and kept a small supply of brandy as an emergency measure against sickness in others of less iron constitution.

Marmalade pointed excitedly to another bottle of approximately the same size and shape. It was labeled TINCTURE OF IODINE — POISON, and there was a red skull and crossbones.

"Coo, man, let's pour some of that into the brandy," he said daringly, "so next time the old witch takes a swig —"

"Gosh, no, man. You'd get put in prison or hanged." Branny's voice was awestruck. He had a wholesome terror of the forces of law and justice.

Marmalade snorted. "Who cares for the rotten old police? If old blackbeetle was out in India, we'd do her in easy, man. One of my Dad's houseboys pushed his wife off a cliff into the river and a crocodile ate her. Never found out either till someone killed the crocodile and found her bracelet inside. He didn't get into any kind of a row." Marmy's saintlike face puckered in a simian grin. "Pity the poor crocodile that ate old hellwitch."

But since there were no cliffs and no crocodiles at the Oaklawn School, little that was productive could be gleaned from this lurid reminiscence. Satisfying themselves with a last dribble in the *eau de cologne* bottle, the two boys stole away to safety.

Apparently nothing was suspected and the conspirators exchanged ecstatic grins every time Aunt Hilda took out her handkerchief and a faint whiff of *eau de cologne* assailed their nostrils.

Not long content with past triumphs, Marmalade's fertile mind soon conceived a new plan of attack. Pleading scientific experiments, he made a surreptitious deal with Ruby, the most amenable of the scullery maids, whereby for the sum of one half-penny apiece she would hand over to him every live mouse caught in the kitchen traps. They soon had quite a flourishing family which they kept in a biscuit tin and fed on crusts from their supper.

At last the hour to strike came. Aunt Hilda's only real self-indulgence was an hour of "forty winks" after tea. It was an immutable law and one could absolutely count upon it. Plans were duly laid. Branny was to stand guard at the foot of the front stairs while Marmalade stole up the back way with his biscuit tin and planted the mice in Aunt Hilda's bed.

Branny waited breathlessly at his post. He could hear the clink of cups where his mother and aunts were taking their tea. Everything was running smoothly. Marmalade reappeared, his golden face beautiful with anticipation.

"Right between the sheets, man. All four of 'em. I bet the old —"

"Cave," whispered Branny, for at that moment the study door opened and Aunt Hilda appeared. They with-

drew into the shadows where they could not be seen but from whence they could watch the broad black back as it camelled its way ponderously upward over the drugget and stair rods.

The two children waited in the darkness, hardly daring to breathe.

At last it came — that faint scream which was probably the most feminine act ever perpetrated by Aunt Hilda. They heard her door open, they saw her appear, clad in a gray woolen dressing gown, at the top of the stairs.

Then, for all her bulk, Aunt Hilda ran down the front stairs as swiftly as a young doe, calling to no one in particular.

"The cat, quick! Mouse in my bed!"

The cat was duly obtained and shut in Aunt Hilda's room where it allegedly left a half-eaten carcass under the bed.

Though the two boys hovered around, they never discovered the fate of the other mice. Whether they were squashed by the bulk of Aunt Hilda or whether they escaped to plague her further was forever shrouded in mystery.

But the reason for the mice's presence in her bed did not long remain a mystery to the astute Aunt Hilda. The truth was made plain after a rigorous cross-examination of the scullery maid, Ruby, and Branny and Marmy received the Wages of Sin.

They were ordered to spend the rest of the day locked in their room,

where they were to write one hundred times in their best copperplate hand the laudable sentence:

"Do unto others as you would be done by."

No food would be served until Aunt Hilda was satisfied with their task.

They wasted considerable time trying to tie two nibs on to a single pen and thus do two lines at once. Finally they abandoned this and settled to their work, which they finished about an hour after their normal dinner time. They were, of course, ravenous, but they were too proud to signal their distress. However, they had a friend at court, for a faint rustling under the door attracted their attention and they saw six thin bars of milk chocolate appear under the crack. They fell on them and devoured them avidly without speculation as to their source.

