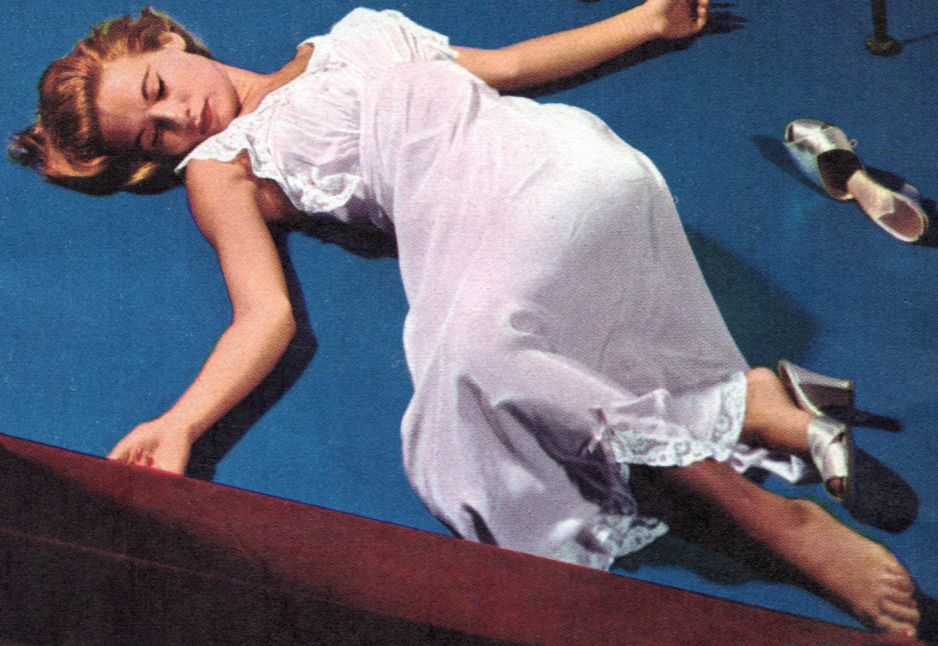


JUNE

35 Cents

ELLERY QUEEN'S MYSTERY MAGAZINE



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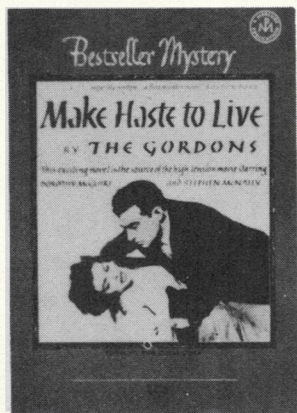
RAY BRADBURY

DOROTHY SALISBURY DAVIS

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*Her beauty masked a secret
so shameful that its exposure
meant ruin . . .*

One man knew Crystal Benson's secret — bitter, thin-lipped Steele Blackford. He turned up in town, after twenty years, with the knowledge that could destroy her. But there was something else he wanted; something that involved Crystal's lovely, teen-age daughter. And his deadly game left Crystal with a terrible choice—a choice between ruin or murder . . . "Make Haste to Live," taut and tense as a novel, is the source of the spine-tingling film, starring Dorothy McGuire and Stephen McNally. A Republic Picture.

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SUSPENSE STORIES

- THE WHOLE TOWN'S SLEEPING *Ray Bradbury* 3
AT MIDNIGHT, IN THE MONTH OF JUNE *Ray Bradbury* 134

DETECTIVE STORIES

- MUM KNOWS BEST *Margery Allingham* 16
BACKWARD, TURN BACKWARD *Dorothy Salisbury Davis* 22
THE MASTERY OF MYSTERY *Jack London* 42
THE FORTUNE TELLER *Karel Čapek* 51
THE MYSTERY OF THE FABULOUS LAUNDRYMAN *Ben Hecht* 55

BLACK MASK MAGAZINE

- DEAD SHOT *Cornell Woolrich* 96
NOTHING WILL HURT YOU, LUCY *Luttrell Tucker* 122

EQMM "FIRST"

- THE DAY OF THE LAST ROCK FIGHT *Joseph Whitehill* 65

EQMM "SPECIAL"

- QUEEN OF THE GRAVEYARD GHOULS *Barry Benefield* 81

DETECTIVE DIRECTORY

Robert P. Mills 132

INDEX TO VOLUME TWENTY-THREE

143

The best of the new and the best of the old

PUBLISHER: *Lawrence E. Spivak*

EDITOR: *Ellery Queen*

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Ray Bradbury's stories have been called "unique — they defy classification." They have appeared in many magazines, including "The New Yorker," "Mademoiselle," "Collier's," and "The Saturday Evening Post"; you have heard them on radio, seen them on television, and read them, believe it or not, in more than 60 anthologies! Some of our leading literary lights have gone quietly mad over Ray Bradbury's "extraordinary," "haunting," "beautiful," "brilliant," "fascinating" stories — and while we are in a quoting mood, let us select quotes especially applicable to the story you are about to read: "Ray Bradbury can make your blood run cold, and in the next minute bring a warm tear to your eye . . . He can invoke the nostalgia of lost childhood years, or the terror of nameless fears . . ."

And when you have finished reading "The Whole Town's Sleeping," we will tell you the strange thing that happened just after we finished reading the story . . .

THE WHOLE TOWN'S SLEEPING

by RAY BRADBURY

IT WAS A WARM SUMMER NIGHT IN the middle of Illinois country. The little town was deep far away from everything, kept to itself by a river and a forest and a ravine. In the town the sidewalks were still scorched. The stores were closing and the streets were turning dark. There were two moons: a clock moon with four faces in four night directions above the solemn black courthouse, and the real moon that was slowly rising in vanilla whiteness from the dark east.

In the downtown drug store, fans whispered in the high ceiling air. In the rococo shade of porches, invisible people sat. On the purple bricks of

the summer twilight streets, children ran. Screen doors whined their springs and banged. The heat was breathing from the dry lawns and trees.

On her solitary porch, Lavinia Nebbs, aged 37, very straight and slim, sat with a tinkling lemonade in her white fingers, tapping it to her lips, waiting.

"Here I am, Lavinia."

Lavinia turned. There was Francine, at the bottom porch step, in the smell of zinnias and hibiscus. Francine was all in snow white and she didn't look 35.

Miss Lavinia Nebbs rose and locked her front door, leaving her lemonade

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glass standing empty on the porch rail. "It's a fine night for the movie."

"Where you going, ladies?" cried Grandma Hanlon from her shadowy porch across the street.

They called back through the soft ocean of darkness: "To the Elite Theater to see Harold Lloyd in *Welcome, Danger!*"

"Won't catch *me* out on no night like this," wailed Grandma Hanlon. "Not with The Lonely One strangling women. Lock myself in with my *gun!*"

Grandma's door slammed and locked.

The two maiden ladies drifted on. Lavinia felt the warm breath of the summer night shimmering off the oven-baked sidewalk. It was like walking on a hard crust of freshly warmed bread. The heat pulsed under your dress and along your legs with a stealthy sense of invasion.

"Lavinia, you don't believe all that gossip about The Lonely One, do you?"

"Those women like to see their tongues dance."

"Just the same, Hattie McDollis was killed a month ago. And Roberta Ferry the month before. And now Eliza Ramsell has disappeared . . ."

"Hattie McDollis walked off with a traveling man, I bet."

"But the others — strangled — four of them, their tongues sticking out their mouths, they say."

They stood on the edge of the ravine that cut the town in two. Behind them were the lighted houses and

faint radio music; ahead was deepness, moistness, fireflies, and dark.

"Maybe we shouldn't go to the movie," said Francine. "The Lonely One might follow and kill us. I don't like that ravine. Look how black, smell it, and *listen.*"

The ravine was a dynamo that never stopped running, night or day: there was a great moving hum among the secret mists and washed shales, and the odors of a rank greenhouse. Always the black dynamo was humming, with green electric sparkles where fireflies hovered.

"And it won't be *me*," said Francine, "coming back through this terrible dark ravine tonight, late. It'll be you, Lavinia, you down the steps and over that rickety bridge and maybe The Lonely One standing behind a tree. I'd never have gone over to church this afternoon if I had to walk through here all alone, even in daylight."

"Bosh," said Lavinia Nebbs.

"It'll be you alone on the path, listening to your shoes, not me. And shadows. You *all alone* on the way back home. Lavinia, don't you get lonely living by yourself in that house?"

"Old maids love to live alone," said Lavinia. She pointed to a hot shadowy path. "Let's walk the short cut." "I'm afraid."

"It's early. The Lonely One won't be out till late." Lavinia, as cool as mint ice cream, took the other woman's arm and led her down the dark winding path into cricket-warmth

and frog-sound, and mosquito-delicate silence.

"Let's run," gasped Francine.

"No."

If Lavinia hadn't turned her head just then, she wouldn't have seen it. But she did turn her head, and it was there. And then Francine looked over and she saw it too, and they stood there on the path, not believing what they saw.

In the singing deep night, back among a clump of bushes — half hidden, but laid out as if she had put herself down there to enjoy the soft stars — lay Eliza Ramsell.

Francine screamed.

The woman lay as if she were floating there, her face moon-freckled, her eyes like white marble, her tongue clamped in her lips.

Lavinia felt the ravine turning like a gigantic black merry-go-round underfoot. Francine was gasping and choking, and a long while later Lavinia heard herself say, "We'd better get the police."

"Hold me, Lavinia, please hold me, I'm cold. Oh, I've never been so cold since winter."

Lavinia held Francine and the policemen were all around in the ravine grass. Flashlights darted about, voices mingled, and the night grew toward 8:30.

"It's like December. I need a sweater," said Francine, eyes shut against Lavinia's shoulder.

The policeman said, "I guess you can go now, ladies. You might drop

by the station tomorrow for a little more questioning."

Lavinia and Francine walked away from the police and the delicate sheet-covered thing on the ravine grass.

Lavinia felt her heart going loudly within her and she was cold, too, with a February cold. There were bits of sudden snow all over her flesh and the moon washed her brittle fingers whiter, and she remembered doing all the talking while Francine just sobbed.

A police voice called, "You want an escort, ladies?"

"No, we'll make it," said Lavinia, and they walked on. I can't remember anything now, she thought. I can't remember how she looked lying there, or anything. I don't believe it happened. Already I'm forgetting, I'm making myself forget.

"I've never seen a dead person before," said Francine.

Lavinia looked at her wrist watch, which seemed impossibly far away. "It's only 8:30. We'll pick up Helen and get on to the show."

"The show!"

"It's what we need."

"Lavinia, you don't mean it!"

"We've got to forget this. It's not good to remember."

"But Eliza's back there now and —"

"We need to laugh. We'll go to the show as if nothing happened."

"But Eliza was once your friend, my friend —"

"We can't help her; we can only help ourselves forget. I insist. I won't

go home and brood over it. I won't *think* of it. I'll fill my mind with everything else *but*."

They started up the side of the ravine on a stony path in the dark. They heard voices and stopped.

Below, near the creek waters, a voice was murmuring, "I am The Lonely One. I am The Lonely One. I *kill* people."

"And I'm Eliza Ramsell. Look. And I'm dead, see my tongue out my mouth, see!"

Francine shrieked. "You, there! Children, you nasty children! Get home, get out of the ravine, you hear me? Get home, get home, get home!"

The children fled from their game. The night swallowed their laughter away up the distant hills into the warm darkness.

Francine sobbed and walked on.

"I thought you ladies'd never come!" Helen Greer tapped her foot atop her porch steps. "You're only an hour late, that's all."

"We —" started Francine.

Lavinia clutched her arm. "There was a commotion. Someone found Eliza Ramsell dead in the ravine."

Helen gasped. "Who found her?"

"We don't know."

The three maiden ladies stood in the summer night looking at one another. "I've a notion to lock myself in my house," said Helen at last.

But finally she went to fetch a sweater, and while she was gone Francine whispered frantically, "Why didn't you *tell* her?"

"Why upset her? Time enough tomorrow," replied Lavinia.

The three women moved along the street under the black trees through a town that was slamming and locking doors, pulling down windows and shades and turning on blazing lights. They saw eyes peering out at them from curtained windows.

How strange, thought Lavinia Nebbs, the ice-cream night, the Popsicles dropped in puddles of lime and chocolate where they fell when the children were scooped indoors. Baseballs and bats lie on the unfootprinted lawns. A half-drawn white chalk hopscotch line is there on the steamed sidewalk.

"We're crazy out on a night like this," said Helen.

"Lonely One can't kill three ladies," said Lavinia. "There's safety in numbers. Besides, it's too soon. The murders never come less than a month apart."

A shadow fell across their faces. A figure loomed. As if someone had struck an organ a terrible blow, the three women shrieked.

"*Got* you!" The man jumped from behind a tree. Rearing into the moonlight, he laughed. Leaning on the tree, he laughed again.

"Hey, I'm the — The Lonely One!"

"Tom Dillon!"

"Tom!"

"Tom," said Lavinia. "If you ever do a childish thing like that again, may you be riddled with bullets by mistake!"

Francine began to cry.

Tom Dillon stopped smiling. "Hey, I'm sorry."

"Haven't you heard about Eliza Ramsell?" snapped Lavinia. "She's dead, and you scaring women. You should be ashamed. Don't speak to us again."

"Aw —"

He moved to follow them.

"Stay right there, Mr. Lonely One, and scare yourself," said Lavinia. "Go see Eliza Ramsell's face and see if it's funny!" She pushed the other two on along the street of trees and stars, Francine holding a handkerchief to her face.

"Francine," pleaded Helen, "it was only a joke. Why's she crying so hard?"

"I guess we better tell you, Helen. We found Eliza. And it wasn't pretty. And we're trying to forget. We're going to the show to help and let's not talk about it. Enough's enough. Get your ticket money ready, we're almost downtown."

The drug store was a small pool of sluggish air which the great wooden fans stirred in tides of arnica and tonic and soda-smell out into the brick streets.

"A nickel's worth of green mint chews," said Lavinia to the druggist. His face was set and pale, like all the faces they had seen on the half-empty streets. "For eating in the show," she explained, as the druggist dropped the mints into a sack with a silver shovel.

"Sure look pretty tonight," said

the druggist. "You looked cool this noon, Miss Lavinia, when you was in here for chocolates. So cool and nice that someone asked after you."

"Oh?"

"You're getting popular. Man sitting at the counter —" he rustled a few more mints in the sack — "watched you walk out and he said to me, 'Say, who's *that*?' Man in a dark suit, thin pale face. 'Why, that's Lavinia Nebbs, prettiest maiden lady in town,' I said. 'Beautiful,' he said. 'Where's she live?' " Here the druggist paused and looked away.

"You *didn't*?" wailed Francine. "You didn't give him her address, I hope? You *didn't*!"

"Sorry, guess I didn't think. I said, 'Oh, over on Park Street, you know, near the ravine.' Casual remark. But now, tonight, them finding the body, I heard a minute ago, I suddenly thought, what've I *done*!" He handed over the package, much too full.

"You fool!" cried Francine, and tears were in her eyes.

"I'm sorry. 'Course maybe it was nothing."

"Nothing, nothing!" said Francine.

Lavinia stood with the three people looking at her, staring at her. She didn't know what or how to feel. She felt nothing — except perhaps the slightest prickle of excitement in her throat. She held out her money automatically.

"No charge for those peppermints." The druggist turned down his eyes and shuffled some papers.

"Well, I know what we're going to

do right *now!*" Helen stalked out of the drug shop. "We're going right straight home. I'm not going to be part of any hunting party for you, Lavinia. That man asking for you. You're *next!* You want to be dead in that ravine?"

"It was just a man," said Lavinia slowly, eyes on the streets.

"So's Tom Dillon a man, but maybe he's The Lonely One!"

"We're all overwrought," said Lavinia reasonably. "I won't miss the movie now. If I'm the next victim, let me *be* the next victim. A lady has all too little excitement in her life, especially an old maid, a lady thirty-seven like me, so don't you mind if I enjoy it. And I'm being sensible. Stands to reason he won't be out tonight, so soon after a murder. A month from now, yes, when the police've relaxed and when he *feels* like another murder. You've got to *feel* like murdering people, you know. At least that kind of murderer does. And he's just resting up now. And anyway I'm not going home to stew in my own juices."

"But Eliza's face, there in the ravine!"

"After the first look I never looked again. I didn't *drink* it in, if that's what you mean. I can see a thing and tell myself I never saw it, that's how strong *I* am. And the whole argument's silly anyhow, because I'm not beautiful."

"Oh, but you are, Lavinia. You're the loveliest maiden lady in town, now that Eliza's —" Francine stopped.

"If you'd only relaxed, you'd been married years ago —"

"Stop sniveling, Francine. Here's the box office. You and Helen go on home. I'll sit alone and go home alone."

"Lavinia, you're crazy. We can't leave you here —"

They argued for five minutes. Helen started to walk away but came back when she saw Lavinia thump down her money for a solitary movie ticket. Helen and Francine followed her silently into the theater.

The first show was over. In the dim auditorium, as they sat in the odor of ancient brass polish, the manager appeared before the worn red velvet curtains for an announcement:

"The police have asked for an early closing tonight. So everyone can be home at a decent hour. So we're cutting our short subjects and putting on our feature film again now. The show will be over at 11. Everyone's advised to go straight home and not linger on the streets. Our police force is pretty small and will be spread around pretty thin."

"That means us, Lavinia. *Us!*" Lavinia felt the hands tugging at her elbows on either side.

Harold Lloyd in Welcome, Danger! said the screen in the dark.

"Lavinia," Helen whispered.

"What?"

"As we came in, a man in a dark suit, across the street, crossed over. He just came in. He just sat in the row behind us."

"Oh, Helen."

"He's right behind us *now*."

Lavinia looked at the screen.

Helen turned slowly and glanced back. "I'm calling the manager!" she cried and leaped up. "Stop the film! Lights!"

"Helen, come back!" said Lavinia, her eyes shut.

When they set down their empty soda glasses, each of the ladies had a chocolate mustache on her upper lip. They removed them with their tongues, laughing.

"You see how *silly* it was?" said Lavinia. "All that riot for nothing. How embarrassing!"

The drug-store clock said 11:25. They had come out of the theater and the laughter and the enjoyment feeling new. And now they were laughing at Helen, and Helen was laughing at herself.

Lavinia said, "When you ran up that aisle crying 'Lights!' I thought I'd die!"

"That poor man!"

"The theater manager's brother from Racine!"

"I apologized," said Helen.

"You *see* what panic can do?"

The great fans still whirled and whirled in the warm night air, stirring and restirring the smells of vanilla, raspberry, peppermint, and disinfectant in the drug store.

"We shouldn't have stopped for these sodas. The police said —"

"Oh, bosh the police," laughed Lavinia. "I'm not afraid of anything. The Lonely One is a million miles

away now. He won't be back for weeks, and the police'll get him then, just wait. Wasn't the film *funny*!"

The streets were clean and empty. Not a car or a truck or a person was in sight. The bright lights were still lit in the small store windows where the hot wax dummies stood. Their blank blue eyes watched as the ladies walked past them, down the night street.

"Do you suppose if we screamed they'd do anything?"

"Who?"

"The dummies, the window-people."

"Oh, *Francine*."

"Well . . ."

There were a hundred people in the windows, stiff and silent, and three people on the street, the echoes following like gunshots when they tapped their heels on the baked pavement.

A red neon sign flickered dimly, buzzing like a dying insect. They walked past it.

Baked and white, the long avenue lay ahead. Blowing and tall in a wind that touched only their leafy summits, the trees stood on either side of the three small women.

"First we'll walk you home, *Francine*."

"No, I'll walk *you* home."

"Don't be silly. You live the nearest. If you walked me home, you'd have to come back across the ravine all by yourself. And if so much as a leaf fell on you, you'd drop dead."

Francine said, "I can stay the night at your house. You're the *pretty* one!"

"No."

So they drifted like three prim clothes-forms over a moonlit sea of lawn and concrete and trees. To Lavinia, watching the black trees flit by, listening to the voices of her friends, the night seemed to quicken. They seemed to be running while walking slowly. Everything seemed fast, and the color of hot snow.

"Let's sing," said Lavinia.

They sang sweetly and quietly, arm in arm, not looking back. They felt the hot sidewalk cooling underfoot, moving, moving.

"Listen," said Lavinia.

They listened to the summer night, to the crickets and the far-off tone of the courthouse clock making it fifteen minutes to 12.

"Listen."

A porch swing creaked in the dark. And there was Mr. Terle, silent, alone on his porch as they passed, having a last cigar. They could see the pink cigar fire idling to and fro.

Now the lights were going, going, gone. The little house lights and big house lights, the yellow lights and green hurricane lights, the candles and oil lamps and porch lights, and everything felt locked up in brass and iron and steel. Everything, thought Lavinia, is boxed and wrapped and shaded. She imagined the people in their moonlit beds, and their breathing in the summer night, safe and together. And here we are, she thought, listening to our solitary footsteps on

the baked summer-evening sidewalk. And above us the lonely street lights shining down, making a million wild shadows.

"Here's your house, Francine. Good night."

"Lavinia, Helen, stay here tonight. It's late, almost midnight now. Mrs. Murdock has an extra room. I'll make hot chocolate. It'd be ever such fun!" Francine was holding them both close to her.

"No, thanks," said Lavinia.

And Francine began to cry.

"Oh, not *again*, Francine," said Lavinia.

"I don't want you dead," sobbed Francine, the tears running straight down her cheeks. "You're so fine and nice, I want you alive. Please, oh, please."

"Francine, I didn't realize how much this has affected you. But I promise you I'll phone when I get home, right away."

"Oh, *will* you?"

"And tell you I'm safe, yes. And tomorrow we'll have a picnic lunch at Electric Park, all right? With ham sandwiches I'll make myself. How's that? You'll see; I'm going to live forever!"

"You'll phone?"

"I promised, didn't I?"

"Good night, good night!" Francine was gone behind her door, locked tight in an instant.

"Now," said Lavinia to Helen, "I'll walk *you* home."

The courthouse clock struck the hour.

The sounds went across a town that was empty, emptier than it had ever been before. Over empty streets and empty lots and empty lawns the sound went.

"Ten, eleven, *twelve*," counted Lavinia, with Helen on her arm.

"Don't you feel *funny*?" asked Helen.

"How do you mean?"

"When you think of us being out here on the sidewalk, under the trees, and all those people safe behind locked doors lying in their beds. We're practically the only walking people out in the open in a thousand miles, I bet." The sound of the deep warm dark ravine came near.

In a minute they stood before Helen's house, looking at each other for a long time. The wind blew the odor of cut grass and wet lilacs between them. The moon was high in a sky that was beginning to cloud over. "I don't suppose it's any use asking you to stay, Lavinia?"

"I'll be going on."

"Sometimes . . ."

"Sometimes what?"

"Sometimes I think people *want* to die. You've certainly acted odd all evening."

"I'm just not afraid," said Lavinia. "And I'm curious, I suppose. And I'm using my head. Logically, The Lonely One can't be around. The police and all."

"*Our* police? *Our* little old force? They're home in bed too, the covers up over their ears."

"Let's just say I'm enjoying my-

self, precariously but safely. If there were any *real* chance of anything happening to me, I'd stay here with you, you can be sure of that."

"Maybe your subconscious doesn't want you to live any more."

"You and Francine, honestly!"

"I feel so guilty. I'll be drinking hot coffee just as you reach the ravine bottom and walk on the bridge in the dark."

"Drink a cup for me. Good night."

Lavinia Nebbs walked down the midnight street, down the late summer night silence. She saw the houses with their dark windows and far away she heard a dog barking. In five minutes, she thought, I'll be safe home. In five minutes I'll be phoning silly little Francine. I'll —

She heard a man's voice singing far away among the trees.

She walked a little faster.

Coming down the street toward her in the dimming moonlight was a man. He was walking casually.

I can run and knock on one of these doors, thought Lavinia. If necessary.

The man was singing, *Shine On, Harvest Moon*, and he carried a long club in his hand. "Well, look who's here! What a time of night for you to be out, Miss Nebbs!"

"Officer Kennedy!"

And that's who it was, of course — Officer Kennedy on his beat.

"I'd better see you home."

"Never mind, I'll make it."

"But you live *across* the ravine."

Yes, she thought, but I won't walk

the ravine with *any* man. How do I know *who* The Lonely One is? "No, thanks," she said.

"I'll wait right here then," he said. "If you need help give a yell. I'll come running."

She went on, leaving him under a light, humming to himself, alone.

Here I am, she thought.

The ravine.

She stood on the top of the 113 steps down the steep, brambled bank that led across the creaking bridge and up through the black hills to Park Street. And only one lantern to see by. Three minutes from now, she thought, I'll be putting my key in my house door. Nothing can happen in just 180 seconds.

She started down the dark green steps into the deep ravine night.

"One, two, three, four, five, six, seven, eight, nine steps" she whispered.

She felt she was running but she was not running.

"Fifteen, sixteen, seventeen, eighteen, nineteen steps," she counted aloud.

The ravine was deep, deep and black, black. And the world was gone, the world of safe people in bed. The locked doors, the town, the drug store, the theater, the lights, everything was gone. Only the ravine existed and lived, black and huge about her.

"Nothing's happened, has it? No one around, is there? Twenty-four, twenty-five steps. Remember that old ghost story you told each other when you were children?"

She listened to her feet on the steps.

"The story about the dark man coming in your house and you up-stairs in bed. And now he's at the *first* step coming up to your room. Now he's at the *second* step. Now he's at the third and the fourth and the *fifth* step! Oh, how you laughed and screamed at that story! And now the horrid dark man is at the twelfth step, opening your door, and now he's standing by your bed. I *got you!*"

She screamed. It was like nothing she had ever heard, that scream. She had never screamed that loud in her life. She stopped, she froze, she clung to the wooden banister. Her heart exploded in her. The sound of its terrified beating filled the universe.

"There, there!" she screamed to herself. "At the bottom of the steps. A man, under the light! No, now he's gone! He was *waiting* there!"

She listened.

Silence. The bridge was empty.

Nothing, she thought, holding her heart. Nothing. Fool. That story I told myself. How silly. What shall I do?

Her heartbeats faded.

Shall I call the officer, did he hear my scream? Or was it only loud to *me*. Was it really just a small scream after all?

She listened. Nothing. Nothing.

I'll go back to Helen's and sleep there tonight. But even while she thought this she moved down again. No, it's nearer home now. Thirty-eight, thirty-nine steps, careful, don't

fall. Oh, I *am* a fool. Forty steps. Forty-one. Almost halfway now. She froze again.

"Wait," she told herself. She took a step.

There was an echo.

She took another step. Another echo — just a fraction of a moment later.

"Someone's following me," she whispered to the ravine, to the black crickets and dark green frogs and the black steam. "Someone's on the steps behind me. I don't dare turn around."

Another step, another echo.

Every time I take a step, *they* take one.

A step and an echo.

Weakly she asked of the ravine, "Officer Kennedy? Is that *you*?"

The crickets were suddenly still. The crickets were listening. The night was listening to *her*. For a moment all the far summer-night meadows and close summer-night trees were suspending motion. Leaf, shrub, star, and meadowgrass had ceased their particular tremors and were listening to Lavinia Nebbs's heart. And perhaps a thousand miles away, across locomotive-lonely country, in an empty way-station a lonely night traveler reading a dim newspaper under a naked light-bulb might raise his head, listen, and think, What's that? — and decide, Only a woodchuck, surely, beating a hollow log. But it was Lavinia Nebbs, it was the heart of Lavinia Nebbs.

Faster. Faster. She went down the steps.

Run!

She heard music. In a mad way, a silly way, she heard the huge surge of music that pounded at her, and she realized as she ran — as she ran in panic and terror — that some part of her mind was dramatizing, borrowing from the turbulent score of some private film. The music was rushing and plunging her faster, faster, plummeting and scurrying, down and down into the pit of the ravine!

"Only a little way," she prayed. "One hundred ten, eleven, twelve, thirteen steps! The bottom! Now, run! Across the bridge!"

She spoke to her legs, her arms, her body, her terror; she advised all parts of herself in this white and terrible instant. Over the roaring creek waters, on the swaying, almost-alive bridge planks she ran, followed by the wild footsteps behind, with the music following too, the music shrieking and babbling.

He's following. Don't turn, don't look — if you see him, you'll not be able to move! You'll be frightened, you'll freeze! Just run, run, *run!*

She ran across the bridge.

Oh, God! God, please, please let me get up the hill! Now up, up the path, now between the hills. Oh, God, it's dark, and everything so far away! If I screamed now it wouldn't help; I can't scream anyway! Here's the top of the path, here's the street. Thank God I wore my low-heeled shoes. I can run, I can run! Oh, God, please let me be safe! If I get home safe I'll never go out alone, I was a fool, let

me admit it, a fool! I didn't know what terror was! I wouldn't let myself think, but if you let me get home from this I'll never go out without Helen or Francine again! Across the street now!

She crossed the street and rushed up the sidewalk.

Oh, God, the porch! My house!

In the middle of her running, she saw the empty lemonade glass where she had left it hours before, in the good, easy, lazy time, left it on the railing. She wished she was back in that time now, drinking from it, the night still young and not begun.

"Oh, please, please, give me time to get inside and lock the door and I'll be safe!"

She heard her clumsy feet on the porch, felt her hands scrabbling and ripping at the lock with the key. She heard her heart. She heard her inner voice shrieking.

The key fitted.

"Unlock the door, quick, quick!"

The door opened.

"Now inside. *Slam* it!"

She slammed the door.

"Now lock it, bar it, lock it!" she cried. "Lock it *tight*!"

The door was locked and barred and bolted.

The music stopped. She listened to her heart again and the sound of it diminishing into silence.

Home.

Oh, safe at home. Safe, safe and safe at home! She slumped against the door. Safe, safe. Listen. Not a sound. Safe, safe, oh, thank God, safe at home. I'll never go out at night again. Safe, oh, safe, safe, home, so good, so safe. Safe inside, the door locked. Wait. Look out the window.

She looked. She gazed out the window for a full half-minute.

"Why there's no one there at all! Nobody! There was no one following me at all. Nobody running after me." She caught her breath and almost laughed at herself. "It stands to reason. If a man *had* been following me, he'd have *caught* me. I'm not a fast runner. There's no one on the porch or in the yard. How silly of me! I wasn't running from anything except *me*. That ravine was safer than safe. Just the same, though, it's nice to be home. Home's the really good warm safe place, the *only* place to be."

She put her hand out to the light switch and stopped.

"What?" she asked. "What, *what*?"

Behind her, in the black living room, someone cleared his throat . . .

EDITORS' NOTE: Now you realize that Ray Bradbury brought his story to an end at the very threshold of its climax. He deliberately left his story unfinished. Who is *The Lonely One*? We don't know. Is *The Lonely One* going to strangle Lavinia? — the way he (no, we are not even sure *The Lonely One* is a man; all we know is that it's "someone") strangled other

young women in that small Illinois town? We don't know. And what is the motive behind The Lonely One's murders? What drives The Lonely One to his periodic killings? We don't know — and in the tradition of Stockton's classic "The Lady, or the Tiger?" Mr. Bradbury meant to leave us guessing.

But this time your editors felt dissatisfied at being suspended in midair. We wanted to know the answers — who did it, and even more important, why? So we got in touch with Mr. Bradbury. Why don't you, we suggested, write a sequel to "The Whole Town's Sleeping"? The sequel could start exactly where the original story ended. But this time, please don't leave us with still another riddle — as Frank R. Stockton did when, finally, he was persuaded to write a "continuation" of "The Lady, or the Tiger?"

What did Mr. Bradbury think of our suggestion?

If you will kindly turn to page 134 . . .



Winner in the de Maupassant Title Contest

In our March issue we published a Guy de Maupassant story and offered a \$100 prize to the reader who sent in the aptest and most effective title for it. The response was overwhelming, both in quantity and quality, and EQMM's editorial staff had a ticklish and trying time choosing a winner. The entries were finally winnowed down to a few hundred, after which the staff, in a consultation that lasted far into the night, selected the entry of Mr. Sidney LeBrun, of Greensboro, North Carolina, as the best. Our \$100 check and our congratulations have already gone to Mr. LeBrun — we would now like to offer our thanks to all you readers who responded so well, and to wish each of you better luck next time.

Here is the second in Margery Allingham's new series — or, as she calls the stories, *Tales of the Coppershop*, the "little room" over the bar in the *Platelayers' Arms* . . . and surely this is as charming a criminological reminiscence as ever came out of a London pub. Charley Luke again tells the story, this time with an assist not only from his friend Albert Campion, but also from that grand old gal, his Mum . . .

It is always interesting to know the reading tastes of our favorite writers. In an interview she gave to Harvey Breit of "The New York Times," Miss Allingham nominated seven books as her "entries for the best thrillers of modern vintage." Of course, we should point out that the word "thriller" has a different meaning (and reputation) in England from the meaning (and reputation) it has in the United States. In England, said Miss Allingham, "there is actually a snobbery for the thriller, especially in the universities and among our statesmen . . . If you have an intelligent mind, and you like to read, and you need to escape, then you require an intelligent literature of escape." Therein lies the crux of the difference — snobbery for instead of the snobbery against, which is so prevalent here. Miss Allingham also said, "I make no distinction between the novel and the thriller" — and therein lies one of Margery Allingham's greatest claims to our eternal respect and gratitude.

Here, then, are Miss Allingham's favorite "thrillers":

Dorothy L. Sayers's *MURDER MUST ADVERTISE*

A. E. W. Mason's *AT THE VILLA ROSE*

Mabel Seeley's *THE CRYING SISTERS*

Jonathan Latimer's *THE DEAD DON'T CARE*

E. C. Bentley's *TRENT'S LAST CASE*

Georges Simenon's *THE MAN WHO WATCHED THE TRAINS GO BY*

Earl Derr Biggers's *THE BLACK CAMEL*

MUM KNOWS BEST

by MARGERY ALLINGHAM

MRS. CHUBB'S "LITTLE ROOM," which hung like a signal-box over the great circular bar of the *Platelayers' Arms*, was unusually de-

serted for the time of day, which was 6 o'clock on a fine warm evening. Only two or three of the habitués were present, but Charley Luke, the

D.D.C.I. of the district, was there, and so was his old friend Albert Campion, startled at this moment into mild astonishment.

Luke was speaking. "Mum? Of course I've got a Mum." He was aggrieved and his diamond-shaped eyes opened as wide as his prominent cheekbones would permit. "What do you think? That I sprang in full uniform from the head of an Assistant Commissioner?" As was his custom, he gave a brief pantomimic display to illustrate his words and managed to look for a second like a piece of early Greek statuary, boldly costumed by a spiv tailor. "Not on your life," he went on, settling down again on the table where he had been sitting. "I've got a Mum, all right. Two jam pots high and boss of all she surveys. Perceptive, that's what Mum is."

He hunched himself suddenly and, by peering at us from under his lids and pulling his lips down over his teeth, gave us a sudden startling glimpse of a new and doughty personality.

"What she knows, she knows she knows," he said. "She's got a twenty-two carat heart, was born within sight — much less sound — of Bow Bells, and takes a poor view of policemen."

Luke grinned at Campion. "Her dad was killed in the Melbourne Street Raid when he was a Sergeant C.I.D.; she married a Superintendent and then there's me coming along. She's had a packet to put up with."

"What exactly has she against the profession?" inquired Mr. Campion

with interest. "Always assuming, of course, that the question is without personal offense."

"Not at all, chum." Luke's magnificent teeth showed for an instant above the pewter rim of his tankard. "She thinks we're a weak-minded, unsuspecting lot, too slow to catch a pussycat. And so we are, by her standards. If she wore a helmet, none of you would go out without your rear lights, and she can smell breath over the telephone. I caught her out once though. Whenever she comes the acid, I promise to buy her a diamond necklace. That sends her back to the gas stove."

He presented his back to us, hunched and sulky, so that we had a momentary glimpse of an angry, elderly person minding her own business grudgingly.

"It was before I got my step up," he said, referring to his Chief Inspectorship. "I'd just taken over this manor and I was going steady, playing myself in. As you know, this isn't a posh district exactly, but it's been posh and there are, so to speak, remnants of poshness scattered about." He waved a hand to the open doorway where the flight of stairs led down into the stucco wilderness of the area north of the Park.

"I'd got my office nice and clean, decided which peg to hang my hat on, and started reading up the 'pending' file, when in came my first bit of homework, a nice respectable old housekeeper, all gloves and embarrassment, and would I please come

and see her Dear Old Master who'd been made a fool of and wanted to speak to someone *BIG*. I hinted the D.O.M. might demean himself and come down to see the D.D.I., but that wouldn't do. The Dear Old Master was too old, too ill, too silly, too upset. It sounded as though he was dropping to bits, so I took my hat off the peg and went down the road with her to inspect the ruin." He paused and his diamond-shaped eyes became reflective.

"I expected a nice clean house, you know," he went on. "But wacky! Luxury! Enormous great rooms full of gorgeous junk!" His long hands, which were never quite still when he was talking, drew some remarkably vivid shapes in the air. One received an impression of vast quantities of baroque furniture, statuettes, pictures and floating drapery. At the end of the swift performance he rubbed an imaginary piece of material between the thumb and forefinger. "Velvet," he said. "Carpets, too. I was over my ankles in lush! Well, I saw the old boy and I thought he was one of his own idols until he spoke. He was sitting by the fire in a high-backed chair and he looked as if the last hundred years hadn't meant much to him. But he was very nice, you know. Very charming and even 'wide' in his own way. I took a shine to him. The story he had to tell was familiar enough — old-fashioned and not even out of the ordinary; but he told it very well and very politely, if you see what I mean — didn't expect *ME*

to be a mug. He could laugh at himself, too. I've been hearing versions of the story all my life. The old chap had been out in his car with a chauffeur driving and they had crossed the park in a rainstorm. Presently, what should they see but a young woman, not too well dressed but quite respectable, caught by her high heel in a grating in the road. The old boy stopped the car and told his man to help her get free. After that they had to give her a lift home because the heel had come off. She gave a very decent address in this neighborhood and they drove her to it, but didn't wait to see her go in."

He sighed and we shook our heads over the duplicity of young women.

"Meanwhile, of course," Luke continued, "on the drive he had heard *The Tale*. It was a good one. She was very young and she said she was a student at a dramatic school, that she lived with her mother who was a widow, and that she was determined to go on the stage. He asked her to tea one day in the following week and the old housekeeper, glad to see him amused, baked a special cake. So it went all through the season until he'd grown quite fond of the poppet. As far as I could hear he never gave her anything except cake and the visits were restricted to formal tea-parties. He was that sort of old boy. But the time came, naturally, when she did her stuff — 'came to her bat,' as we say in the trade." Luke pushed his hat onto the back of his head and blinked at us innocently.

