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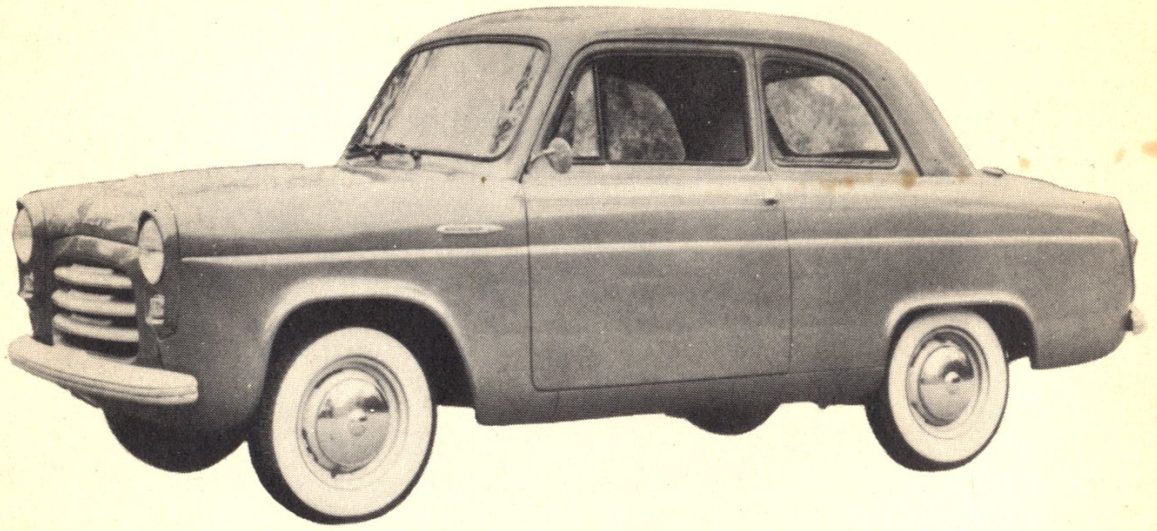

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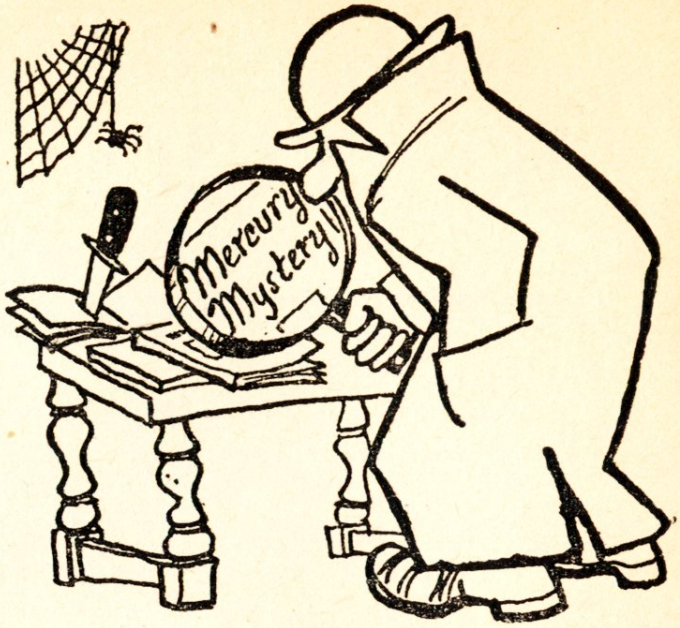

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We are indebted to "The Sunday Times" of London for the following word-portrait of Agatha Christie: "Known by those who appreciate a nicely coined phrase as the 'Queen of Crime,' Agatha Christie is no disappointment in the flesh. Regal she certainly is — an upstanding, good-looking woman in her early sixties, with a fresh English complexion and well-groomed white hair, wearing good clothes and wearing them with an air. She has, too, that unassuming genial graciousness which is expected from the famous these days, but which in Mrs. Christie's case is no false bonhomie. Remembering painful shyness in her own youth (even now social exchanges are something of an effort to her), she is more than normally concerned to put other people at their ease."

They say, "Style is the man" — and in these emancipated and enlightened times, the woman. Surely Agatha Christie's work reflects herself. Her stories may concern thieves and murderers, but as one of her own characters once remarked, they look and behave very much like everybody else — "nice, quiet, reasonable people very often." You won't find the sordid and the sensational in her stories — like the grand lady herself, they put the readers at their ease.

So settle back for a quiet, unostentatious mystery — one of the best in Agatha Christie's fine series about mystic Harley Quin and his murder-medium, Mr. Satterthwaite. You will probably agree with both that "by looking back over the past one can see things as they were and not as they appeared to be."