It was typical of Branny's love for his mother that he never subsequently caused her embarrassment by thanking her. In some respects he was a very tactful and gallant gentleman.

As the afternoon lengthened with no sign from their jailer, Satan inevitably entered to find mischief for idle hands. He started innocently enough, goading Marmalade to write a number of lyrics all beginning with the line of their imposition.

But after a while this palled and the poet turned artist. Since they had used up all their paper, Marmalade adorned the end-leaves of Branny's copy of *Black Beauty* with caricatures

of Aunt Hilda's ample figure, which became increasingly anatomical. By the time they heard Aunt Hilda's footsteps on the stairs, the end-papers of Miss Sewell's innocuous little opus were in a condition which would have caused the cheeks of its authoress to turn deep scarlet. Quickly *Black Beauty* was hidden behind the other books on the shelf and forgotten.

Although Marmalade remained the only male boarder, Oaklawn School for Girls prospered financially — an undeniable fact of which the aunts made capital, attributing it, of course, to their own efficiency and overlooking the geographical and chronological aspects of the case.

Branny, as far divorced as ever from his mother, dreamed of the holidays for which he and his mother had secretly planned a trip to Weston-Super-Mare.

But when the holidays came his dreams were shattered, for Aunt Nellie's Anglo-Indian connection had been all too successful and there were several unwanted, homeless girls who had nowhere to go and had to remain under the school's care.

So Constance was required to stay at home and Branny stayed too, eating the same uninteresting food as during term time and denied even the use of the front stairs.

But life was not too impossible — at least not until the day that Aunt Hilda started, unbeknown to anyone else, to collect items for a local Church bazaar for the Belgian Refugee Fund. During the course of her probings,

she came upon Branny's books and it was not long before *Black Beauty* was discovered. Unfortunately there was a duplicate copy and she picked on the one in which Marmalade, now vacationing with an aunt in Chapstow, had made his recognizable drawings.

It went to the vicarage along with other books, a faded lampshade, two broken parasols, a wilted pair of chintz curtains, and a supernumerary pair of andirons.

Branny was in the garden the next day when the vicar's wife arrived. With the sure instinct of childhood, he knew that there was trouble brewing even before he saw *Black Beauty* clasped to an indignant bosom.

He gave her one of his slowest, sweetest smiles, but she hardly responded. Then his heart went sick because he saw what she was carrying.

She was shown to the drawing-room to see Aunt Hilda, and soon Branny's mother and Aunt Nellie were sent for. Branny hovered around but acoustically the drawing-room was poor — that is, for people listening outside the door. He heard nothing but later, when the vicar's wife left and the conference was transferred to the study, his eavesdropping was more successful.

"It's entirely your fault, Constance," Aunt Hilda was speaking. "You've raised the child without the first principles of discipline."

"He needs a good whipping," this from Aunt Nellie.

"It's not his fault and you're not to

touch him." Branny could hear his mother's voice, tearful but determined. Then he caught the mention of Marmalade's name.

"That degenerate imp . . . he'll have to go . . . wouldn't have had Mrs. Jackson . . . for the world . . . scandal . . . ruin the school . . . of course, Branny must go too."

It was more than Branny could bear. He pushed open the door and marched in.

The three women were sitting around the center table. His mother held a handkerchief up to her face. Aunt Hilda's arms were folded across a broad intransigent chest. Aunt Nellie drummed jeweled fingers. On the table lay *Black Beauty*, open at the end-pages, the broad caricatures glaringly displayed.

Branny's eyes were riveted on them in horrified fascination. Then some strange impulse seized him and he started to laugh, helplessly, hysterically.

"Branson Foster." Aunt Hilda's voice thundered through the room. But it was Aunt Nellie's ringed hand that delivered the sharp slap to the boy's face.

"Stop it — at once!"

Branny's laughter ended as abruptly as it had begun.

He moved toward his mother, seeking her face. But it was hidden behind her handkerchief.

Aunt Hilda demanded: "Branson, did you — er — perpetrate these — these —?"