"It's wonderful to me," he announced, "how certain stories just happen to work. Everybody's heard 'em, women are born knowing how to tell 'em, yet they never fail. Tell the truth — say, you've counted your money and you haven't as much as you thought — and no one will believe you. But come out with one of these old Cinderella yarns and Bob's your Uncle! You've got a happy and contented audience digging in its hip pocket. This girl told the one about the ball — I believe she really did call it a ball — where she was to meet The Impresario. She'd got a dress but — ahem — no jewelry." Luke favored us with a leer of quite horrific archness, fluttering his lashes and widening his mouth like a cat's. "He fell for it," Charley went on, "went through all the motions except one. He did not ring for the chauffeur and drive her down to Cartier's for something suitable. Not at all. He trotted off to his study, unlocked the secret safe, and came back with something which must have startled her out of her wits. It was a single-string diamond necklace. Family stuff, worth the Lord knows what. I had a full description of it, complete with weights of the individual stones and all the rest. He lent it to her for the evening. He told me that without a tremor, but I could see he knew he'd asked for it. He said she was so young and so guileless and had come to the house so often — that's where she was so clever — that he trusted her."

Luke wrinkled up his long nose

with weary resignation. "After that it was just the usual," he went on, flicking away the details with a bony hand. "No girl, tea-party deserted, no girl next day. Housekeeper consulted, talk, chauffeur sent round to the house where they had taken her on the first occasion. Finds out she's not known there. . . . All the ordinary palaver. And there is my poor old pal without his sparklers and without his little ray of sunshine who, no doubt, is shining somewhere else all lit up like a perishing Christmas tree. That was where I came in." Luke shook his head. "The public believes in us if Mum doesn't," he said. "Think of it. What an assignment!"

"So you didn't get the necklace back?" someone said.

Luke lifted up his hand.

"Don't hurry me," he protested. "Let me have my pleasure. I tried. We worked on it for months. The only description of the girl which we sifted — from the report of the three of them — housekeeper, chauffeur, and old boy — was that she was five foot one, two, or three inches high; that she was pretty, innocent-looking, 'like a flower,' and that her eyes and hair were 'blue and brown,' 'hazel and black,' 'brown and dark.' The diamonds were easier, but not much. It was a single string, you see. The value lay in the size and purity of the stones. The jewelers helped more than anybody. They all agreed that the necklace couldn't be disposed of over here without making a bit of a stir in the trade and that if it were broken

up it would lose so much in value that they rather thought an effort would be made to get it to the Continent intact. We warned the Customs and shook up all the likely fences. I put the thing in the hands of a really good boy by name of Gooley, who was a sergeant of mine, and I got on with my other work."

Luke paused and accepted the cigarette Campion offered him. "It was one Sunday afternoon in August," Charley continued. "Hot? I thought I was being rendered down! I was sitting in Mum's backyard reading the paper and trying to make a noise like someone weeding a path, when Gooley came through on the blower. He was in a terrific state. He thought he'd got her, he said, or he thought he knew where she was. In the last report I'd had from him he'd mentioned some rumors he'd picked up of a diamond necklace owned by a member of the chorus at the New Neapolitan. He'd followed these up like a sensible lad, but the show had closed, making the job more difficult. Now he'd got wind of the string of ice again and had pinned it down to a troupe of seventeen dancers who were just going off to Holland. In fact, they were actually at Liverpool Street Station, waiting for the boat train which was mercifully late. He was ringing up from the platform and they were all in the tea room, chattering like a parrot-house and laughing as if they'd got something on their minds." Luke grinned at the recollection.

"Poor Gooley," he went on. "He reported that they were *all* covered with diamonds! He said he'd never seen such a blaze. And he guessed that all the cheap jewelry counters of Western London must have been cleared. He was certain that the real necklace must be amongst them, but for the life of him he didn't know where. He asked if he could pull them all in." The D.D.C.I. spread out his hands. "I wasn't quite as senior as I am now," he remarked, "so before answering I asked for the name of the management. When I heard it I thought twice. The Customs angle was difficult too. They'd help, of course, but if the train was late and the boat was waiting they wouldn't thank me if I set 'em on a wild goose chase. Gooley was by no means certain, and being alone he couldn't watch seventeen girls at once. 'We'll have to pick her out,' he said to me. 'Can't you bring an expert? He could look the necklaces over and pick the right one at once.'"

Luke rubbed his hand over his forehead and we remembered the heat of the day. "Expert!" he said bitterly. "Anyone who had brains enough to be an expert was out of London that afternoon. I only had half an hour. The old boy and his servants were away in Scotland and it looked as if I'd have to turn it up and let Gooley down. There wasn't a soul I could produce on the spur of the moment. Then I had a brain wave. 'Hold it,' I said to him. 'I'm coming and I'll bring someone who

knows most things.'” He beamed at us. “I took Mum,” he said.

“It was quite ticklish work getting her there in time, but she arrived at last — little black hat crammed over her eyes, best coat buttoned up to hide her house dress. We found Gooley as arranged, by the book-stall. He was sweating with heat and anxiety, and his jaw dropped when he saw who I'd got with me. ‘Is that. . . ?’ he began. ‘Greatest living expert,’ I said hastily. ‘Where are they?’ He pointed to the upstairs tea room. ‘They’re getting ready to make a move,’ he said; ‘train’s due in ten minutes.’

“We put Mum in, then. The idea was for her to take sights, spot the real diamonds, and then nip out and tell us. But there was nothing like that. Within a matter of minutes there was the Ma and Pa of a row inside. We hadn’t time to get in. As we started, a girl came flying out into our arms, making a bolt for it. Seconds later, Mum followed, very dignified except that there was a cup of tea all over her where the kid had chucked it the moment she had asked her to take off her necklace.” Luke wagged his head. “Poor Mum! She was very pleased with herself until we all four got back to the station, roused the jeweler from Crumb Street, and got him to take a squint through his spyglass at the kid’s necklace. Net value seventeen and six, and he didn’t know how they did it at that price, he announced. ‘Cheer up, Mum,’ I said to her. ‘How could you tell

diamonds, duck? You never had any except the little black ’uns you call your eyes!’ Besides, it wasn’t as if it mattered. By that time the girl had broken down and come across with the whole story, and I’d got through to Harwich where they’d picked up the real necklace.”

As he ceased to speak, Mr. Champion took off his hornrim spectacles. “Oh, I see. Mrs. Luke picked the *girl*.”

The D.D.C.I. nodded. “Seventeen lovelies, five others on the staff, and four schoolmistresses who had nothing to do with it,” he announced. “Mum took one look round and picked the only wrong ’un in the room. She’d seen her picture in the sensational Sunday rag she takes. Couldn’t think what the story had been, but she knew it must be a police case because that’s the only news she reads. It was eighteen months before — but she remembered!” Luke chuckled. “She had nothing to help her,” he went on with some pride. “All the girls were plastered with fake ice to assist their chum to ‘fool the customs.’ The crook had lent the real stones to the youngest of them all — a kid of seventeen — so that she could carry the can if there was any trouble. Or that was the idea. However, when Mum made her entrance and pounced on herself direct, she lost her nerve.”

Luke glanced at his watch and drank up hastily. “And who shall blame her?” he inquired rhetorically. “Not Charles! Kitchen lino to be laid tonight or else,” he added briefly — and skipped.

WINNER OF A SECOND PRIZE

Where do authors get their ideas? That is the question most often asked of writers by interested readers. And as we have remarked in the past, the answer is — everywhere. The sources for plot ideas and for character conceptions are infinite — they are all around us, they exist all the time, and they all stem, directly or indirectly, from real life. Think of the possible roots: a comment in a newspaper or magazine, a chance remark by a best friend or a complete stranger, a scientific fact, a statistic, a glimpse of a newsreel or a movie, a glance out of a train window or out of a car, airplane, or ship's porthole. The origins, the starting points, the prime causes, the beginnings are multitudinous. Speaking for ourselves, we ultimately developed a full-length novel from a stray remark we once heard an old gossip make: "She's the kind of woman who brings out the worst in men." That single comment began a chain reaction of character-cause and event-effect that finally became a book. Then there was that time we were reprimanded for smoking too much and filling up the ashtrays too quickly, and we replied facetiously: "Where do you expect the butts to be put — on the ceiling?" And out of that silly rejoinder, after months of planning and plotting, stewing and selecting, came a novel titled THE CHINESE ORANGE MYSTERY. Then there was the mustache on a subway poster that ultimately became a short story; and the watching of Eva Le Gallienne in "Alice in Wonderland," the hobby of philately, the spoonerism dropped by an English professor, the trip to Cap Cod, the typographical error which suggested an interesting play on words, the visit to an Amusement Park — all led to one fictional disguise or another . . .

Dorothy Salisbury Davis's prize-winning story, "Backward, Turn Backward," became an embryo some years ago in a radio broadcasting studio in New York, peopled at the time with actors, actresses, and technicians; the show being broadcast was a family comedy. After years of mulling and metamorphosis it turned into an entirely different brain-child: the scene changed from a metropolitan locale to the small town of Pottersville; the city characters became country folk, with not an actor or technician in the lot; and the family comedy became a family tragedy. . . . The author herself will tell you more after you have read the story — a tale of crime and detection in the same class with Mrs. Davis's earlier prize-winners, those superb stories, "Spring Fever" and "Born Killer."

BACKWARD, TURN BACKWARD

by DOROTHY SALISBURY DAVIS

SHERIFF ANDREW WILLETS STOOD at the living-room window and watched his deputies herd back from the lawn another surge of the curious, restive people of Pottersville. Some had started out from their houses, shops, or gardens at the first sound of his siren, and throughout the long morning the crowd had swelled, winnowed out, and then swelled again.

Behind him in the kitchen, from which the body of Matt Thompson had been recently removed, the technical crew of the state police were at work with microscope and camera, ultraviolet lamp and vacuum cleaner. He had full confidence in them but grave doubts that their findings would add much weight to, or counterbalance by much, the spoken testimony against Phil Canby. They had not waited, some of those outside, to give it to police or state's attorney; they passed it one to another, neighbor to stranger, stranger sometimes back again to neighbor.

It was possible to disperse them, the sheriff thought, just as a swarm of flies might be waved from carrion; but they would as quickly collect again, unless it were possible to undo murder — unless it were possible to go out and say to them: "It's all a mistake. Matt Thompson fell and hit his head. His daughter Sue got hysterical when she found him . . ." Idle conjecture. Even had he been able to say that to

the crowd they would not have dispersed. They would not have believed it. Too many among them were now convinced that they had been expecting something like this to happen.

There was one person in their midst responsible in large measure for this consensus, a lifetime neighbor of both families, Mrs. Mary Lyons, and she was prepared also to give evidence that Phil Canby was not at home with his grandson the night before, at the hour he swore he was at home and asleep.

Sheriff Willets went outdoors, collected Mrs. Lyons, and led her across the yard between the Thompson house and the house where Phil Canby lived with his daughter and son-in-law, and up her own back steps. From the flounce of her skirts and the clack of her heels he could tell she didn't want to come. She smiled when she looked up at him, a quick smile in which her eyes had no part.

"I hope this won't take long, Andy," she said when he deliberately sat down, forcing her hospitality. "I should give the poor girl a hand."

"In what way, Mrs. Lyons?"

"With the house," she said, as though there would be nothing unusual in her helping Sue Thompson with the house. "It must be a terrible mess."

"You've lots of time," he said. "There's nobody going to be in that

house for quite a while except the police."

Mrs. Lyons made a noise in her throat, a sort of moan, to indicate how pained she was at what had happened across her back yard.

"You were saying over there," Willets went on, "that you knew something terrible was going to happen."

"Something terrible did happen, even before this," she said, "Phil Canby taking after that girl. Sue Thompson's younger than his own daughter."

"Just what do you mean, taking after her?"

"I saw him kiss her," she said. Then, as though it had hurt her to say it in the first place, she forced herself to be explicit. "A week ago last night I saw Phil Canby take Sue in his arms and kiss her. He's over sixty, Andy."

"He's fifty-nine," the sheriff said, wondering immediately what difference a year or two made, and why he felt it necessary to defend the man in the presence of this woman. It was not that he was defending Canby, he realized; he was defending himself against the influence of a prejudiced witness. "And he gave it out the next day that he was going to marry her, and she gave it out she was going to marry him. At least, that's the way I heard it."

"Oh, you heard it right," Mrs. Lyons said airily, folding her hands in her lap.

If it had been of her doing, he should not have heard it right, the

sheriff thought. But Phil Canby had passed the age in life, and had lived too much of that life across the hedge from Mary Lyons, to be either precipitated into something or forestalled from it by her opinions. Had he looked up on the night he proposed to Sue Thompson and seen her staring in the window at them, likely the most he would have done would be to pull the windowshade in her face.

"Would you like your daughter to marry a man of fifty-nine, Andy?"

"My daughter's only fifteen," the sheriff said, knowing the answer to be stupid as soon as he had made it. He was no match for her, and what he feared was that he would be no match for the town, with her sentiments carrying through it as they now were carrying through the crowd across the way. They would want Phil Canby punished for courting a young girl, whatever Canby's involvement in her father's murder. "How old is Sue Thompson, Mrs. Lyons?"

"Nineteen, she must be. Her mother died giving birth to her the year after I lost Jimmie."

"I remember about Jimmie," the sheriff said, with relief. Remembering that Mary Lyons had lost a boy of four made her more tolerable. He wondered now how close she had got to Matt Thompson when his wife died. Nobody had been close to him from then on that Willets could remember. He had been as sour a man as ever gave the devil credence. A gardener by trade, Thompson had worked for the town of Pottersville,

tending its landscape. A lot of people said that whatever tenderness he had went into the care of his flowers. One thing was agreed upon by all of them, it didn't go into the care of his daughter. As he thought about it now, Willets caught a forlorn picture from memory: Sue as a child of five or six trotting to church at her father's side, stopping when he stopped, going on when he went on, catching at his coat-tail when she needed balance but never at his hand, because it was not offered to her. Would no one but himself remember these things now?

"How long has it been since you were in the Thompson house, Mrs. Lyons?"

Her eyes narrowed while she weighed his purpose in asking it. "I haven't been in the house in fifteen years," she said finally.

He believed her. It accounted in part for her eagerness to get into it now. "She isn't much of a housekeeper, Sue," he said, to whet her curiosity further and to satisfy his own on what she knew of her neighbors. "Or maybe that's the way Matt Thompson wanted it."

She leaned forward. "What way?"

"It has a funny dead look about it," he said. "It's not dirty, but it just looks like nothing has been put in or taken out in fifteen years."

"He never got over his wife's death," Mrs. Lyons said, "and he never looked at another woman."

Her kind had no higher praise for any man, he thought. "Who took care of Sue when she was a baby?"

"Her father."

"And when he was working?"

"I don't know."

"From what I've heard," he lied, for he had not yet had the opportunity to inquire elsewhere, "you were very good to them, and so was Phil Canby's wife in those days."

"Mrs. Canby was already ailing then," she snapped. "I was good to both families, if I say it myself."

"And if you don't," the sheriff murmured, "nobody else will."

"What?"

"People have a way of being ungrateful," he explained.

"Indeed they do."

"You know, Mrs. Lyons, thinking about it now, I wonder why Matt didn't offer Sue for adoption."

"You might say he did to me once." A bit of color tinged her bleached face after the quick, proud answer. She had probably been at the Thompson house night and day then with solitudes and soups, when Matt was home and when he wasn't home.

Assuming Thompson to have been sarcastic with her — and he had had a reputation for sarcasm even that far back — the sheriff said: "Would you have taken the child? You must've been lonesome . . . after Jimmie."

For once she was candid with him, and soft as he had not known her to be since her youth. "I'd have thought a good deal about it. I had a feeling there was something wrong with her. She was like a little old maid, all to herself. She's been like that all her life — even in school, they say."

"It makes you understand why she was willing to marry Phil Canby," the sheriff said quietly. "Don't it?"

"Oh, I don't blame her," Mrs. Lyons said. "This is one case where I don't blame the woman."

Willets sighed. Nothing would shake her belief that there was something immoral in Phil Canby's having proposed marriage to a girl younger than his own daughter. "Last night," he said, "your husband was away from home?"

"He was at the Elks' meeting. I was over at my sister's and then I came home about 10:30. I looked at the clock. I always do. It takes me longer to walk home than it used to."

"And that was when you heard the baby crying?"

"It was crying when I came up the back steps."

Phil Canby had been baby-sitting with his grandson while his daughter, Betty, and his son-in-law, John Murray, were at the movies. It was his custom to stay with young Philip every Thursday night, and sometimes oftener, because he lived with them; but on Thursdays Betty and her husband usually went to the movies.

"And you're sure it was the Murray baby?"

"Who else's would it be over that way? I couldn't hear the Brady child from here. They're five houses down."

The sheriff nodded. Phil Canby swore that he was in bed and asleep by that time, and he swore that the baby had not cried. He was a light

sleeper, in the habit of waking up if little Philip so much as whimpered. The neighbors to the south of the Murray house had not heard the crying, nor for that matter the radio in the Murray house, which Canby said he had turned on at 10 o'clock for the news. But they had been watching television steadily until 11:30. By that time the Murrays had come home and found Phil and the baby Philip each asleep in his own bed.

But to the north of the Murrays; in the corner house where Sue Thompson claimed she was asleep upstairs, her father Matt had been bludgeoned to death some time between 10 o'clock and midnight.

"And you didn't hear anything else?" the sheriff asked.

"No, but I didn't listen. I thought maybe the baby was sick and I was on the point of going down. Then I remembered it was Thursday night and Mr. Canby would be sitting with him. He wouldn't take the time of day from me."

Not now he wouldn't, the sheriff thought. "Have you any idea how long the baby was crying, Mrs. Lyons?"

"I was getting into bed when he stopped. That was fifteen minutes later maybe. I never heard him like that before, rasping like for breath. I don't know how long the poor thing was crying before I got home."

If Phil Canby had murdered Matt Thompson and then reached home by a quarter to 11, he would have had time to quiet baby Philip and to

make at least a pretense of sleep himself before his family came home. Betty Murray admitted that her father was in the habit of feigning sleep a good deal these days, his waking presence was so much of an embarrassment to all of them. Scarcely relevant except as a practised art.

Willets took his leave of Mrs. Lyons. What seemed too relevant to be true, he thought, striding over the hedge which separated her yard from the Thompsons, was that Phil Canby admitted quarreling with Thompson at 9 o'clock that night, and in the Thompson kitchen.

After the first exchange of violent words between the two households, when Phil Canby and Sue Thompson made known their intentions of marriage, an uneasy, watchful quiet had fallen between them. Sue Thompson had not been out of the house except with her father, and then to Sunday prayer meeting. Matt Thompson had started his vacation the morning his daughter told him. Vacation or retirement: he had put the hasty choice up to the town supervisor. Thompson then had gone across to Betty Murray. He had never been in Betty's house before, not once during her mother's long illness or at her funeral; and if he had spoken to Betty as a child, she could not remember it. But that morning he spoke to her as a woman, and in such a manner and with such words that she had screamed at him: "My father is not a lecher!" To which he had said: "And my daughter is not a whore. Before she

takes to the bed of an old man, I'll shackle her!" When John Murray came home from the office that night and heard of it, he swore that he would kill Matt Thompson if ever again he loosed his foul tongue in Betty's presence.

But Matt Thompson had gone into his house and pulled down all the shades on the Murray side, and Phil Canby had gone about the trade he had pursued in Pottersville since boyhood. He was a plumber, and busier that week for all the talk about him in the town. All this the sheriff got in bits and pieces, mostly from Betty Murray. When Thursday night had come around again, she told him, she felt that she wanted to get out of the house. Also, she had begun to feel that if they all ignored the matter, the substance of it might die away.

So she and John had gone to the movies, leaving her father to sit with the baby. About 8:30, Sue Thompson had come into the yard and called to Phil. He went out to her. She had asked him to come over and fix the drain to the kitchen sink. Her father was sleeping, she told him, but he had said it would be all right to ask him. Canby had gone back into the house for his tools and then had followed her into the Thompson house, carrying a large plumber's wrench in his hand. When Phil Canby had told this to the sheriff that morning — as frankly, openly, as he spoke of the quarrel between himself and Thompson, a quarrel so violent that Sue hid in the pantry through it — Willets

got the uncanny feeling that he had heard it all before and that he might expect at the end of the recitation as candid and calm a confession of murder.

But Canby had not confessed to the murder. He had taken alarm, he said, when Matt Thompson swore by his dead wife to have him apprehended by the state and examined as a mental case. He knew the man to do it, Thompson had said, and Canby knew the man of whom he spoke: Alvin Rhodes, the retired head of the state hospital for the insane. Thompson had landscaped Rhodes's place on his own time when Rhodes retired, borrowing a few shrubs from the Pottersville nursery to do it. This the sheriff knew. And he could understand the extent of Canby's alarm when Canby told about the confinement of a friend on the certification of his children, and on no more grounds apparent to Canby than that the man had become cantankerous, and jealous of the house which he had built himself and in which he was becoming, as he grew older, more and more of an unwelcome guest. Phil Canby had bought the house in which he now lived with his daughter. He had paid for it over 30 years, having had to add another mortgage during his wife's invalidism. Unlike his friend, he did not feel a stranger in it. The baby had even been named after him, but he was well aware the tax his wooing of Sue Thompson put upon his daughter and her husband.

All this the sheriff could under-

stand very well. The difficulty was to reconcile it with the facts of the crime. For example, when Canby left the Thompson house, he took with him all his tools save the large wrench with which Thompson was murdered. Why leave it then — or later — except that to have taken it from beside the murdered man and to have had it found in his possession (or without it when its ownership was known) was to leave no doubt at all as to the murderer? All Canby would say was that he had forgotten it.

Willetts went to the back door of Canby's house. He knocked, and Betty Murray called out to him to come in. Little Philip was in his high chair, resisting the apple sauce his mother was trying to spoon into him. The sheriff stood a moment watching the child, marveling at the normalcy which persists through any crisis when there is a baby about. Every blob of sauce spilled on the tray Philip tried to shove to the floor. What he couldn't get off the tray with his hands he went after with his tongue.

The sheriff grinned. "That's one way to get it into him."

"He's at that age now," his mother said, cleaning up the floor. She looked at Willetts. "But I'm very grateful for him, especially now."

The sheriff nodded. "I know," he said. "Where's your father?"

"Up in his room."

"And the Thompson girl?"

"In the living room. Sheriff, you're not going to take them . . ."

"Not yet," he said, saving her the

pain of finishing the sentence. He started for the inside door and paused. "I think Mrs. Lyons would be willing to have her there for a bit."

"I'll bet she would," Betty said. "I had to close the front windows, with people gaping in to see her. Some of them, and they weren't strangers either, kept asking . . . where her boy friend was."

"It won't be for long," Willets said; and then because he had not quite meant that, he added: "It won't be this way for long."

"Then let her stay. I think she feels better here, poor thing, just knowing Papa's in the house." She got up then and came to him. She was a pretty girl and, like her father's, her eyes seemed darker when they were troubled. "Mr. Willets, I was talking to Papa a while ago. He was trying to tell me about . . . him and Sue. He told her when he asked her to marry him that he was going to be as much a father to her . . . as a husband." Betty colored a bit. "As a lover," she corrected. "That's what he really said."

"And did he tell you what she had to say to that?"

"She said that's what she wanted because she'd never had either one."

The sheriff nodded at the obvious truth in that.

"I thought I'd tell you," Betty went on, "because I know what everybody says about Papa and her. They think he's peculiar. Almost like what I told you Matt Thompson said. And he's not. All the time mother was sick,

until she died, he took care of her himself. He even sent me away to school. Most men would have said that was my job, and maybe it was, but I was terribly glad to go. Then when mother died, and I got married, it must have seemed as though . . . something ended for him. And fifty-nine isn't really very old."

"Not very," Willets said, being so much closer to it than she was.

"I'm beginning to understand what happened to him," Betty said. "I wish I'd thought about it sooner. There might have been something . . . somebody else."

The sheriff shook his head. "That's a man's own problem till he's dead."

"You're right," she said after a moment. "That's what really would have been indecent."

The sheriff nodded.

"I wish it was possible to separate the two things," Betty said as he was leaving, "him and Sue—and Mr. Thompson's murder. I wish to God it was."

"So do I," the sheriff said, thinking again of the pressures that would be put upon him because it was not possible to separate them, not only by the townspeople but by the state's attorney, who would find it so much more favorable to prosecute a murderer in a climate of moral indignation.

On the stairway, with its clear view of the living room, he paused to watch Sue Thompson for a moment, unobserved. She was sitting with a piece of crochet work in her

lap at which she stitched with scarcely a glance. Whatever her feelings, the sheriff thought, she was not grieving. She had the attitude of waiting. All her life she had probably waited — but for what? Her father's death? A dream lover? A rescuer? Surely her girlish dreams had not conjured up Phil Canby in that role. The strange part of it was that it seemed unlikely to the sheriff she had dreamed of rescue at all. However she felt about her father, she did not fear him. Had she been afraid of him, she could not have announced to him that she intended to marry Phil Canby. And because she was not afraid of him, Willets decided, it was difficult to imagine that she might have killed him. She was a soft, plump girl, docile-eyed, and no match for her father physically. Yet she was the one alternate to Phil Canby in the deed, and he was the only one who knew her well enough to say if she was capable of it.

The sheriff went on and knocked at Canby's door. "I've got to talk to you some more, Phil."

Canby was lying on the bed staring at the ceiling. "I've told you all I know," he said, without moving.

The sheriff sat down in the rocker by the open window. The radio, which Canby claimed to have been listening to at 10 o'clock the night before, was on a table closer to the window; and across the way, no more than fifteen yards, the neighbors had not heard it.

"Mrs. Lyons says that little Philip

was crying at 10:30 last night, Phil."

"Mrs. Lyons is a liar," Canby said, still without rising. His thin gray hair was plastered to his head with sweat and yet he lay on his back where no breeze could reach him. A pulse began to throb at his temple. The skin over it was tight and pale; it reminded Willets of a frog's throat.

"Betty admits you didn't change the baby. That wasn't like you, Phil, neglecting him."

"He was sleeping. I didn't want him to wake up. I had to think of my plans."

"What plans?"

"My marriage plans."

"What were they?"

Finally Canby rose and swung his slippered feet over the side of the bed. He looked at Willets. "We're going to be married in Beachwood." It was a village a few miles away. "I've got a house picked out on the highway and I'll open a shop in the front of it."

It was fantastic, Willets thought: both Canby and the girl behaved as though they were not in any way suspected of Matt Thompson's death — as though nothing in the past should interfere with the future. This angered Willets as nothing save Mrs. Lyons's judgments had. "You're in trouble, Phil, and you're going to hang higher than your fancy plans if you don't get out of it. The whole damn town's against you."

"I know that," Canby said. "That's why I'm not afraid."

The sheriff looked at him.

"If I didn't know what everybody was saying," Canby went on, "I wouldn't of run off home last night when Matt Thompson said he was going to get me certified."

"Phil," the sheriff said with great deliberateness, "the state's attorney will maintain that's why you *didn't* run home, why you *weren't* in this house to hear the baby crying, why you *weren't* home in time to change him, why you *can't* admit Mrs. Lyons heard Philip crying! Because, he'll say, you were over in the Thompson kitchen, doing murder and cleaning up after murder."

Canby was shaking his head. "That baby don't cry. He don't ever cry with me around."

The sheriff got up and walked the length of the room and back, noting that Phil Canby was careful in his things, their arrangement, their repair. He was a tidy man. "You're still planning to marry her, then?" he said when he reached Canby.

"Of course. Why shouldn't I?"

The sheriff leaned down until he was face to face with the man. "Phil, who do *you* think killed her father?"

Canby drew back from him, his eyes darkening. "I don't know," he said, "and I guess I never rightly cared . . . till now."

Willets returned to the rocker and took a pipe from his shirt pocket. He didn't light it; he merely held it in his hand as though he might light it if they could talk together. "When did you fall in love with Sue Thompson?"

Canby smoothed the crumpled

spread. "Sounds funny, saying that about somebody my age, don't it?" Willets didn't answer and Canby went on: "I don't know. Whatever it was, it happened last spring. She used to stop by ever since she was a little girl, when I was out working in the yard, and watch me. Never said much. Just watched. Then when little Philip came, she used to like to see him. Sometimes I'd invite her in. If I was alone she'd come. Kind of shy of Betty, and whenever John'd speak to her she'd blush. John don't have a good opinion of her. He's like all the young fellows nowadays. They look at a girl's ankles, how she dances, what clothes she puts on. It's pure luck if they get a decent wife, what they look for in a girl . . ."

"You and Sue," the sheriff prompted, when Canby paused.

"Well, I was holding Philip one night and she was watching. He was puckering up to cry, so I rocked him to and fro and he just went off to sleep in my arms. I remember her saying, 'I wish I could do that,' so I offered her the baby. She was kind of scared of it." The man sank back on his elbows and squinted a bit, remembering. "It struck me then all of a sudden how doggone rotten a life Matt had give her as a kid."

"How, rotten?" the sheriff said.

"Nothing. No affection, no love at all. He bought her what she needed, but that was all. She was in high school before she knew people was different, what it was like to . . . to hold hands even."

"I wonder what got into him," Willets said. "Most men, losing a wife like he did, would put everything into the kid till they got another woman."

"He didn't want another woman. He liked his hurt till it got to mean more to him than anything else."

The sheriff shook his head. It might be so, although he could not understand it. "Go on about you and Sue," he said.

Canby took a moment to bring himself back to the contemplation of it. He sat up so that he could illustrate with his hands, the strong, calloused, black-nailed hands. "I put Philip into his cradle and she was standing there and I just sort of put out my arms to her like she was maybe a little girl which'd lost something or was hurt, and she came to me." He paused, moistened his lips, and then plunged on. "While I was holding her . . . Oh, Jesus, what was it happened then?"

He sprang up from the bed and walked, his hands behind his back. "I thought that was all over for me. I hadn't felt nothing like it, not for years." He turned and looked down at Willets. "I was young again, that's all, and she wasn't a little girl. I was ashamed at first, and then I thought — what am I ashamed of? Being a man? I waited all summer thinking maybe it'd go away. But it didn't. It just got inside me deeper and quieter so's I wasn't afraid of it, and I wasn't ashamed. And when I asked her and she was willing to marry me, I ex-

plained to her that it couldn't be for long because I'm fifty-nine, but she didn't care." He opened his hands as if to show they were empty. "That's how it was, Andy. That's how. I can't explain it any more than that."

"That's how it was," the sheriff repeated, getting up, "but look how it is right now."

Willets went downstairs to Sue Thompson where she still sat, crochet work in hand, a bit back from the window yet with the people outside within her view.

"Know any of those folks, Miss Thompson?"

"No," she said, "I don't think I do."

He could believe that, although some of them had lived in the neighborhood all her lifetime. He sat down opposite her so that the light would be in her face. "Last night, Miss Thompson, why did you tell Mr. Canby your father said it would be all right to ask him to fix the drain?"

"Because I wanted him to come over. It was the only excuse I could think of."

"Your father didn't say it would be all right?"

"No."

"Didn't you expect trouble between them?"

"I didn't think my father would wake up."

"I see," the sheriff said. A pair, the two of them, he thought, unless their guilt was black as night: one as naïve as the other. The marks of Canby's wrench were on the drainpipe where

he had actually commenced to work. "When did you and Mr. Canby expect to be married?"

"Soon. Whenever he said."

"Were you making plans?"

"Oh, yes," she said, smiling then. "I've been doing a lot of work." She held up the crocheting by way of illustration.

"Didn't you expect your father to interfere — in fact, to prevent it?"

"No," she said.

The sheriff rested his chin upon his hand and looked at her. "Miss Thompson, I'm the sheriff of this county. Your father was murdered last night, and I'm going to find out why, and who murdered him. You'd better tell me the truth."

"I'm telling you the truth, Mr. Willets. I know who you are."

"And you didn't expect your father to interfere with your marriage?"

"He never interfered with anything I did," she said.

"Did you know he told Betty Murray that he would chain you up rather than see you marry her father?"

"I didn't know that. He never said it to me."

"Just what did he say when you told him?"

"He laughed. I think he said something like, 'Well, doesn't that beat everything.'"

The sheriff sat up. "He was treating you like a halfwit. You're an intelligent girl. Didn't you resent it?"

"Of course," she said, as though surprised that he should ask. "That's

one reason why I'm so fond of Phil . . . Mr. Canby."

"You resented it," Willets repeated, "and yet you did nothing about it?"

"I was waiting," she said.

"For what? For him to die? To be murdered?"

"No," she said, "just waiting."

"Have you always got everything you wanted by waiting, Miss Thompson?"

She thought about that for a moment. "Yes, I think I have . . . or else I didn't want it any more."

Passive resistance, that's what it amounted to, the sheriff thought. If nations could be worn down by it, Matt Thompson was not invulnerable. But his murder was not passive resistance. "Last night you hid in the pantry during the quarrel?"

"Yes. Phil told me to go away, so I hid in there."

"Did you hear what they were saying?"

"Not much. I put my fingers in my ears."

"What did you hear exactly?"

She looked at him and then away. "I heard my father say 'insane asylum.' That's when I put my fingers to my ears."

"Why?"

"I was there once with him when I was a little girl."

"Can you tell me about it?" the sheriff said.

"Yes," she said thoughtfully. "There was a man working for him in the garden. I liked him, I remember.

He would tickle me and laugh just wonderful. When I told my father that I liked him, he took me inside to see the other people. Some of them screamed at us and I was frightened.”

“I see,” the sheriff said, seeing something of Matt Thompson and his use of the afflicted to alarm the timid. “Last night, when did you come out of the pantry?”

“When my father told me to. He said it was all over and I could go up to bed.”

“And you did? No words with him about the quarrel?”

“I went upstairs and went to bed, like I told you this morning.”

“And you went to sleep right away because you felt so badly,” he said, repeating her earlier account of it. He could see how sleep must have been her salvation many times. She had slept soundly through the night, by her account, and had wakened only to the persistent knocking of Phil Canby — who, when he was about to start his day’s work, had remembered, so he said, the plumber’s wrench. Going downstairs to answer Canby’s knocking, she had discovered her father’s body.

The sheriff took his hat. “You can have the funeral tomorrow, Miss Thompson,” he said. “I’d arrange it quickly if I were you, and see to it there’s a notice of it in the paper.”

He went out the front door and across the yard, ignoring the questions pelted at him from the crowd. The technician in charge of the state crew was waiting. “I don’t have much for

you, Willets. Whoever did the job scrubbed up that kitchen afterwards. But good.”

“Canby’s clothes?”

“Nothing from that job on them. We’ll run some more tests to be dead sure if you want us to.”

“I want you to. What about hers?”

“Not even a spot to test. I put them back in her room, night clothes and day clothes.”

The sheriff thought for a moment. “What was the kitchen cleaned up with?”

“A bundle of rags. Left in the sink. They came out of a bag hanging beside the stove.”

“Handy,” the sheriff said, and went upstairs.

After the male sparsity and drabness in the rest of the house — and that was how Willets thought of it, as though a woman’s hand had not touched it in years — Sue’s room screamed with color. Her whole life in the house was in this one room. There was crochet work and needlework of multi- and clashing colors, laces and linens, stacked piece on piece. She had fashioned herself a fancy lampshade that almost dripped with lace. At some time not too long before, she had tried her hand at painting, too. It was crude, primitive, and might very well be art for all he knew, but in his reckoning it was in contrast to the exact work of her needle. In a small rocker, left over from her childhood — perhaps even from her mother’s childhood, by its shape and age — sat two dolls, faded

and matted and one with an eye that would never close again. The dust of years was ground into them and he wondered if they had been sitting there while she grew into womanhood, or if upon her recent courtship — if Phil Canby's attentions could be called that — she, a timid girl, and likely aware of her own ignorance, had taken them out to help her bridge the thoughts of marriage.

The bed was still unmade, Sue's pajamas lying on it. Not a button on the tops, he noticed, and the cloth torn out. The technician had put them back where he had found them. Her dress lay with its sleeves over the back of the chair, just as she had flung it on retiring. She had, no doubt, put on a fresh dress to go out to the fence and call Phil Canby. There was scarcely a crease in it. The sheriff trod upon her slippers, a button, a comb. The rug, as he looked at it, was dappled with colored thread from her sewing. Not the best of housekeepers, Sue Thompson, he thought, going downstairs and locking up the house; but small wonder, keeping house only for herself and in one room.

George Harris, the state's attorney, was in the sheriff's office when he returned to the county building. He didn't want to seem too eager, Willets thought, since obviously the sheriff had not yet made an arrest. He spoke of the murder as a tragedy and not a case, and thus no doubt he had spoken of it in town.

"I've had a lot of calls, Andy," he said, "a lot of calls."

The sheriff grunted. "Did you answer them?"

Harris ignored the flippancy. "Not enough evidence yet, eh?"

"I'm going to put it all together now," Willets said. "When I get it in a package I'll show it to you. Maybe in the morning."

"That's fine by me," Harris said. He started for the door and then turned back. "Andy, I'm not trying to tell you how to run your office, but if I were you, I'd call the local radio station and give them a nice handout on it — something good for the nerves."

"Like what?"

"Oh, something to the effect that any suspect in the matter is under police surveillance."

He was right, of course, Willets thought. The very mention of such surveillance could temper would-be vigilantes. He called the radio station and then worked through most of the night. His last tour of duty took him past the two darkened houses where his deputies kept sullen vigil.

Fifty or so people attended the funeral service and as many more were outside the chapel. Among them were faces he had seen about the town most of his life. With the murder they seemed to have become disembodied from the people who clerked, drove delivery trucks, or kept house. They watched him with the eyes of ghouls to see how long it would take him to devour his prey.

The minister spoke more kindly of

Matt Thompson than his life deserved, but the clergyman had the whole orbit of righteousness, frugality, and justice to explore and, under the circumstances and in the presence of those attending, the word love to avoid.

Phil Canby stood beside the girl as tall as he could, with the hard stoop of his trade upon his back. His head was high, his face grim. Sue wept as did the other women, one prompted by another's tears. Behind Canby stood his daughter and his son-in-law, John Murray — who, when the sheriff spoke to him at the chapel door, said he had taken the day off to "see this thing finished." It would be nice, Willets thought, if it could be finished by John Murray's taking the day off.

When the final words were said, people shuffled about uneasily. It was customary to take a last look at the deceased, but Matt Thompson's coffin remained unopened. Then his daughter leaned forward and fumbled at a floral wreath. Everyone watched. She caught one flower in her hand and pulled it from the rest, nearly upsetting the piece. She opened her hand and looked at the bloom. Willets glanced at Mrs. Lyons, who was on tiptoe watching the girl. She too was moved to tears by that. Then the girl looked up at the man beside her. If she did not smile, there was the promise of it in her round, blithe face. She offered him the flower. Phil Canby took it, but his face went as gray as the tie he wore. Mrs. Lyons let escape a hissing sound, as sure a

condemnation as any words she might have cried aloud, and a murmur of wrathful shock went through the congregation. Willets stepped quickly to Canby's side and stayed beside him until they returned to the Murray house, outside which he then doubled the guard.

He went directly to the state's attorney's office, for George Harris had had the report on his investigation since 9 o'clock that morning.

"Everything go off all right?" Harris offered Willets a cigarette, shaking four or five out on the desk from the package. He was feeling expansive, the sheriff thought.

"Fine," he said, refusing the cigarette.

The attorney stacked the loose cigarettes. "I'll tell you the truth, Andy, I'm damned if I can see why you didn't bring him in last night." He patted the folder closest to him. It chanced to be the coroner's report. "You've done a fine job all the way. It's tight, neat."

"Maybe that's why I didn't bring him in," Willets said.

Harris cocked his head and smiled his inquisitiveness. At 45 he was still boyish, and he had the manner of always seeming to want to understand fully the other man's point of view. He would listen to it, weigh it, and change his tactics — but not his mind.

"Because," the sheriff said, "I haven't really gone outside their houses to look for a motive."

The attorney drummed his fingers on the file. "Tell me the God's truth,

Andy, don't you think it's here?"

"Not all of it," the sheriff said doggedly.

"But the heart of it?"

"The heart of it's there," he admitted.

"All of it' to you means a confession. Some policemen might have got it. I don't blame you for that."

"Thanks," Willets said dryly. "I take it, Mr. Harris, you feel the case is strong against him?"

"I don't predict the outcome," the attorney said, his patience strained. "I prosecute and I take the verdict in good grace. I believe the state has a strong case, yes." He shrugged off his irritation. "Much hinges, I think, on whether Canby could feel secure from interruption while he did the job, and afterwards while he cleaned up."

Willets nodded.

Harris fingered through the folder and brought out a paper. "Here. The girl hid in the pantry when he told her to leave. She went upstairs to bed when her father told her to. Now I say that if she came downstairs again, all Canby had to do was tell her to go up again. She's the amenable type. Not bright, not stupid, just willing and obedient."

That from his documentation, Willets thought. If ever Harris had seen the girl it was by accident. "Then you think she was an accessory?" Certainly most people did now, having seen or heard of her conduct at the funeral.

The attorney pursed his lips. "I wouldn't pursue that right now. You

haven't turned up anything to prove it. But he could feel secure about being able to send her upstairs again before she saw anything. That's what was important: that he could feel safe, secure. That's how I'd use it. Put that together with the Lyons woman's testimony and his own daughter's. No jury will take his word that he was home with his grandson between 10 and 11."

"Did he strip naked to do the job?" said Willets. "His clothes went through the lab."

"Old work clothes." The attorney looked him in the eyes. "There's been cleaner jobs than this before and I'll prove it. I don't expect to go in with the perfect case. There's no such thing."

"Then all I have to do," Willets said, "is get the warrant and bring him in."

"That's all. The rest is up to me." The sheriff had reached the door when Harris called after him. "Andy . . . I'm not the s.o.b. you seem to think I am. It's all in here." He indicated the file. "You'll see it yourself when you get to where you can have some perspective."

Harris might very well be right, the sheriff thought as he walked through the county court building. He had to accept it. Either Harris was right and he had done his job as sheriff to the best of his ability and without prejudice, making the facts stand out from sentiments . . . or he had to accept something that logic would not sanction: Sue Thompson

as the murderer of her own father. That this amenable girl, as Harris called her, who by the very imperturbability of her disposition had managed a life for herself in the house of her father — that she, soft and slovenly, could do a neat and terrible job of murder, he could not believe. But even granting that she could have done it, could someone as emotionally untried as she withstand the strain of guilt? He doubted it. Such a strain would crack her, he thought, much as an overripe plum bursts while yet hanging on the tree.

But the motive, Canby's motive: it was there and it was not there, he thought. It was the thing which so far had restrained him from making the arrest — that, and his own stubborn refusal to be pressured by the followers of Mary Lyons.

The sheriff sat for some time at his desk, and then he telephoned Matt Thompson's friend, Alvin Rhodes. The appointment made, he drove out to see the former superintendent of the state hospital for the insane.

Rhodes, as affable as Thompson had been dour, told of Matt Thompson's visiting him the previous Wednesday, the day before his death. "We were not friends, Willets," the older man said, "although his visit implies that we were. He was seeking advice on his daughter's infatuation with a man three times her age."

As Thompson had grown more sullen with the years, the sheriff thought, Rhodes had mellowed into affability upon retirement. Such ad-

vice was not sought of someone uncongenial to the seeker. "And did you advise him, Mr. Rhodes?"

"I advised him to do nothing about it. I recounted my experience with men of Canby's age who were similarly afflicted. The closer they came to consummation, shall we say, the more they feared it. That's why the May and December affairs are rare indeed. I advised him to keep close watch on the girl, to forestall an elopement, and leave the rest to nature. In truth, Willets, although I did not say it to him, I felt that if they were determined, he could not prevent it."

"He cared so little for the girl," Willets said, "I wonder why he interfered at all. Why not let her go and good riddance?"

Rhodes drew his white brows together while he phrased the words carefully. "Because as long as he kept her in the house, he could atone for having begot her, and in those terms for having caused his wife's death." Willets shook his head. Rhodes added then: "I told him frankly that if anyone in the family should be examined, it was he and not the girl."

Willets felt the shock like a blow. "The girl?"

Rhodes nodded. "That's why he came to me, to explore the possibility of confining her — temporarily. In his distorted mind he calculated the stigma of such proceedings to be sufficient to discourage Canby."

And the threat of such proceedings, Willets thought, was sufficient to

drive Canby to murder — as such threats against his own person were not. "I should think," he said, preparing to depart, "you might have taken steps against Matt Thompson yourself."

Rhodes rose with him. "I intended to," he said coldly. "If you consult the state's attorney, you will discover that I made an appointment with him for 2 o'clock yesterday afternoon. By then Thompson was dead. I shall give evidence when I am called upon."

The sheriff returned to the courthouse and swore out the warrant before the county judge. At peace with his conscience at last, he drove again to the Murray house. Betty Murray was staring out boldly at the watchers who had reconvened — as boldly as they were again staring in at her.

There would be a time now, Willets thought, when they could stare their fill and feel righteous in their prejudgment of the man. Only then would they be willing to judge the full story, only then would they be merciful, vindicating their vindictiveness. He ordered his deputies to clear the street. John Murray opened the door when the sheriff reached the steps.

"Better take Betty upstairs," Willets said to her husband. He could see the others in the living room, Sue and Phil Canby sitting at either ends of the couch, their hands touching as he came.

"The old man?" John whispered. Willets nodded and Murray called to his wife. Betty looked at him over

her shoulder but did not move from the window.

"You, too, Miss Thompson," Willets said quietly. "You both better go upstairs with John."

Betty lifted her chin. "I shall stay," she said. "This is my father's house and I'll stay where I want to in it."

Nor did Sue Thompson make any move to rise. Willets strode across to Canby. "Get up," he said. "I'm arresting you, Phil Canby, for the willful murder of Matt Thompson."

"I don't believe it," Betty said from behind them, her voice high, tremulous. "If God's own angel stood here now and said it, I still wouldn't believe it."

"Betty, Betty," her husband soothed, murmuring something about good lawyers.

Canby's eyes were cold and dark upon the sheriff. "What's to become of her?" he said, with a slight indication of his head toward Sue.

"I don't know," Willets said. No one did, he thought, for she looked completely bemused, her eyes wide upon him as she tried to understand.

"You're taking him away?" she said as Canby rose. Willets nodded.

"It won't be for long," John Murray said in hollow comfort, and more to his wife than to the girl.

"Don't lie to her," Canby said. "If they can arrest me for something I didn't do, they can hang me for it." He turned to Willets. "If you're taking me, do it now."

"You can get some things if you want."

"I don't want no things."

Willets started to the door with him. Betty looked to her husband. He shook his head. She whirled around then on Sue Thompson. "Don't you understand? They're taking him to jail. Because of you, Sue Thompson!"

Canby stiffened at the door. "You leave her alone, Betty. Just leave her alone."

"I won't leave her alone and I won't leave Sheriff Willets alone. What's the matter with everyone? My father's not a murderer." Again she turned on Sue. "He's not! He's a good man. You've got to say it, too. We've got to shout it out at everybody, do you hear me?"

"Betty, leave her alone," her father repeated.

"Then get her out of here," John Murray said, his own fury rising with his helplessness. "She sits like a bloody cat and you don't know what's going on in her mind . . ."

The sheriff cut him off. "That's enough, John. It's no good." He looked at the girl. Her face was puckered up almost like an infant's about to cry. "You can go over home now, Miss Thompson. I'll send a deputy in to help you."

She did not answer. Instead she seemed convulsed with the effort to cry, although there was no sound to her apparent agony. Little choking noises came then. She made no move to cover her face and, as Willets watched, the face purpled in its distortion. All of them stared at her, themselves feeling straitened with the

ache of tears they could not shed. Sue's body quivered and her face crinkled up still more, like a baby's.

Then the sound of crying came — a high, gurgling noise — and it carried with the very timbre and rasp of an infant's. Willets felt Phil Canby clutch his arm and he felt terror icing its way up his own spine; he heard a sick, fainting moan from Betty Murray between the girl's spasms, but he could not take his eyes from the sight. Nor could he move to help her. Sue hammered her clenched fists on her knees helplessly. Then she tried to get up, rocking from side to side. Finally she rolled over on the couch and, her backside in the air, pushed herself up as a very small child must. Her first steps were like a toddle when she turned and tried to balance herself. Then, catching up an ashstand which chanced to stand in her way, she ran headlong at Willets with it, the infantile screams tearing from her throat . . .

In time it would be told that Sue Thompson reverted to the infancy she coveted at least once before her attack on Willets, rising from sleep as a child on the night of her father's quarrel with Canby, ripping off her night clothes when she could not manage the buttons, and in a rage with her father — when, perhaps, he berated her for nudity, immodesty, or some such thing a child's mind cannot comprehend — attacking him with a child's fury and an adult's frenzied strength . . . using the weapon at hand, Phil Canby's wrench.

Sheriff Willets could document much of it when the sad horror had been manifest before him: the crying Mrs. Lyons heard, even the cleaning up after murder, for he had watched Canby's grandson clean off the tray

of his highchair. And he could believe she had then gone upstairs to fall asleep again and waken in the morning as Sue Thompson, nineteen years old and the happy betrothed of Phil Canby.

Dorothy Salisbury Davis's husband, Harry Davis, is a fine stage, radio, and television actor. It was while he was doing a radio broadcast that Mrs. Davis got the first inkling, the first flash, that eventually became the story you have just finished. Present in the studio at air time was a woman who, so far as Mrs. Davis could see, had no part in the radio drama. The script did call, however, for a baby, and when the time came for the baby to be heard, this woman, 40-odd and as large as her years, came to the microphone, screwed up her face, and cried pitifully. The sound of a baby crying was so genuine, so lifelike, that the actress playing the role of the baby's mother instinctively put her arm around the crying woman, soothing her and cuddling her, while continuing to speak her lines of dialogue.

It was Mrs. Davis's earliest notion to build a story around the character of such an actress — a person with great histrionic ability whose only talent the theatre chose to use in a whole lifetime of endeavor was that of a sound effect — a gift for perfect infantile mimicry. Such an unfortunate artist, Mrs. Davis felt, might out of cumulative frustration actually revert to infancy. But somehow this character never seemed to develop properly, and no plot around her seemed to jell. Only when, fighting frustration herself, Mrs. Davis transferred the locale from Broadway to a small town, transforming the actress to the kind of person delineated in Sue Thompson, did the original idea begin to take satisfying shape and finished form.

Mrs. Davis did not completely trust her instincts. She found factual documentation for just such a reversion as she has described. It is a matter of psychiatric record that the behavior pattern of an adult so afflicted becomes identical with a child's. As for such a person committing murder, can you conceive of a more dangerous situation than attempting to restrain, or further frustrate, a person in the throes of so horrifying a reversion?

Horrifying is the word . . .

"The Master of Mystery" is the second in our series of Jack London's tales of crime and detection. It is a story of witchcraft and devils and ancient sorceries; it is also the story of a theft, and how a shaman-sleuth solved the mystery of the stolen blankets. True, the shaman-sleuth's methods are compounded of equal parts of revivalist hysteria, mass hypnotism, and shrewd psychology — but they are the methods of an authentic criminologist none the less. And the background — primitive Eskimo, Thlinket Land — only adds charm to Jack London's off-trail but pure detective story.

With each of the ten stories in this series we will tell you a few facts about Jack London — insights into his character and personality, or bits of his thinking, or anecdotes about his work and life. Sometimes these sidelights will give a deeper meaning, even add stature, to the selected story. For example, it is well known that Jack London "had no patience with show or pretence." Surely that is revealed most clearly in the story you are about to read. As is this characteristic which was part-and-parcel of Jack London's make-up: "The greatest passion of his life was for exact knowledge. 'Give me the fact, man, the irrefragable fact!' is the motif that runs through all his work."

Yes, "people had to take Jack London as he was, or leave him alone." The people took him, as they did his work, and they have never let go.

THE MASTER OF MYSTERY

by JACK LONDON

THERE WAS COMPLAINT IN THE village. The women chattered together with shrill, high-pitched voices. The men were glum and doubtful of aspect, and the very dogs wandered dubiously about, alarmed in vague ways by the unrest of the camp and ready to take to the woods on the first outbreak of trouble. The air was

filled with suspicion. No man was sure of his neighbor, and each was conscious that he stood in like unsureness with his fellows. Even the children were oppressed and solemn, and little Di Ya, the cause of it all, had been soundly thrashed, first by Hooniah, his mother, and then by his father, Bawn, and was now whimpering and

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CHILDREN OF THE FROST*

looking pessimistically out upon the world from the shelter of the big overturned canoe on the beach.

And to make the matter worse Scundoo, the shaman, was in disgrace and his known magic could not be called upon to seek out the evildoer. Forsooth, a month gone, he had promised a fair south wind so that the tribe might journey to the *potlatch* at Tonkin, where Taku Jim was giving away the savings of twenty years; and when the day came, lo, a grievous north wind blew, and of the first three canoes to venture forth, one was swamped in the big seas, and two were pounded to pieces on the rocks, and a child was drowned. He had pulled the string of the wrong bag, he explained — a mistake. But the people refused to listen; the offerings of meat and fish and fur ceased to come to his door; and he sulked within — so they thought — fasting in bitter penance; in reality, eating generously from his well-stored cache and meditating upon the fickleness of the mob.

The blankets of Hooniah were missing. They were good blankets, of most marvelous thickness and warmth, and her pride in them was greatedened in that they had been come by so cheaply. Ty-Kwan, of the next village but one, was a fool to have so easily parted with them. But then, she did not know they were the blankets of the murdered Englishman, because of whose take-off the United States cutter nosed along the coast for a time, while its launches puffed and snorted among the secret

inlets. And not knowing that Ty-Kwan had disposed of them in haste so that his own people might not have to render account to the Government, Hooniah's pride was unshaken. And because the women envied her, her pride was without end and boundless, till it filled the village and spilled over along the Alaskan shore from Dutch Harbor to St. Mary's. Her totem had become justly celebrated, and her name known on the lips of men wherever men fished and feasted, what of the blankets and their marvelous thickness and warmth. It was a most mysterious happening, the manner of their going.

"I but stretched them up in the sun by the sidewall of the house," Hooniah disclaimed for the thousandth time to her Thlinket sisters. "I but stretched them up and turned my back; for Di Ya, dough-thief and eater of raw flour that he is, with head into the big iron pot, overturned and stuck there, his legs waving like the branches of a forest tree in the wind. And I did but drag him out and twice knock his head against the door for riper understanding, and behold, the blankets were not!"

"The blankets were not!" the women repeated in awed whispers.

"A great loss," one added. A second, "Never were there such blankets." And a third, "We be sorry, Hooniah, for thy loss." Yet each woman was glad in her heart that the odious, dis-sension-breeding blankets were gone.

"I but stretched them up in the sun," Hooniah began again.

"Yea, yea," Bawnspoke up, wearied. "But there were no gossips in the village from other places. Wherefore it be plain that some of our own tribes-people have laid unlawful hand upon the blankets."

"How can that be, O Bawn?" the women chorused indignantly. "Who should there be?"

"Then has there been witchcraft," Bawn continued stolidly enough, though he stole a sly glance at their faces.

"*Witchcraft!*" And at the dread word their voices hushed and they looked fearfully at each other.

"Ay," Hooniah affirmed, the latent malignancy of her nature flashing into a moment's exultation. "And word has been sent to Klok-No-Ton, and strong paddles. Truly shall he be here with the afternoon tide."

The little groups broke up and fear descended upon the village. Of all misfortune, witchcraft was the most appalling. With the intangible and unseen things only the shamans could cope, and neither man, woman, nor child could know until the moment of ordeal whether devils possessed their souls or not. And of all shamans Klok-No-Ton, who dwelt in the next village, was the most terrible. None found more evil spirits than he, none visited his victims with more frightful tortures. Even had he found, once, a devil residing within the body of a three-months babe — a most obstinate devil which could only be driven out when the babe had lain for a week on thorns and briars. The body

was thrown into the sea after that, but the waves tossed it back again and again as a curse upon the village, nor did it finally go away till two strong men were staked out at low tide and drowned.

And Hooniah had sent for this Klok-No-Ton. Better had it been if Scundoo, their own shaman, were undisgraced. For he had ever a gentler way, and he had been known to drive forth two devils from a man who afterward begat seven healthy children. But Klok-No-Ton! They shuddered with dire foreboding at thought of him, and each one felt himself the centre of accusing eyes, and looked accusingly upon his fellows — each one and all, save Sime, and Sime was a scoffer whose evil end was destined with a certitude his successes could not shake.

"Hoh! Hoh!" he laughed. "Devils and Klok-No-Ton! — than whom no greater devil can be found in Thlinket Land."

"Thou fool! Even now he cometh with witcheries and sorceries; so beware thy tongue, lest evil befall thee and thy days be short in the land!"

So spoke La-lah, otherwise the Cheater, and Sime laughed scornfully.

"I am Sime, unused to fear, unafraid of the dark. I am a strong man, as my father before me, and my head is clear. Nor you nor I have seen with our eyes the unseen evil things —"

"But Scundoo hath," La-lah made answer. "And likewise Klok-No-Ton. This we know."

"How dost thou know, son of a

fool?" Sime thundered, the choleric blood darkening his thick bull neck.

"By the word of their mouths — even so."

Sime snorted. "A shaman is only a man. May not his words be crooked, even as thine and mine? Bah! Bah! And once more, bah! And this for thy shamans and thy shamans' devils! and this! and this!"

And Sime snapped his fingers to right and left.

When Klok-No-Ton arrived on the afternoon tide, Sime's defiant laugh was unabated; nor did he forebear to make a joke when the shaman tripped on the sand in the landing. Klok-No-Ton looked at him sourly, and without greeting stalked straight through their midst to the house of Scundoo.

Of the meeting with Scundoo none of the tribespeople might know, for they clustered reverently in the distance and spoke in whispers while the masters of mystery were together.

"Greeting, O Scundoo!" Klok-No-Ton rumbled, wavering perceptibly from doubt of his reception.

He was a giant in stature and towered massively above little Scundoo, whose thin voice floated upward like the faint far rasping of a cricket.

"Greeting, Klok-No-Ton," Scundoo returned. "The day is fair with thy coming."

"Yet it would seem . . ." Klok-No-Ton hesitated.

"Yea, yea," the little shaman put in impatiently, "that I have fallen on ill days, else would I not stand in

gratitude to you in that you do my work."

"It grieves me, friend Scundoo . . ."

"Nay, I am made glad, Klok-No-Ton."

"But will I give thee half of that which be given me."

"Not so, good Klok-No-Ton," murmured Scundoo, with a deprecatory wave of the hand. "It is I who am thy slave, and my days shall be filled with desire to befriend thee."

"As I —"

"As thou now befriendest me."

"That being so, it is then a bad business, these blankets of the woman Hooniah?"

The big shaman blundered tentatively in his quest, and Scundoo smiled a wan, gray smile, for he was used to reading men, and all men seemed very small to him.

"Ever hast thou dealt in strong medicine," he said. "Doubtless the evildoer will be briefly known to thee."

"Ay, briefly known when I set eyes upon him." Again Klok-No-Ton hesitated. "Have there been gossips from other places?" he asked.

Scundoo shook his head. "Behold! Is this not a most excellent mucluc?"

He held up the foot-covering of sealskin and walrus hide, and his visitor examined it with interest.

"It did come to me by a close-driven bargain."

Klok-No-Ton nodded attentively.

"I got it from the man La-lah. He is a remarkable man, and often have I thought . . ."

"So?" Klok-No-Ton ventured impatiently.

"Often have I thought," Scundoo concluded, his voice falling as he came to a full pause. "It is a fair day, and thy medicine be strong, Klok-No-Ton."

Klok-No-Ton's face brightened. "Thou art a great man, Scundoo, a shaman of shamans. I go now. I shall remember thee always. And the man La-lah, as you say, is remarkable."

Scundoo smiled yet more wan and gray, closed the door on the heels of his departing visitor, and barred and double-barrred it.

Sime was mending his canoe when Klok-No-Ton came down the beach, and he broke off from his work only long enough to load his rifle ostentatiously and place it near him.

The shaman noted the action and called out: "Let all the people come together on this spot! It is the word of Klok-No-Ton, devil-seeker and driver of devils!"

He had been minded to assemble them at Hooniah's house, but it was necessary that all should be present, and he was doubtful of Sime's obedience and did not wish trouble. Sime was a good man to let alone, his judgment ran, and a bad one for the health of any shaman.

"Let the woman Hooniah be brought," Klok-No-Ton commanded, glaring ferociously about the circle and sending chills up and down the spines of those he looked upon.

Hooniah waddled forward, head bent and gaze averted.

"Where be thy blankets?"

"I but stretched them up in the sun, and behold, they were not!" she whined.

"So?"

"It was because of Di Ya."

"So?"

"Him have I beaten sore, and he shall yet be beaten, for that he brought trouble upon us who be poor people."

"The blankets!" Klok-No-Ton bel-
lowed hoarsely, foreseeing her desire to lower the price to be paid. "The blankets, woman! Thy wealth is known."

"I but stretched them up in the sun," she sniffled, "and we be poor people and have nothing."

He stiffened suddenly, with a hideous distortion of the face, and Hooniah shrank back. But so swiftly did he spring forward, with inturned eyeballs and loosened jaw, that she stumbled and fell groveling at his feet. He waved his arms about, wildly flagellating the air, his body writhing and twisting in torment. An epilepsy seemed to come upon him. A white froth flecked his lips, and his body was convulsed with shiverings and tremblings.

The women broke into a wailing chant, swaying backward and forward in abandonment, while one by one the men succumbed to the excitement. Only Sime remained. He, perched upon his canoe, looked on in mockery; yet the ancestors whose seed he bore pressed heavily upon him, and he swore his strongest oaths

that his courage might be cheered. Klok-No-Ton was horrible to behold. He had cast off his blanket and torn his clothes from him, so that he was quite naked, save for a girdle of eagle-claws about his thighs. Shrieking and yelling, his long black hair flying like a blot of night, he leaped frantically about the circle. A certain rude rhythm characterized his frenzy, and when all were under its sway, swinging their bodies in accord with his and venting their cries in unison, he sat bolt upright, with arm outstretched and long, talon-like finger extended. A low moaning, as of the dead, greeted this, and the people cowered with shaking knees as the dread finger passed them slowly by. For death went with it, and life remained with those who watched it go; and being rejected, they watched with eager intentness.

Finally, with a tremendous cry, the fateful finger rested upon La-lah. He shook like an aspen, seeing himself already dead, his household goods divided, and his widow married to his brother. He strove to speak, to deny, but his tongue clove to his mouth and his throat was sanded with an intolerable thirst. Klok-No-Ton seemed half to swoon away, now that his work was done; but he waited with closed eyes, listening for the great blood-cry to go up — the great blood-cry, familiar to his ear from a thousand conjurations, when the tribespeople flung themselves like wolves upon the trembling victim. But there was only silence, then a low tittering

from nowhere in particular which spread and spread until a vast laughter welled up to the sky.

“Wherefore?” he cried.

“Na! Na!” the people laughed. “Thy medicine be ill, O Klok-No-Ton!”

“It be known to all,” La-lah stutted. “For eight weary months have I been gone afar with the Siwash sealers, and but this day am I come back to find the blankets of Hooniah gone ere I came!”

“It be true!” they cried with one accord. “The blankets of Hooniah were gone ere he came!”

“And thou shalt be paid nothing for thy medicine which is of no avail,” announced Hooniah, on her feet once more and smarting from a sense of ridiculousness.

But Klok-No-Ton saw only the face of Scundoo and its wan, gray smile, heard only the faint far cricket’s rasping. “I got it from the man La-lah, and often have I thought,” and, “It is a fair day and thy medicine be strong.”

He brushed by Hooniah, and the circle instinctively gave way for him to pass. Sime flung a jeer from the top of the canoe, the women snickered in his face, cries of derision rose in his wake, but he took no notice, pressing onward to the house of Scundoo. He hammered on the door, beat it with his fists, and howled vile imprecations. Yet there was no response, save that in the lulls Scundoo’s voice rose eerily in incantation. Klok-No-Ton raged about like a madman, but when

he attempted to break in the door with a huge stone, murmurs arose from the men and women. And he, Klok-No-Ton, knew that he stood shorn of his strength and authority before an alien people. He saw a man stoop for a stone, and a second, and a bodily fear ran through him.

"Harm not Scundoo, who is a master!" a woman cried out.

"Better you return to your own village," a man advised menacingly.

Klok-No-Ton turned on his heel and went down among them to the beach, a bitter rage at his heart, and in his head a just apprehension for his defenseless back. But no stones were cast. The children swarmed mockingly about his feet, and the air was wild with laughter and derision, but that was all. Yet he did not breathe freely until his canoe was well out upon the water, when he rose up and laid a futile curse upon the village and its people, not forgetting to specify Scundoo who had made a mock of him.

Ashore there was a clamor for Scundoo and the whole population crowded his door, entreating and imploring in confused babel till he came forth and raised his hand.

"In that ye are my children I pardon freely," he said. "But never again. For the last time thy foolishness goes unpunished. That which ye wish shall be granted, and it be already known to me. This night, when the moon has gone behind the world to look upon the mighty dead, let all the people gather in the blackness before

the house of Hooniah. Then shall the evildoer stand forth and take his merited reward. I have spoken."

"It shall be death!" Bawn vociferated, "for that it hath brought worry upon us, and shame."

"So be it," Scundoo replied, and shut his door.

"Now shall all be made clear and plain, and content rest upon us once again," La-lah declaimed oracularly.

"Because of Scundoo, the little man," Sime sneered.

"Because of the medicine of Scundoo, the little man," La-lah corrected.

"Children of foolishness, these Thlinket people!" Sime smote his thigh a resounding blow. "It passeth understanding that grown women and strong men should get down in the dirt to dream-things and wonder tales."

"I am a traveled man," La-lah answered. "I have journeyed on the deep seas and seen signs and wonders, and I know that these things be so. I am La-lah —"

"The Cheater —"

"So called, but the Far-Journeyer right-named."

"I am not so great a traveler —" Sime began.

"Then hold thy tongue," Bawn cut in, and they separated in anger.

When the last silver moonlight had vanished beyond the world, Scundoo came among the people huddled about the house of Hooniah. He walked with a quick, alert step, and those who saw him in the light of Hooniah's

slush-lamp noticed that he came empty-handed, without rattles, masks, or shaman's paraphernalia, save for a great sleepy raven carried under one arm.

"Is there wood gathered for a fire, so that all may see when the work be done?" he demanded.

"Yea," Bawn answered. "There be wood in plenty."

"Then let all listen, for my words be few. With me have I brought Jelchs, the Raven, diviner of mystery and seer of things. Him, in his blackness, shall I place under the big black pot of Hooniah, in the blackest corner of her house. The slush-lamp shall cease to burn, and all remain in outer darkness. It is very simple. One by one shall ye go into the house, lay hand upon the pot for the space of one long intake of the breath, and withdraw again. Doubtless Jelchs will make outcry when the hand of the evildoer is nigh him. Or who knows but otherwise he may manifest his wisdom. Are ye ready?"

"We be ready," came the multi-voiced response.

"Then will I call the name aloud, each in his turn and hers, till all are called."

La-lah was first chosen, and he passed in at once. Every ear strained, and through the silence they could hear his footsteps creaking across the rickety floor. But that was all. Jelchs made no outcry, gave no sign. Bawn was next chosen, for it well might be that a man should steal his own blankets with intent to cast shame

upon his neighbors. Hooniah followed, and other women and children, but without result.

"Sime!" Scundoo called out.

"Sime!" he repeated.

But Sime did not stir.

"Art thou afraid of the dark?" La-lah, his own integrity being proved, demanded fiercely.

Sime chuckled. "I laugh at it all, for it is a great foolishness. Yet will I go in, not in belief in wonders, but in token that I am unafraid."

And he passed in boldly, and came out still mocking.

"Some day shalt thou die with great suddenness," La-lah whispered, righteously indignant.

"I doubt not," the scoffer answered airily. "Few men of us die in our beds, what of the shamans and the deep sea."

When half the villagers had safely undergone the ordeal, the excitement, because of its repression, became painfully intense. When two-thirds had gone through, a young woman, close on her first child-bed, broke down, and in nervous shrieks and laughter gave form to her terror.

Finally the turn came for the last of all to go in — and nothing had yet happened. And Di Ya was the last of all. It must surely be he. Hooniah let out a lament to the stars, while the rest drew back from the luckless lad. He was half dead from fright, and his legs gave under him so that he staggered on the threshold and nearly fell. Scundoo shoved him inside and closed the door. A long time went by,

during which could be heard only the boy's weeping. Then, very slowly, came the creak of his steps to the far corner, a pause, and the creaking of his return. The door opened and he came forth. Nothing had happened, and he was the last.

"Let the fire be lighted," Scundoo commanded.

"Surely the thing has failed," Hooniah whispered hoarsely.

"Yea," Bawn answered complacently. "Scundoo groweth old, and we stand in need of a new shaman."

Sime threw his chest out arrogantly and strutted up to the little shaman. "Hoh! Hoh! As I said, nothing has come of it!"

"So it would seem, so it would seem," Scundoo answered meekly. "And it would seem strange to those unskilled in the affairs of mystery."

"As thou?" Sime queried.

"Mayhap even as I." Scundoo spoke quite softly, his eyelids drooping, slowly drooping, down, down, till his eyes were all but hidden. "So I am minded of another test. *Let every man, woman, and child, now and at once, hold their hands up above their heads!*"

So unexpected was the order, and so imperatively was it given, that it was obeyed without question. Every hand was in the air.

"Let each look on the other's hands, and let all look," Scundoo commanded, "so that —"

But a noise of laughter, which was more of wrath, drowned his voice. All eyes had come to rest upon Sime. Every hand but his was black with

soot, and his was guiltless of the smirch of Hooniah's pot.

A stone hurtled through the air and struck him on the cheek.

"It is a lie!" he yelled. "A lie! I know naught of Hooniah's blankets!"

A second stone gashed his brow, a third whistled past his head, the great blood-cry went up, and everywhere were people groping for missiles.

"Where hast thou hidden them?" Scundoo's shrill, sharp voice cut through the tumult like a knife.

"In the large skin-bale in my house, the one slung by the ridge-pole," came the answer. "But it was a joke —"

Scundoo nodded his head, and the air went thick with flying stones. Sime's wife was crying, but his little boy, with shrieks and laughter, was flinging stones with the rest.

Hooniah came waddling back with the precious blankets. Scundoo stopped her.

"We be poor people and have little," she whimpered. "So be not hard upon us, O Scundoo."

The people ceased from the quivering stone pile they had builded, and looked on.

"Nay, it was never my way, good Hooniah," Scundoo made answer, reaching for the blankets. "In token that I am not hard, these only shall I take. Am I not wise, my children?"

"Thou art indeed wise, O Scundoo!" they cried in one voice.

And Scundoo, the Master of Mystery, went away into the darkness, the blankets around him and Jelchs nodding sleepily under his arm.

*A perfectly delightful "crime" story by the great
Czech novelist and dramatist*

THE FORTUNE TELLER

by KAREL ČAPEK

(translated by Paul Selver)

EVERYBODY WHO KNOWS ANYTHING about the subject will realize that this episode could not have happened in Czechoslovakia or in France or in Germany, for in all these countries, as you are aware, judges are bound to try offenders and to sentence them in accordance with the letter of the law and not in accordance with their shrewd common-sense and the dictates of their consciences.

And the fact that in this story there is a judge who, in passing sentence, was guided not by the statute book, but by sound common-sense, is due to the circumstance that the incident which I am about to relate could have happened nowhere else than in England; in fact, it happened in London, or to be more precise, in Kensington; no, wait a bit, it was in Brompton or Bayswater — anyway, somewhere thereabouts. The judge was, as a matter of fact, a magistrate, and his name was Mr. Kelly, J. P. Also there was a lady — Mrs. Myers.

Well, I must tell you that this lady, who was otherwise a respectable person, came under the notice of Detective-Inspector Robert MacLeary.

"My dear," said MacLeary to his wife one evening, "I can't get that Mrs. Myers out of my head. What I'd like to know is, how the woman makes her living. Just fancy, here we are the month of February and she's sent her servant for asparagus. And I've discovered that she has between twelve and twenty visitors every day, and they vary from charwomen to duchesses. I know, darling, you'll say she's probably a fortune teller. Very likely, but that can only be a blind for something else — say, the drug traffic or espionage. Look here, I'd rather like to get to the bottom of it."

"All right, Bob," said the excellent Mrs. MacLeary, "you leave it to me."

And so it came about that on the following day Mrs. MacLeary, of course without her wedding ring, but on the other hand, very girlishly dressed and with a scared look on her face, rang at Mrs. Myers's door. She had to wait quite a while before Mrs. Myers received her.

"Sit down, my dear," said the fortune teller, when she had very thoroughly inspected her shy visitor. "And now what can I do for you?"

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"I — I — I ——" stammered Mrs. MacLeary. "I'd like — it's my twentieth birthday tomorrow — I'm awfully anxious to know about my future."

"But, Miss — er, what name, please?" asked Mrs. Myers, and seized a pack of cards which she began to shuffle energetically.

"Jones," sighed Mrs. MacLeary.

"My dear Miss Jones," continued Mrs. Myers, "don't misunderstand me. I don't tell fortunes by cards, except, of course, just now and then, to oblige a friend, as every old woman does. Take the cards in your left hand and divide them into five heaps. That's right. Sometimes I read the cards as a pastime, but apart from that — dear me!" she said, cutting the first heap. "Diamonds! That means money. And the knave of hearts. That's a nice hand."

"Ah," said Mrs. MacLeary, "and what else?"

"Knave of diamonds," proceeded Mrs. Myers, uncovering the second heap. "Ten of spades, that's a journey. But here!" she exclaimed, "I see clubs. Clubs always mean worry, but there's a queen of hearts at the bottom."

"What does that mean?" asked Mrs. MacLeary, opening her eyes as wide as she could.

"Diamonds again," meditated Mrs. Myers over the third heap. "My dear, there's lots of money in store for you; but I can't tell yet whether you're going on a long journey or whether it's someone near and dear to you."

"I've got to go to Southampton to see my aunt," remarked Mrs. MacLeary.

"That must be the long journey," said Mrs. Myers, cutting the fourth heap. "Somebody's going to get in your way, some elderly man —"

"I expect that's my uncle!" exclaimed Mrs. MacLeary.

"Well, here we've got something and no mistake," declared Mrs. Myers over the fifth heap. "My dear Miss Jones, this is the nicest hand I've ever seen. There'll be a wedding before the year's out; a very, very rich young man is going to marry you — he must be a millionaire or a businessman, because he travels a lot; but before you are united, you'll have to overcome great obstacles; there's an elderly gentleman who'll get in your way, but you must persevere. When you do get married, you'll move a long way off, most likely across the ocean. My fee's a guinea, for the Christian mission to the poor."

"I'm so grateful to you," declared Mrs. MacLeary, taking one pound and one shilling out of her handbag, "awfully grateful. Mrs. Myers, what would it cost without any of those worries?"

"The cards can't be bribed," she replied with dignity. "What is your uncle?"

"He's in the police," lied the young lady with an innocent face. "You know, the secret service."

"Oh!" said the old lady, and drew three cards out of the heap. "That's very nasty, very nasty. Tell him, my

dear, that he's threatened by a great danger. He ought to come and see me, to find out more about it. There's lots of them from Scotland Yard come here and get me to read the cards for them, and they all tell me what they have on their minds. Yes, just you send him to me. You say he's on secret service work? Mr. Jones? Tell him I'll be expecting him. Goodbye, dear Miss Jones. Next, please!"

"I don't like the look of this," said Mr. MacLeary later, scratching his neck reflectively. "I don't like the look of this, Katie. That woman was too much interested in your late uncle. Besides that, her real name isn't Myers, but Meierhofer, and she hails from Lubeck. I wonder how we can stop her little game? I wouldn't mind betting five to one that she worms things out of people that are no business of hers."

And, Mr. MacLeary did pass the word on to the bosses. Oddly enough, the bosses took a serious view of the matter, and so it came about that the worthy Mrs. Myers was summoned to appear before Mr. Kelly, J. P.

"Well, Mrs. Myers," the magistrate said to her, "what's all this I hear about this fortune-telling of yours with cards?"

"Good gracious, your worship, I must do something for a living. At my age I can't go on the music halls and dance!"

"H'm," said Mr. Kelly. "But the charge against you is that you don't read the cards properly. My dear good lady, that's as bad as if you were

to give people slabs of clay when they ask for cakes of chocolate. In return for a fee of one guinea people are entitled to a correct prophecy. Look here now, what's the good of your trying to prophesy when you don't know how to?"

"It isn't everyone who complains," she urged in her defense. "You see, I foretell the things they like. The pleasure they get out of it is worth a few shillings, your worship. And sometimes I'm right. 'Mrs. Myers,' said one lady to me, 'nobody's ever read the cards for me as well as you have and given me such good advice.' She lives in St. John's Wood, and is getting a divorce from her husband."

"Look here," the magistrate cut her short, "we've got a witness against you. Mrs. MacLeary, tell the court what happened."

"Mrs. Myers told me from the cards," began Mrs. MacLeary glibly, "that before the year was out I'd be married, that my future husband would be a rich young man and that I'd go with him across the ocean ——"

"Why across the ocean particularly?" inquired the magistrate.

"Because there was the nine of spades in the second heap; Mrs. Myers said that means journeys."

"Rubbish!" growled the magistrate. "The nine of spades means hope. It's the jack of spades that means journeys; and when it turns up with the seven of diamonds, that means long journeys that are likely to lead to something worthwhile. Mrs. Myers, you can't bamboozle me. You

prophesied to the witness here that before the year was out she'd marry a rich young man. But Mrs. MacLeary has been married for the last three years to Detective-Inspector MacLeary, and a fine fellow he is, too. Mrs. Myers, how do you explain that absurdity?"

"My goodness me!" said the old lady placidly. "That does happen now and then. When this young person called on me she was all dressed up, but her left glove was torn. So that looked as if she wasn't too well off, but she wanted to make a good impression. Then she said she was twenty, but now it turns out she's twenty-five ——"

"Twenty-four," Mrs. MacLeary burst forth.