Branson was still looking at his

mother, paying no attention to Aunt Hilda.

"Speak up, you wicked child," rapped Aunt Nellie.

But Branny did not answer. The aunts started talking, both at once. Branny had found his mother's hand and was squeezing it. His touch seemed to give her courage because she spoke at last.

"Hilda, Nellie," she faltered. "Leave us alone, will you, please?"

"Very well, Constance. He's *your* son." Aunt Hilda rose ponderously. "But if you find he isn't innocent — and I can't believe he is . . ."

"Innocent," snorted Aunt Nellie. "He must have a good whipping."

Aunt Hilda took a ruler from the desk and pushed it across the table towards Constance. The two aunts withdrew.

Alone with his mother, Branny did not speak for a moment. His eyes turned again to the dreadful book on the table. Then suddenly, almost fiercely, he picked it up and threw it in the fire. The sight of the flames curling around the images of Aunt Hilda gave him a strange satisfaction.

His mother's large brown eyes were staring at him inquiringly.

"Oh, Branny, did you. . . . Oh, if only I knew what to do . . . if your father were alive."

His eyes downcast, Branny said: "I didn't do it but — but I don't want Them to know I didn't."

"But Branny . . ."

"I'll take a whipping." He took the ruler from the table and held it out.

"But Branny . . . if you're innocent —"

"I'll take a whipping," he repeated doggedly.

"Oh, Branny, I know what it is. You don't want to tell on Marmy."

Still Constance did not move. Her large brown eyes filled with tears. With sudden determination Branny seized the ruler from her with his right hand and brought it down on his own left palm with hard, painful whacks. After each blow he uttered a realistic howl. He changed hands, striking at his right hand. With the sixth blow he gave vent to a burst of caterwauling which, for all its violence, was almost sincere.

Then he rushed from the room, past his listening aunts who looked at each other and nodded in satisfaction. He could almost hear them saying:

"I didn't know poor Constance had it in her."

He ran up the front stairs to his room and stayed there almost all day.

When next he saw his mother alone, he learned that Aunt Hilda was adamant about his going away to a boys' boarding school next term. Marmy would have to leave, too.

And when he went up to bed in his lonely attic, Aunt Hilda forbade him once again the use of the front stairs. That night he dreamed of Marmy's Indian crocodile, but the woman toppling over the cliff into the reptile's jaws was not the houseboy's wife, it was Aunt Hilda. And when he awoke,

a strange quivering of excitement was in him. If Aunt Hilda were gone, life could be golden again. Accidents did happen. Why couldn't an accident happen to Aunt Hilda?

Once his mind had leaped this terrific hurdle, the idea was never out of his thoughts. He nursed it like a secret joy. An accident had happened to the wife of Marmy's father's houseboy and nothing had happened to the houseboy. Marmy had said so. The profundity of Marmy's influence on him was beginning to show. Timid, unassertive, he would never have imagined what he was imagining if the other boy had not taught him that one can fight even the most formidable foe.

His dreamings were at first thrilling but vague. He remembered the blue bottle of iodine in Aunt Hilda's room with its red skull and marked with the word POISON, and wondered what would happen if by chance some of it got into Aunt Hilda's brandy. Iodine tasted bad. Branny knew that because he had licked some off once after it had been applied to a cut finger. Probably Aunt Hilda would taste the iodine and not drink the brandy. No, the accident wouldn't happen that way.

Branny's mind dwelt constantly and caressingly on Marmy's Indian reminiscence of the unwanted wife, the cliff, and the crocodile. His days and nights were exalted with an image of Aunt Hilda falling from a high place, while below, its jaws gaping to receive its prey, squatted a

monstrous but cooperative crocodile. In Branny's secret dream world, Aunt Hilda gradually stopped being a human being. She became a symbol of Injustice. If something happened to her, it would not be something happening to a real person of real flesh and blood.

He brooded more and more, yearning for the old days of closeness and safety with his beloved. He grew so pale with brooding that his mother became quite worried about him. However, she ascribed his vapors to his dread of going away to boarding school, for arrangements were already being made with a gentlemanly but inexpensive establishment in Kent and his departure was scheduled for the beginning of the Easter term.