"That's all the same. Well, she wanted to get married, what I mean to say, she made out to me she wasn't married. So I arranged a set of cards for her that'd mean a wedding and a rich husband. I thought that'd meet the case better than anything else."

"And what about the obstacles, the elderly gentleman, and the journey across the ocean?" asked Mrs. MacLeary.

"That was to give you plenty for your money," said Mrs. Myers artlessly. "There's quite a lot has to be told for a guinea."

"Well, that's enough," said the magistrate. "Mrs. Myers, it's no use. The way you tell fortunes by cards is a fraud. Cards take some understanding. Of course, there are various ideas about it, but if my memory

serves me, the nine of spades never means journey. You'll pay a fine of fifty pounds, just the same as people who adulterate food or sell worthless goods. There's a suspicion, too, Mrs. Myers, that you're engaged in espionage as well. But I don't expect you'll admit that."

"As true as I'm standing here ——"

"We'll say no more about that. But since you're an alien without any proper means of subsistence, the authorities will make use of the powers vested in them, and will have you deported. Goodbye, Mrs. Myers, and thank you, Mrs. MacLeary. I must say that this inaccurate fortune-telling is a disgraceful and unscrupulous business."

About a year later Mr. Kelly met Detective-Inspector MacLeary.

"Fine weather," said the magistrate amiably. "By the way, how is Mrs. MacLeary?"

Mr. MacLeary looked very glum. "Well — you know, Mr. Kelly," he said with a certain embarrassment, "Mrs. MacLeary — well, the fact is — she's left me."

"You don't say so," said the magistrate in astonishment. "Such a nice young lady, too!"

"That's just it," growled Mr. MacLeary. "Some young whipper-snapper went crazy about her before I knew what was happening. He's a millionaire, or a businessman from Melbourne. I tried to stop her, but ——" Mr. MacLeary made a helpless gesture with his hand. "A week ago they sailed together for Australia."

In our February 1954 issue we gave you William March's prize-winning story, "The Bird House," and called your attention to the fact that it was based on the true-life murder of a laundryman named Isadore Fink — one of the most baffling unsolved murders in the annals of New York City crime. And we told you that at least one other famous author has written a tale of homicide based on the same real-life case — Ben Hecht, himself a fabulous personality. Well, here is the Hecht version — "The Mystery of the Fabulous Laundryman," a deliberately rococo chronicle of little Meyer Nobody, who was most foully slain in a locked room and whose identity was a deep, dark secret . . . told in the accents and lingo of that famous Hecht-MacArthur play, "The Front Page."

THE MYSTERY OF THE FABULOUS LAUNDRYMAN

by BEN HECHT

I WILL WRITE THIS STORY OUT AS IT was told to me with the hope that you will believe it, as did I, listening to the bibulous and rococo verbiage of Mr. Dick McCarey.

In the days when I was a newspaperman such a tale as my friend McCarey unleashed between his first and fifteenth drinks in that buzzing Harlem tavern would have sent me bouncing into the night to run it down, nor would I have rested till the last detail had been garnered and verified and the whole thing blazoned across a front page. (A statement, this, which such of my erstwhile editors as happen upon these words may very likely challenge with snorts. But what newspaperman, having quit that daft profession, does not remember himself as one of its heroes? And

this is not so much a boast as an obeisance to a lost and glamorous vocation.)

The braves of the press today seem to me a less gaudy lot than those I once knew as colleagues. But that is perhaps due to the romanticism which distance and a thousand lies throw upon the past. This McCarey, however, who will in a moment take the floor, is of that species which rather egotistically I choose to fancy extinct. He is of that tribe that once practiced journalism as if it were Holy Orders.

Mr. McCarey was sitting by himself in a corner of the noisy, foggy bar room when I spied him this night and he was a man full of truculence and contempt, as I expected him, to be although I hadn't seen him for a year.

"Hello," I said, "how's Parnell?"

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Mr. McCarey looked up and from the fact that his eyes failed to blaze at the name Parnell I knew that the highball before him was his first. For my friend McCarey, despite a dourness and cynicism derived from twenty years of newspaper work, is one who, having a sufficient number of drinks under his belt, will never fail to rise and do battle in behalf of that last most confused and ineffectual Irish patriot, Mr. Parnell.

Mr. McCarey grinned and beckoned me to sit opposite him.

"What are you doing in this foul town?" he said, laboring as always under the delusion that I was, despite five years' residence in Manhattan, an alien. But this was a rather general attitude held by Mr. McCarey towards men and women encountered in the bar rooms that were his stamping ground—that they were all aliens, all wanderers with their hearts in faraway places. Such noble and romantic concepts are peculiar to the colleagues of my past.

"Still in search of fame and fortune," I answered him.

"Oho!" said Mr. McCarey and sneered.

His voice will bear mentioning that you may hear him. It was a husky, rushing voice whose most characteristic tones were those of boundless and derogatory anger. He spoke chiefly in sneers but the sneers, these, not of small frustration but of a large and tumultuous romanticism which found the world too dingy for its practice.

Then, looking me slowly up and down, Mr. McCarey remarked, "Same old suit of clothes, eh?"

I nodded and this brief confession of my unimproved estate appeared to lighten the McCarey mood. His swollen but still boyish face relaxed, his lip uncurled and his Celtic eye softened.

"How's the world been treating you?" I said.

"The world," said Mr. McCarey with an angry squint, "has seen fit to harass and bedevil me beyond the power of speech. You are looking upon a man who is one of the foul favorites of misfortune."

Turning his squint on the bartender some 30 feet to the leeward, Mr. McCarey cried out, "Here, you foul Corsican. Another glass of that peculiar liquor."

"I'll have one too," I said.

Mr. McCarey held up two fingers and the barkeep nodded.

"You are looking upon a man," then resumed Mr. McCarey, seemingly entranced by this locution, "who is one of the darlings of disaster."

He laughed cruelly as if he were a merciless spectator of his own distress and fell silent, making faces the while of deep inner meditation.

"What," I inquired, "is the general cause of your depression—women, debts, or the ennui of a noble soul?"

"The cause of my depression," said Mr. McCarey, "is a laundryman. Oh, what a laundryman!" The Celtic eyes fluttered and a sigh shook the McCarey frame from head to foot.

"You are looking upon a man," he added, falling after a pause into his favorite rodomontade, "who bears in his bosom a secret so fabulous, so heartbreaking as to render him speechless. Speechless!" he repeated loudly, and favored the coterie of drinkers draped around the bar in front of us with a carnivorous glare.

"Let's get out of this fish trap," he said after having sneered and squinted separately at a dozen of the customers. "Hey, you peculiar Aztec!" This brought the waiter. "*Rechnung, bitte. Verstehen sie?* The bill," he added, translating contemptuously. "Here are your thirty pieces of silver," he said with a high aversion for the whole transaction. "Count them, ingrate." To me he said, "Come on."

I started for the door but Mr. McCarey moved in an arc and, with an unexpected list, tacked into an unoccupied corner. Here, overturning a chair and kicking it savagely out of his path, he sat down in another.

"*Ober kellner!*" he bawled, "hey, you foul Swiss! Some service here. If you please!"

Mr. McCarey would have fought for Parnell now.

"This place," he confided abruptly to me, "has one asset which distinguishes it among its horrible ilk. It is the watering trough of that foulest of all bipeds, Monsoor Gavin, my esteemed city editor."

"What paper are you on now?" I asked.

"None," said Mr. McCarey loudly. "I have tonight severed my associa-

tion with the depraved press and as soon as Monsoor Gavin sticks his snout into this tallyho I am going to cool him off and lay him to rest."

Mr. McCarey despite his scowl seemed appeased by this pronouncement. He smiled sullenly and, ogling the doorway through which his enemy was to appear, lifted his glass and seemed to drink not his liquor but his foe's very blood.

"I would like to tell you about this laundryman," he said. "One reason being that it is slowly driving me mad. And the other being that Monsoor Gavin is a toad among toads, a snake and a varlet whom it will give me a great pleasure to betray. Foully."

This last word was a happy mouthful.

"The laundryman's name was Meyer," he went on. "What was that name that Mary Queen of Scots had written on her heart?"

"Calais," I said.

"Calais," repeated Mr. McCarey. "Well, the name Meyer is written on my heart. Meyer the laundryman."

Again Mr. McCarey laughed cruelly as if there were within him a Greek chorus cued to deride his hurt whenever he expressed it. Having ended his laughter, however, he looked at me with so sad and appealing an eye that I nodded sympathetically.

"May the angels guard his sleep," he said.

"Is this laundryman dead?" I asked.

"Yes, thank God," said Mr. McCarey. "Dead and under a slab in Potter's Field."

"What happened to him?" I asked.

"Words fail me," said Mr. McCarey and his eye, the one that wasn't squinting, clouded with tears. He swallowed his fifth drink in silence and then tossed his head in the manner of a bull entering the arena and glared about him.

"It's a foul world," he said.

"Let's hear," I insisted.

"Well, I can't tell you everything," he said. "My lips are sealed regarding certain matters. I'm sorry."

Mr. McCarey assumed the look of a sibyl and for several minutes he gazed at me darkly.

"I can tell you this much," he said finally, "Meyer died on a hot night a month ago, shot through the head twice. And his right hand chopped off at the wrist, for good measure. But I don't want you to misunderstand me. I am not one who sits in mourning for Meyer's death. It's his living, his ten years over the washtub in Harlem that unnerves me when I think of it."

Mr. McCarey grew grave and squinted with both eyes.

"I can tell you this much," he said. "He was a short, thin old man with a thoughtful face and a weak chin. He came to Harlem ten years ago and moved into one of those putrid tenements on Troop Street—a hovel reeking with poverty and disaster. That's the kind of a home Meyer moved into," grinned Mr. McCarey as if in derision of his literary flourishes, "one of those edifices that seem built out of sweat and refuse. He took

a single room, renting it off a monstrous wench named Mrs. Maum. An oily, sweating behemoth in a wrapper who tipped the scales at three hundred and fourteen pounds. One of those female hippogriffs that seem to thrive best, peculiarly enough, in districts where food and space are scarcest."

Another drink was directed with grace and thoughtfulness down the McCarey gullet.

"Meyer moved in with this unsightly piece of tenement fauna," he went on, "and started taking in washing. Yes, he pursued his career as a laundryman in the basement. You know what he did? He went around all day, soliciting customers. And then on the next day he presided at the tubs. Nobody ever looked at him or spoke to him. He just shuffled back and forth fetching his wash and carrying it in a basket—on his head, by God. On his head in a basket," repeated Mr. McCarey. "Tie that!"

I nodded blankly at this challenge.

"Tie that," insisted Mr. McCarey, full of an odd excitement.

I changed my tactics and this time shook my head in impotence, and Mr. McCarey was appeased.

"I thought so," he said and looked grim. "It's a foul world," he added, "full of horrible and fantastic things."

Again there was silence during which Mr. McCarey communed and debated the ways of life and washed down the secret results of his cerebration with another highball.

"Well, there's no use in hiding

anything," he resumed. "Anyway, I can tell you this much. This foul dinosaur, Madam Maum, was a widow with a weazened and half idiot babe in arms when Meyer moved in. And what attracted her beautiful ferret's eyes was the fact that Meyer spent all his hard earned nickels buying new bolts for his door, putting steel bars across his windows, and boarding himself in like some daffy old boy with a nightmare on his heels."

Mr. McCarey paused to ogle the door and his thoughts shifted angrily.

"Monsoor Gavin," he said, "is overdue. His dog sled is usually along by this time."

"What's wrong with the Monsoor?" I asked.

"Very, very many things," said Mr. McCarey. "He is a skulking ape that it will afford me considerable pleasure to cool off in seventeen shades of lavender. That's as much as I can say now."

True to his word Mr. McCarey lapsed again and fell to making menacing faces at his liquor glass. Then he laughed cruelly and said with a growl, "He didn't have a friend. Not a friend."

"Who?" I asked.

"Meyer. Meyer," said Mr. McCarey. "Meyer, this fabulous laundryman. Not a human soul to talk to. Not one human being to take his hand."

"And why should they do that?" I asked.

"Because," said Mr. McCarey, "he was the loneliest, saddest creature

alive in the world. What a life for *him!*"

"Who?" I asked.

And my friend McCarey shut his eyes and laughed with greater cruelty than ever this evening.

"There are some things that can't be told," he said. "But this much I can tell you. He was up at dawn, washing in the tubs. In the afternoon he tottered through the streets, that foul basket on his head. He always showed up at 6 in a cigar store a block away and bought a pack of cigarettes. One pack a day. And then home and to bed and asleep behind his bolts and bars by 8."

"Not a very interesting regimen," I said.

"Is that so," said Mr. McCarey, ogling me as if I had been transformed into the mysterious foe, Monsoor Gavin himself. "Is that so!" he repeated. "Well, I beg to differ."

Rebuked, I beat to the leeward and inquired casually, "What happened to Meyer?"

"All these peculiar didoes on the part of this laundryman," said Mr. McCarey, "stirred the female curiosity of that horrible creature Mrs. Maum, who began to set her cap for Meyer. And there," he deflected himself with a snarl, "there you have the eternal feminine. Love coming to bud among the ashcans. Cupid bombardng this hippogriff with a battering ram. This dismal squaw used to lie in wait for Meyer as he came shuffling home, puffing on a cigarette. Ready to make wassail, she was. Primed for

the kill, her five chins and three stomachs jiggling seductively. What a foul Cleopatra! But Meyer was proof against these blandishments. He chose to ignore them. He said good evening to her — and so much for romance. But, mark you, there was a woman scorned and roundly.”

“Come,” I said quietly, “who was this Meyer?”

But Mr. McCarey appeared not to hear this question which had begun to aggravate me. A smoky look was on his face.

“Imagine this man,” said Mr. McCarey, “living like that for ten years. Friendless and chained to a washtub like a Carthaginian slave. All sorts of fantastic things happened in the world during these ten years, but none of them as fantastic as this that I’m telling you — Meyer at the washtubs. Meyer with a basket on his head. And nothing as heartbreaking. What a laundryman!”

I settled back in my chair, deciding on silence and indifference as the most effective measures. But Mr. McCarey was walking the ways of his secret and had no eyes for my tactics. He drank with dignity as I kept silent, and appeared to be toasting the dead and gone hero of his tale.

“Monsoor Gavin,” he said, setting the glass on the table with ominous poise, “has heard that I am lying in wait for him and is shunning this horrible rendezvous like a plague spot.”

“Let’s hear of Meyer’s death,” I said.

“On a hot night,” said Mr. McCarey with an unexpected rush of words, “full of that summer steam which the dwellings of the poor begin to exhale no sooner does the foul sun go down; and in a darkness mixed with dust, cinders, and disease that turned the shadows into pumice stones; amid these wretched and famine-haunted scenes Meyer was done to death and his right hand chopped off.

“I can tell you this much and no more,” Mr. McCarey squinted cautiously at me. “The police arrived at 10 o’clock and found Meyer’s room locked, the doors bolted from the inside, mind you. The windows barred. The street agog with the news that there had been a murder done. Mrs. Maum, that dismal squaw, had heard two shots and come wallowing out of the house like a square rigger with her mouth full of screams. The foul police whacked away trying to get into Meyer’s room and couldn’t. They were thwarted. They brought axes and battered down the wretched door and there was Meyer, murdered and mutilated on the floor.”

Mr. McCarey grew wistful. He lit a cigarette with a great deal of grace. And he stared morosely into the foggy air of the bar room, shaking his head and heaving three separate sighs.

“Let me tell you one thing,” he said. “I have always looked on Gavin as a man of parts. He may be a rat and a varlet, as you say, but he knows more about the newspaper business in his little finger than all the foul

geniuses on Park Row put together. But despite all this dazzling cunning which I am ready to admit in fairness, this Gavin has the heart of a snake. He is a craven and yellow thing that crawls. That's a very fair picture of the man."

"I've never met him," I said.

"He's a wizard," said Mr. McCarey. "Although I'm going to tear his heart out and stuff it like an olive, I give him his due. Let me tell you something."

Mr. McCarey wagged a wild forefinger under my nose.

"This bulletin of Meyer's death dropped on Gavin's desk was no more than two lines long," he said. "A stupid laundryman done to death in a tenement. One of those dull, poverty-ridden crimes. A bubble coming up from some dismal sewer revealing for the moment that there is life in those stale waters. That's all the bulletin showed. But not to Monsoor Gavin. Monsoor Gavin called me over and, with that peculiar sneer with which he addresses his betters, pointed at this dull, stupid announcement that some totally unimportant human being named Meyer had been snuffed out in some wretched hovel in Troop Street and said to me, 'There's something in this. There's more in this than meets the eye.' So much for Monsoor Gavin's cunning."

Again my friend scowled and, ogling the door, drained his foe's life's blood from his glass.

"Let me tell you another thing," he said, and spat. "Lieutenant Neid-

linger of the Harlem police is a bird of a similar ilk. A species of double-dealing, cringing officialdom that I will cool off and lay to rest before yonder sun has set."

Mr. McCarey chuckled.

"What did you find when you got to Troop Street?" I asked.

"The usual blather," snarled Mr. McCarey. "Lieutenant Neidlinger was all agog when I descended on this tenement. He was hovering about the premises and perspiring like an African bride. I tackled him for the facts about this dull, stupid crime and he at once unburdened his vulgar heart to me. There was some wretched mystery about the business that filled this pretzel-headed police official full of confusion and alarm.

"'Item one,' said this peculiar fellow, 'how had the desperado responsible for Meyer's death gained entrance into this laundryman's stronghold? Item two, having gained said entrance and committed the bloody deed, how had the same desperado made his exit leaving every door bolted on the inside and the windows barred? Item three, the dastardly criminal could have pot-shotted Meyer from the street but how could he have chopped off his hand without coming inside the room? Item four, why had this peculiar assailant removed Meyer's hand and whisked it away?' All these nuances were rattling around inside that vast, empty policeman's skull on this hot night.

"'There's some mystery here,' he said.

"'We'll discuss that later,' said I. 'First, I want to take a look at this dull corpse of a laundryman.'"

Mr. McCarey began to weave over the table and turn suddenly from left to right as if facing his enemies.

"Who was this Meyer?" I asked again, and more soothingly than ever.

My friend was drifting through mists. Once more I could feel him walking the ways of his secret. He was beyond the prod of questions.

"I knew him at once," said Mr. McCarey. "I can tell you so much. I knew him. I took one look and I knew him. And I grabbed this dithering cop and fastened myself like a foul burr to his coat-tails. I gave him no rest. I heckled and bedeviled him until he was panting like one of those horrible little Pomeranians. I drove him out of his mind. I dragged that dizzy Teuton up and down this Troop Street where Meyer had lived. We pumped and blasted and burrowed, but not a ray of light. Nothing. There was less to find out about this strange laundryman than if he had never lived. He was a man with no more substance than a shadow on a screen. He was Meyer Nobody. We had at his customers. He was Meyer Nobody to them.

"And all the time this dull fellow Neidlinger kept mumbling. 'Why did he bar the windows and bolt the doors for ten years and how did they get away after killing him?'"

"'Because,' your oratrix replied, 'he was afraid. Because there was some peculiar nightmare on his heels.'

And I kept prodding this dismal bloodhound to redouble his efforts. To no avail."

"But you knew all the time," I said.

"Yes," said my friend and snarled.

"Who?"

Mr. McCarey stared at me. In the long pause that followed it became apparent that what kept my friend silent was neither drink nor reticence but a great desire not to cry. A series of symptoms showed that Mr. McCarey was overcoming the womanish crisis that held him spellbound. He brought his glazed eyes slowly back to reality until they encountered his cigarette, which hung in his fingers and trembled. He then carried this cigarette, which he held like the Prince of Wales, to his mouth and maneuvered it promptly back toward the table.

"We won't go into that now," he said. "This little thin, thoughtful-faced old man with a weak chin who slaved over a washtub for ten years kept his strange mouth shut and ended up cornered in his tenement fortress, murdered and wallowing in his own gore with his right hand chopped off."

I realized that Mr. McCarey's great secret was out on its feet but still fighting, and I summoned patience into my voice.

"Did they solve it?" I asked.

"All I am privileged to tell you," said Mr. McCarey, "is Yes."

His voice had thickened and grown angrier.

"But that worm of a man, Monsoor Gavin, writhes on the hook of his own cowardice. That foul Corsican trembles lest he hit a sunken road. He refuses to print it. Lieutenant Neidlinger refuses to open his dull mouth. He skulks in the bush. Three dithering cops who know what I know have been transferred and promoted and are full of a craven, foolish silence. You are looking upon a man," Mr. McCarey burst out, "who is slowly wilting under the bludgeonings of a conspiracy!"

"How did they solve it?" I asked, closing in on Mr. McCarey.

"By following Mrs. Maum," said he. "By shadowing that barely animate and faintly human mass of tissue to an office on Forty-ninth Street."

Mr. McCarey communicated with the waiter, ordered more drinks, and issued a confused command that Monsoor Gavin immediately on his appearance should be haled before us for summary justice.

"What was she doing in Forty-ninth Street?" I asked.

"Who?" asked Mr. McCarey.

"La Maum," I said.

"Oh, that foul wench," said Mr. McCarey, and spat.

"Yes," I persisted.

"My lips are sealed on that subject," said Mr. McCarey. "All I can tell you is that she went to collect the wages of her sin. She journeyed to Forty-ninth Street in quest of her share of the blood money. You see, it was she who had baffled that master mind, Lieutenant Neidlinger. It was

this abnormal trollop that had hoisted her idiot boy in through the transom, barely large enough for a cat to crawl through, to bolt the doors inside after the murderers had left. This weazened and backward stripling had crawled in and out of the transom like some trained lizard."

"Why did she want the doors bolted from the inside?" I asked.

"For no reason," said Mr. McCarey, "just a foolish, silly female ambition to create mystery. She derived some species of deformed pleasure from her son's didoes in and out of that transom. But they had nothing to do with the case, *per se*. This dithering pachyderm of a female Macbeth had been hired only to get Meyer to unbolt his doors to the murderers. This she did by cooing outside his portal for an hour."

"Were they caught?" I asked still closing in.

"No," said Mr. McCarey. "A thousand times, No. We followed Mrs. Maum into that Forty-ninth Street office but the dastardly crew we were after were wigwagged by some peculiar outpost — and escaped. Leaving behind," Mr. McCarey's eyes both squinted and his voice grew harsher, "leaving behind a package in the safe containing Meyer's right hand. It was addressed and ready to be mailed."

"To whom?" I asked.

Mr. McCarey was silent.

"To whom?" I persisted.

"To a man named Stalin in Moscow, Russia," he said. "It was being

sent him with its fingerprints intact to verify the report already over the cables."

"Who was Meyer?" I asked.

"Will you believe me when I tell you?" said Mr. McCarey softly, and pulled his head erect with a lurch. "Or will you join this foul conspiracy against truth and justice led by Monsoor Gavin and his peculiar myrmidons? Will you believe me if I tell you I've got all the facts of this fabulous crime?"

"I will," I said.

"This laundryman," said Mr. McCarey in a soft voice, "was the Czar of Russia."

I regarded Mr. McCarey calmly.

"Nikolai the Second," he said with dignity, in a sad croak. Then he went on in a mumble, "Escaped from his executioners in Siberia in 1918. Shipped across the world, his royal mind fogged by the tragedy of his murdered kin. But enough of his brain left to know he was hunted and that murder waited for him around every corner on the globe. So he drifted into Harlem as a little laundryman.

"The Czar of all the Russias."

"You said you knew the minute you saw him," I said.

"Yes."

"How?"

The McCarey heart came charging out of its torpor.

"How did I know?" he said. "Because when I looked down on this dead laundryman I saw a cross in his left hand. A Muscovite cross."

"What did Neidlinger say?"

But the McCarey was in the mists. Tears were slipping down his stiffened cheeks and his head was wagging loosely over the table.

A short, gray-haired man appeared beside him. He had a red, excited face and a pair of black bristling eyebrows. He began shaking the McCarey shoulder.

"Wake up, you lout," said this man. "Come on, quit your stalling, you drunken bum."

Mr. McCarey opened one angry eye.

"Monsoor Gavin," he said, and tried to rise, "you foul Armenian!"

"Pull yourself together," said Monsoor Gavin, and stood trembling with an excitement even greater than Mr. McCarey's had been. Mr. McCarey slowly opened a second eye, glared, and emitted a carnivorous snarl.

"I'm going to stuff your heart," he said, "like a fowl olive."

The fearless Monsoor with the red face ignored this promise and hoisted the McCarey to his feet. He was pushing at him from behind with eager, almost frantic, gestures and steering him for the door.

"Pull yourself together," he whispered fiercely into the McCarey ear. He turned to me. "No, I can handle him. I don't need you." To Mr. McCarey he added, giving that brave a final shove toward the door, "You're going home and pack. I got it all fixed up. The boss has agreed. Do you hear me? Agreed, by God! You're leaving in the morning for Moscow."

DEPARTMENT OF "FIRST STORIES"

Best "First Story" in EQMM's Ninth Annual Contest

Last year's contest produced thirteen "first stories" worthy of publication — thus tying the high-water mark for "first stories" established in our Eighth contest. As we commented in 1953, the discovery of thirteen new talents in a single year is breath-taking news, and if EQMM's annual contests do nothing more than bring to light a dozen or more new writers every year, the contests will be worth every dollar they cost and every long hour of toil on the part of your editors and their staff. Nothing is so important to the future of the detective-crime short story as new blood — "good, rich, red blood." So please note the fact that once again EQMM's annual contest is officially on — our tenth world-wide competition, for the largest number of prizes and the greatest amount of money ever awarded in the mystery field.

Once more we are offering a special prize of \$500 for the best "first story" to be submitted between now and October 20, 1954. If any of you have had the yen in the past to change your status from reader to writer, and especially to try your hand at a detective, crime, or mystery short story — even as short as 1500 words — we urge you to obey that impulse. If your story is good enough, it may win one of the regular prizes, including the \$1500 First Prize or the \$1000 Special Award of Merit; or it may win the \$500 award for the best "first story"; or it may be purchased at our regular space rates for "first stories." In any event, its publication will bring you honor as well as honorarium, and we promise your name will appear, with those of old masters and new, in the goodliest company this side of paradise. So, make us exclaim again: Hallelujah, the young men and women are a-comin'!

In our Ninth Annual Contest we again had great difficulty in selecting the best "first story" among the thirteen winners in this division; but finally we awarded the \$500 prize to Joseph Whitehill for "The Day of the Last Rock Fight." This is the story of a private school for boys — "for misfits and boys with emotional problems." You will find it sensitive and perceptive — and no wonder: it is partly the product of the author's work in psychotherapy at the Menninger Clinic — "in the sense," as Mr. Whitehill himself expressed it, "that it is a rebellion against the common

attitude in fiction that the adolescent mind is an amusing pet, to be treated with condescension." The story will tug at your heart, and perhaps sadden you, if not actually disturb you. And if the story does not wholly succeed, it is chiefly because the author has aimed exceedingly high. All the more credit to Mr. Whitehill for attempting a really important story . . .

Now, some facts about the author: He is nearly twenty-seven, six-feet-four and 190 in his stockinged feet, has a wonderful wife and three equally wonderful "little bandits," likes to play tennis and swim, was in the Navy for a year "seeing the world in the immediate vicinity of Stockton, California," got bored with both Harvard and the University of Tulsa despite his GI Bill of Rights, confesses that his "second love after writing is electronics," has worked (looking backward) as an engine lathe machinist, a draftsman, an accountant, a dishwasher, a sailing instructor, a Girl Scout leader (!), and an electronics design engineer, and has varying passions for jeeps, Andres Segovia, splicing good manila, and "the sour smell of scorching Oster oil on the tool bit when you're feeding at high speed into 1020 steel."

Just reading that last quotation alone tells you that Joe Whitehill is going to be heard from . . .

THE DAY OF THE LAST ROCK FIGHT

by JOSEPH WHITEHILL

FALLBROOK ACADEMY

May 16, 195-

Dear Dad,

I expect this will be a very long letter, so I am sending it to your office marked *Personal*. I know you don't like to do family business at the office, but I wanted you to have a chance to read this all by yourself, and I didn't want Mother or Sue reading it before you did.

Thank you for sending my allowance, and also for the subscription to the home paper. Thank you also for

the nice new wallet for my birthday. I really needed it, as my old one was afflicted with rot and falling apart.

I apologize for not having written sooner. As you said in your last letter, "*Something* must have happened in the last two months worth writing down." I have been very busy with things here at school, but mainly I haven't written because I didn't know how to say what I wanted to say. I hope this letter will make up for the long delay.

You keep asking me what I think

of Fallbrook Academy and if I'm happy here, and so on. Well, I don't like it here, and I want to come home. That's what this letter is for — to tell you that now it's all right for me to come back home. I guess I know why you sent me here, and I admit that I wanted very much to come when I did. It's not that the people here aren't nice or anything. They are. They're so nice it's phony. In all the catalogues of the school they call it a *Special School*, but the boys here call it *Goodbar*. (Mr. Goodbar is a chocolate bar full of nuts.) They all kid about it, and pretend they don't care about being put in a school for misfits and boys with emotional problems. I guess most of them like it here. Most of them say they hate their parents, one or both, and are really glad to get away from them. All the faculty are so sweet and kind and sympathetic that a lot of the boys get away with murder. (That last word was sort of a poor choice, I suppose, but I'll leave it there anyway.) But I don't feel like I belong here any more.

It is going to be very complicated to explain everything in just one letter, because there are lots of different ways of looking at that mess that happened there at home, and I suppose I am the only one who knows the whole story. I guess you sent me here because you thought I was terribly upset by Gene Hanlon getting killed out there at Manning Day School at home, and seeing his body lying in the creek, and so on. Well, that was part of it, but only a little part. The

rest of it I couldn't tell anybody until Detective Sergeant Gorman put the story in the paper last week. I got that paper in the mail yesterday and I have been reading the story over and over, and feeling relieved and awful at the same time.

I'm sure you read the same story, so you already know that Gene Hanlon was murdered, instead of getting killed accidentally as they said at first. But neither you nor anybody else knows that I saw the murder done, and knew all the time who did it. I guess if I acted upset afterwards it was from knowing all this and not being able to tell anyone about it. I'm going to work on this letter all night, if it takes that long, because I have to get all this out of my system. (When you stay up after curfew around here they don't actually *make* you go to bed, but the doctor who is on duty looks in on you every half hour or so to see what you're doing, and to try to make you *want* to go to bed.)

I suppose the beginning is the best place to start, so I will tell you first about Gene Hanlon, the boy who got killed. He came to Manning Day School last fall as a Senior. They said he was fired from his last school, but I don't know about that. I didn't like him just from looking at him. I know you hate judgments that way on first impressions, but I couldn't help it. I wouldn't ever bring him over to our house, but if I had, you might have seen what I was talking about. He was big and beefy, and

he played on the first string last fall. He was also blond, and the girls thought he was cute and from what I heard they fought over him for dates. But he was a bully, and he cheated in the classroom and he borrowed your stuff without asking you and then left it some place where you had to go hunt it up yourself.

In a school like Manning Day there are always a number of tight little groups — cliques, I guess you call them — that move around independently and generally stay out of the way of the others. I mean there is a football group, and a group of boys who drink beer, and a group who studies hard, and a group who loaf and tries to avoid everything that looks like work, and a group that meets in the locker room to talk about sex and tell dirty jokes. It was probably the same way when you yourself went to school, but you may have forgotten. When you go to a school like that, you pretty soon find the group that suits you best, and you stay there and don't try to mix with any of the others, because if you do you won't be let in.

What I am getting at in this long explanation is that Gene Hanlon was the Big Man in all the groups I wouldn't be seen dead in. He was tops among the football players and their fans. He could tell filthier stories and, he said, hold more liquor than anybody else. And he told stories about the things he had done to girls that you wouldn't believe if anybody else had told them, but with him telling

them, you knew they were all possible. I guess he was feared more than he was liked, but one thing sure, he never went anywhere alone. There was always a loud bunch along with him horse-laughing and beating him on the shoulders.

I stayed out of his way. There is something about me that brings out the worst in bullies. That's what Peter Irish used to say. I guess it's because I'm slightly built, and because of those glasses I have to wear. Once, I was going upstairs to lab, and Gene Hanlon was coming down and we met halfway, and for no reason I could see, he belted me as hard as he could on my shoulder. My glasses flew off and bounced halfway down the stairs along with a whole armload of books and papers. I had to grab the bannister to keep from following them down myself. Two other guys with him saw him do it and didn't say anything at first, but then they looked at Gene and knew they'd better laugh, so they did. So I sat there on the stairs all confused inside, holding my shoulder to make it stop hurting. Gene Hanlon and the others went on down the stairs laughing to beat all at how I looked there with everything scattered around me. On the way down, Gene kicked my physics book ahead of him, bouncing it all the way to the bottom. When I could stand up all right I went down and got it. When I picked it up it fell apart in my hands with its binding broken and I guess I started to cry. I hate to see books treated that way.

When I had about got everything picked up, Peter Irish came up to where I was and wanted to know what had happened. Peter being my best friend, I told him all about it. Probably there were still tears in my eyes about the physics book because Peter said, "Do you want me to get him for you?"

I thought for a minute how swell that would be, but then I said no. It was almost yes because Peter was the only one in school who could have whipped Gene under any rules, and it was a very satisfying thing to think about. But then I thought about afterwards, when Gene had gotten over his beating and he began to wonder why Peter had done it, and he would remember that Peter was my best friend. Then he would put one and one together and start out after me seriously. So I said no.

Peter Irish was a good friend to have. I suppose he was the strongest kid in school, but he didn't ever use his strength to bully people, but just for things that were fun, like squashing a beer can in one hand. You knew him pretty well because of all the times he came over to the house to study with me. I remember the time he beat you at Indian Hand Wrestling on the dining room table, and you were a real good sport about it because Mother was watching and laughing at your expression. But anyway, you know how strong Peter was, and you can feature what he would have done to Gene if I'd told him to. Peter always stayed out of fights un-

less they were for fun, and if they ever got serious he'd quit because he didn't want to hurt anybody. But he would have torn Gene Hanlon apart if I had asked him to.

That was something I don't think you understood — Peter and me, I mean, and why we hung around together. The simplest way to say it is that we swapped talents. I used to write a lot of his themes for him, and help him in labs so he'd finish when the rest of us did, and he'd show me judo holds and how to skin a squirrel, and such things. You would call it a good working agreement.

Now, there are just two more things you have to know about to see the whole picture. The first one is Peter Irish and Angela Pine. Peter and Angela went together all last year and the year before, and neither of them wanted anybody else. Both their folks made them date other kids because they didn't like to see them going steady, but everybody knew that Angela belonged to Peter, and Peter belonged to Angela, and that's all there was to it. He used to talk to me a lot about her, and how they were going to get married and run a riding stable together. And he told me that he would never touch her that way until they were married. They used to kiss good night and that was all, because Peter said that when the great thing happened, he wanted it to happen just right, and it could never be really right while they were both kids in high school. A lot of the fellows thought that more went on

between them than I know did, but that's because they didn't understand Peter really. He had a simple set of rules he operated under, and they suited him very well. He was good to Angela and good to animals, and all he asked was to be let alone to do things his own way.

The other thing you have to know about is the noontime rock fights. From the papers and the inquest and all, you know something about them, but not everything. I guess most of the parents were pretty shocked to learn that their little Johnny was in a mob rock fight every day at school, but that's the way it was. The fights started over a year ago, as near as I can recollect, and went on all that time without the faculty every finding out. The papers made a big scandal out of them and conducted what they called an "expose of vicious practices at select Manning Day School." It was comical, actually, the way everybody got all steamed up over the things we knew went on all the time, not only at Manning but in all the other schools in town. Of course, we all knew the rock fights were wrong, but they were more fun than they seemed wrong, so we kept them up. (That time I came home with the mouse under my eye, I didn't get it by falling in the locker room. I just forgot to duck.)

We had a strict set of rules in the fights so that nobody would really get hurt or anything, and so the little guys could get into them too without fear of being killed. All sixty of us,

the whole school, were divided into two teams, the Union Army and the Confederates, and after lunch in the cafeteria we'd all get our blue or gray caps and head out into the woods behind the school. The faculty thought we played Kick the Can and never followed us out to check up on us.

Each team had a fort we'd built out of sapling logs — really just pens about waist high. The forts were about two hundred yards apart, invisible to each other through the trees and scrub. You weren't allowed to use rocks any bigger than a hazelnut, and before you pegged one at a guy in the opposite army, you had to go "chk, chk" with your mouth so the guy would have a chance to find where it was coming from and duck in time. We had scouting parties and assault teams and patrols, and all the rest of the military things we could think up. The object was to storm the enemy's fort and take it before recess was up and we had to quit.

These rock fights weren't like the papers said at all. I remember the *Morning Star* called them "pitched battles of unrelenting fury, where injuries were frequent." That was silly. If the injuries had been frequent, it wouldn't have been fun any more, and nobody would have wanted to keep doing it. You *could* get hurt, of course, but you could get hurt a lot worse in a football game with the grandstand full of newspaper reporters and faculty and parents all cheering you on.

Now I guess you know everything

that was important before the day Gene Hanlon got killed, and I can tell you how it happened so that you'll know why.

After our last morning class, Peter Irish and I went down to the wash-room in the basement to clean up for lunch. All morning Peter had acted funny — silent and sort of tied up inside, and it was worrying me some. At first I thought I had done something he didn't like, but if I had, he'd have told me. He'd hardly said two words all morning, and he had missed two recitations in English that I had coached him on myself. But you couldn't pry trouble out of Peter, so I just kept quiet and waited for him to let me in on it.

While he was washing his hands I had to go into one of the stalls. I went in and shut the door and was hanging up my jacket when I heard somebody else come into the wash-room. I don't know why, but I sat down — being real careful not to make any noise.

Somebody said, "Hi, Pete, boy." It was Gene Hanlon, and he was alone for once.

"Hi, Gene." That was Peter. (I am trying to put this down as near as I can just the way they said it.)

"Oh, man!" Gene said, "Today I am exhaustpipe!"

"Tired?"

"You said the word, man. Real beat under."

"Why so?"

"Big date last night. Friend of yours, Angela Pine." Just as if that

stall door hadn't been there, I could see Gene grinning at Peter and waiting for a rise out of him. Peter didn't say anything, so Gene tried again. "You're pretty sly, Pete."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean about Angela. You've done a real fine job of keeping her in dry-dock all this time."

"She dates other guys," Peter said, sounding like he ought to clear his throat.

"Aaaah. She goes out with those meatballs and then comes home and shakes hands at the door. What kind of a date is that?"

"Well, that's *her* business."

Gene said, giggling, "I don't know what her business is, but I got a few suggestions for her if she ever asks me."

"What are you getting at?"

"Real coy boy. She's crazy for it. Just crazy. Real crazy hungry chick, yeah."

"Are you through?"

"What? . . . Oh, sure. *Hey!* You sore or something?"

Peter said, "It's time for you to go eat lunch."

"All right already. Jesus! You don't have to get *that* way about it. A guy gives you a compliment and you go and get sore. You *are* an odd ball. You and your screwy horses too. See you around." And Gene went out scuffing his feet along the floor.

When I came out of the stall Peter was hunched stiff-armed over the washbasin. He didn't even know I was around. I wished right then that I

could have gone back and un-lived the last five minutes. I wished they had never happened, and that everything was back just the way it was before. I was hurt and mad, and my mind was whirling around full of all the stuff Gene Hanlon had said. Just to be doing something, I got busy combing my hair, wetting and shaking the comb and all, trying to find a way to say what I was feeling. Peter was very busy turning both faucets on and off again in a kind of splashy rhythm.

Finally I said, "If you believe all that crud, you're pretty silly. That guy's a bragging liar and you know it."

Peter looked up at me as though he had just noticed I was there. "I've got to believe it," he said.

I jumped on him for that. "Oh, come on," I said. "Give Angela a little credit. She wouldn't give that pile of you-know-what the right time."

Peter was looking down the basin drain. "I called her this morning to say hello. She wouldn't talk to me, Ronnie. She wouldn't even come to the phone."

Now I knew what had been eating him all morning. There wasn't any more a friend could say to Peter, so I made him let go of the faucets and come with me to eat lunch in the cafeteria. All through lunch he just pushed dishes around on his tray and didn't say anything. As we scraped our plates I asked him if he was going out to the fight in the woods, and he

surprised me by saying yes, so we got our caps and hiked out to the Confederate fort.

Almost everybody, Gene Hanlon too, was there before us, and they'd already chosen today's Generals. Smitty Rice was General of the Armies of the Confederacy, and Gene Hanlon was the Union commander. Gene took all his boys off to the Union fort to wait for the starting whistle, and Smitty outlined his strategy to us.

There was to be a feint at the south side of the Union fort, and then a noisy second feint from the north to pull the defenders out of position. Then Smitty and Peter Irish were to lead the real massed assault from the south, under the lip of the hill where the first feint had come from. When five minutes had gone by on my watch, we all got up and Smitty blew the starting whistle and we piled out of the fort, leaving only five inside as a garrison, and a couple of alarm guards a little way out on each side of the fort.

I got the job I usually got — advance observation post. I was to note enemy movements and remember concentrations and directions and elapsed times between sightings. Even though you couldn't see more than a hundred feet through the woods, you could always get a fair idea of the enemy strategy by the way they moved their troops around. So all I had to do was stay in one place and watch and listen and remember, and every so often Smitty would send a

runner over from Field Headquarters to check up on what had happened lately. I had three or four good posts picked out where I could hide and not be seen, and I never used the same one twice running.

Today's was my favorite — Baker Post, we called it. It was a dense thicket of young blackjack oak on a low hill on the inside of a bend in the creek, and because nothing grew on the gravel bars of the creek, you could see a long way to each side. The creek ran generally south, cutting the fighting area between the forts right in two, and it made a good defense line because there were only a few places you could cross it in one jump and not get your shoes wet. The east bank of the creek, directly across from Baker Post, is a vertical bluff about ten feet high so that the ground up there is right on eye level with Baker, and the creek and the gravel bars are spread out between you and the bluff bank. I always knew that Baker Post was good, because every time I took it up I had to flush out a covey of quail or a cottontail.

It was always quiet in the woods during the first few minutes of those fights. Even the birds shut up, it seemed like, waiting for the first troop contacts. Out of the corner of my eye I saw somebody jump the creek at the North Ford, and I rolled over to watch. Because of the brush up there I couldn't see who it was, but I knew he was there because once in a while a bush would stir, or his foot would slide a little on the gravel.

Pretty soon he came out to the edge of the underbrush and crouched there looking around and listening. It was Gene Hanlon. His eyes crossed right over me, without finding me, and after a minute he came out and ran low along the creek. When he got even with Baker Post, he went down to his knees and began filling his cap with rocks. I had to laugh to myself at how stupid that was. He should have collected his ammunition earlier, when he and his army were on their way over to their fort. He was wasting maneuvering time and exposing himself for no good reason. It makes you feel good when a guy you hate does something dumb like that.

I got ready to go "chk, chk" with my mouth just to scare him and see him run. But then I looked up at the bluff over him and my heart flopped over inside me. Peter Irish was there, down on one knee, looking over at Gene Hanlon. Gene never looked up. Peter moves like that — floating in and out of the brush as quietly as if he didn't weigh anything. Peter was a good woods fighter.

So instead of going "chk, chk" I hunkered down lower in my thicket and thought to myself that now it wasn't a game any more. Peter looked a long time over at where I was hiding, then he looked up and down the creek bed, and then he moved back a little from the edge of the bluff. He put all his weight pulling on a half-buried boulder beside him until it turned over in its socket and he could get a good grip on it. Even from

where I was I could see the cords come out in his neck when he raised it up in his arms and stood up. I hadn't heard a sound except the creek gurgling a little, and Gene Hanlon scratching around in the gravel. And also the blood roaring in my own ears. Watching this was like being in a movie and seeing the story happen on the screen. Nothing you can do or say will change what is going to happen because it's all there in the unwinding reel.

Peter held the heavy stone like a medicine ball and walked to the edge of the bluff and looked down at Gene Hanlon. Gene had moved a few feet south along the creek, so Peter above him moved south too, until he was even with Gene. Peter made a little grunt when he pushed the rock out and away and it fell. Gene heard the grunt and lifted his head to look up, and the rock hit him full in the face and bent his head away back and made his arms fly out. He sat right down in the water with his red and dirty face turned up to the sky and his hands holding him up behind. Then he got himself up with his head still twisted back like that, so he was looking straight up, and he wandered a little way downstream with the water up to his knees and then he fell out on a gravel bar on his stomach. His legs and arms spread out like he was asleep but his head was up rigid and his mouth was open. I couldn't look any more.

Peter hadn't made a sound leaving, but when I looked up, the bluff above

was empty. As soon as I could move without getting sick I faded out of there and went up north a ways to Able Post and lay down in the foxhole there and held myself around the knees and just shook. I couldn't have felt more upset if I had dropped that rock myself. Just like the movie reel had the ends tied together, the whole scene kept rolling over and over in front of my eyes, and I couldn't stop the film or even turn off the light in the projector.

I lay there with my head down waiting for someone to find the body and start hollering. It was little Marvin Herold, Smitty's courier, who started screaming in his high voice, "Safety! Oh God. . . . Safetysafetysafety. . . . Help . . . Help!" "Safety" was the call we used to stop the fights if anyone saw a master coming or somebody got hurt. I lay there for several minutes listening to guys running past me through the brush heading for Baker Post, then I got up and followed them. I couldn't move very fast because my knees kept trying to bend the wrong way.

When I came out of the brush onto the gravel bank, I was surprised that everything looked so different. When I had left just five minutes before, the whole clearing and the creek were empty and lying bright in the sun and Gene Hanlon was there all alone on the gravel bar. Now, with all the guys standing around and talking at once with their backs to the body, the whole place was different, and it

wasn't so bad being there. I saw little Marvin Herold go over and try to take the pulse of Gene Hanlon's body. Marvin is a Boy Scout with lots of merit badges, and I expected him to try artificial respiration or a tourniquet, but he didn't find any pulse so he stood up and shook his head and wobbled over to where we were. He looked terribly blank, as though the Scout Manual had let him down.

The assumption going around was that Gene had run off the bluff and landed on his head and broken his neck. I couldn't see Peter anywhere, so I finally had to ask Smitty where he was. Smitty said he had sent Peter in to the school to tell somebody what had happened, and to get the ambulance. Smitty was still being the General, I guess, because there was nothing else for him to do. I tried to think to myself what Peter must be feeling like now, sent off to do an errand like that, but I couldn't get anywhere. My head was too full of what I was feeling like, standing with the fellows on the gravel bar looking at Gene Hanlon spread out half in the water like a dropped doll, knowing just how he had gotten there, and not being able to say anything.

Then Smitty got an idea, and he said, "Ronnie, weren't you here at Baker Post all the time?"

I made myself look at him, and then I said, "No, damn it. I got to thinking their army might try a crossing up by Able Post, so I went up there instead."

He said, "Oh," and forgot it.

Not long after we heard a siren. We all knew what it was, and everybody stopped talking to listen to it as it got nearer. It was the first time I ever heard a siren and knew while hearing it why it had been called, and where it was going. It was sort of creepy, like it was saying to us over the trees, "Wait right there, boys. Don't anybody leave. I'll be there in a minute, and then we'll see just what's going on." I wanted to run and keep on running, until I got away from all the things swarming around inside me. You always wish afterward you had never joggled the wasp ball.

Pretty soon we heard somebody moving in the woods on the bluff and then two big men in white pants, carrying a folded-up stretcher, and another man in a suit carrying a black bag, came out to the lip of the bluff. They stood there looking at us a minute without saying anything until one of the stretcher bearers saw Gene Hanlon lying there all alone on the gravel bar. The man said something to the other two, and they all three looked where he pointed. Then the doctor looked at us all bunched up where we were and said, "Well, how do we get down?" He sounded sore. None of us moved or said anything, and in a minute the doctor got tired of waiting and blasted us. "Wake up over there! How do we go to get down?" Smitty came unstuck and gave them directions, and they went back into the brush heading north.

From then on things got pretty

crowded in the woods. Two uniformed policemen and a photographer and a plainclothesman showed up, and then Peter Irish came back leading almost the whole school faculty, and later a reporter and another photographer arrived. Nobody paid any attention to us for a while, so we just sat there in a clump, not moving or saying much. I managed to get right in the middle, and I kept down, hiding behind the guys around me and looking between them to see what was going on. After the police photographer was through taking pictures of Gene Hanlon from all sides, the two ambulance men raised him onto the stretcher and covered him with a piece of canvas or something and carried him away. The photographer took pictures all around by the creek and then went up onto the bluff and took pictures of the ground up there too. The plainclothesman poking around on the gravel bar found Gene Hanlon's blue cap half full of rocks and gave it, with the rocks still in it, to one of the policemen to save.

I finally got up nerve enough to look for Peter Irish. He was standing with Smitty and Mr. Kelly, the math teacher, and they were talking. Peter didn't look any different. I didn't see how he could do it. I mean, stand right out there in plain sight of everyone, looking natural, with all that in his head. He looked around slowly as though he felt me watching him, and he found me there in the middle of the bunch. I couldn't have looked away if I had tried. He gave me a little

smile, and I nodded my head to show him I'd seen it, then he went back to his talking with the other two.

Then the plainclothesman went over to the three of them, and I got all wild inside and wanted to jump up and say that Peter couldn't possibly have done it, so please go away and let him alone. I could see the plainclothesman doing most of the talking, and Peter and Smitty saying something once in a while, as though they were answering questions. After a little the plainclothesman stopped talking and nodded, and the other three nodded back, and then he led them over to where the rest of us were. Smitty and Peter sat down with us and Mr. Kelly collected all the other faculty men and brought them over.

The plainclothesman tipped his hat back and put his hands in his pockets and said, "My name is Gorman. Sergeant Gorman. We know all about the rock fight now, so don't get nervous that you'll let on something that'll get you into trouble. You're already *in* trouble, but that's not my business. You can settle that with your instructors and your parents. Uh. . . . You might think some about this, though. It's my feeling that every one of you here has a share in the responsibility for this boy's death. You all know rock fighting is dangerous but you went ahead and did it anyway. But that's not what I'm after right now. I want to know if any of you boys actually saw this (what's his name?) this Hanlon boy run over the bluff." I was looking

straight at Sergeant Gorman but in the side of my eye I saw Peter Irish turn his head around and look at me. I didn't peep.

Then Sergeant Gorman said, "Which one of you is Ronnie Quiller?"

I almost fainted.

Somebody poked me and I said, "Me." It didn't sound like my voice at all.

Sergeant Gorman said, "Which?"

I said, "Me," again.

This time he found me and said, "Weren't you supposed to be lying here in this thicket all the time?"

"Yes," I said. All the kids were looking at me. "But there wasn't anything doing here so I moved up there a ways."

"I see," he said. "Do you always disobey orders?"

"No," I said, "But after all, it was only a game."

"Some game," said Sergeant Gorman. "Good clean fun."

Then he let me alone. There was only one person there who knew I would never have deserted the post assigned to me. That was Peter Irish. I guess, Dad, that's when I began to get really scared. The worst of it was not knowing how much Peter knew, and not daring to ask. He might have been waiting out of sight in the brush after he dropped that rock, and seen me take out for Able Post. I had always been his friend, but what was I now to him? I wanted to tell him everything was okay and I wouldn't for the world squeal on him,

but that would have told him I knew he did it. Maybe he knew without my telling him. I didn't know what to do.

Sergeant Gorman finished up, "Let's all go back to the school now. I want to talk to each of you alone." We all got up and started back through the woods in a bunch. I figured Peter would think it was funny if I avoided him, so I walked with him.

I said, "Lousy damn day."

He said, "Real lousy."

I said, "It seems like a hundred years since lunch."

We didn't say any more all the way back.

It took all afternoon to get the individual interviews over. They took us from Assembly Hall in alphabetical order, and we had to go in and sit across from Sergeant Gorman while he asked the questions. He must have asked us all the same questions because by the time he got to me he was saying the words like they were tired. A girl stenographer sat by him and took down the answers.

"Name?"

"Ronnie Quiller." I had to spell it.

"Were you at the rock fight this afternoon?"

"Yes, I was."

"What side were you on?"

"The Confederates."

"What were you supposed to do?"

"Watch the guys on the other side."

"After this whistle, did you see anyone?"

"No."

"You sure?"

"No, I didn't. That's why I moved from Baker Post up to Able Post. There wasn't anything doing where I was hiding."

"In rock fights before, have you ever changed position without telling somebody?"

"Sure, I guess. You can't run clear back to the Field Headquarters to tell anyone anything. It's up to them to find *you*."

Sergeant Gorman squinted at me with his eyebrows pulled down. "You know that if you had stayed where you were supposed to be you would have seen him fall over that bluff there?"

"Yes," I said.

"I wish you had."

Afterwards I ran into Smitty out in the hall and I asked him why all this fuss with the police and all. I asked him who called them.

"It was Peter, I think. He told Mr. Kelly to, and Mr. Kelly did."

"What do you suppose they're after?" I asked Smitty.

"Oh, I guess they're trying to get a straight story to tell Gene's parents and the newspapers. From what I get from Mr. Kelly, the school is all for it. They want everybody to know they weren't responsible."

"Do *you* think Gene fell over that bluff?" I couldn't help asking that one.

"I don't know. I suppose so." He cocked his head to one side and grinned a little at me. "Like they say

in the papers, 'Fell or Was Pushed,' huh?"

I said, "I guess nobody'd have nerve enough to do that to Gene — push him, I mean." All of a sudden I was thinking about something I had seen. Going back in my mind I remembered seeing Sergeant Gorman pick up Gene's cap half full of rocks. Gravel rocks taken from the low bank of the creek. Now, I figured that Sergeant Gorman wouldn't have been a Sergeant if he was stupid, and unless he was stupid he wouldn't go on for long thinking that Gene had fallen from above — *when the cap half full of rocks said he'd been down below all the time!*

I got my bike and rode home the long way to give me time to think about Peter and what he had done, and what I should do. You were real swell that night, and I guess I should have told you the whole story right then, but I just couldn't. I put myself in Peter's place, and I knew he would never have told on me. That's the way he was. He hated squealers. I couldn't think about his ever learning I had squealed on him. That would put me right alongside Angela Pine in his book. To him, I would have been the second person he trusted who let him down.

I felt like a rat in a cage with no place to go and no way out. When you kept me home nights after that, I didn't mind, because I wouldn't have gone out after dark if I'd been paid to. I don't blame you and Mother for thinking I had gone loony

over the whole thing. Every noon recess for two whole weeks they pulled us into Assembly Hall and one of the masters would give a speech about group responsibility or public conscience or something awful like that, and then, worst of all, they made us bow our heads for five minutes in memory of Gene Hanlon. And there I'd be, sitting next to Peter Irish on the Assembly Hall bench, thinking back to the day of the last rock fight, and how Peter had looked up there on the bluff with the cords of his neck pulled tight, holding that big rock like it was a medicine ball. I had the crawliest feeling that if anybody in the Hall had raised up his head and looked over at us together there on the bench, he would have seen two great fiery arrows pointing down at us. I was always afraid even to look up myself for fear I would have seen my own arrow and passed out on the spot.

It was my nightmares that got you worried, I guess. They always started out with Peter and me on a hike on a dusty country road. It was so hot you could hardly breathe. We would walk along without saying anything, with me lagging a little behind Peter so I could always keep an eye on him. And then the road would come out on the football field there at school, and he would go over to the woodpile and pick up a thin log and hold it in one hand, beckoning to me with the other and smiling. "Let's go over to the drug store," he'd say, and then I'd start running.

I would follow the quarter mile track around the football field and I'd know that everything would be all right if I could only get around it four times for a full mile. Every time I turned around to look, there he'd be right behind me, carrying that log and running easily, just like he used to pace me when I was out for the 880. I would make the first quarter mile all right, but then my wind would give out and my throat would dry up and my legs would get heavy, and I'd know that Peter was about to catch me, and I'd never make that full mile.

Then I would jar awake and be sweating and hanging on tight to the mattress, and in a minute you'd come in to see why I'd screamed. Your face was always kind of sad over me, and there in my bed in the dark, with you standing beside, I would *almost* let go and tell you why things were so bad with me. But then as I'd come awake, and the hammering in my heart would slow up, and the sweat would begin to dry, all the things I owed Peter Irish would stand out again and look at me, and I would know that I could never tell you about it until my telling could no longer get Peter Irish into trouble.

I'm tired now, Dad — tired in so many ways and in so many places that I don't know where to begin resting. This letter took all night, as I thought it would. It's beginning to get light outside and the birds are starting up. I just reread the story in the paper where it says that Ser-

geant Gorman knew all along that Gene Hanlon had been murdered. I told you he wasn't stupid. He knew what that cap half full of rocks meant, and he knew what it meant to find a big damp socket in the earth on top of the bluff, and the rock which had been *in* the socket down below in the creek. And after he had talked to each of us alphabetically there in the school office, he knew the name of the only boy in school strong enough to lift up a seventy pound rock and throw it like a medicine ball. He knew all of these things before the sun went down on the day of the last rock fight, but he was two months putting the rest of the story together so he could use it in his business.

As I read it in the paper, Sergeant Gorman went over to Peter's house last Monday night and talked to him

about the things he had learned, and Peter had listened respectfully, and then, when Sergeant Gorman was through and was ready to take Peter along with him, Peter excused himself to go upstairs and get his toilet articles. He got his four-ten shotgun instead and shot himself. I suppose it was the same four-ten he and I hunted squirrels with.

There's only one good thing about this whole stinking lousy mess, Dad. Because Sergeant Gorman talked to Peter and Peter listened, there in the living room; when Peter Irish climbed up those stairs he did it knowing that I, Ronnie Quiller, had not squealed on him. That may have made it easier. I don't know.

Now please, Dad — please may I come home again?

RONNIE



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QUEEN OF THE GRAVEYARD GHOULS

by BARRY BENEFIELD

THERE WAS A LONG ROW OF PEARL-topped buttons in one corner of the great oak desk, and the short, heavily built man sat down and pushed violently at the one marked *Clerical Manager*. Then, leaning forward in his chair, he ran his hands repeatedly back over his round, closely cropped head, answering a constitutional demand to fill in energetically, somehow, the wait. The outer door of his three-room office suite opened and let in a torrential clatter of typewriters that penetrated, though somewhat dimmed,

even to his inner room; and presently the second door opened to admit the deferential Kitchell.

"Mr. Kitchell, I told you before I left a week ago on the Western trip that my stenographer and private secretary had left me — again."

"Yes, Mr. Eads."

"To be married, of course, Mr. Kitchell. She is now, I suppose, on her honeymoon — loathsome word! — honeymoon! She is the latest of four whom I have by labor, great labor, Mr. Kitchell, trained to do *my* work in *my* way, only to be told just when

they were becoming valuable that they wanted to marry! The fourth, the fourth successive one! You know that, Mr. Kitchell; you sent them in from the main office."

"Yes, sir; I remember."

"Mr. Kitchell, where in the fiend's name do they find all these heroes in this city? Only fools or heroes marry poor in New York, and I hope none of the young ladies I accepted as my secretary married a fool. But where *do* they find the men? Is all the young crop of men marrying? Is there to be no coming crop of old and acid bachelors, old and noble bachelors, old and wicked bachelors? I feel keenly about this, Mr. Kitchell; my race must not die out. Do I make myself clear?"

"Oh, yes, sir," agreed Kitchell, palely smiling. He was uncertain whether the great man was ferociously angry or angrily facetious.

"Now, Mr. Kitchell, in this past week have you found the kind of person I told you I wanted — one competent stenographer with sense enough to develop into a private secretary — I don't need and I won't have a mob of helpers in here — and who is not likely, so far as you can judge, of course, to inveigle some man into dragging her off to Atlantic City, Niagara Falls, or Coney Island on a honeymoon? Still, as I told you, Mr. Kitchell, not a monstrosity; I hate ugliness. Nor a man; they talk inside business outside. Mr. Kitchell, have you found her?"

"I think so, sir."

"Good! Send the paragon in. I'll try her for a week."

In order to test her rapidity, her accuracy, her readiness to meet an emergency quickly, and to accustom her in the beginning to his brusque time-saving manner, Mr. Eads prepared to plunge into the dictation of several long and complicated letters to the Southern and Western managers of the company. When she knocked he said, "Come in"; and began walking up and down, his head drooped forward on his folded arms, getting ready the matter to be fired at her.

"Are you ready?" he asked. For a second he stopped and glanced at her. He was acutely conscious of a satisfying impression of trained efficiency, native intelligence, personal immaculateness, and — something else. He had neither the time nor the inclination to analyze that; he began again his walking up and down.

The little woman moved swiftly to the stenographer's desk in the corner and cleared it for action. From time to time her dark eyes rested on the short, heavily built man striding up and down near her. She dared to let a smile flutter in her fair, almost imperceptibly pinched face; though instantly the smile was gone, and she pressed her lips together so tightly that they seemed to hurt her. She patted at her hair, black hair softened by the faintest mist of gray, and, suddenly sticking out her tongue at the back of the great man, she tilted her chin even a shade higher and sat down.

"I am ready," she announced.

"Take these then."

Having dictated for almost an hour, he consulted a memorandum-pad on his desk, looked at his watch, snatched his hat out of a closet set in the wall and started for the door.

"I'm late for a meeting," he explained over his shoulder. "Your room is the one inside there, of course. You'll find all you need in there. If not, ask Mr. Kitchell. Leave the letters on my desk to be signed. I'll be back at 1. Go out to lunch when you're through, or when you like. I have lunch at 2:15, always. I'd like you to get those letters off, please, as soon as they're signed."

At 1 he was back in his office. The door leading into the secretary's room was closed, and he judged, from the feel of the atmosphere, that she was gone.

Sitting down leisurely, he began reading over the pile of newly typed pages before him, signing the ends as he came to them.

"She's *all right!*" He said it out to himself several times contentedly. "At least, with the pencil and the machine. And thank the Lord, she's got sense. I can see *that*. The rest will follow. And I reckon she's safe from — no, I don't know about that. Anyhow I'm glad —"

He sat staring at a page in front of him. "Hello!" he breathed. "What the dickens is this?" The page was not addressed and had no envelope on top of it. There were other pages beneath it, and he began to read curiously.

In Minden [it said] the houses are not jammed up against one another. There is usually, or used to be, anyhow, an alley running through the middle of each block, so that wagons could drive in to unload wood for the fireplaces, manure for the gardens, and feed for the horses and cows; but John — he always refused to be called Johnnie — pretended that the narrow alley between his house and hers was some vast body of water across which he sailed in a low rakish craft to capture the Fair Isabel.

He called her that. She suspected from the first that she owed the distinction of being chosen for the pirate's bride over the girl on the other side of his house to the facts of her name and hair. The other girl was named Gertie, and her hair was the color of sand.

The man by the great oak desk leaned back in his chair. "Minden!" He spoke it in a fierce whisper. "The Fair Isabel!"

Reaching out his hand, he pressed a pearl-topped button marked *Boy*. He would send for her at once. But when the boy came in he said, "Never mind; get back to your work." He would not send for her yet. He would wait, to see it through, if he could. Picking up the stenographer's manuscript, he leaned back in his chair and began reading again:

All boys are divided into two classes — those who want to be

locomotive engineers and those who are pirates. She always liked the pirate kind better.

"Fair Isabel," he used to say, striding up to her sitting on her back steps with the dolls, one of whom always had the whooping-cough, that being the only name of a disease she knew — "Fair Isabel, see you yonder ship in the offing?" She never could see the ship in the offing at first, but by standing and shading her eyes with her hands she could.

"Captain, I see."

"Make ready then, girl; for we sail on the morrow at dawn."

Saying which, he would stride away, his swords and cutlasses fighting at one another between his short legs. Once, when he carried some eight or ten, they tripped him, and he fell. Leaping up, he looked at the Fair Isabel to see if she were even smiling. Her eyes declared, no doubt, that they had seen absolutely nothing untoward happen. Walking up to her, he announced, "Come fortune fair or foul, you are the pirate captain's bride." Then he went off on a cruise, around the house, for a couple of years.

Being patriotic, both generally and specially, they were studying United States history, in which the most fascinating character mentioned was Captain Kidd, and Louisiana history, which had the gorgeous Lafitte of New Orleans. That curious streak of fairness

marked in all simon-pure pirates was in John too, so that he alternated between the parts, one week roving the broad Atlantic (his back yard) as Kidd, the next spreading terror among the shipping (the chickens) of the circling Gulf (her back yard) as Lafitte.

And though the Fair Isabel was on board wherever the black flag flew, yet her life on the bounding billows was not an unhappy one. All she asked was that she might have with her the brats, and leisure to treat the particular one that happened at any time to be afflicted with whooping-cough — dread disease for a doll.

Once, on the Atlantic, in the midst of a terrible storm, one of the brats whooped so violently that her golden hair fell off into the sea. The vessel hove to to rescue the hair, with the result that a British man-o'-war came *very* near capturing Kidd and all his crew, not to speak of three wagon-loads of gold. Rough pirate justice demanded that a brat with hair as indiscreet as that should walk the plank out of the stable window at sunset. Dawn and sunset are the two crisis times in pirate days.

The Fair Isabel died young. It was in the spring, for in her last moments, with that keenness of the senses that had enabled her always to see the pirate ship in the offing, she saw, from the deck of Lafitte's long schooner, the pale pink myrtle blooms, and caught the sweet odor

of the white Cape jasmines, and heard old Mis' Leslie's bees mobbing the flowering locust-tree in her back yard.

There was ever a streak of tenderness in Lafitte. And though the lookout reported six or seven helpless and undoubtedly rich merchantmen nearby, yet the captain said, holding his hands over his eyes: "We have other business in hand today. And there'll be no gun loosed on this ship for a week."

Not far from Mobile Bay, on the edge of the warm Gulf Stream, at sunset, they buried the Fair Isabel. Religion, alas, did not largely occupy Lafitte's every-day thoughts, but it touched him, at times. Standing there on the draped deck, the sinking sun athwart his pallid face, his head drooped forward on his folded arms, he said, as his bride slipped beneath the changeless sea, "I know not how, Fair Isabel, but sometime, somewhere, we shall meet again."

And, turning, he strode toward his cabin. Passing a worshipful cabin-boy, he stooped to lay a gentle hand on his shoulder. "My lad," he said, looking out across the listening waves, "some day you, also, will grow up and be a man. It is dangerous to love a woman too much. For if you lose her, life has lost all flavor." Then he disappeared into his cabin, not to be seen for a week.

At least that was his firm inten-

tion, but his delicate retirement was rudely broken into by circumstances over which he had no control — for one thing school.

The man by the great oak desk rose, holding the pages yet unread in his hand, and walked to the open window. Forty stories below, Trinity's ancient churchyard lay, a tiny speck of quiet, clean green in the chaos of lower Manhattan's straining, crowding buildings. Down from Central Park, riding the soft spring breeze, came sweet faint ghosts of flowering myrtles and white Cape jasmines. The morning sun, out in the bay, spread the smooth water with shining silver. Coming home, going home, huge-funneled ships steamed up and down the city's twin rivers.

Opposite the Battery several sailing vessels lay at anchor. One of them was a three-masted schooner, and the man by the window surely saw a black flag flying at half-mast, as when Fair Isabel — was it yesterday? — sank slowly into the sea. And, turning, his head dropped forward on his folded arms, the sun athwart his pallid face, he strode back to his desk, and sat down, and began reading again the stenographer's manuscript:

Whether influenced by the passing of the Fair Isabel, or whether his thoughts were turned into more virtuous channels by nickel and dime novels that now began circulating, unseen of parents, about the neighborhood, anyhow, Cap-

tain Kidd-Lafitte became something else. Having cut throats and scuttled ships for many long years, the pirate, at the age of thirteen, turned over a new leaf.

Not infrequently breakers of the law do become its stoutest defenders; and the reformed rover of the seas began that matchless service in the cause of law and order as Old King Brady, Old Cap Collier, Old Sleuth, Old Silent, and Old Bloodhound. It was his modest belief that he did his best work as Old Bloodhound.

The Fair Isabel was no more, but the Queen of the Wharf Rat Gang, the Queen of the Diamond Thieves, the Queen of the Opium Smokers, the Queen of the Graveyard Ghouls, *she* was; and she lived a shamelessly glorious life. The ghouls exhumed several brats, whose bodies she had had a sneaking curiosity for some time to see, anyway. Her daylight nights among the ghouls were perhaps the most placidly pleasant she has ever spent.

Still, it seemed that she was doomed to be captured always. "It's a hard case," Old Bloodhound used to say quite frankly, "but, woman, I warn you, I never drop a trail." Nor did he, then.

There was a curious similarity about the conclusions of his cases. The end of the ghoulish case was like all the rest. Standing before the captured criminal queen, a cool quiet smile on his calm face, he slid the bull's-eye lantern back under

his coat and touched her on the shoulder.

"I believe," he said, with no trace of the excitement of victory in his low voice, "I believe I stand in the presence of the Queen of the Graveyard Ghouls."

"And so this is Old Bloodhound?" In her tone was not so much interrogation as acknowledgment of defeat. "Then the game's up."

"Yes, the game's up. I never put the nippers on a woman's wrists unless I have to. My mother was a woman. Will you go quietly with me, or must I—"

"It is useless to resist," she said, and, rising, stood ready to go with him.

But no matter how low in caloused criminality she had sunk, and though all the men of all her gangs were hanged or sent to the penitentiary for 99 years, yet she was repeatedly saved in court by the laconic but marvelously effective eloquence of the great detectives, whom she married, seriatim. They were the fathers of not a few of her children.

In these modern times no doubt every veteran ferret of thirteen has an electric flashlight, but Old Sleuth and his contemporaries did peerless if perilous service in the destruction of society's parasites though they used only the old-fashioned, oil-burning, japanned-tin bull's-eye lantern, which did, however, it must be admitted, al-

ways undiplomatically proclaim its approach by the odor of oil and burnt paint sent in advance, far in advance, and all around.

John's father, who was suspected at the time of being in league with the graveyard ghouls, once caught Old Bloodhound creeping around under the house flashing the bull's-eye into the malignant unblinking eyes of stubbornly maternal hens sitting in dark chimney corners; and dragged him out. In the struggle Old Bloodhound's disguise came off — any detective's would have come off — so that he was instantly recognized. On the pretense that the bull's-eye was dangerous to the house, he was condemned to pick parasitic potato-bugs off the plants in the garden every day for a week after school.

A large majority of potato-bugs are of a low furtive nature which prevents them from taking a frank, open, manly stand on the top sides of the leaves whence they can be easily picked off and killed. Old Bloodhound therefore derived great benefit from the bull's-eye, which he snatched from beneath his coat and flashed upon every villainous plant he came to, which was every other plant. The potato-patches were in a dreadful condition that year.

The Queen of the Graveyard Ghouls, being in a state of temporary reformation and matrimony, helped him. And though every time she touched a slick, wriggly,

striped bug she wanted to throw it down and run, and though she felt as if millions of the things were crawling all over her, yet she did not run, because Old Bloodhound had to pick two long rows before supper on penalty of being switched.

Sometimes, across the alley, she did hear him getting switched. That was always as hard for her as if the strokes were on her own bare legs; and perhaps she cried more than Old Bloodhound himself did. But he did not know that; she was ashamed to betray her weakness to him, who usually at the beginning of a whipping shut his lips tight and got mad, an undiplomatic action that only brought on more licks and hurt her more.

Rising, and tiptoeing for some vague reason, the man by the great oak desk, moved to the door of the inner room set aside for his secretary. It was only 1:30 o'clock, but she might have come in. He knocked gently, and, receiving no answer, tiptoed back to his chair and began reading again;

Then there came a lonesome time, her first lonesome time, for the old queen. The ex-pirate and ex-detective turned into a girl-hating fisherman-hunter. Five miles down the bayou he and a bigger savage built a small log cabin on the bank; and when school did not claim them, and often when it did,

they were "batchin' it," contentedly alone with the woods and other rough wild things to which they were akin.

But that phase passed within a year, and John became, not again, indeed, the fiercely gallant Lafitte, not the charmingly mysterious and perfectly poised Old Bloodhound, but a strange, bashful, grubby, shifty-eyed creature with a cracked voice and a face usually gashed about the lips and chin. His mother had been dead a long time, and the indiscreet Mrs. Peck, his father's housekeeper, told the old queen more than one gigantic secret that ought never to have been whispered outside the family circle. Old Bloodhound, Mrs. Peck said, was misusing his first razor.

About this time the candy-heart mania seized Minden's younger set. It usually came in the spring just after kites and just before marbles. The old queen's father being a kiln-boss at a sawmill a mile down the bayou, it fell to her to go after the mail every afternoon. On the way to the post office she had to cross a bridge over a deep gully.

For a week she noticed him who had been the fearless Lafitte and the intrepid Old Bloodhound hiding under the bridge. Finally, late one afternoon, the creature came sneaking out across her path. With eyes averted, he handed her the necklace of pink candy-hearts, all bored with a jackknife and strung on a narrow pink ribbon. Then he

hurried away, lest she notice in his presence the printing on the hearts saying, among many even more outrageous things, *To My Darling*.

The old queen, however, had known all along what was coming from under the bridge; for five other ex-detectives had already awarded her their necklaces of pink hearts. All the old pirates, however, were horribly unattractive now. Still, Honor if not Mercy demanded that she make and delicately indicate a choice, lest there be more furtive fighting such as had already sent Old Bloodhound home with a dark blue eye and a bleeding nose.

Presently the old queen and her nearest neighbor were at a party where he or she who was "it" knelt in a ring of circling chanting children before their successive choices; and singing, "I measure my love to show you," so did by holding the hands more or less widely apart. Old Bloodhound got her widest measure.

It is a secret, heretofore undivulged, that at the time the old queen was really and truly, though silently, in love with only one man in all the world, Minden's single professional gambler, the tall, the natty, the unspeakably nobby Leigh Osborne, who wickedly played cards all night, slept all morning, and stood all afternoon on the street corners looking fearfully handsome, easily. Besides, he was some 35 or more.

All the ex-pirates and even the

future engineers, without knowing what was the matter with them, were fairly sick for a new kind of playing that would give to their eruptive remolding beings something of grace and ease and polish. (This thought is taken almost bodily from a marvelous little book, "worth its weight in gold," entitled, *Things to Tell the Young Boy*, by Arthur P. Puling.)

Presently a Frenchman, named Choiseul and coming from New Orleans, brought in something of grace and ease and polish. He opened a dancing-school in the Light Guards' deserted armory, with a man to turn the crank of a mechanical piano on wheels, that furnished perfect dance-time if little music. Behold! Old Bloodhound transforming again — this time to a Social Butterfly! Once, indeed, on a rainy Friday night he took the old queen to a dance in *the* cab. Minden had but one. "Yes," the old queen said to the other girls at the dance, "oh, yes, we came in a cab. It's so rainy out, you know."

In her life there are four periods so splendid that they seem to belong to some golden legendary age far away in space, far, far back in the magic mist of time — once when she roved the seas as the pirate's bride, again when she was Queen of the Graveyard Ghouls, then when she and Old Bloodhound were village butterflies together, and — one other.

After two years Old Bloodhound deserted society for scholarship. Ambition grew, and his hair. "Women" were put out of his thoughts. He lived to make A's in school. Sometimes, on the way home, he would walk with the old queen, if she hurried to catch up with him. He talked, with monstrous sobriety and ignorance, about platonic love. He was also very sad; he said he had several secret sorrows. One was that he had "frittered his life away."

Not infrequently a neighbor or a porter used to push Old Bloodhound's father home in a wheelbarrow, when the cab was otherwise engaged. Early one night, when he had been pushed home in bad condition, Mrs. Peck ran out to the alley fence and called: "Mr. Luling! Mr. Luling! Come over, please. I think this is the end."

On a rainy day the next week, when everybody carried umbrellas, John's father rode up the hill in the black hearse with the white horses; and the night of that day the scholar came over and told the old queen that he must go to college and be Somebody. "Yes, you *must* go." Her lips said it.

Old Bloodhound's father left very little, and the ex-pirate started out over the parish selling four thin books for fat prices. One was *Things to Tell the Young Boy*, by Arthur P. Puling. The other three were for the young girl, the young wife, and the young husband, also of course

by Mr. Puling. They swept the parish, sending Old Bloodhound on to college in the fall.

After that Mrs. Peck went away to live with relatives. The owner of the house rented it to another family. When they moved in, the old queen, though she was sixteen, stole over into the back yard one night and dug up from the ground under the mulberry tree by the woodpile the comparatively immortal china hands and heads and feet of Lafitte's five lonely brats.

Four years at college and not a week in Minden! In the vacation periods Mr. Puling's waters of knowledge for husband and wife, boy and girl, were to be spread, not for nothing, over other parched parts of the State. But there were letters; letters partly for the reason no doubt that Old Bloodhound wanted the other students at his boarding house to see that he too got letters from a girl, because he cautioned the Queen of the Graveyard Ghouls please to make her handwriting, at least on the envelopes, less like a man's.

In his second year he sent a little fraternity pin. "When a fellow gives this to a girl," he wrote, "and if she accepts, it means — you know what, Isabel. Don't ever even whisper it to a living soul that I told you, but the three Greek letters on the pin are the initials of words meaning Honor and Courage and Fidelity." The old queen never whispered it outside.

It was said that in her life there are four periods so splendid that they seem to belong to some golden legendary age far away in space, far, far back in the magic mist of time — once when she was a pirate's bride on the changeless seas, again when she was Queen of the Graveyard Ghouls, then when she and Old Bloodhound were village butterflies together, and — one other.

Now came the other; she was getting ready. Lest, on the wings of books, he soar so far away from her that sometime in the future she might shame him with her unlettered ignorance, she gathered books to *her* heart too; not school books, for school days for the kilnman's daughter were over, but whatever the village library and the neighbors could lend her; old, old books most of them, many very dry, some very wise, a few that seemed to have been written by men that had known her and Old Bloodhound intimately, all of them giving something that *might* help.