It was the Germans, those arch-experts in murder, who brought Branny's secret desire out of the realms of dream and into reality. The zeppelin raids had now begun in earnest and it was rumored that they would not concentrate upon London alone but were planning to destroy the industrial cities of the midlands, even the nearby city of Bristol. These rumors were confirmed by a solemn visit from the vicar who, in his role of special constable, was responsible for seeing that all regulations were observed concerning the safety of Littletonians.

England was not yet blacked-out as it was to be later in the War and the street lamps had not yet been painted that bluish purple which, though picturesque, was to make the

towns and villages so gloomy at night. The menace from the air — especially in the west — was nowhere near as great as in the Second World holocaust. Nevertheless, each little town in England was beginning to take itself seriously as a target especially picked by the Kaiser himself, and black cloth for curtains was at a premium.

The menace, however inconsiderable, was there. And the vicar, a resourceful and conscientious man, felt responsible for the safety of his flock, in particular for the young lambs entrusted to the care of the principals of Oaklawn School for Girls.

Consequently, he evolved a plan and called on Mrs. Foster and the Aunts for a solemn conference.

It had been arranged by the local authorities that the approach of zepelins should be signaled by the ringing of the church bell. At the first peal it behooved everybody to extinguish all lights and betake themselves to the security of their cellars. But the vicar realized that in a house of some sixty or seventy persons — mostly young persons — there might be panic or confusion resulting in serious accidents.

He suggested that the three Principals should divide up the duties among themselves or their appointees and having decided on their battle stations, they should hold a practice or two during daylight hours. In this way the girls and mistresses would get accustomed to the routine and then — when the fatal hour

struck — they would hurry to the safety of the cellar like trained soldiers with the minimum of disorder. He further suggested that an air of jollity or "larkishness" should be given to the whole proceeding so that the children would not be unduly intimidated or alarmed.

"If I can be of any service," he concluded mildly, "you can count on me."

But that was sending coals to Newcastle. Aunt Hilda had grasped the idea perfectly. And her superb generalship was more than equal to it. In fact, it was exactly the task she relished.

After dinner the next day she addressed the whole school, including the staff and servants, allotting specific duties.

She tried, unsuccessfully, to give to the project an air of holiday or treat — a special amusement designed by herself for the delectation of the whole school. While attempting to make light of any possible danger, she managed to make her discourse sound like Pericles's Funeral Oration.

The girls and mistresses smiled half-heartedly as they trooped out of the dining-hall.

However, the actual practice alert did prove to be more fun than had been expected. Aunt Hilda scheduled it for the second hour of afternoon school. She handled it with impressive thoroughness. Girls, governesses, even the servants were instructed to go upstairs to their rooms, to undress and get right into bed, just as if it were

their normal bedtime. At the sound of the whistle, things were to begin.

It was far, far better than the algebra or French of afternoon school.

The girls loved it, especially the little ones. And how they giggled when — the whistle having sounded — Aunt Nellie appeared in a cerise peignoir and lighting the candle in broad daylight, advised them, half in English and half in French: "Look sharp, children, and prenny garde."

Squeaking and tittering could be heard from every room, particularly from the senior dormitory where Miss Earle — who had a flair for the dramatic — had appeared in a Japanese kimono with her hair actually done up in a full panoply of curl papers.

Branny enjoyed it all, too. He had, as the only possessor of a flashlight, been given a special assignment. His job was to stand at the top of the back stairs, flashing on his light when needed and shooing off any one who made a turn toward the front stairs. He entertained himself by flashing his light into the girls' eyes as they scuttled down the stairs with a "boo, look out for the zeppelins" or a surreptitious pinch for those with whom he knew he could take liberties.

After the last girl and junior staff member had been shepherded down, Branny stood at his post and watched, fascinated, as Aunt Hilda emerged from her room in a snuff-colored dressing gown and conscientiously went through the motions of turning out the unlighted gaslights in each

passage. Then, carrying a lit candle, she made her portentous way down the front stairs towards the gas bracket in the hall. She was moving fast and purposefully but on the last stair but one she stumbled and the candle fell from her hand.