In the bottom of her bigger trunk, the one covered with fuzzy brown leather, there began accumulating pieces of fine linen, hemmed, embroidered, laundered, not for herself alone; Old Bloodhound could not be rich in the beginning. In the other trunk, the low fat one with the scarred tin sides, was collected an old blistered bull's-eye lantern, some china heads and hands and feet tied in bunches

and named, many dance programs with tiny dangling pencils, and one necklace of pink candy-hearts; in another day Old Bloodhound might like to remember the days when he was young.

The fourth great period, the greatest! The long summer days sang, and the silver nights whispered. Telling no one, the old queen was getting ready.

After college Old Bloodhound traveled northward. Within two years there were five letters from Nashville, three from St. Louis, one from Chicago, then — no more. One by one six of the pirate brats were put in boxes and sent through the mail to the Chicago address. One of those terrible secret letters in Old Bloodhound's pin stood for Courage, another for Fidelity. The old queen continued to get ready.

The man by the great oak desk laid the few typewritten pages yet unread down on it, and let his head sink down on them. Several times his hand reached out haltingly to find and touch the pearl-topped button marked *Boy*; but it always drew back before contact. After a while, with an effort, he sat up and began once more reading the stenographer's manuscript:

Some day, the old queen planned, she would go out searching for the wandering Lafitte; but soon her mother went up the hill in the black hearse, which had gray horses

now, and her father was getting weak and helpless with age. For his sake, and looking into the future, she studied stenography at home, then went into the Minden National Bank. She was chaperon at many parties, she belonged to the Baptist Ladies' Aid Society, she sang hymns at funerals: it happens earlier in small towns than in cities; she was passing into old maidenhood.

But one day, finally, at the beginning of a new year, she sat on a train looking out on Minden as it also slipped away in time and space. Her eyes rested last on that part of town, near the upstanding Baptist steeple with the rusty brown tin covering, where Old Bloodhound had hunted down the nefarious potato-bugs, and then on the white-stoned cemetery where lay her parents and his. Minden now was only the dead; life was elsewhere, maybe.

Chicago, she could not find him there. At the street number given in the final letter a new loft-building was going up. But there his boarding house *had* been. There, so long ago, it seemed, the postman had handed in, one by one, the pirate brats carrying messages from their ancient mother that no one ever heard.

Using her stenography for food and clothes, the old queen took her stand and waited and watched. In other days her eyes could see fairly well, as when shading them with

her hands she always saw the ship lying in the offing. "It's a hard case," Old Bloodhound used to say, "but, woman, I'll get you in the end. I never drop a trail." And she had his old bull's-eye lantern to help her.

The *Minden Mercury* followed her every week. Once it had a piece of news in it; that was when she had been in Chicago three years. The *Mercury* had copied it from a daily of the State's metropolis, which, in turn, had taken it, as proved by internal evidence, from a New York paper. It was about "The Rise of a Mindenite." Old Bloodhound was the Mindenite. It did not matter *what* he was. *Where* was he? The story told. The next day she was on the train, going eastward this time.

How to meet him? Could the Queen of the Graveyard Ghouls meet Old Bloodhound in a commonplace way? Could she write a note beginning, "Dear John, perhaps you will remember —" No, not *that* way.

The lobby of his office building has a great semi-circle of elevator doors. Opposite them are stands for telephones, shoe blacks, cigars, candy, flowers; it is almost a public place. There she could wait — to be detected. In others days Old Bloodhound could detect her though she was disguised, heavily, in her father's overcoat. Now she wore no disguise — of which she was aware. He passed in and out of the lobby

daily for a week; he never saw her.

But was she fair? She and he had always played fair. Was it fair to expect him to detect her in such a constant crowd? One day he stepped into an elevator that had no other passengers. She hurriedly followed him in. For a second his steady brown eyes rested on her, then left her.

The elevator was getting up near the top of the building. He must leave it soon. Yet she did not, could not speak. Instinct, pride, was against it: though they stood face to face, Old Bloodhound had not detected the Queen of the Graveyard Ghouls. He stepped off at the fortieth floor; she rode down and got to her boarding house.

What next — if anything? There were still several of the pirate brats in the little trunk — the low fat one with the scarred tin sides. Could she send him one of them? She knew his address certainly this time. When a thousand miles had separated them, when she had suspected that ill fortune might have made him fear too much on her account, when she had thought that perhaps she could help him, then that could be done. It could not be done now. The Queen of the Graveyard Ghouls *must* be detected or remain forever silent. So she resolved.

What next — if anything? Up there on the fortieth floor there must be stenographers, many of them. She was a stenographer.

After six months she was there. Maybe some day, in passing, Old Bloodhound would pierce her disguise, her inevitable disguise of 34 years. Often he did pass through the main office. Often she could almost reach out her hand and touch him, as she always longed to do; and always when he was near, even though her head was bent over a machine, she was whispering, "Old Bloodhound is on the trail." But he wasn't. He *could* not ever again detect the Queen of the Graveyard Ghouls.

One of the stenographers from the main office was promoted to be his secretary. The old queen cultivated the girl's friendship, that she might get in his room all alone just once. When she did she left in his coat closet the old bull's-eye. It cost to do that. Of the pride she had left, and that was not much perhaps, it cost half. But it had taken eighteen months to bring her to that. Maybe he never saw it.

Within a year another girl from the main office was sent in to be his secretary, and not long afterward a third. Then, one day, Mr. Kitchell sent the old queen into the president's office for a week's trial.

Without asking her name, hardly looking at her, he shot four letters at her and went out. They were easy; she did them in 50 minutes. Tiptoeing to the coat closet, she looked in. The old bull's-eye still stood in a corner. The cleaning

woman never disturbs *his* things. Perhaps he had seen it and it had meant nothing to him. But maybe he hadn't, maybe he hadn't.

He would be gone over two hours. She walked to the window and looked out. Down in the bay, under the guns of Castle William, lay a three-masted schooner. She saw a black flag fluttering from a masthead. In the April wind were white locust-blooms and the whispers of babies, babies drifting far, farther away. When the wind rose she heard a pirate's brat with the whooping-cough.

The old queen went back to the typewriter. When she had hidden the venerable blistered bull's-eye in Old Bloodhound's closet, she had killed half of all the pride she had left. It had required a year and a half to bring her to that. What she now wrote on the typewriter killed the other half. It had required two years to bring her to that — nearly four years in all. It might have been worse.

Once, long, long ago, at sunset, Fair Isabel, the pirate's bride, was buried on the edge of the warm Gulf Stream. She died of imagination. The Queen of the Graveyard Ghouls never died. She was always rescued. A queen without pride is no longer a queen. The old Queen of the Graveyard Ghouls is dying now. She goes to join the gang. The end at least must be fitting. Old queen, dear old queen, dearer than all the rest, goodbye!

"Good God!" The man by the great oak desk jumped up and leaped for the closet set in the wall. Swinging open the door, he snatched his hat off a hook; and then, suddenly, leaned down and felt around in the dark corners. He pulled out the old bull's-eye.

"She's only playing," he cried to himself; "she's only playing. I know it, I know it — now."

Rushing back to the desk, he pushed in hard on the pearl-topped button marked *Boy*.

"Son, do you know where my stenographer has her lunch?" he asked, when the boy came in. "The new one, the one that came in this morning. Do you know her?"

"*Her?* Sure, sir, everybody here knows *her*." The boy's voice was enthusiastic. "She eats in Child's, downstairs, next door. I'll go after her."

"No, you won't. I'll go. 'Everybody here knows *her!*' My God! Get back to your work, boy."

"But she may not be in Child's now, sir," the boy argued. "Sometimes she goes across the street and sits in the Trinity graveyard, specially when it's fine weather like this. A lot of them do. I'll go over there."

"Never mind. Get back to work."

The man slid the bull's-eye under his coat, turned his collar up about his neck, pulled his hat far down over his eyes, and stole toward the door, stealthily. Old Bloodhound was on the trail at last.

Behind old Trinity's iron fence the grass of a new season sprang green and

strong from a soil seeded by nature hundreds of years before. The tiny wilderness of brown tombstones, dissolving slowly back into the beginnings, leaned whispering over the graves of men and women who lived in a time that knew the terrific Kidd and the gallant Lafitte.

Looking through the tall palings, Old Bloodhound saw, sitting on a bench under a blossoming bush, the Queen of the Graveyard Ghouls, alone. For once, the great detective concluded, she was off her guard, because her usually taut little body lay limply back against the bench, and her eyes were closed.

Going in through a side gate, Old Bloodhound maneuvered to a position behind the bench, and, pulling his bull's-eye from beneath his coat, he stole around with absolute noiselessness and stood before her. After a while he reached out his hand and touched her shoulder.

The eyes of the old queen fluttered, opened, closed, then looked into his.

"I believe," he said, sliding the bull's-eye back under his coat, and smiling, desperately, "I believe I stand in the presence of the Queen of the Graveyard Ghouls."

"And so this is Old Bloodhound?" she asked, turning her head wearily down on her arm. "Then the game's up."

"Yes, the game's up. I never put the nippers on a woman's wrists — if I can help it. My mother was a woman. Will you go quietly with me, or must I —"

"It is useless to resist," she said; and, rising, stood ready to go.

As they passed the corner of the ancient church she left his side and stood leaning against a stone pillar, beating her hands together, and laughing a low mocking laugh.

"Foiled!" she mocked. "Old Bloodhound is foiled at last!"

"Why — er? What do you — No, Old Bloodhound never drops a trail."

"The Queen of the Graveyard Ghouls has slipped *your* clutches. She lies back there, with the gang. *She* will never come back, Old Blood-

hound. Won't you let her be, won't you, please, let her be, Old Bloodhound, for ever and ever and ever?" She was pleading now.

He thought a minute. Then a frown settled on his brow, and he folded his arms, letting his head droop forward.

"Girl, see you yonder ship in the offing?"

She shaded her eyes with her hands, and looked a long time.

"Oh, Isabel, *please!*"

"Captain, I see."

"Make ready, then, girl; for we sail on the morrow — at noon."

NEXT MONTH . . .

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This month **Black Mask Magazine** offers a Hollywood picture — in a guilt-edged frame

DEAD SHOT

by CORNELL WOOLRICH

PAROLE OFFICER BUCK NELSON, on his first night in California, was dreaming of an earthquake. He woke up, tried changing sides in bed, and waited for the dream to go away. It didn't. The throbbing and the vibration kept right on.

Slightly alarmed, and now more fully awake, Nelson sat up in bed and gave the chain-pull on his bedside lamp a hitch. It must be a real earthquake. Dreams didn't continue after you once woke up. The chain-pull, he noticed, kept on jittering slightly of its own accord.

Why, you could even hear the thing! He hadn't known they made any noise. It would stop, and then go on again, stop and then go on again.

He pawed the grogginess out of his eyes and jumped to his feet. Then he saw that it was neither dream nor earthquake. It was simply somebody giving his room door a drubbing such as it had never had before. The door was being shaken and heaved against rather than knocked on or pounded.

"All right, all right," Nelson barked. "Take it easy, whoever you are."

The commotion didn't stop. Even verbal assurance wasn't enough for whoever was out there. He wanted to

get in, and he wanted to get in fast, and nothing short of that would satisfy him.

Nelson heaved a bathrobe around him, got over to the door, tweaked the key, and swung it in. "Whaddya think you're doing, riveting at Lockheed?" he growled. "I happen to live behind this!"

The figure standing on the other side practically threw himself against Nelson's chest and clung to him, he was so overjoyed at finally securing admittance.

"Whew!" he sputtered. "I thought I'd never get in here!"

He was a little fellow, about half the size of the parole officer both in width and length. He had a shrewd, ferret-like, sharp-edged face, at present harassed, even terrified. His clothes would have been dapper enough, but they looked as though they'd been left on him too long.

Nelson detached himself by main force, held the man none too gently at arm's length, and scowled searchingly into his face. "Wait a minute, I never forget a face. It's coming back . . ."

When it did come it evidently was no occasion for hanging up holly. Nelson's hand went aloft, reversed

itself, landed crushingly on his visitor's shoulder as if he were trying to push him halfway down through the floor. "You're pinched!" he bayed. "You damn little will o' the wisp! I've been looking for you for eighteen months. Clip Rogers, in the flesh! Jump parole on me, will you? You're coming back to New York and finish up a little rest cure you got coming to you for practicing handwriting on other people's checks!"

"For Pete's sake, gimme a break!" the intruder pleaded. "I came to you of my own free will, didn't I? I heard you were in town, and I—I'll go back with you gladly. I'll do anything you say. What I'm up against now is so much worse. . . . It's a terrible thing when you gotta go to your own enemies, but I ain't got no one else to turn to. You're the only one can help me."

"Help you?" sneered Nelson. "I'll help you on the end of my foot, all the way from here back to Centre Street!" Meanwhile he was dressing fast, as only a detective in a hurry can dress.

"Look, Nelson," his visitor whined. "You and me has always been natural-born enemies. Every time you been in one place, I've done my level best to be in another, as far away from you as I could get. But the one thing I've got to hand you is this—you've always been a square shooter. Whatever you dished out to me, I had coming to me by law. You never gave me more than was down on the books. You never framed me or nothin'.

That's why I came to you. I been flitting around the town all night like a chicken with its head cut off, not knowing which way to turn. You're my only chance."

The parole officer was dressed now. He reached for his hat, then ran it around on his finger a couple of times undecidedly. "You did come to me of your own accord," he admitted grudgingly. "And knowing you like I do, that's a miracle in itself. And you're plenty frightened—more than I've ever seen you before."

He shunted a chair over, with its back against the door, to block any attempt at escape on his visitor's part, leaned back in it, hat low over the bridge of his nose, and folded his arms in an I'm-from-Missouri attitude. "Let's hear what it is. I got nothing to lose by listening. The next train out isn't until 9, anyhow."

The visitor drew his sleeve across his perspiring forehead.

"It started two days ago. I'm hanging around outside one of these fancy-pants picture previews to try and do myself a little good when . . ."

Clip Rogers had been waiting patiently outside the Egyptian Theatre on Hollywood Boulevard for the past half-hour or more, for the gala preview to be over. High-powered floodlights cast a noonday radiance over the imposing entrance, adorned with a plaster sphinx and flanked by rows of obelisks. A banner, stretched between two palm-trunks growing up through holes in the cement flooring

in the courtyard, proclaimed: LUCILLE LAFITTE in *My Heart's On Furlough*.

Clip was sheltered on the lee side of one of the obelisks, the side on which the shadow fell, so that his face was kept out of the direct glare of the floodlights. He had provided himself, for the present occasion, with an autograph album, which he was holding ready, keeping his thumb between the pages for a bookmark. As a matter of fact, his former associates, both in and out of jail, would have been vastly surprised to learn what a rabid movie-fan he had become all of a sudden. He wasn't exactly the type, either in years or previous experience.

At last his patience was rewarded. The preview broke, the doors were thrown open, and the audience came streaming out. In their midst, the star of the event, and the object of Clip's worshipful vigil, was borne along, smiling and nodding acknowledgment to the congratulations being showered on her from all sides. She was blonde and angelic-looking in white fur, her hair slanted over one hazel eye.

As she passed his vantage point, Clip stepped forward, book in one hand, fountain pen in the other, and faltered tremulously with a look of soulful admiration on his usually shrewd and ferret-like face: "Miss Lafitte, could I — could I ask you for your autograph?"

The star stopped short. She scanned the blank album he had opened and was holding toward her eagerly.

"Haven't you any others yet?" she queried in surprise.

"No ma'am," said Clip with a reverent sigh. "Yours is the one I want to start my book off with."

"Hmm, I see," purred the star contentedly. "In that case, how can I refuse you?" She motioned away a couple of special studio police who were trying to interfere, took the pen from him, swirled it a couple of times. Nothing came out on the paper.

"Push down a little harder," Clip suggested apologetically. "I guess the ink's a little low."

She added pressure and the signature came out.

"There you are, young man." She passed the book back to him, gave him a strictly-publicity smile, and proceeded regally on her way to her car.

"Thank you, Miss Lafitte, thank you," he breathed after her, overcome with emotion. He turned and slipped back behind the obelisk again, hugging his treasured memento tightly to his chest.

Five minutes later, and several blocks away, the book landed in an ash can, signature and all, after he had first carefully extracted the blank check that had been bedded between its leaves under carbon paper. Back in his furnished room he carefully inked in the traced signature lying along the bottom of the check, and filled it out to the bearer for \$2500. The check-form, of course, had been obtained from the same bank that carried her account. He endorsed it,

Clifford C. Rogers, his formal name, on the back, folded it gently three times, and touched it whimsically to his lips. "Thank you, Miss Lafitte, thank *you*," he breathed a second time, addressing his unwitting benefactress.

"This ain't the jail," Clip objected as he alighted between the two husky bank guards who had ridden out with him. "What'd you bring me out here for?"

"We know it ain't," one of them answered gruffly. "But Miss Lafitte wanted to see you herself before she preferred charges against you. She asked us to bring you."

"Maybe she wants to reform you," the other one snickered.

"What went wrong?" Clip asked, as they started him up the terraced walk toward the imposing entrance ahead. "That was the quickest pinch I was ever in, and I've been in some fast ones. I thought I had that John Hancock down pat, and the teller takes just one look at it and pedals the buzzer for you guys."

"You had the signature right," one of his escorts informed him. "It was the name you had wrong. Lafitte is her stage name. She signs all her checks with her real name, Link-hoffer."

Clip smote himself lightly on the forehead with his free hand. "Now he tells me," he groaned.

They were admitted by a Filipino doorman. There was a short wait in a foyer that could have accommodated

a skating rink. Then a prim-looking young woman, evidently the star's personal secretary, came out and announced: "Miss Lafitte will see this person now."

The three of them rose to their feet. The prim-looking young woman motioned Clip's captors back. "Just the man himself, please. She'd like to speak to him alone."

The two bank guards exchanged a look. "Told you she wanted to reform him," one of them slurred to the other.

"He may try to bolt for it if he goes in there without us, Miss," his companion objected.

"I'm sure you need have no fear if you'll just wait right outside the door here, within call."

"O. K., but tell Miss Lafitte to sing out if she needs us." They shrugged and sat down again, with the injured air of men who feel they are being made fools of. One of them tapped his forehead significantly. "All these picture stars are kinda screwy," he grunted.

The secretary closed the heavy library door behind Clip, and he found himself face to face with the celebrity he had mistakenly picked for an easy victim. She was sitting behind a massive desk, like a judge about to pass sentence. Smoke from a foot-long cigarette holder coiled lazily upward. She looked somewhat different from the way Clip remembered her at the preview — far less sweet and angelic. In fact, there was something hard and relentless about her

expression now. Her eyes peered at him shrewdly from behind reading glasses, and she was wearing trousers.

"That will be all, Miss Prescott. I'll call you." The secretary slipped out through a side door, which she didn't quite close, leading into an adjoining room.

Clip had come to an uncertain halt in the middle of the room. He wasn't at his ease. He didn't mind being arrested, and he didn't even mind doing time if he had to. But he didn't like being reformed or lectured to. And it looked like that was what this was leading up to.

She looked him over carefully for a while. Finally she pointed the cigarette holder at him. "You know what you can get for it, don't you?"

He didn't have to be told. He knew it by heart. He nodded sullenly.

"What did you do it for? You look too smart for that."

He didn't answer that. After all, everyone has a right to his own life.

"How would you like me to drop the charges?" she said suddenly.

"I wouldn't complain."

"You need money, I suppose, or you wouldn't have tried it. How would you like me to offer you, say, five hundred dollars?"

"I'd like it fine," said Clip, wondering when she was going to get through kidding him.

She kept studying him closely. Her own face remained impassive. "I haven't said I would, yet." Then she added: "How would you like me to drop the charges *and* offer you \$500?"

"You already asked me that," he pointed out.

"I asked you each one separately. Now I'm asking you the two together."

"I'd like it swell, lady," he admitted.

"Come over a little closer," she instructed. "I want to be able to talk to you without having to raise my voice."

Unwillingly he shifted nearer, until he stood directly across the desk from her.

Turning about in her chair, she unlocked a drawer in the desk, opened it, took out a long envelope. She drew a folded paper out of it. "See this? Do you recognize what it is?"

She held it up toward him. Only the two top lines were visible, the way she was holding it folded. *The President of the United States of America. Greetings* — She quickly lowered it again before he could read the printed sheet any further.

"It's an induction order," Clip said. "Somebody's been tapped."

She didn't say anything for a minute. She put the document away again, relocked the drawer. Then she cushioned her head against her clasped hands. "Tell me —" Her voice dropped slightly to a more intimate tone. "Have you had any experience with firearms? Small arms?"

"I've been around them and they've been around me," he admitted.

"Would you call yourself a good shot?"

"No," he said with a positive shake

of his head. "I used to have a job as a decoy for a shooting gallery down at Long Beach. I'd hit the ducks to make it look easy, so the suckers would buy chances. No, I wouldn't call myself a good shot. I'd call myself a dead shot."

She nodded briskly, as though she liked that. "You sound like someone I could do business with."

"I do business awful easy," Clip assured her.

"Let me point out to you before we go any further that if you should go out of here and repeat what I'm about to say to you, you haven't got a chance of getting anyone to believe you. I'll simply deny every word of it. It'll be your word against mine. And I'm Lucille Lafitte, and you're just a check forger. So don't waste your time trying."

He nodded.

"Here's my proposition. You saw what I just showed you?"

"Sure. The Valentine from Unkie."

"It's someone very close to me. We don't have to mention names. I don't want him to go."

Clip wondered what she wanted him to do about it. He didn't have any drag with the draft board.

She came to the point abruptly, as though she'd read his thoughts. "He's due to report the day after tomorrow. I'm giving him a party here tomorrow night — a farewell party, an induction party. I'll give you a gun. You say you're a dead shot. I want you to be outside there on the grounds tomorrow night at 10 o'clock.

I want you to come up to one of the French windows of my living room where the party will be going on. I'll lead him into a certain position, just inside the window, where you can't fail to get a good look at him. And at exactly 10 o'clock" — she took a deep breath — "I want you to shoot him — so that he won't have to go." She put both her hands flat on the desk.

Clip took a quick time-step to the rear. He gave her a curdled look. "Wait a minute, lady. You've got your crust! I faked your name to a check, all right! And I've done it before, and maybe peddled a little oil stock, too. But that's where I draw the line. I ain't no murderer. I never killed anyone in my life, and I never will. You can keep your proposition. I'm a handwriting expert, not a triggerman. Call them in, I'll take my two years."

She stood up suddenly behind the desk, eyes flashing behind her reading glasses. "Who said anything about killing him, you fool! Why didn't you wait till I finished? What d'you suppose I'm trying to keep him out of the service for? Because I love him!"

"I thought you said take a shot at him."

"I did. But I want you to make sure of hitting him in the arm. *And no place else.* Just severe enough to call for hospitalization, without endangering his life in any way. Enough to disable him for two or three weeks, until I can try pulling strings."

"Oh, that's different," he faltered

apologetically. "I guess I didn't get you."

"I guess you didn't!" She sat down again. "It's got to be a real wound — make no mistake about that! Just grazing him or nicking him won't be enough. It's got to look right. But I don't want him maimed for life, or the bone shattered in any way. Do you think you can do it?"

"Them ducks were pretty small and they moved pretty fast. I never missed one all that summer. I would've been fired if I did."

She rose again, beckoned to him. "Now come over to the window with me for a moment and I'll show you the set-up." She flung back a pair of drapes and revealed a huge French window, ceiling-high, broken up into small square panes. It was set at right angles to a row of similar ones in an outjutting wing of the house. A terrace ran before all of them alike, with an ornate waist-high stone balustrade railing it off from the sunken grounds and shrubbery surrounding the place.

She pointed. "It'll be the second window down from here, the middle one of the three. See where that stone urn is? Right there. You crouch down below the balustrade, and shoot from *under* it, between those spiral supports, and not over it. That way no one in the room at the time is likely to get a look at your face. We'd better set a time for it, so that you can get in here and then out again on the dot. There's a tall wall clock there in the room — you'll be able to see it plainly from where you are. Keep

your eye on it. Watch for it to hit 10. Do it on the nose of 10. Now there's a sofa in there, with its back to the window, that overlaps a little way. I'll lead him to the end seat so that he's right in front of you. That's how you'll know him. Watch for the man you see me plant on the end seat two or three minutes before 10. I'll arrange to have a low stand for holding drinks next to the sofa, about knee-high. His arm will probably go down to it from time to time. That'll give you enough clearance away from his body. Shoot through the glass and all. Hit his arm. Lame it. I want to keep him with me."

"And the gun?"

"You'll get that when you're ready for it and not any sooner. Reach down into that urn. You'll find it waiting for you when you get there. And when you're through using it, drop it back in again. I'll see that it disappears. I'll call the front gateman off at five to 10, so that you have a chance of getting in without being seen. I'll see that he's kept here at the house on some excuse or other so that he doesn't get back to his post until five after 10. That'll give you ten full minutes to get in, let fly, and get out again afterwards. That should be enough."

"And the money?"

"If I give it to you now, you're liable to welsh out of it and never show up."

"And if I wait until afterwards for it you're liable to welsh out of it and never pay off."

"We'll split the difference. Two hundred and fifty now. Two hundred and fifty in a sealed envelope in Letterbox 36 at the post office. It's rented in the name of Benedetto, belongs to one of my maids. Here's a duplicate key to it. There won't be anything in it until after 10 o'clock tomorrow night, so don't try opening it ahead of time. There'll be a train ticket along with it to take you out of town until the thing blows over. That shouldn't take long. I can put the soft pedal on the whole affair."

He hitched his head toward the closed door behind him. "And how are you going to fix it with *them*?"

"That's easy. Just go over to the door and tell them I'm not pressing charges. If I don't want you held, they can't hold you. After all, I'm the complainant — what I say goes."

She saw a look of calculating craftiness flicker across Clip's face.

"I know what you're thinking," she added quickly. "Once I do that, you're in the clear — you don't have to carry out your part of the bargain. You can disappear between now and tomorrow night and I can go whistle. Get that idea out of your head. It won't be as simple as all that." She drew something to the end of her finger, let it slip back again. "Take this ring, for instance. It's valued at twenty thousand dollars, many times the amount of that check. If I clear you, and you don't show up again, I'll simply accuse you of having stolen it. I'll make it armed robbery at the point of a gun. I can make it stick,

too. Don't kid yourself. That'll turn it into a grand larceny rap and double the time you'd do."

The crafty look disappeared again, as quickly as it had first showed up. She'd won that point. He was beginning to wish he'd never heard of her in the first place.

She got up. "All right, time's up. This is the take. Now which is it, yes or no?"

His collar bothered him. "Yes," he muttered, wrinkling his forehead.

She went over to the door and opened it. "You men needn't wait. I'm dropping charges. I don't want this man prosecuted. Good day."

She closed the door and came back to him again.

"That's that. There's a side gate. You can go out that way when you leave, so you won't have to run into them again. Here's the two hundred and fifty on account. And I expect you out in back, where I showed you, at 10 tomorrow night. Take my advice and be there!" Again she fiddled with the ring meaningfully, and this time with a jeweled bracelet as well. He got her perfectly.

The interview was over.

Precisely at four to 10, Clip crouched down into position beneath the balustrade, his entrance into the grounds unobserved, as she had promised him it would be. Facing him, the middle one of the three French windows was like a furnace of glowing amber against the darkness, with figures floating back and forth behind

it like vivid tropical fish swimming in a lighted tank.

"I was a fool to come," he muttered to himself. He kept his eye on the large wall clock she'd mentioned. It was three to 10 now.

Somebody must be performing inside, singing or reciting or giving some sort of an act. He couldn't see the entertainer, but he could see them all looking over in one direction and applauding. Then he glimpsed a figure in a flashing silver dress go swiftly by the window, and he recognized Lucille Lafitte. She looked angelic and sweet again, as she seemed to whenever she was on public view. She raised her arm as if she were calling someone over to her. He saw her turn her head a little and glance at the clock as she went by.

Clip sidled up to the urn, keeping it between him and the lighted window, and plunged his arm into it. It was filled with fine white sand for about a third of the way down. His hand closed on something hard and steely cold and he brought the gun up. It was a .38.

He moved in close under the balustrade again. It was nearly time now — just a minute to go. She'd better hurry up or the gateman would get back to his post and he'd find himself trapped in here. The end seat on the sofa was still vacant.

He broke the gun and examined it intently in the dim shine of the window. Every chamber was stacked. He closed it and thumbed the safety off.

Silver was blurring the window again. Lucille Lafitte was bearing down on the sofa, bringing a man with her. Now for the first time Clip set eyes on the man he was supposed to shoot. He was handsome and husky-looking, and his clothes fitted him the way only an actor's can. They were both laughing. He wanted her to take the seat first, but she shook her head and pushed him down into it. Then she handed him a glass, gave him a pat on the head to keep him where he was, and moved off across the room again.

It was 10 o'clock. "Hold still now, brother," Clip addressed him silently. He raised the gun and sighted it, using the base of the balustrade to steady it. He chewed his lip nervously, waiting for the arm to come out. The man's shoulder projected, but that was too close to the head. Clip was a good shot, and the distance wasn't great, but he wasn't going to take even that much of a chance. Not for her or anyone else.

The man turned his head suddenly and glanced down at the stand. Then he reached, glass in hand, evidently to set it down. For a moment his arm was straight out, on a descending line, between sofa and stand.

Clip aimed for the rounded bulge of the biceps, gave his finger a pluck, and there was a shattering report that seemed to glance off the walls all around him.

One of the panes went out with a sharp crack, and there was just a big hole there with rough edges.

The arm gave a jerk up, then swung all the way down, limp and boneless, over the side of the sofa. It swayed a couple of times like a slow-motion pendulum, then hung still. The head had toppled down after it, dangled there inert, face toward floor, over the arm of the sofa.

For a moment nothing else happened, no one in the room seemed to move. It had been too sudden, and they probably still didn't know what it was.

Clip, however, didn't wait for it to come to an end. He jumped to his feet, dropped the gun into the urn, scuttled off across the lawn, bending over nearly double to make himself less conspicuous.

The first scream caught up with him just as he plunged from sight around a turn in the shrubbery. It sounded sort of stagey — too long-drawn and even. For some reason he had an idea Lucille Lafitte had emitted it.

He reached the side entrance by which he had gained admittance, found it still unguarded, and sidled out through the slanting gate without widening it any. He made off full-tilt down the tree-shaded street that sloped sharply downward on that side of the Lafitte grounds.

He kept running long after he was out of sight of the house, long after there was any real need for it. He kept up until he'd reached one of the lighted thoroughfares that swept out toward Santa Monica, and in toward the heart of town. He boarded a bus

there, inbound, and dropped back on the seat panting for breath. He was vaguely disturbed. He didn't like the mental snapshot he'd brought away with him, that last glimpse through the window, before breaking and running. He kept blinking, but it wouldn't go away.

When a man has been shot in the arm the instinctive thing for him to do is to clutch the wound tightly with his uninjured hand. Why had the man's head gone over the side of the sofa inert like that, and just swayed there loosely afterwards without coming up again? There was something wrong with the picture.

He got off at the lower end of Hollywood Boulevard, within walking distance of the small furnished room which had been his headquarters for the past three days — a long term of occupancy, measured by his average stay in any one place heretofore. He didn't, however, go back to it immediately. Instead he stepped into a small counter lunchroom and sat down at the far end, nursing a cup of coffee. Music was blatting squeakily from a mesh screen high up on the wall.

Suddenly a voice spoke: "We interrupt this program to bring you a news flash. Lew Dolan, leading man in Lucille Lafitte's last two pictures, was just shot by a mysterious intruder, through a window in the home of the screen actress. It happened less than half an hour ago. Dolan died instantly, with a bullet in his head. Police are already at work looking for

a man who was arrested yesterday for forging the star's name to a check, and then was released at her intercession. He is believed to be deranged —"

Clip got off the tall stool he was on and got out fast, just ahead of the description that he was sure was going to follow. Luckily there was no one else sitting at the counter at the moment.

He came reeling out and the sidewalk was swimming dizzily all around him. "Now I've done it!" he groaned, pasting a hand to his forehead. "I've traded in a midget larceny rap for a king-sized murder rap!"

Clip's first impulse was to appeal to her for help, Lucille Lafitte herself, risky as it was. She was the only one who could help him. She was his only hope. She could at least take a little of the pressure off, convince them that it had been a terrible accident, that he hadn't meant to kill Lew Dolan. She was the only one who knew that he hadn't. Their bargain had simply been for him to clip Dolan in the arm. The police would listen to her, they wouldn't to him. He didn't mind taking his medicine for a fatal accident, if he had to, but not for premeditated murder. She *had* to help him. She owed him that much, at least.

Her number wasn't listed, but he had a retentive memory. He'd overheard the bank manager call it when he was being held in his office the previous day, and he repeated it now.

A voice that sounded like that of

the grim-faced secretary got on. "Miss Lafitte can't speak to anyone. There has been a tragedy here."

"Tell her — tell her I'm calling from Letterbox 36. Just say that to her."

Suddenly he recognized Lucille Lafitte's voice. The code word had brought her on fast. She sounded breathless. "Hello? Hello! What did you say about Letterbox 36?"

"Miss Lafitte, it's *me*. You know who I am. The fellow you — you made the deal with yesterday."

That was as far as he got. A scream of outrage ripped from her throat. "*You!* It's *you*, is it! You have the nerve to —"

"Miss Lafitte, you've got to help me! You've got to make them believe it was a slip. It's partly your responsibility, you know, on account of you put me up to it, by giving me the gun and telling me to try to —"

"*Gave* you? They're right, you *are* insane. You snatched up a gun from a desk drawer before I could stop you and threatened my life with it. You held it against my back and compelled me to open the door and tell the two men outside to go away. Then you robbed me of two hundred and fifty dollars and warned me you'd come back and kill me if I reported it to the police. I was afraid, so I didn't. You told me then you had a grudge against Lew Dolan and were going to kill him when you found him. And you came back and did, just as you'd said you would!"

Sweat was streaming down his face.

"You told me you just wanted me to wing him, to keep him from going into the service. You propositioned me. You gave me the two hundred and fifty and the —"

"Lies, lies, lies!" she screeched. "You're a maniac. Why did you kill him? He never did you any harm! You vicious murderer! You should be shot down like a mad dog!"

"Miss Lafitte, for the love of Pete!"

"Murderer!" she raved. "Murderer!"

Then suddenly in the midst of her furious outburst, he heard her drop her voice and whisper to somebody who must have been standing there beside her, probably a detective: "Have you traced him yet? I can't hold him much longer."

He hung up fast and made tracks away from the place. And not a minute too soon.

The keen of oncoming radio cars was already knifing the air as he went tottering groggily around the corner and disappeared into the night.

"Oh, brother!" he groaned dismally. "If I never knew what trouble was before, I sure know what it is now!"

He decided to get out of town fast. There wasn't anything else he could do. Who was going to believe him now that she'd turned against him?

He beat it back to his room by a roundabout way to pick up the few belongings he had there. At the corner below his rooming house he tapered off speed and edged up close to the

building-line before turning it and breaking cover. He craned his neck and took a cautious look around it. He could make out the entrance half-way up the block on the opposite side. It looked harmless, deserted.

But he waited a moment. It looked too good to be true.

He let his eyes stray up the face of the building until he had located his own particular room window on the third floor, over at the end. It looked as dark and inscrutable as any of the others. There was about a foot of white window shade showing across the top of the dark pane. Clip frowned and considered it. In the daytime, he always kept his shades pretty far down, never up high like that. It was a precautionary habit acquired during the course of his long and colorful career, and by now it was second nature to him. It had still been broad daylight when he last left the room, and he was pretty sure the shade hadn't been up that high. It wouldn't have been like him. His landlady wouldn't have been able to go in there either, during his absence, because he had the room key safely in his pocket at this very moment. Not unless she'd climbed through the transom over the door, and she was too fat for that.

He stayed where he was, waiting and watching. It was better to be safe than to be sorry.

Suddenly his patience paid off. The shade moved, just as he was watching it. It came down nearly to the bottom, to about where he usually

left it, and then it stopped and stayed liked that. From then on it didn't move again. But it didn't have to — once was enough.

Somebody was already up there. They must have just finished getting into position. He would have walked right smack into their clutches if he hadn't stopped to reconnoiter first.

He turned and slunk back the way he'd come, cautiously but fast. He went away from there — as far away as he could get on one pair of feet.

Well, maybe he could still make a stab at the money and the train-ticket, if he was fast enough. He had the \$250 she had given him, but the remainder of the money would come in mighty handy now. Maybe Lafitte would try to hold back that part of it from them because it would implicate her too deeply in the affair. He hoped she'd have sense enough to realize that.

The post office, because of the rush to send gifts to the men overseas, stayed open until midnight these days. On the corner below it, as he edged cautiously nearer, a lanky panhandler accosted him. "Spare a dime, boss?" he muttered.

Clip shook his head inattentively and brushed by. He had other things on his mind right now.

He cased the building cautiously from outside in the street first. Then he ventured into the vestibule and cased the inside of the post office itself from there, through the glass doors. It was swarming with people, but that was no deterrent. Safety in crowds. There was a big line at the

stamp window, and an even bigger one at the parcel post window. He concentrated his attention on the letterboxes which studded one entire wall like glass bricks. There didn't seem to be anybody near them.

Letterbox 36, she'd said. He started counting them off, beginning at the upper left-hand corner, until he'd located it. It was the next-to-the-last one in the second row. That would save time — just to aim for it, hit it, and skate out again, without wasting time doing arithmetic all over them.

But he still didn't make the break, hung back where he was. He now looked all over the post office floor, picking out people who were not in line and didn't seem to be doing anything. His experience with detectives had given him a sixth sense. Those were always the ones to watch out for, the people who didn't seem to be doing anything, were just killing time, standing still in one place.

There were two such. There was a man at one of the writing slabs painstakingly making out a money order or something. He seemed to be having his troubles doing it. He kept crumpling up the form he'd just been working on, and starting over on a new one. He was strictly minding his own business, however. There was an umbrella hooked by its handle to the edge of the counter beside him. Clip liked that — it made him feel a lot safer. In all his long experience he'd never yet come across a detective who carried an umbrella.

Then there was another man stand-

ing near the wall on the far side, away from the mailboxes, poring over a chart of postal rates for various zones that was tacked up there. He was holding a sizable batch of letters in his hand, checking them off one by one with the rate-table. Every few minutes he'd drop one in a chute nearby. This, too, was confidence-inspiring. Clip had heard of detectives stalking their prey in all sorts of guises and under all sorts of circumstances, but he'd never yet heard of one mailing letters while he did so. He could even see the man moisten something on his tongue each time and then stamp it on the corner of the envelope. Verisimilitude couldn't go any further than that.

But he didn't go in. He went outside again instead. He went back to where the panhandler was working his beat. "Here's that dime you asked me for before. Take this key, step over to the letterboxes inside there, and open up Number 36. Bring me back whatever's in it. I'll wait out here. There's more for you when you get back."

He followed him back at a safe distance. The panhandler was already at the box when Clip reached the vestibule again.

Nothing happened for a minute. Then all of a sudden the man at the slab had stopped writing out his money order, the man against the wall had stopped mailing his letters. Both of them were drifting casually and aimlessly in one direction, but by two different ways. They were exe-

cuting a pincer movement, and the claws were going to come together at Letterbox 36.

"That's all I wanted to know!" Clip exclaimed internally, and turned around and backed out fast. "I can't get *out* of town, and I can't stay *in* town! Now what am I going to do?"

"Then I remembered hearing you was in town," Clip concluded. "And even *you* looked good to me, the fix I was in now. So I beat it over here —"

Buck Nelson still sat tilted back against the door, arms interlocked across his chest, hat-brim low on his nose. He didn't say anything for several minutes afterwards, minutes that were like six-month sentences to the quailing Clip.

"Well, I'll tell you . . ." he drawled finally, and then left Clip hanging in mid-air some more, while he kicked the unspoken verdict around in his head a little longer.

"Any other cop," he resumed at last, "would probably clamp a can-opener onto your wrist and haul you out of here backwards. Maybe I'm just a good-natured slob. But there's a couple of little things about that cockeyed story of yours that make me halfway believe it. First off, it's too screwy to be anything but true. When a guy makes up a story he usually tries to make it sound as plausible as possible, so it'll be swallowed easier. This thing you've been telling me is out of this world. You couldn't *expect* anyone to believe it. So what would you make it up for? Which makes me

think maybe it's true. She probably did proposition you, like you said. And secondly, you can't keep after a guy as many years as I've been after you without getting to know him pretty well. You're not the killing type. You'd steal the gold teeth out of your own grandmother's head if she was careless enough to open her mouth while you were around. But you don't go in for blood crimes. So I think they've given you a bum rap. You're my own particular meat, you little weasel, and I don't like 'em fooling around with my meat."

Clip was practically tap-dancing around him in his eagerness. "Then will you help me, Mr. Nelson?" he whinnied.

"I don't know if I can. You've sewed yourself up so tight through your own damfoolishness that maybe nobody can get you out of it any more." His own feet, and the two front legs of his chair, both landed on the floor with a simultaneous thump of decision. He stood up and shoved the chair out of the way. "C'mon," he ordered with a jerk of his head, opening the door.

"Where — where we going?" asked Clip fearfully.

"About the last place you'd probably think of going right now," answered the parole office curtly, "or that they'd expect to find you near. Back to her house, to take a nice quiet look around."

The side gate through which Clip had beat it was locked by now, of

course. They threaded their way along the wall toward the rear of the property until they'd found a place which looked not insurmountable. A pepper tree grew in fairly close.

"Take it from here," Nelson muttered. "This ought to be an old story to you."

Clip got up into the tree, edged out along it as far as he could, and swung down on the inside of the wall. Nelson had a good deal more difficulty because of his greater weight, but he finally made it, too.

"This is as bad as breaking and entering, I guess," he grunted, brushing himself off. "But they can't break me for it out here because I don't work out here in the first place."

They made their way, one behind the other, through the shrubbery and then across the shadowy lawn that led up to the back of the house — fugitive and policeman prowling side by side, instead of stalking one another.

They edged up stealthily to the terrace. The windows were all dark and lifeless, at least from this direction.

"Here's where I ducked down and fired from," Clip whispered. "Then I threw it in that thing, like she told me."

Nelson plunged his arm down into the urn and rotated it exhaustively. "Gone," he reported. "Somebody's taken it out again. And in a hurry, too." He stropped dust off his sleeve reflectively. "And Somebody could be another name for Lafitte herself.

She was the only one who knew it was to go in there."

He thumped Clip across the balustrade. "C'mon, we're going in there."

They hoisted themselves up and over.

"This window here —"

"I see it already." The two halves were fitted sleekly together, but when Nelson reached out and cautiously tested the latch-grip, the halves broke company and gave inward without a sound. Somebody must have forgotten to make them fast in the excitement following the event. But then who expects a murderer to revisit the scene of his crime, and on the same night at that?

Holding their breaths, they stepped through into the death-room, Nelson now in the lead. Glass from the broken pane crunched under his foot and he quickly sidetracked, and motioned Clip back-hand to do likewise. He closed the window halves behind them, and drew the shades all the way down to the bottom. For a minute the room was a blob of darkness around them. In the stillness the clock that had timed Clip's shot could be heard, ticking away eerily.

Then there was a slight click, and a white toy balloon of light from Nelson's pocket-torch started floating around in the blackness. He lightly dusted the sofa with it first of all. There was nothing on that any more. The body had long been removed, of course. Not even a drop of blood had landed on it to show that anyone had been killed sitting there.

He swung around the opposite way and lit up the clock-face. It was almost 3 - five hours since it had happened.

Clip, hovering anxiously behind him, suddenly put his hand on Nelson's shoulder.

The torch-halo naturally didn't encircle only the rounded clock-face and leave the surrounding area in darkness. It splashed over, lit up the adjoining sections of the wall as well.

"Hold it a minute," Clip whispered. "I want to get something."

"What is it? Don't take too long. Remember, we're on thin ice here."

Clip blinked, shaded his eyes for a minute as if trying to remember something, then looked again. There was a triple arrangement facing them, from left to right — blank wall, clock-face, and an oil painting.

"The picture's on the right now, ain't it? Now, so help me, it was on the left when I fired. The room was all lighted up and I saw it there with my own eyes. It's been changed over from one side of the clock to the other."

Nelson swiveled his torch impatiently from side to side. "More of that say-so stuff. Like the disappearance of the gun, and like the proposition she made you. You can't prove it. Gimme something I can get my teeth into, will you?"

"I know I ain't wrong. It's been switched," Clip insisted.

Nelson closed in suddenly, took hold of the bottom of the gilt frame, shifted the picture upward and aside.

He stuck his torch in behind it and lit it up, almost at contact-point.

A small, deep gash was revealed, which bit deeply into the plaster of the wall. It was freshly made — its edges showed spotlessly white, there was no dust present.

Nelson nodded slowly. "You know what that is, don't you? A bullet was taken out of here. By someone who didn't want it to be found lodged in there. And when the police take a bullet out of a wall, they don't cover it up afterwards with an oil painting."

"And I only fired once, so help me!" Clip protested.

Nelson made a swift pass of his hand at him. "Stay here a minute. Don't move. I'm going to take a short cut to finding out something once and for all." He rolled his light off the wall and through an opening that led deeper into the house. Then he followed it in, treading with catlike soundlessness.

He disappeared from view. There was a wait. Then a faint clicking sound, as of a wheel going around. Then the sound of his voice, coming out of the darkness, but so smothered Clip couldn't distinguish a word of it.

Suddenly he came back again, snapped off his torch, plunging the two of them back into tarry blackness.

"What'd you do?" Clip breathed.

"I just called the police."

Clip gave a heave of nervous recoil.

"I pretended it was about some business of my own, then I found out

a few things indirectly while I was at it. There's a fellow I know on Homicide here. *The bullet that killed Dolan was still lodged in his skull when his body was taken out of here by them around midnight.* So it certainly wasn't that one that was scooped out of the wall. That makes *two* bullets."

"And I only —"

"I know, but that's no good. You can't prove that any more — you've ditched the gun."

"Usually," Clip murmured dolefully, "when you hang onto a gun after somebody's been shot with it, that's the worst thing you can do. This time, to throw it away was the worst thing to do."

"And ballistics can't save you any more, either. The gun's not only gone, but the second bullet is as well. So you can't prove the slugs came from two different guns. And you can't prove which yours is, the one in his head or the one in the wall."

He jogged Clip toward the window by which they had entered.

"But if it'll make you feel any better, I *have* found out two things since we came over here."

"What are they?" faltered Clip.

"One is that there certainly *was* a murder committed in this room at 10 o'clock tonight, all right. And two is, that you didn't commit it. Now all we got to do is find some way of proving that. What convinces me that somebody fired a shot along with you is the fact that they dug one bullet out of the wall and made it disappear. If they'd left it where it was, I'd have

thought both bullets were yours. By trying to cover up, they gave themselves away. That's always it — being *too smart!*"

He reopened the French window, nudged Clip through.

"Now what're we going to do, Mr. Nelson?" Clip quavered.

"We're going out the way we came in, then we're coming back in again through the front door and meet a few of the people who live in this house. Especially the lady that started the whole rumpus."

The room was now brilliantly lighted. Lucille Lafitte was the last one to come into it, after everyone else was assembled. She had evidently taken the time to put on full make-up, even for such a thing as meeting a murderer face to face in the middle of the night. She wore a white dressing-gown trimmed with mink.

The others present consisted of the prim secretary, Emma Prescott; the housekeeper, a white-haired, aristocratic woman named Mrs. Britton; Rose Benedetto, the maid; and a beefy cook called Sophie. They were all in various stages of deshabelle, and all in a considerable state of nervousness — all, that is, except Miss Prescott, who had brought her knitting into the room and was busily working at it.

A manacle now linked Clip's wrist to Nelson's, for appearances' sake if not total conviction. Clip didn't enjoy it much. To him a manacle was a manacle.

Lucille Lafitte made an imposing entrance. She stopped short at sight of Clip, put her hand to her heart, then clenched her fist and raised it aloft as if calling down retribution. "So you've got him, have you? Good! That was quick! The despicable —" Then she stopped short. "But why did you bring him here, at this hour of the night?"

"Just to have you identify him. It'll save you a trip downtown." Nelson went through a businesslike pass with his credentials. She barely glanced at them. At any rate they were authentic, even if for the wrong state of the union.

"We just picked him up a few minutes ago with a patrol car," Nelson went on plausibly. "I'm on my way in with him."

She glanced around the room. "You're not alone with him, are you?" she asked uneasily.

"There's a whole battery of cops outside," Nelson reassured her. Technically, this was true — the only difference being they didn't know Clip was in here with him. "I didn't want to turn your house into a parade ground, so I left them outside."

He got down to business. "Sit down, Miss Lafitte. I know you've been questioned before —"

"Have I!" she interjected, rolling her eyes upward with a martyred expression.

"These are just the finishing touches. Then we won't have to bother you any more. Now first of all, the identification. Is this the man who was

brought here yesterday from the bank?"

This was just a decoy question, Clip knew — an excuse for their being there at all.

"He certainly is!" she exclaimed, glaring at Clip.

Nelson threw the next one at her before she was expecting it. "Now, how many shots did you hear?"

She had been in the act of fitting a cigarette into the foot-long holder she carried around with her. She dropped the cigarette just as he asked the question, or perhaps a split second later, and had to bend down and pick it up again. She reinserted it into the holder. "Just one," she said quite calmly. The act of bending over had brought the blood to her face a little; otherwise she was perfectly self-possessed.

He asked all the others in turn, taking them in the order in which they were sitting. "You?"

"Just one," said the housekeeper.

"You?"

"Just one," said the maid.

"You?"

"I didn't hear any. There was such a racket going on in that kitchen, getting things ready for the party —"

He didn't wait for her to finish. "You?"

Emma Prescott stopped knitting, but she didn't answer for a minute.

"I asked you how many —"

"I heard you, sir," she said quietly. "One, I suppose."

"Why do you say, 'suppose'?"

"It seemed to echo. It was a long

sound, not a short one. The walls seemed to give it back a second time." She dropped her eyes to her knitting again. They gave a nervous flicker — perhaps because she was being stared at so intently — toward Lucille Lafitte. The latter delicately blew a cloud of smoke.

Clip nearly made the tactical error of nodding in agreement. But Nelson was already at something else.

"You owned a gun, I believe, Miss Lafitte?"

"Yes, I did have one. He snatched it out of the desk drawer yesterday before I could stop him, and I've already told your men the rest of the story."

"We can't find it, of course. He's made it disappear. It would help us somewhat if you could . . ." He slowed up, to get her off-guard, then snapped it at her fast: "What caliber was it, can you tell us?"

"A — a — a —" She made three false starts, enough to have ruined any scene in any picture. Then suddenly she got sore.

"I don't know. Why do you ask me? I'm not a gun expert! I never went near it myself. It was bought years back and kept around simply for house protection. I'm an artist. All I know is stocking sizes, I don't know gun sizes!"

"You had a license for it, of course?"

"Yes."

"Well, wouldn't the license tell you what caliber it was?" he said.

"I don't know where it is. It would take time to locate it."

Miss Prescott seemed to be about to say something. Her knitting needles slowed up a little. Then she blinked, as if she had just felt someone's eyes on her. The needles picked up speed once more, and she lowered her head. If Nelson had caught the little by-play, he gave no sign of it.

"Anyway, what's the difference what caliber it was?" Lucille Lafitte exclaimed pettishly, bringing her eyes back to Nelson once more. "He shot Lew with it, and Lew is dead. That's enough, isn't it?"

Clip's lips stirred querulously. Nelson, who seemed to have eyes at the side of his head, brought his foot down heavily on Clip's, and the latter clamped his mouth shut again.

Nelson diplomatically forebore pursuing the gun line of questioning any further since it seemed to annoy her so. Instead he went on to something else. "Would you mind placing yourselves as you were at the time of the shot?" But this time he didn't take them in sitting order, he shuffled them up. "You?"

"I was in the kitchen."

"You?"

"I was up on the second floor," the maid said. "One of the ladies was a little plas — had a headache, and I was looking after her."

"You?"

"I was in bed, in my room, trying to sleep," said the housekeeper.

"You?"

"I was in a little room just off the library, answering some of Miss Lafitte's correspondence."

He threw it at Lafitte fast, and with a catch in it.

"You were in here with your guests, of course."

"Yes, I was right here in the room at the very time it —"

This time there could be no mistaking the abrupt turn of Miss Prescott's head toward her employer. Then the secretary quickly corrected herself, looked down again, as if it had been unintentional.

Lafitte had stopped short in mid-sentence. She began over again with a bright smile of apology. "No, excuse me. I stepped outside for just a moment, to — to give some orders to the butler. Just outside the door —"

"And did you give the orders?" Nelson inquired pleasantly.

"No, I couldn't find him at the moment. So I decided to wait till later, and just as I turned to go back inside again, I heard it."

Miss Prescott was knitting very intently. Her head was so low it might almost have been held that way in fear.

Nelson stood up, and the manacle brought Clip up with him. "Well, since the gun has disappeared, and you can't tell us what caliber it was," the parole officer said, "we'll have to rely on the death-bullet to tell us that."

"But why is that so important?" the star grimaced impatiently. "I don't see why you have to —"

"It makes a great deal of difference," Nelson explained. "The gun will be found eventually — they al-

ways are. Even if it isn't, the license will be, and the record of the sale. If the bullet turns out not to be of a matching caliber" — he threw up his free hand — "we have no case against this man, except a purely circumstantial one that's not worth a damn."

They all looked slightly awed at this bit of police mumbo-jumbo. All but Lafitte. She looked thoughtful.

"What arrangements have you made for the disposal of the body after it's been released?" Nelson asked off-handedly, as he started toward the door with his captive.

Lafitte shuddered delicately. "I told them to — to take poor Lew to the Sunset Mortuary. I've rented a private chapel there."

"Could I use your phone for a minute? I want to find out what the caliber of the bullet is."

Lafitte nodded, looking strained.

He took Clip outside with him of necessity, picked up the phone, and gave the dial a spin. "Hello, that you, Ellis?" he said in a ringing voice that must have carried back to the room they had just come from. "Buck Nelson. Is it out yet?" Then he said, "Holy smoke!" and gave a low whistle of dismay. Then he listened intently, and so did everybody else. You could hear a pin drop.

Finally he said: "I stopped off at Miss Lafitte's house with him first to get her identification. I'm bringing him right in now."

"Hey!" Clip expostulated in a terrified undertone. Then he looked

down. Nelson's thumb was pressed flat on the receiver hook.

All eyes were on the parole officer when he reentered the room with his captive. He mopped his forehead as though he'd just heard bad news.

"I'm sorry, there's been a slip-up," he announced. "Somebody down there got their wires crossed. The body has already been released and turned over to the mortuary."

Lafitte's face looked deathly white. "Why do you call that a slip-up?"

"Because the bullet is still in his head. It was lodged so deep it would have meant destroying the whole skull to remove it. They were afraid to do that without special permission from you — there's some regulation about that. In the meantime, while they were waiting, it was sent out by mistake. I don't know how it happened. The remains will have to be reclaimed by us tomorrow and go back onto the laboratory slab."

The star sprang to her feet. "No!" she shrieked. "I won't allow it! Lew's beautiful profile! And I wanted everyone to look at him while he was lying there in the chapel! He'll be a headless horror —"

"Miss Lafitte, that bullet *has* to come out. If it doesn't check with the gun, when that's eventually found, then it's not this man's crime."

She sat down again, as abruptly as she'd stood up. "Oh, I see." Suddenly she was very docile. "I could have a mask made of his face before it's done. When will they — when are they going to do it?"

"Plenty of time yet. Everyone's gone home by now, so it won't be until sometime tomorrow morning."

He gave a jerk on the handcuff and started Clip toward the door.

The last glimpse they had of Miss Lucille Lafitte, she was resting her head tearfully against her secretary's shoulder and sniffing tragically into a gauzy handkerchief. "At least he'll have a few more hours of being his own handsome self," they heard her whimper mournfully.

As they came away from the house in the early-morning darkness Clip asked nervously: "You ain't really going to turn me over to them right away, are you?"

"Maybe you'll wish I was when you hear what's next on the program," Nelson grunted ominously.

The skittish captive shied in his tracks. "That don't sound good," he exclaimed in sudden alarm. "Where you taking me, then?"

"Down to the mortuary, to the private chapel Lucille Lafitte has rented. You're going to get under the sheets and take the place of Dolan for the next few hours."

Clip hiccupped twice in violent succession. His knees buckled and Nelson had to hold him up by the scruff of the neck. "Never mind the accordion act," he rebuked, hustling him onward.

"But — but — but *why*?"

"Because I want to see who comes near it between now and the time the place is thrown open to the public.

Somebody's going to, or else I've got this thing figured all wrong."

"Why couldn't I just hide on the sidelines with you and watch who comes near it from there? Why do I have to take the stiff's place?" demanded Clip, his teeth chattering.

"Because he isn't there already. The body of Dolan is over at the police lab where no one can get at it, not even me."

"Then why couldn't we just wait for them to get the slug out?"

"They've got it out already, you dope. What do you think they do, take all night for things like that? I had them on the phone the first time. It's out and it's a .22 — a woman's weapon."

"Then don't that prove it wasn't me? The gun she gave me was a .38."

"No, it still don't prove it wasn't you who shot it. The gun you did fire isn't around any more. Look, do you have to have a dictionary for every step of the way? In order to find out who did it, we'd have to shove the slug back inside the corpse's head, just as though the cops had never taken it out, and then watch it and see what happens. And since we haven't got the corpse handy, we've got to make our own corpse, and then leave it lying around where someone can get at it — somebody who was in that room with us just now. For my money it's Lafitte herself. And you're the corpse."

"I feel like one already," Clip said in a smothered voice. "Sometimes I wish I'd stayed honest."

The place was inky-black. In the darkness there was a rustling sound, like a sheet being agitated. This erupted finally into an explosive sneeze, "Ha-choo!"

Instantly, from somewhere in the gloom, a voice whispered, "Shut up, you!"

"I can't help it. It's cold on this blame thing."

"One more sneeze out of you and —" The threatening voice suddenly stopped short. There was a faint clash from somewhere outside, as if a door had opened, then shut again. "Hold it, somebody's coming!"

Moments of complete silence followed. Then a key ticked into a ponderous metal door, closer at hand. It crunched open. A finger of light shot out and pointed its way through. It picked up a motionless human outline lying under a shroud, on top of a velvet-draped bier, and stayed on that.

The glowing orb slowly advanced, coming in. The cautious tap of high heels across the mosaic flooring accompanied it.

The torch was finally put down, left balanced on the edge of the catafalque, so that it played steadily on the corpse's enshrouded head. A handbag snapped open, and a hand reached out and placed a handkerchief on the rim of the bier. Nestled within this was a bullet.

Two black-gloved hands now came forward into the light and hovered above the upper edge of the shroud, as if about to draw it back and expose

what lay beneath. Then they hesitated, withdrew again. The shroud seemed to quiver slightly, but this could have been mistaken for an optical illusion.

The torch was picked up again, and this time played about the circumference of the place, as if in search of something. It finally came to rest upon a funeral urn standing over in a corner, on top of a slender bronze tripod. There was nothing else in the place, no possible cranny for concealment.

The torch was set down again, and then the high-heeled footsteps withdrew into the corner. There was a dull impact as the urn was set down on the floor. Then the footsteps came back again. Once more a black-gloved hand went out to the head of the shroud, this time feeling the head through the shroud, as if to locate it. Then it joined its mate in a double grip around the bronze tripod that had been standing in the corner a moment before, swinging this high up overhead and poising it like a hammer or mallet for a blow.

Suddenly there was a quick flurry of velvet, somewhere down at floor-level, a woman's choked scream, and the tripod landed ringingly off in the background, roughly wrenched away from its wielder. Nelson's voice came curtly: "Don't move! This is a gun I've got in your back!"

The shroud swirled violently, and the corpse came to life, leaping out from under and taking refuge as far over at the side of the chapel as it

could, dragging its winding sheet part of the way across the floor with it, and sputtering in breathless panic.

Nelson spoke again. "Throw that switch over there and light up the dome in the ceiling, Clip, so I can see who we've got here."

A heavily-veiled woman, a phantom-like apparition in widow's weeds, with no face showing, stood at bay just beyond the bore of Nelson's gun when the soft amber and violet glow went on overhead.

Nelson reached for the handkerchief with his free hand and crammed it into his pocket. "There's your .38 bullet, Clip. Out of the wall and on its way into his head, in place of the other one that she thought was still in there." He rummaged in the handbag, still with one hand. "And here's the .22 gun to go with the bullet they've already taken out of Dolan's head." He put that in his pocket, too.

"So you fell for it, didn't you, Miss Lafitte?" he addressed the swathed figure. "Nobody but a movie star living in a dream-world would have swallowed such a moth-eaten yarn. As though the police would have released a body with a bullet still in its head!"

He reached for the veil to fling it up. The figure recoiled for an instant, then as if realizing its own helplessness, stood passive once more. The veil somersaulted out of the way and the prim, chiseled features of Emma Prescott, the star's secretary, were revealed behind it.

"Holy —" Clip gasped. Even Nelson's eyes gave a snap of surprise.

"Yes, I'm the one," she said bitterly. "So now you know."

"Go outside and phone the police," Nelson said quietly.

"*Me* phoning the police to come and get someone else," Clip exulted. "That's a new one!"

When he came back she was saying to Nelson: "I was married to him and I never got over being married to him, I guess. He threw me over as soon as the breaks started to come his way, ditched me with a Mexican divorce. I got this job with her. I don't hold anything against her — she didn't know. I used to see them together, and it did something to me. Then I overheard her cooking up this harebrained scheme when they brought this man to the house yesterday. I was in the next room, and I left the door open an inch. Her cockeyed plot was just made to order for me. It was too good an opportunity to let go by. I only realized then that it must have been in my mind for a long time — to kill him. I had this little .22, and the study where I answered letters for her was directly opposite those living-room windows. The two wings stick out parallel, with the terrace in between. I, too, was in a straight line with him, only I was farther back than where this man hid. I was behind him, in the second wing.

"I went in there and locked the door and left the lights out. Then I

opened the French window and came out, and crouched down low where he couldn't see me, on *my* side of the terrace. I could even see the clock in there, in the lighted room, just as he could. But I'd set my wrist-watch by it ahead of time, anyway, to make sure. When I saw him raise his gun, I raised mine. When I saw him sort of draw back his head, I knew he was going to pull the shot, and I got ready to pull mine. But he was aiming at Lew's arm. I aimed for his head.

"The two shots came as close together as it was humanly possible to make them. They sounded like one shot, rolling a little, or echoing back from the wall behind him. They even went through the same window-square — so that only one pane broke. I was afraid he'd see the flash behind him, but he never noticed it. He was too taken up looking straight ahead of him."

"A Siamese shot," Nelson commented.

She kept twisting her hands around and looking down at them. "I took the .38 out of the urn. No one saw me in the confusion, in the few minutes before the police got there. They were running all over the lawn being hysterical. I took care not to be the first one out there. You'll find the gun underneath one of the tiles in the fireplace in the library."

She shaded her eyes.

"Finish it up," Nelson urged softly. "Get it out of your system. You're not a professional killer. You'll feel better if you do."

"I saw where the bullet had gone into the wall, and I knew it must be his, not mine, because mine had gone into Lew's head, and there was no arm-wound — this man here missed him completely. I quickly covered it up with an oil painting. Then I dug it out later with a nail-file, after the police had left. What worried me, of course, was that the caliber of the other gun, the one he'd used, was bound to come to light sooner or later. Even though I had the gun itself hidden, I knew you'd trace it through the license, or if I destroyed that — which I intended to — it could be tracked down easily enough to the place she'd bought it. It was a legitimate sale, with the records available. Then when you came to the house with him, and said there'd been a slip-up — Lew's body had gone to the mortuary with the bullet still in his head — it seemed a God-sent opportunity, the one and only chance I would ever have. If I'd stopped and thought coolly about it — But when you've just killed someone for the first time in your life — Let them find his skull shattered when they came to reclaim him, what did I care? The .38 bullet would be found lying there among the pieces. The right bullet for the right gun."

"How did you get in here?"

"I already had the key to this chapel in my possession. It had been delivered to me, as her secretary, as soon as the arrangements were completed to have him brought here. She went back to bed after you two left

the house, and I rummaged among her clothes. She had a whole room given over to nothing but clothes. I found this widow's outfit hanging there — it must have been left over from one of her pictures, I suppose — and I got into it."

Nelson nodded reflectively. "And now you're sorry, like they always are. Now you wish you hadn't done it."

She looked up at him sharply. "No," she said. "You're not a woman, so I can't expect you to understand. I don't know yet whether it was love or hate that made me do it. I never will know — they're both too much alike. I only know one thing — I can't have him, but neither can she now."

The door opened and the first wave of cops came flooding in. Nelson got up off the edge of the vacant bier. "This lady, here, is for you," he said. "And this runt here is for me, so you can skip him."

"It sure was nice of you to let me stop off here first and pick up my clean shirts and socks, before we start back East," Clip said, unlocking his room door. "I move around a lot, and sudden, but I sure hate to have to leave any place without a clean shirt."

"Of course, where you're going," Nelson remarked drily, "all that stuff is going to be supplied to you, free of charge. But still I do have to sit next

to you on the train for three days, so — What's that you just picked up from the floor?"

Clip looked it over uncertainly. "I dunno. A letter musta been shoved under my door since I was last here." He stripped it open and looked at it, then he turned it briefly toward Nelson.

The President of the United States of America. Greetings —

Clip refolded it and shoved it in his pocket.

They went downstairs again, Clip with his belongings under his arm. They came to a stop. "And now I guess it's the railroad station —"

"No," Nelson said. He waved him on his way, up the street. "You've got a bigger and better parole officer than me to look after you from now on. I guess I'll just have to wait my turn. Get going."

Clip got going.

"See you after the war, Clip," Nelson called after him.

"See you after the war, policeman," Clip called back. And then he added under his breath: "But not if I see you first." He kept going, faster and faster all the time. "Sure is a lucky thing," he said to himself, "he didn't read down to the third line."

Clip had got it out of the desk drawer in the Lafitte house when he and Nelson were standing there in the dark and Nelson was telephoning. The name typed in on the third line was Lew Dolan.

DEPARTMENT OF 'FIRST STORIES'

and **Black Mask** section

Luttrell Tucker's "Nothing Will Hurt You, Lucy" is one of the thirteen "first stories" which won special awards in EQMM's Ninth Annual Contest. It is a story which qualifies in the highest tradition of **BLACK MASK** — the tradition of realism, atmosphere, and introspection, the tradition of delayed action, brooding mood, and that peculiar kind of personal involvement which we have come to expect in the hardboiled 'tec. So, you will find Luttrell Tucker's story hard yet tender, melodramatic yet underplayed . . . and after you have finished reading it, we will have more to say.

As to the author herself, we cannot resist quoting from her own letter: "I come from a writing family. What else could we do with a father who writes and delivers the best sermons in the whole Episcopal church (in our not unbiased opinion) and a mother who, in spite of raising five highly individual daughters, kept up her interest in painting and has just recently written and illustrated an article for the *Ford Times* on her own and dad's personal experiences of 'skin diving' in Key West — complete with mask and snorkel?"

"My oldest sister Lael Tucker's recent novel, LAMENT FOR FOUR VIRGINS, was, as you know, a best seller; my second sister, Leigh Tucker, has by-lined many fine feature articles for various newspapers; my third sister does her writing as a Public Relations Counsel; and my 'baby' sister is still gathering material by following her husband around the British Empire in his job with the British Colonial Service . . . Besides sister writers I claim an uncle, Irvin Tucker, for his OUT OF THE HELLBOX, and a great uncle, Louis Tucker, for his CLERICAL ERRORS, and a cousin, Augusta Tucker, of MISS SUSIE SLAGLE fame. Then there are in-laws like Charles Wertenbaker (THE BARONS and THE DEATH OF KINGS), and — but why go on? You do see what I mean by a 'writing family'?"

We do indeed! And the whole "writing family" can be genuinely proud of their Luttrell's first story — as we are proud to give Luttrell Tucker her baptism in print.

More comment when you have read Miss Tucker's dark, dreary tale of Lucy and Harry — wonderful Harry . . .

NOTHING WILL HURT YOU, LUCY

by LUTTRELL TUCKER

THE INSPECTOR INDICATED FIRMLY that she was to be let alone. They moved the body, took the necessary photographs, got fingerprints — all without disturbing her. She simply sat through it all, silent.

The doctor hesitated, looking her over as he made ready to leave with the rest.

"Shock," he said fussily, seeing with professional eyes her rigid figure, her feet placed so primly side by side in their neat black oxfords, her hands straining together in her lap, her wide-open, unseeing eyes with the pupils dilated.

"Not acute." The doctor frowned, shaking his grizzled head. "She'll come out of it." Perhaps he was trying to convince himself.

"Yeah." Impatience tinged the Inspector's voice.

The doctor turned from the slight girl on the couch to look up at the Inspector's impassive face. It was set on a strong thick neck over a bulky but surprisingly tall frame. The doctor saw stubbornness in the lips, toughness in the jaws. He detected no quality of mercy.

"Take it easy," the doctor warned. "Unless you want a 'While of Unsound Mind' verdict later."

The Inspector nodded.

"I'm after a confession," he admitted with a smile that merely pulled up the corners of his mouth and left his

blue eyes untouched. "I'll be careful."

The doctor with a grunt and a shrug left, the last to go except for Mike sitting quietly in the corner with his shorthand notebook open, watching the Inspector.

After the door closed, the Inspector stood in the middle of the small, shabby room, letting the quiet settle around him. When he finally spoke, his voice was unobtrusive, disappearing into the faded tired furniture, into the inadequate rug, hardly disturbing the dim air.

"You're Mrs. Flavell?"

The unseeing eyes turned in his direction, the way a blind person's will on hearing a sound. Only these eyes were not blind; they looked inward instead of outward. The Inspector did not know if she would answer. But because the question was directed to those inward visions, she did, at once.

"Yes."

Pride in the small word. Yes, she was Mrs. Flavell.

"How old are you, Mrs. Flavell — Lucy?"

"Nineteen." The voice was listless this time. Her age was unimportant to her.

"How long have you known Mr. Flavell — Harry?"

"Two months, three weeks, and two days." This was important; it was a song, the tune that played in her

heart. "I've known Harry two months, three weeks, and two days," she repeated. She might just as well have said, "My life began two months, three weeks, and two days ago."

The Inspector waited until he could regulate his voice to exactly the same monotone.

"How long have you been married?"

"Two months." She smiled suddenly, but not at him. "Two months today. We were celebrating. Champagne." The smile faded in a moment of awareness as her dilated brown eyes tried to focus on the Inspector's face. It was as if the last word had been a signal, sending unbearable pain through her body.

The Inspector watched her sharply. The pupils of her eyes were enormous. He saw them contract slightly, struggling for focus. Then to his enormous relief her expression went slack again. She dropped her lids to unseeing contemplation of the hands in her lap, tightly clenched, knuckles white with the strain of which she was unaware.

"And Harry — what time did he come home from work today?" When he was sure it was all right, the Inspector inserted the question probingly, delicately.

"Harry didn't work." Pride in her feathery voice again. "He didn't need to work since I got the money. I could take care of him."

The Inspector stifled a sigh. There it was, naturally. As always. Money or love. Money or love.

His eyes darted around the apartment and confirmed his certainty that no money had been spent here. He looked the girl over, too, professionally, and saw that her clothes were bargain-rack stuff — neat, but no style. They matched her unbecomingly arranged hair and unpolished nails. No money there. So where was the money? How did it figure?

The champagne bottle on the table — he'd told them to leave that — looked self-conscious, out of place. It was the only sign of luxury he saw.

He'd better find out about the money, where it was, before he went for the whole pot, the confession. It would be easier this way than digging later.

"How long have you had this money, Mrs. Flavell?"

"The letter came six weeks ago." She put her head back against the couch, apparently not even conscious of talking. The present was too much, there was only the past to escape to.

The Inspector waited, hoping, and after a while the voice did go on in the same dreamy, unaware way.

"An uncle," she said. "I'd never seen him, my mother's brother. He left me such a lot. Ten thousand dollars."

The Inspector almost forgot himself in a whistle. He hadn't been looking for such an amount — not in this tawdry case. A frown creased his forehead. He liked things to add up nice and neat. There was something wrong here. He had an uneasy feeling that it wasn't going to be quite as smooth as it had looked at first.

But they never were.

"Were you and Harry living here when the letter came?"

"Oh, no." Although she shook her head, her neck stayed rigid, giving the effect of a puppet-head on a stick. The Inspector noticed unwillingly that her neck was slender and white, and that the skin was soft with youth.

"We were living with Aunt Cora, the one that raised me since my parents died. Harry didn't like it there, but we had to stay until he could find something — some work, he said. Only, of course, it wasn't necessary after the letter came, so we left right away. That night. Harry and Aunt Cora didn't like each other."

Her voice was faintly apologetic. Apologizing for her aunt, no doubt, the Inspector decided. How could anyone not like Harry?

"When I opened the letter, Harry said; 'Thank God, Lucy. I don't think I could have stood it much longer.' So we slipped out. 'We'll write to Aunt Cora, Lucy,' Harry said, 'send her a nice check when we're sure there's no mistake about the money. What a nice surprise for her, eh, Lucy? A check some morning in the mail. She'll like that. Let's do it my way, Lucy.'"

Her mind had recorded his words, probably exactly. Because they were so important. Wonderful Harry, her tone said.

"So we slipped out," she went on. "I packed a few things and got my birth certificate and my social security card that Aunty kept in the big Bible

because Harry said I would need them to prove my identity. But he said not to bring many clothes, we'd get those later. We left while Aunt Cora was still at church. I wrote a note and told her not to worry, that she'd hear soon."

"And have you written her?"

"Oh, yes. Harry took the letter I wrote to the Post Office and got a money order to go with it and mailed it as soon as everything was straight about the money. Harry wanted Aunt Cora to be happy, too. But we went that night and took the train for Chicago with a bit of money Harry had saved up that I hadn't known about — for special emergencies, he said. We went to Chicago because that was where the lawyer wrote from, and I went to them and got the money. I signed the papers and they looked up my identification and they had to give me the certified check I asked for, and then we came to San Francisco. Harry wanted to live here, so we rented this apartment. We've been here exactly fifteen days and today is our anniversary. We've been married two months today."

Her voice was like a small stream sliding over rocks, murmuring quietly to itself. The Inspector had to bend over to catch the words; he motioned Mike to come closer.

"So you were celebrating your anniversary with champagne." He kept his voice in key with hers. "Did you have champagne often?"

"Oh, no." She was shocked, almost aware, and he cursed himself for a

fool. But she finally lapsed into the earlier monotone. "Only once before," she said, a tender smile playing around her mouth. "On the train, the night we left Aunty's — the night the registered special-delivery letter came about the money."

"This registered letter. Did you notice the envelope?"

She raised her eyes in surprise and the Inspector stiffened in alarm, but again her eyes refused to focus. "The envelope —" She paused and frowned. "The one on the outside or the one on the inside?"

"There were two envelopes?" He kept the excitement out of his voice with an effort.

She nodded and dropped her glance indifferently. "The letter had been missent the first time. I should have received it weeks before, the lawyer said. He was puzzled. He couldn't understand how it had got addressed to South America somewhere, then returned to them. He sent the envelope to show me where the letter had been and how long it had taken coming back."

She paused again and the same tender smile touched her lips.

"It was fate. I knew it. If I had got the letter sooner, I wouldn't have met Harry." Her eyes widened a little at the enormity of it. "Never have met Harry," she repeated, as if tormenting herself with the thought.

The Inspector looked at her, barely suppressing a snort. Could she be that unconscious? he asked himself. No. She'd killed her husband, she'd killed

her wonderful Harry, so obviously she knew the truth now. Only shock had made her forget. Temporary amnesia, merciful forgetfulness. He'd remind her, when the right moment came, he'd remind her that all at once she had come to know the truth. And then, when he was ready —

Slow and easy on the background, work in as many details as possible in case she repudiated her story later. And then he'd get her. She might have hysterics; probably would. But she'd committed murder and he had his job to do. Maybe Harry deserved to die, but so what? Let someone else figure the angles.

"How did you meet Harry?" the Inspector asked, forcing his voice to a deep softness. There were still too many pieces missing.

Happiness lay around her like a cloak. "He came into the bank, into the room where all us girls worked. He stopped by the door to talk to Esther and I saw him and I wanted him to notice me more than anything in the world. I liked the way he stood, the way his hair grew around his ears. I liked his forehead —" She paused. "I prayed."

My God, the Inspector told himself, I'm getting old, I can't take it, she'll have me in tears next.

"— nodded at Esther and said something and then his eyes, he looked up, right at me. I — I thought he'd just look away again, but he didn't. He looked over his shoulder at me as he left."

"And when you started home, he

was waiting outside the door for you?" The Inspector's voice was rough, too loud, and she looked startled. Take it easy! he told himself.

But he knew it didn't matter. He had all he needed. Find the tie-up between Harry and the lawyers for the uncle's estate. Maybe the lawyers weren't in on it; that remained to be checked. Harry could have been a junior clerk or an office boy — anything where one of his jobs was to mail the firm's letters. Simple enough to steam them open — waiting for the right one. The one made to order for his talents, just like this one. A young girl inheriting money she knew nothing about. Another envelope, type a new address, a long way off but with a nice clear return address so it would come back to the lawyers in due time. Any office could make such a mistake — regrettable, but not criminal. Oh, yes, very neat.

"Waiting for me when I went home?" Her voice was puzzled. "No, it was the next day that I saw him again, in the drug store. He just happened in when I was eating my lunch and he sat down beside me . . ."

"And three weeks and two days later you were married — secretly, of course," the Inspector finished flatly. "What took him so long?"