As Branny scurried away to join the others in the cellar he suddenly knew what was going to happen.

A minute later, when Aunt Hilda came down, he heard her say to Ruby: "One of the rods is loose on the front stairs. See to it at once or someone will break her neck."

Branny's pulses were racing as he heard these words from the dark corner of the cellar where he was holding his mother's hand.

The stair rod is loose . . . someone will break her neck . . .

Next time, perhaps, it wouldn't be daylight. A stair rod might be loose at the top of the stairs rather than at the bottom. Then someone going down hurriedly in the darkness might easily fall all the way from the top and — break her neck. . . .

That night, when going through the stereotyped formula of his prayers: "And bless mother and all kind friends and make me a good boy. Amen," he added a rider:

"And please, God, make the zeppelins come here soon."

During the ensuing days while he was waiting for his prayers to be answered, Branny was a model boy. He was good, so obedient, that every one thought he must be sickening from some infectious disease.

He was particularly polite to Aunt Hilda, for he had inspected the front stairs very carefully. The carpet was overlaid by a drugget of thick, patterned linen. This was held in place by stair rods which fitted into rings at both ends. By pushing the rod an inch or two out of its rung on the banister side and by loosening the drugget, he found he achieved a surface almost as slippery and hazardous as a toboggan slide. Only a quick grab at the banister with the right hand could save anyone. And Aunt Hilda had held the candle in her right hand during the practice. After the fall, when the drugget would automatically be more loosened, no one could ever guess that the stair rods had been deliberately pushed out of their ring-sockets.

He decided on loosening the rods on two stairs — the third and fourth from the top — and practiced several times, even doing it with his eyes closed, since the final deed would have to be done in darkness.

With a child's implacability he trained himself to the task as thoroughly and impersonally as a guerrilla, but he never really assessed what he was doing. There was going to be an accident. That was all.

Waiting was hard, especially at night when he lay sleepless in bed, his senses tingling in expectation of the sound of the church bell. That there might be any real danger from zeppelins to himself or to his mother never even occurred to him. Branny feared no straightforward menace.

He was asleep when the church bell finally sounded at two o'clock on a bitter cold night in early December. He jumped out of bed shivering, put on his trousers and jersey, picked up his flashlight, and made his way to his appointed place between the front and back stairs.

From the girls' bedrooms he could hear twitterings, less gay and giggly now that the real thing had come. He watched the governesses moving, candles in hand, from dormitory to dormitory. Then he slipped to his mother's room and escorted her to the servants' wing, whence she was to conduct the maids down the kitchen stairs into the distant safety of the cellar.

Before the procession started was his time for action. Very quickly, and quite calmly, he ran to the front stairs and loosened the rods and the drugget on the third and fourth stairs.

Soon afterwards the girls and governesses began to troop from their dormitories. The children, for the most part, looked frightened and bewildered. Branny didn't tease them or pretend to be a zeppelin this time, but — as befitted the only male in the house — said cheerful and encouraging things.

"The old zeps won't get this far. We'll shoot 'em all down over London. You see if we don't. . . ."

Then, when everyone had dispersed — including Aunt Nellie in her cerise wrap — Branny made his way down the back stairs and to the far end of the hall where he could

keep the front stairs under observation.

He did not exactly want to witness Aunt Hilda's downfall. There was no element of sadism or gloating in his scrutiny. It was simply a ruthless sense of efficiency which made him wish to reassure himself that the accident would happen.

The church bell had stopped tolling and the minutes seemed endless. In the near-darkness he could hear the grandfather clock near him ticking off the seconds like drum beats.

Then there was the opening of a door upstairs and he recognized Aunt Hilda's heavy tread as she moved along the upstairs passages, turning out the gas. As he waited breathless, he heard another sound. Someone was running with light, swift tread up the back stairs. It must, he reflected, be one of the governesses who had forgotten something. He heard Aunt Hilda's voice saying:

"Forgotten your coat? Well, hurry up and get it. It's very cold in the cellar and I hope none of the girls . . ."