Her eyes were on him, bewildered at his tone of voice. He cursed his impatience and forced sympathy into his eyes and voice.

"You were married. And your Aunt Cora — was she upset when you told her?"

"She was awfully angry." There was more strain in her voice now, though the alarm had faded. "She wouldn't let Harry come stay with me, not at first. Then I threatened to leave, too. She wanted the money I gave her from my salary, so finally she let him come. I begged Harry to be nice to her. Harry put his arms around me: 'All right, Lucy,' he said, 'sweet, gentle Lucy. I'll never hurt you, Lucy. Just remember that. Nothing can hurt you any more, Lucy.' And he was so nice to Aunty that she began to like him. And finally she said one day, 'I guess you're lucky to get him, Lucy, and that's a fact.' I knew what she meant, of course. No boys had ever paid any attention to me, before Harry."

As she spoke pain filled her eyes and the Inspector knew he had to hurry. His luck had held awfully well. No use pushing it any more than necessary.

"So you didn't tell Aunt Cora about the inheritance? You just went to Chicago? Did the lawyers know you were married?"

"No. Harry said it might only cause complications and delay things."

The Inspector nodded. Of course. Well, that would sew it up, except for the pay-off. Still, he felt uneasy, dissatisfied somehow. His glance swept the apartment again, the dark, dreary shabbiness of it. . . . With so much money?

"Harry pick out this apartment?" he asked, not knowing why it mattered. It was just something that

didn't quite fit, a piece of the jigsaw to put into place.

"Yes." Her voice was dreamy. "I stayed at the hotel and Harry found it for us. He said he liked it because it was homey."

"Homey?"

"Big and old and sort of nice. 'No little cramped-up rooms, Lucy.' And he liked it because the rent wasn't high. 'Mustn't waste your money, Lucy,' he said; and when I told him to do whatever he wanted, he kissed me. He carried me over the door sill when we moved in." The tender joy in her voice almost made the Inspector gag — or cry — he wasn't sure which. "He carried me all through the apartment and showed me just how big the rooms were, and into the kitchen. 'No dirty garbage to carry out for my Lucy,' he said. I had never seen an incinerator built right into the kitchen, and he showed me how it worked. He liked the incinerator, and so did I."

Almost every apartment house in San Francisco had them, but maybe these kids hadn't known that. The Inspector knew they weren't standard equipment in other cities.

"Ever been to San Francisco before?" he asked her quietly.

"No."

He'd known she'd say that, but it was just as well to have it on Mike's record. He'd bet his bottom dollar that San Francisco was no strange setting to Harry, though. That one would come to a place with which he was familiar. They always did.

But the incinerator . . . On impulse the Inspector walked into the kitchen, handling his big body so well that not a board creaked. He stood in the middle of the room and looked around. It was what you would expect from the rest of the apartment, old-fashioned, poorly equipped, with a stained sink and a big door over it opening into the chute that carried garbage and trash down to the furnace in the basement. He stared at the incinerator door, wondering, and then, of course, he saw.

What a fool! It was the opening to the incinerator that had pleased dear Harry so. Big — big enough for a small body — you'd have trouble with the shoulders, but that could be managed. A modern apartment would have a smaller opening. Even most of the older buildings built the door to the chute smaller. Harry must have hunted all over San Francisco for just this one. Or maybe he'd known about it — from previous experience.

A good plan — perfect, as far as the Inspector could see. A young couple rent an apartment. The name would be phony, of course. Pay rent in advance, then suddenly decide to leave. Only the man leaves, but who knows that? And who cares? The aunt might try to trace her niece eventually, but she'd have no address. You could bet that the letter from Lucy, with the nice money order, had never been sent. And the whole 10,000 in cash, so there'd be no trouble. Just walk out quietly and disappear. San Francisco was the stepping-off place to the

world, and \$10,000 was a lot of money. If anybody got suspicious — if the furnace was cleaned out — what matter? The bird would have flown.

A good plan, carefully worked out — only it hadn't worked.

The Inspector ran his hand through his hair. Somewhere he had missed a piece. He was being taken for a ride, but by whom? And how?

And then, in a blinding light, he saw it, and he kicked at the door in disgust for his blindness.

Turning on his heel, he strode back into the other room with angry strides. No need to be quiet now.

Arms akimbo he stood looking down at her, so small, so young, so innocent, sitting quietly with her hands in her lap staring at nothing, big brown eyes vacant, soft brown hair escaping untidily now from the prim little knot at the base of her slender neck. . . . The Inspector snorted aloud.

Amnesia? Amnesia, hell! All an act. Why did this girl have to kill? She could make her fortune on the stage.

He smiled at her, not a nice smile, but she apparently didn't notice. Well, he could play the game, too, now that he knew the rules. Make a fool out of him, would she? Oh, she was good, all right! What would she do to a jury? He'd see to it that she paid, he vowed silently — he'd have her burned in the newspapers because she had tried to trick him.

And because she'd murdered her husband, too. That, too.

"Who bought the champagne to-

night?" His question was abrupt and she looked up at him, startled again. But he knew he needn't bother to be gentle. She wouldn't come out of this carefully simulated shock; she couldn't afford to. So quiet, so dazed, sitting alongside her husband's body while the police fumbled around taking fingerprints and pictures . . . She'd even fooled the doc.

"The champagne? Harry, of course. He brought it with him. He was so happy. 'Two months, Lucy! Two months tonight. We've been married two months.' He opened the bottle and filled the two glasses he had bought just for the occasion, he said. And he — he kissed the rim of his glass and bowed to me. 'Don't worry, Lucy,' he said, 'nothing's going to hurt my Lucy.' I don't know why he said that. Nothing could hurt me with Harry around."

She looked up at him, and the Inspector almost groaned aloud. How corny can you get? he asked himself. And he tried to keep the disgust off his face. Might as well let her fill in the whole picture the way she'd planned to, before he threw it back in her face. This little panther playing the kitten, though! It was enough to make a man swear blue blazes.

"And Harry handed you your drink? He fixed it and handed it to you?" It was hard to keep the bitter sarcasm out of his voice, hard to pretend to be even more of a fool than he'd been already.

A spasm of pain crossed the girl's face as she shook her head. "My glass

was on the table for me. I started to pick it up just as he kissed his glass again — and then the phone rang.”

The phone. Of course, perfect!

“Did you get many phone calls?”
What a story!

“Oh, no.” Those widening eyes again. “None. We didn’t know anybody. It startled us so, Harry even spilled some of his drink. He put his glass down, and —”

“And while his back was turned you changed drinks with him?”

She looked at him in that wide-eyed surprise. He wanted to slap her.

“Yes,” she said.

“Why?”

In spite of himself, he was fascinated. It was like reading a book, racing along, wanting to know the end of the story before tossing it aside, yawning, and forgetting it.

He watched the blush come up her neck, over her high cheekbones, into her forehead. A real, honest-to-God blush! What an actress!

“His lips —” The Inspector watched her lips tremble “— his lips, he had kissed his glass and I —” She looked helplessly down at her hands, lying together in her lap. He saw the tears hitting against her white fingers.

“You loved him so much that you wanted to drink out of the glass he had kissed?” His voice was loud, harsh and jeering, and what difference could it make now? “So he got the poison instead of you, and the telephone was a wrong number?”

“Yes,” she said, her eyes still on his face. “How did you know?”

So then he let her have it. “Baby, who do you think you’re kidding?”

Oh, she was good! That trick of the eyes and lips, the confusion, the stammer . . . “But — that’s what Harry said. I — he — when he came back he told me it was a wrong number and picked up the glass and bowed to me, and he threw back his head and drank the whole thing and . . . and I stood watching him. I didn’t drink mine. . . . What do you mean? It was all . . . *all* poisoned . . . the whole bottle. It had to be. It had to be . . .” The last was a whisper.

“You know it wasn’t!” He was shouting because he was sick of her. And because he pitied her, God help him, the little white-skinned scrawny fool. “We’ve played your show, right down to the curtain. But now it’s over. *Only one drink was poisoned — and he drank it!* You found out why he married you, you couldn’t take it, and you put him away. Why didn’t you admit it? You might have had a chance!” The Inspector turned his back on her. “Let’s go, Mike. You’ve got her fairy tale down in your book. I need some fresh air.”

She made a funny sound and he turned back to her. Still putting on the act! He felt like taking her young thin neck in his hands and squeezing the admission out of her, the lying little hellcat. Trying to use him!

Her eyes were getting bigger and bigger as she stared at him. Her face was so white that the veins stood out blue, and he saw a pulse beating in her forehead. He stared back.

She seemed to fight realization in a panic, but it came on, flattening all before it; and because he could not wrench his eyes away, the Inspector saw it wreak a sort of devastation. He heard her whisper, "Nothing will hurt you, Lucy. Nothing will hurt you, Lucy." Then she fell at his feet.

The Inspector felt sweat on his forehead. He stood looking down at her. "My God!" he said. "Women!"

"She loved him, sir." Mike was standing pushed into his corner, staring down at the motionless girl.

"She fooled you, eh?" The Inspector laughed and with the sound the tension went out of him and he laughed again. "Pick up your little book, Mike, and get some water to throw on her. The newspaper boys are going to love this one! They'll tar

and feather her on the story I'll give them." He snorted. "The jury may let her go, but the newspapers will see to it that it does her no good. They'll have the straight of it."

Mike's eyes reminded the older man suddenly of Lucy's eyes.

"She didn't do it, Inspector. It was an accident. He meant to poison her, but she — you heard her say —"

"I heard her say a lot of things," said the Inspector. "Now I'm talking. She's guilty as hell and I'm going to see to it that she pays. With your help — you and your little notebook, you damn innocent."

The two men stood glaring at each other for a long minute before Mike's glance dropped. The younger man leaned over to pick up his book.

"Yes, sir," he said.

EDITORS' NOTE: *The touching, disturbing problem in Luttrell Tucker's first-published story is in the great tradition not only of the best Black Mask tales but also of Frank R. Stockton's classic riddle, "The Lady, or the Tiger?"*

Was Lucy innocent or guilty?

Did the young bride deliberately poison her scoundrel of a husband? Or did Harry die, "the biter bit," as the result of his own murder-plot-gone-wrong?

Was it love or hate? Shock or histrionics?

Too often life itself fails to resolve its own riddles, and the verdict of a jury — or of a policeman — is not always the shining truth. In refusing to answer the question herself, Luttrell Tucker follows the path of Stockton. Remember Frank R. Stockton's famous question? — "And so I leave it with all of you: Which came out of the opened door, — the lady, or the tiger?" And so the author leaves it with you: Did Lucy tell the truth, or was the Inspector right?

What do you think?

EQMM's DETECTIVE DIRECTORY

edited by ROBERT P. MILLS

<p>TOO SOON TO DIE by HENRY WADE (MACMILLAN, \$2.75)</p>	<p>“. . . a model of the leisurely but wholly absorbing crime novel.” (AB)</p>	<p>“. . . the plot extremely clever, the writing excellent.” (FC)</p>
<p>PREY FOR ME by THOMAS B. DEWEY (SIMON & SCHUSTER, \$2.50)</p>	<p>“. . . fast, believable, well characterized . . . Even familiar plot devices . . . take on new life . . .” (AB)</p>	<p>“A tough, fast, entertaining story.” (FP)</p>
<p>MAN MISSING by MIGNON G. EBERHART (RANDOM, \$2.50)</p>	<p>“. . . a wholly enjoyable reappearance of Nurse Keate . . .” (DD)</p>	<p>“. . . an absorbing story . . .” (FP)</p>
<p>AN AFTERNOON TO KILL by SHELLEY SMITH (HARPER, \$2.50)</p>	<p>“You’ll surely enjoy reading the book, but may be left with a keen desire to strangle Miss Smith . . .” (AB)</p>	<p>“Nice characterization, action; sound picture of Edwardian era. Pleasant period piece.” (SC)</p>
<p>SAY IT WITH BULLETS by RICHARD POWELL (SIMON & SCHUSTER, \$2.50)</p>	<p>“Sustained thread of suspense . . . ranges from sheer nonsense to tense excitement.” (DD)</p>	<p>“Plot bit too ingenious, but dialogue is peppy, scenery swell, pace hot.” (SC)</p>
<p>THE CASE OF THE FORTY THIEVES by JOHN RHODE (DODD, MEAD, \$2.50)</p>	<p>“. . . a fair amount of interest . . .” (AB)</p>	<p>“More activity than usual for this author . . . He’s done worse.” (SC)</p>
<p>DARK CRUSADE by JAMES FOX (LITTLE, BROWN, \$3.00)</p>	<p>“. . . loosely organized . . . falling short of effectiveness . . .” (AB)</p>	<p>“Picaresque series of adventures is knowledgeable, taut. Superior.” (SC)</p>
<p>LT. PASCAL’S TASTES IN HOMICIDES by HUGH PENTECOST (DODD, MEAD, \$2.50)</p>	<p>“. . . three novelettes faintly disappointing from such a highly skilled practitioner . . .” (AB)</p>	<p>“Well-knit and adroit narratives are fine specimens of genre. Good hunting.” (SC)</p>

Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine rounds up the judgment of reviewers across the country. The key on the right gives sources.

<p>"Some brilliant work on character and motivation . . ." (LGO)</p>	<p>"Inspired character drawing . . . complex story is expertly managed." (AdV)</p>	<p style="text-align: center;">KEY TO REVIEW SOURCES</p> <p>AB: <i>Anthony Boucher in the New York Times</i></p> <p>FC: <i>Frances Crane in the Evansville Press</i></p> <p>SC: <i>Sergeant Cuff in The Saturday Review</i></p> <p>DD: <i>Drexel Drake in the Chicago Tribune</i></p> <p>H-M: <i>Brett Halliday and Helen McCloy in the Westport (Conn.) Town Crier</i></p> <p>DBH: <i>Dorothy B. Hughes in the Los Angeles Daily News</i></p> <p>LGO: <i>Lenore Glen Offord in the San Francisco Chronicle</i></p> <p>FP: <i>Fay Profflet in the Saint Louis Post-Dispatch</i></p> <p>AdV: <i>Avis de Voto in the Boston Globe</i></p>
<p>"This isn't strikingly different from other good hardboiled items, but you keep reading it." (LGO)</p>	<p>". . . a sharp story, very well written in the best tough fashion . . ." (FC)</p>	
<p>". . . solid, competent job . . . ingenious plotting and briskly moving pace." (H-M)</p>	<p>"Highly atmospheric, considerable had-I-but-known . . . Feminine and expert." (AdV)</p>	
<p>". . . narration is superbly smooth, sinister, and — on the last page — simply maddening." (LGO)</p>	<p>". . . ending . . . is a merry surprise. Don't miss this beautifully written novel." (FC)</p>	
<p>"The villain's pretty visible, but the infallible Powell style keeps things . . . lively . . ." (LGO)</p>	<p>". . . a true topnotcher. In fact, it's a honey, it's a doll; run for it." (DBH)</p>	
<p>". . . in Rhode's best vein. C plus." (LGO)</p>	<p>". . . a first-rate plot adds bite to the stately proceedings . . . Worthwhile." (AdV)</p>	
<p>". . . lots of action . . . elliptical plotting may leave readers in bewildered doubt." (LGO)</p>	<p>"Episodic, sometimes hard to follow, but cumulatively impressive." (AdV)</p>	
<p>"The backgrounds are excellent . . . simplicity and high competence." (LGO)</p>	<p>"Each story is smoothly plotted, with . . . solid characterization and atmosphere." (H-M)</p>	

"At first," Ray Bradbury wrote to us, "I thought your suggestion impossible, the entire project an insurmountable one. But I have learned once more, even as I have learned in the past, that the subconscious is a mighty friend, and that the enemy of the subconscious mind is the insolence of the conscious mind when it says, 'No, it can't be done!' I put your letter aside last night and during the evening did a bit of reading from various books, including some poetry. Late in the evening I came across the first line of a poem by Edgar Allan Poe, which gave me the title for the sequel: 'At Midnight, In the Month of June.' And this morning my subconscious delivered! . . . I feel much indebted to you for having given me that fabulous thing that Henry James spoke of: The Minimum of Suggestion."

And so our "minimum of suggestion" finally became a prize-winning story by Ray Bradbury. And now you can continue reading "The Whole Town's Talking" — for here is the sequel (or Part Two, if you prefer), and it begins, as it should, with The Lonely One waiting for Lavinia . . .

AT MIDNIGHT, IN THE MONTH OF JUNE

by RAY BRADBURY

HE HAD BEEN WAITING A LONG, long time in the summer night, as the darkness pressed warmer to the earth and the stars turned slowly over the sky. He sat in total darkness, his hands lying easily on the arms of the Morris chair. He heard the town clock strike 9 and 10 and 11, and then at last 12. The breeze from an open back window flowed through the midnight house in an unlit stream, that touched him like a dark rock where he sat silently watching the front door — silently watching.

*At midnight, in the month of
June*

The cool night poem by Mr. Edgar Allan Poe slid over his mind like the waters of a shadowed creek.

*The lady sleeps! Oh, may her sleep,
Which is enduring, so be deep!*

He moved down the black shapeless halls of the house, stepped out of the back window, feeling the town locked away in bed, in dream, in night. He saw the shining snake of garden hose coiled resiliently in the grass. He turned on the water. Standing alone, watering the flower bed, he imagined himself a conductor leading an orchestra that only night-strolling dogs

might hear, passing on their way to nowhere with strange white smiles. Very carefully he planted both feet and his tall weight into the mud beneath the window, making deep, well-outlined prints. He stepped inside again and walked, leaving mud, down the absolutely unseen hall, his hands seeing for him.

Through the front-porch window he made out the faint outline of a lemonade glass, one-third full, sitting on the porch rail where *she* had left it. He trembled quietly.

Now, he could feel her coming home. He could feel her moving across town, far away, in the summer night. He shut his eyes and put his mind out to find her; and felt her moving along in the dark; he knew just where she stepped down from a curb and crossed a street, and up on a curb and tack-tacking, tack-tacking along under the June elms and the last of the lilacs, with a friend. Walking the empty desert of night, he *was* she. He felt a pulse in his hands. He felt long hair prickle his neck, and his mouth turn greasy with lipstick. Sitting still, he was walking, walking, walking on home after midnight.

"Good night!"

He heard but did not hear the voices, and she was coming nearer, and now she was only a mile away and now only a matter of a thousand yards, and now she was sinking, like a beautiful white lantern on an invisible wire, down into the cricket and frog and water-sounding ravine. And he knew the texture of the wooden ra-

vine stairs as if, a boy, he was rushing down them, feeling the rough grain and the dust and the leftover heat of the day . . .

He put his hands out on the air, open. The thumbs of his hands touched, and then the fingers, so that his hands made a circle, enclosing emptiness, there before him. Then, very slowly, he squeezed his hands tighter and tighter together, his mouth open, his eyes shut.

He stopped squeezing and put his hands, trembling, back on the arms of the chair. He kept his eyes shut.

Long ago, he had climbed, one night, to the top of the courthouse tower fire-escape, and looked out at the silver town, at the town of the moon, and the town of summer. And he had seen all the dark houses with two things in them, people and sleep, the two elements joined in bed and all their tiredness and terror breathed upon the still air, siphoned back quietly, and breathed out again, until that element was purified, the problems and hatreds and horrors of the previous day exorcised long before morning and done away with forever.

He had been enchanted with the hour, and the town, and he had felt very powerful, like the magic man with the marionettes who strung destinies across a stage on spider-threads. On the very top of the courthouse tower he could see the least flicker of leaf turning in the moonlight five miles away; the last light, like a pink pumpkin eye, wink out. The town did not escape his eye — it could do

nothing without his knowing its every tremble and gesture.

And so it was tonight. He felt himself a tower with the clock in it pounding slow and announcing hours in a great bronze tone, and gazing upon a town where a woman, hurried or slowed by fitful gusts and breezes of now terror and now self-confidence, took the chalk-white midnight sidewalks home, fording solid avenues of tar and stone, drifting among fresh-cut lawns, and now running, running down the steps, through the ravine, up, up the hill, up the hill!

He heard her footsteps before he really heard them. He heard her gasping before there was a gasping. He fixed his gaze to the lemonade glass outside, on the banister. Then the real sound, the real running, the gasping, echoed wildly outside. He sat up. The footsteps raced across the street, the sidewalk, in a panic. There was a babble, a clumsy stumble up the porch steps, a key ratcheting the door, a voice yelling in a whisper, praying to itself. "Oh, God, dear God!" Whisper! Whisper! And the woman crashing in the door, slamming it, bolting it, talking, whispering, talking to herself in the dark room.

He felt, rather than saw, her hand move toward the light switch.

He cleared his throat.

She stood against the door in the dark. If moonlight could have struck in upon her, she would have shimmered like a small pool of water on a windy night. He felt the fine sapphire

jewels come out upon her face, and her face all glittering with brine.

"Lavinia," he whispered.

Her arms were raised across the door like a crucifix. He heard her mouth open and her lungs push a warmth upon the air. She was a beautiful dim white moth; with the sharp needle point of terror he had her pinned against the wooden door. He could walk all around the specimen, if he wished, and look at her, look at her.

"Lavinia," he whispered.

He heard her heart beating. She did not move.

"It's me," he whispered.

"Who?" she said, so faint it was a small pulse-beat in her throat.

"I won't tell you," he whispered. He stood perfectly straight in the center of the room. God, but he felt *tall!* Tall and dark and very beautiful to himself, and the way his hands were out before him was as if he might play a piano at any moment, a lovely melody, a waltzing tune. The hands were wet, they felt as if he had dipped them into a bed of mint and cool menthol.

"If I told you who I am, you might not be afraid," he whispered. "I want you to be afraid. Are you afraid?"

She said nothing. She breathed out and in, out and in, a small bellows which, pumped steadily, blew upon her fear and kept it going, kept it alight.

"Why did you go to the show tonight?" he whispered. "*Why* did you go to the show?"

No answer.

He took a step forward, heard her breath take itself, like a sword hissing in its sheath.

"Why did you come back through the ravine, alone?" he whispered. "You *did* come back alone, didn't you? Did you think you'd meet me in the middle of the bridge? Did you hope you'd meet me in the middle of the bridge? Why did you go to the show tonight? Why did you come back through the ravine, alone?"

"I —" she gasped.

"You," he whispered.

"No —" she cried, in a whisper.

"Lavinia," he said. He took another step.

"Please," she said.

"Open the door. Get out. And run," he whispered.

She did not move.

"Lavinia, open the door."

She began to whimper in her throat.

"Run," he said.

In moving he felt something touch his knee. He pushed, something tilted in space and fell over, a table, a basket, and a half-dozen unseen balls of yarn tumbled like cats in the dark, rolling softly. In the one moonlit space on the floor beneath the window, like a metal sign pointing, lay the sewing shears. They were winter ice in his hand. He held them out to her suddenly, through the still air.

"Here," he whispered.

He touched them to her hand. She snatched her hand back.

"Here," he urged.

"Take this," he said, after a pause.

He opened her fingers that were already dead and cold to the touch, and stiff and strange to manage, and he pressed the scissors into them. "Now," he said.

He looked out at the moonlit sky for a long moment, and when he glanced back it was some time before he could see her in the dark.

"I waited," he said. "But that's the way it's always been. I waited for the others, too. But they all came looking for me, finally. It was that easy. Five lovely ladies in the last two years. I waited for them in the ravine, in the country, by the lake, everywhere I waited, and they came out to find me, and found me. It was always nice, the next day, reading the newspapers. And you went looking tonight, I know, or you wouldn't have come back alone through the ravine. Did you scare yourself there, and run? Did you think I was down there waiting for you? You should have *heard* yourself running up the walk! Through the door! And *locking* it! You thought you were safe inside, home at last, safe, safe, safe, didn't you?"

She held the scissors in one dead hand, and she began to cry. He saw the merest gleam, like water upon the wall of a dim cave. He heard the sounds she made.

"No," he whispered. "You have the scissors. Don't cry."

She cried. She did not move at all. She stood there, shivering, her head back against the door, beginning to

slide down the length of the door toward the floor.

"Don't cry," he whispered.

"I don't like to hear you cry," he said. "I can't stand to hear that."

He held his hands out and moved them through the air until one of them touched her cheek. He felt the wetness of that cheek, he felt her warm breath touch his palm like a summer moth. Then he said only one more thing:

"Lavinia," he said, gently, "Lavinia."

How clearly he remembered the old nights in the old times, in the times when he was a boy and them all running, and running, and hiding and hiding, and playing hide-and-seek. In the first spring nights and in the warm summer nights and in the late summer evenings and in those first sharp autumn nights when doors were shutting early and porches were empty except for blowing leaves. The game of hide-and-seek went on as long as there was sun to see by, or the rising snow-crueted moon. Their feet upon the green lawns were like the scattered throwing of soft peaches and crabapples, and the counting of the Seeker with his arms cradling his buried head, chanting to the night: five, ten, fifteen, twenty, twenty-five, thirty, thirty-five, forty, forty-five, fifty . . . And the sound of thrown apples fading, the children all safely closeted in tree or bush-shade, under the latticed porches with the clever dogs minding not to wag their tails

and give their secret away. And the counting done: eighty-five, ninety, ninety-five, a hundred!

Ready or not, here I come!

And the Seeker running out through the town wilderness to find the Hiders, and the Hiders keeping their secret laughter in their mouths, like precious June strawberries, with the help of clasped hands. And the Seeker seeking after the smallest heartbeat in the high elm tree or the glint of a dog's eye in a bush, or a small water sound of laughter which could not help but burst out as the Seeker ran right on by and did not see the shadow within the shadow . . .

He moved into the bathroom of the quiet house, thinking all this, enjoying the clear rush, the tumultuous gushing of memories like a waterfalling of the mind over a steep precipice, falling and falling toward the bottom of his head.

God, how secret and tall they had felt, hidden away. God, how the shadows mothered and kept them, sheathed in their own triumph. Glowing with perspiration how they crouched like idols and thought they might hide *forever!* While the silly Seeker went pelting by on his way to failure and inevitable frustration.

Sometimes the Seeker stopped right *at* your tree and peered up at you crouched there in your invisible warm wings, in your great colorless windowpane bat wings, and said, "I see you there!" But you said nothing. "You're *up* there all right." But you

said nothing. "Come on *down!*" But not a word, only a victorious Cheshire smile. And doubt coming over the Seeker below. "It is *you*, isn't it?" The backing off and away. "Aw, I *know* you're up there!" No answer. Only the tree sitting in the night and shaking quietly, leaf upon leaf. And the Seeker, afraid of the dark within darkness, loping away to seek easier game, something to be named and certain of. "All right for *you!*"

He washed his hands in the bathroom, and thought, Why am I washing my hands? And then the grains of time sucked back up the flue of the hour-glass again and it was another year . . .

He remembered that sometimes when he played hide-and-seek they did not find him at all; he would not let them find him. He said not a word, he stayed so long in the apple tree that he was a white-fleshed apple; he lingered so long in the chestnut tree that he had the hardness and the brown brightness of the autumn nut. And God, how powerful to be undiscovered, how immense it made you, until your arms were branching, growing out in all directions, pulled by the stars and the tidal moon until your secretness enclosed the town and mothered it with your compassion and tolerance. You could do anything in the shadows, anything. If you chose to do it, you could do it. How powerful to sit above the sidewalk and see people pass under, never aware you were there and watching, and might put out an arm to brush their

noses with the five-legged spider of your hand and brush their thinking minds with terror.

He finished washing his hands and wiped them on a towel.

But there was always an end to the game. When the Seeker had found all the other Hiders and these Hiders in turn were Seekers and they were all spreading out, calling your name, looking for you, how much more powerful and important *that* made you.

"Hey, hey! Where *are* you! Come in, the game's *over!*"

But you not moving or coming in. Even when they all collected under your tree and saw, or thought they saw you there at the very top, and called up at you. "Oh, come down! Stop fooling! Hey! we see you. We know you're there!"

Not answering even then — not until the final, the fatal thing happened. Far off, a block away, a silver whistle screaming, and the voice of your mother calling your name, and the whistle again. "Nine o'clock!" her voice wailed. "Nine o'clock! Home!"

But you waited until all the children were gone. Then, very carefully unfolding yourself and your warmth and secretness, and keeping out of the lantern light at corners, you ran home alone, alone in darkness and shadow, hardly breathing, keeping the sound of your heart quiet and in yourself, so if people heard anything at all they might think it was only the wind blowing a dry leaf by in the

night. And your mother standing there, with the screen door wide . . .

He finished wiping his hands on the towel. He stood a moment thinking of how it had been the last two years here in town. The old game going on, by himself, playing it alone, the children gone, grown into settled middle-age, but now, as before, himself the final and last and only Hider, and the whole town seeking and seeing nothing and going on home to lock their doors.

But tonight, out of a time long past, and on many nights now, he had heard that old sound, the sound of the silver whistle, blowing and blowing. It was certainly not a night bird singing, for he knew each sound so well. But the whistle kept calling and calling and a voice said, *Home and Nine o'clock*, even though it was now long after midnight. He listened. There was the silver whistle. Even though his mother had died many years ago, after having put his father in an early grave with her temper and her tongue. "Do this, do that, do this, do that, do this, do that, do this, do that . . ." A phonograph record, broken, playing the same cracked tune again, again, again, her voice, her cadence, around, around, around, around, repeat, repeat, repeat.

And the clear silver whistle blowing and the game of hide-and-seek over. No more of walking in the town and standing behind trees and bushes and smiling a smile that burned through the thickest foliage. An automatic thing was happening. His feet were

walking and his hands were doing and he knew everything that must be done now.

His hands did not belong to him.

He tore a button off his coat and let it drop into the deep dark well of the room. It never seemed to hit bottom. It floated down. He waited.

It seemed never to stop rolling. Finally, it stopped.

His hands did not belong to him.

He took his pipe and flung that into the depths of the room. Without waiting for it to strike emptiness, he walked quietly back through the kitchen and peered outside the open, blowing, white-curtained window at the footprints he had made there. He was the Seeker, seeking now, instead of the Hider hiding. He was the quiet searcher finding and sifting and putting away clues, and those footprints were now as alien to him as something from a prehistoric age. They had been made a million years ago by some other man on some other business; they were no part of him at all. He marveled at their precision and deepness and form in the moonlight. He put his hand down almost to touch them, like a great and beautiful archeological discovery! Then he was gone, back through the rooms, ripping a piece of material from his pants-cuff and blowing it off his open palm like a moth.

His hands were not his hands any more, or his body his body.

He opened the front door and went out and sat for a moment on the porch rail. He picked up the lemonade

glass and drank what was left, made warm by an evening's waiting, and pressed his fingers tight to the glass, tight, tight, very tight. Then he put the glass down on the railing.

The silver whistle!

Yes, he thought. Coming, coming.

The silver whistle!

Yes, he thought. Nine o'clock. Home, home. Nine o'clock. Studies and milk and graham crackers and white cool bed, home, home; nine o'clock and the silver whistle.

He was off the porch in an instant, running softly, lightly, with hardly a breath or a heartbeat, as one bare-footed runs, as one all leaf and green June grass and night can run, all shadow, forever running, away from the silent house and across the street, and down into the ravine . . .

He pushed the door wide and stepped into the owl diner, this long railroad car that, removed from its track, had been put to a solitary and unmoving destiny in the center of town. The place was empty. At the far end of the counter, the counter-
man glanced up as the door shut and the customer walked along the line of empty swivel seats. The counter-
man took the toothpick from his mouth.

"Tom Dillon, you old so-and-so! What *you* doing up this time of night, Tom?"

Tom Dillon ordered without the menu. While the food was being prepared, he dropped a nickel in the wall-

phone, got his number, and spoke quietly for a time. He hung up, came back, and sat, listening. Sixty seconds later, both he and the counter-
man heard the police siren wail by at 50 miles an hour. "Well — *hell!*" said the counter-
man. "Go get 'em, boys!"

He set out a tall glass of milk and a plate of six fresh graham crackers.

Tom Dillon sat there for a long while, looking secretly down at his ripped pants-cuff and muddied shoes. The light in the diner was raw and bright, and he felt like he was on a stage. He held the tall cool glass of milk in his hand, sipping it, eyes shut, chewing the good texture of the graham crackers, feeling it all through his mouth, coating his tongue.

"Would or would you not," he asked, quietly, "call this a hearty meal?"

"I'd call that very hearty indeed," said the counter-
man, smiling.

Tom Dillon chewed another graham cracker with great concentration, feeling all of it in his mouth. It's just a matter of time, he thought, waiting.

"More milk?"

"Yes," said Tom.

And he watched with steady interest, with the purest and most alert concentration in all of his life, as the white carton tilted and gleamed, and the snowy milk poured out, cool and quiet, like the sound of a running spring at night, and filled the glass up all the way, to the very brim, to the very brim, and over . . .

Rogues' Gallery



**BURR
SHAFFER**

9-13

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"I'M JUST WAITING FOR THE AUTHOR TO RETURN TO THE SCENE OF HIS
CRIME!"

INDEX TO VOLUME TWENTY-THREE — JANUARY-JUNE 1954

<p>ALLINGHAM, MARGERY: Tall Story . . . April 138 Mum Knows Best June 16 BAILEY, H. C.: The Superfluous Clues March 48 BENEFIELD, BARRY: Queen of the Graveyard Ghouls June 81 BENTLEY, PHYLLIS: Conversation at an Inn Feb. 74 Chain of Witnesses May 34 BLOCHMAN, LAWRENCE G.: The Swami of Northbank March 35 BOUCHER, ANTHONY: The Girl Who Married a Monster Feb. 11 BRADBURY, RAY: The Whole Town's Sleeping June 3 At Midnight, In the Month of June June 134 BROUGH, JAMES C.: President Sam Houston: Detective April 86 BURKE, THOMAS: The Pariah Jan. 121 CANNING, VICTOR: Food for Thought Feb. 108 ČAPEK, KAREL: The Fortune Teller . June 51 CARR, JOHN DICKSON: Will You Make a Bet with Death? April 70 CARTER, YOUNGMAN: London Nights' Entertainment Feb. 93 CHRISTIE, AGATHA: The Disappear- ance of Captain Harwell Jan. 44 CLAYTON, JOHN BELL: The Roman Candles March 99 DAVIS, DOROTHY SALISBURY: Backward, Turn Backward June 22 DEFORD, MIRIAM ALLEN: The Judgment of En-Lil May 25 DE MAUPASSANT, GUY: (Title Contest Story) March 3 DOUGLASS, DONALD McNUTT: Ghost of Greenwich Village . . . Feb. 81 ELLIN, STANLEY: The House Party . May 127 GANT, MATTHEW: The Crate at Outpost I May 52 GILBERT, MICHAEL: Murder by Jury Jan. 57 The Unstoppable Man Feb. 3 The Neat Man March 90 GRANBERRY, EDWIN: A Trip to Czardis May 58 HAYES, RAPHAEL: The Man Who Could Not Die March 65 HECHT, BEN: The Mystery of the Fabulous Laundryman June 55 HOLDER, Wm.: Right in the Heart . May 20 HOWARD, HAYDEN: Pass the Bottle . Feb. 52 JOHNSTON, ALBERT: Louisville Blues . May 81 KING, LILLIAN: Try to Remember . Jan. 85</p>	<p>LONDON, JACK: A Piece of Life March 102 The Master of Mystery June 42 MACDONALD, JOHN D.: Triple Cross . April 34 MARCH, WILLIAM: The Bird House . Feb. 26 MILNE, A. A.: Murder at Eleven . . . March 24 MORRISON, ARTHUR: The Flitter- bat Lancers April 113 MYERS, HENRY: The Pale Sergeant . . April 59 PATRICK, Q.: The Glamorous Opening Jan. 81 Death and Canasta April 132 PENTECOST, HUGH: Talking Calf . . . May 89 PETERKIN, JULIA: Ashes March 81 PHILLPOTTS, EDEN: Peters, Detective April 46 POPKIN, ZELDA: Junie-No-Name . . . Feb. 113 POST, MELVILLE DAVISSON: The Dark Night Jan. 128 QUEEN, ELLERY: Sherlock Holmes First Editions (article) Feb. 65 Miser's Gold April 81 RINEHART, MARY ROBERTS: The Trumpet Sounds May 3 SCHISGALL, OSCAR: The Way I Killed Him Jan. 101 SHEEHAN, DAVID V.: A G Is a G . . . Feb. 48 SIEVEKING, L.: The Bookhawker . . . April 106 SIMENON, GEORGES: Maigret's Christmas Jan. 3 STANTON, WILL: The Curse of Stonewall Jackson Jan. 140 STRIBLING, T. S.: The Mystery of the Five Money Orders March 9 SYMONS, JULIAN: Life and Death in the Scillies March 76 TUCKER, LUTTRELL: Nothing Will Hurt You, Lucy June 122 TWIN, MARK: My Watch May 124 VAN DOREN, MARK: April Fool . . . April 65 VICKERS, ROY: The Man Who Punished Himself Feb. 129 Double Image April 5 WALSH, THOMAS: The Night Calhoun Was Off Duty April 96 WEBER, RALPH N.: The Survivor . . Feb. 91 WHITEHILL, JOSEPH: The Day of the Last Rock Fight June 65 WHITMAN, WALT: One Wicked Impulse! Jan. 92 WIEGAND, DENNIS: The Street of the Buzzards Feb. 39 WOLSON, MORTON: The Attacker . . Jan. 65 WOOLRICH, CORNELL: The Last Bus Home March 116 Dead Shot June 96 YAFFE, JAMES: Mom in the Spring . May 65</p>
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Mason's client wants to get hold of a tape recording that has damaging evidence against a man named Fritch. But Grogan, a blackmailer, wants \$20,000 for it! Then Fritch is found dead!
- 2 The Case of the Hesitant Hostess**
By **ERLE STANLEY GARDNER**
Three beautiful women make this a puzzler. The first one says she saw Perry's client *disappearing from the*
- 3 Some Women Won't Wait**
By **ERLE STANLEY GARDNER**
(Written under pen name of *A. A. Fair*)
That famous detective team Donald Lam and Bertha Cool are trying to crack a "little blackmail case." But it turns out to be a baffling **MURDER!**
- 4 Funerals Are Fatal**
By **AGATHA CHRISTIE**
When Richard Abernathie died, no one suspected foul play—except his sister Cora. She claimed he was **MURDERED**. Everyone said the idea was preposterous. *But the next day CORA was MURDERED!*

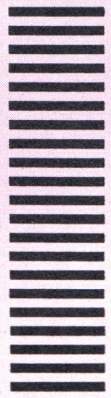
scene of the crime. The second shouldn't have appeared at all—but did. The third disappeared completely!

- 5 The Frightened Wife**
By **MARY ROBERTS RINEHART**
Anne Collier had \$1,000,000 in a secret bank account. Anne didn't even tell her husband, Fred, about it—for fear he'd kill her. But it was **FRED** who was **SHOT TO DEATH!**
- 6 The Unknown Quantity**
By **MIGNON G. EBERHART**
"If the man I so closely resemble and am impersonating has *already* been murdered, **WHY** is someone trying to kill **ME?**" That's what Dixon kept asking himself. He gets the answer from a **DEAD man!**

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