The sound of the light scurrying footsteps retreated. A door opened and closed. For a second or two there was no sound except the rhythmic ticking of the grandfather clock and the pounding of Branny's own heart.

Then footsteps again and — as he peered unseeingly into the darkness upstairs — Branny was conscious of someone approaching the top of the front stairs. Aunt Hilda must be coming down, but without her candle.

Now he could see her dimly as she

moved. She had reached the small landing at the crest of the stairs.

She started down. He watched in a kind of appalled fascination.

Then there was the metallic rattle of stair rods. A scream . . . a crash . . . as she fell forward and hurtled down the stairs, landing on the tiles of the front hall.

A little moan . . . then silence . . .

For a moment Branny stood motionless. One impulse urged him to move forward, another held him back. A sense of triumph warred with a feeling of fear for what he had done,

In the dim light from the gas by the front door he could see the dark figure lying still — very still — at the foot of the stairs.

He felt nothing — only the certainty that Aunt Hilda was there — dead.

Then he heard a sound that made his blood turn to ice. There were heavy footsteps above him and a voice came from the upstairs landing: "Good God, what has happened? Did you have an accident?"

It was a horribly familiar voice. *Aunt Hilda's voice!* He became conscious that his Aunt, holding her candle high above her head, was making her way down the stairs, skirting the perilous third and fourth steps.

Aunt Hilda was coming down the stairs. Then it could not be Aunt Hilda who was lying there, a dark pool on the tiles of the hall.

Through his agony of remorse and terror Branny heard Aunt Hilda's voice again:

"Constance, Constance, are you hurt?"

There was no need for Branny to move closer. In the nearing light from his aunt's candle, he could make out quite clearly the outlines of that figure lying there, could see the aureole of dark hair framing the beloved face, paler now than death.

"Mother!"

The word came in a groan of agony. Then Branny turned away and disappeared into the darkness.

There is a degree of suffering beyond which the human mind cannot go, even in childhood where suffering is so acute. It is beyond the realm of sanity and verges on the outer darkness beyond which there is no thought, no reason.

Luckily for Branny he reached that point of narcosis immediately. His only instinct was a blind desire to hide — somewhere far away, to fade and quite forget. Up in the attic there was a cupboard whose door he could lock from the inside. It was musty and dirty but he didn't care. It was dark and as far away from the front hall as possible.

For hours he crouched there in the darkness, his mind mercifully blank. If any conscious thought came to him it was simply that he had killed his mother and if he stayed hidden up there long enough he'd die too and that would be that.

Somewhere in the house were voices and footsteps, the girls returning from their cellar and trooping back to their

dormitories. And then someone was calling his name:

"Branny . . . Branny . . ."

But he didn't move. He'd never come out of his hiding place . . . never . . . and when they found him, if they ever did, he'd be dead and they could bury him by his mother.

He sat there, dry-eyed, and immobile as a rock. He had no sense of time or place any more. He slept. He was dimly conscious of that when he awoke. He was dimly conscious too of faint light creeping through the cracks in the door which told him it was day. Then the daylight went again. It never occurred to him that he might be hungry. He did not even feel the aching of his body. Noises sounded occasionally, infinitely remote. He heard them but he didn't try to interpret them. He slept again and awoke again to his stubborn grief.

At some point, it might have been aeons later, he heard Aunt Nellie's voice and he knew that she was near, actually in the attic.

"The cupboard, Miss Snellgrove. When Miss Foster searched up here yesterday, she never thought of the cupboard. It is just possible . . ."

And then Miss Snellgrove's tearful voice. "Oh, Mrs. Delaney, hasn't there been any new word from the police station?"

"Not a word, but it's hopeless. They have searched everywhere, all over the countryside. I am convinced, Miss Snellgrove that the boy is . . ."

At that moment the door handle

of the cupboard was vigorously shaken.

"See? It's locked. Branny." Aunt Nellie's voice was kind but strained with anxiety. "Branny, I know you are there. Do come out, there's a good boy."

Branny crouched deeper into the cupboard and pulled some musty curtains over him. They were not going to get him out by any trick of kindness or anxiety.

They were both tugging at the unyielding door.

"He must be there. Oh, Branny, do come out. . . ."

At last they went away. It seemed a long time before anyone came again and then there was the sound of footsteps and a man's voice. Branny recognized it at once as that of the doctor who had attended his father during his final illness.

"Branny — " this time it was Aunt Hilda speaking — "Dr. Berry is here to talk to you. He has something to tell you." She added hurriedly: "I'm going away so you can talk to him alone."

Branny heard her heavy footsteps departing and the doctor's voice:

"Branson, my boy, won't you come out? I want to talk to you about your mother."

Branny did not answer. They were speaking softly and gently to him now, but as soon as they got him out, they'd be harsh with him. Perhaps they had guessed what he had done on the stairs and he would be sent to prison.

Then Doctor Berry spoke again. "Branson," he said quietly, "I want you to come with me and see your mother. She's asking for you. She needs you very badly, my boy."

Branny's heart missed a beat. Through all those long hours in the darkness it had never occurred to him that his mother might still be alive.

Slowly his hand went up to the lock. Then he withdrew it again. No, this might be a trap — to lure him out so they could pounce on him.

"Branson, she's down in the drawing-room waiting. You wouldn't want to be unkind to her, would you? She's had a terrible accident. . . ."

Branny could bear it no longer. He crashed open the cupboard door and stood there facing Dr. Berry. For a moment the physician stared in astonishment at the child. Branny was covered with grime and dust. His hair was full of cobwebs and the expression on his pale face held in it all the misery of the world.

Dr. Berry was strangely touched and, dirty as Branson was, he drew him towards him. The kindness of a stranger was too much for the boy and the pent-up flow of unshed tears broke loose in a torrent.

For a moment Dr. Berry said nothing. He just held the quivering child close and patted his head while Branny wept his heart out. Then the doctor produced a handkerchief, wiped Branny's eyes, and said cheerfully:

"Come on, now, old boy. You've got to be a man. Your mother needs

a man to look after her and you're the only one in the house, you know."

Then in answer to an unspoken question, he went on: "She's going to live, Branson, but she may never be able to walk again. That's why she'll need a man like you to look after her."

He took Branny's hand and led him from the attic. "Now, go on down and have a good scrub and then we'll take you to see her. Come on, let's see a clean smiling face and look sharp."

Aunt Hilda and Aunt Nellie were waiting for him downstairs. They kissed him and Aunt Hilda said "poor little boy" as she produced the best Brown Windsor soap. Aunt Nellie got his Sunday suit and used her own comb and brush to brush the dust and cobwebs from his hair.

And then, when he looked clean and neat, Aunt Hilda said: "Your mother's in the drawing-room, dear. Her bed is down there now and you can have the little study next door all for your own. So you can look after her. And you can have all your meals together."

"And," put in Aunt Nellie with a grim attempt at cheerfulness, "after a few weeks when your mother's a

little stronger, she'll need you to push her wheel-chair. So you won't be going to boarding school next term after all . . ."

Dr. Berry led him then into the drawing-room where his mother's bed was placed near the window. She lay in it, frail and beautiful, her soft hair about her face.

"Well, here's your new nurse, Mrs. Foster."

Branny moved to his mother's bedside and took the slender hand that she held out to him. They looked long into each other's eyes like lovers.

"Branny," she breathed. "Oh, Branny, darling . . ."

After the doctor had left, they stayed there, fingers intertwined. There was a faint fall of snow outside the windows and through an open door Branny could see his own bed in the little room that had been prepared for him. There was even a fire.

Soon Aunt Hilda came in, carrying a tea tray with two cups only. There was a boiled egg for Branny and muffins to be toasted.

"Now, Nurse Branson," she said, "I'm going to leave you to take care of your patient."

Branny felt his heart would burst with joy.



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