THE MAN IN THE EMPTY CHAIR

by AGATHA CHRISTIE

MR. SATTERTHWAITE WALKED slowly up Bond Street enjoying the sunshine. He was, as usual, carefully and beautifully dressed, and was bound for the Harchester Galleries where there was an exhibition of the paintings of one Frank Bristow, a new and hitherto unknown artist who showed signs of suddenly becoming the rage. Mr. Satterthwaite was a patron of the arts.

As Mr. Satterthwaite entered the Harchester Galleries, he was greeted at once with a smile of pleased recognition.

"Good morning, Mr. Satterthwaite, I thought we should see you before long. You know Bristow's work?

Fine — very fine, indeed. Quite unique of its kind."

Mr. Satterthwaite purchased a catalogue and stepped through the open archway into the long room where the artist's work was displayed. They were water colors, executed with such extraordinary technique and finish that they resembled colored etchings. Mr. Satterthwaite walked slowly round the walls scrutinizing and on the whole approving. He thought that this young man deserved to arrive. Here were originality, vision, and a most severe and exacting technique. There were crudities, of course. That was only to be expected — but this was also something closely allied to genius. Mr. Satterthwaite paused before a little masterpiece representing Westminster Bridge with its crowd of buses, trams and hurrying pedestrians. A tiny thing and wonderfully perfect. It was called, he noted, "The Ant Heap." He passed on and quite suddenly drew in his breath with a gasp, his imagination held and riveted.

The picture was called "The Dead Harlequin." The forefront of it represented a floor of inlaid squares of black and white marble. In the middle of the floor lay Harlequin on his back with his arms outstretched in his motley of black and red. Behind him was a window and outside that window, gazing in at the figure on the floor, was what appeared to be the same man silhouetted against the red glow of the setting sun.

The picture excited Mr. Satterthwaite for two reasons. The first reason was that he recognized, or thought that he recognized, the face of the man in the picture. It bore a distinct resemblance to a certain Mr. Quin, an acquaintance whom Mr. Satterthwaite had encountered once or twice under somewhat mystifying circumstances.

"Surely I can't be mistaken," he murmured. "If it *is* so, what does it mean?"

For it had been Mr. Satterthwaite's experience that every appearance of Mr. Quin had some distinct significance attaching to it.

There was, as already mentioned, a second reason for Mr. Satterthwaite's interest. He recognized the scene of the picture.

"The Terrace Room at Charnley," said Mr. Satterthwaite, "curious — and very interesting."

He looked with more attention at the picture, wondering what exactly had been in the artist's mind. One Harlequin dead on the floor, another Harlequin looking through the window — or was it the same Harlequin? He moved slowly along the walls gazing at other pictures with unseeing eyes, his mind always busy on the same subject. He was excited. Life, which had seemed a little drab this morning, was drab no longer. He knew quite certainly that he was on the threshold of exciting and interesting events. He crossed to the table where sat Mr. Cobb, a dignitary of the Harchester Galleries, whom he had known for many years.

"I have a fancy for buying No.

39," he said, "if it is not already sold."

Mr. Cobb consulted a ledger.

"The pick of the bunch," he murmured. "Quite a little gem, isn't it? No, it is not sold." He quoted a price. "It is a good investment, Mr. Satterthwaite. You will have to pay three times as much for it this time next year."

"That is always said on these occasions," said Mr. Satterthwaite smiling.

"Well, and haven't I been right?" demanded Mr. Cobb. "I don't believe, if you were to sell your collection, Mr. Satterthwaite, that a single picture would fetch less than you gave for it."

"I will buy this picture," said Mr. Satterthwaite. "I will give you a check now."

"You won't regret it. We believe in Bristow."

"He is a young man?"

"Twenty-seven or eight, I should say."

"I should like to meet him," said Mr. Satterthwaite. "Perhaps he will come and dine with me one night?"

"I can give you his address. I am sure he would leap at the chance. Your name stands for a good deal in the artistic world."

"You flatter me," said Mr. Satterthwaite, and was going out when Mr. Cobb interrupted.

"Here he is now. I will introduce you to him right away."

He rose from behind his table. Mr. Satterthwaite accompanied him to where a big clumsy young man was leaning against the wall surveying the world at large from behind the barricade of a ferocious scowl.

Mr. Cobb made the necessary introductions and Mr. Satterthwaite made a formal and gracious little speech.

"I have just had the pleasure of acquiring one of your pictures, 'The Dead Harlequin.' "

"Oh! Well! You won't lose by it," said Mr. Bristow, ungraciously. "It's a bit of damned good work, although I say it."

"I can see that," said Mr. Satterthwaite. "Your work interests me very much, Mr. Bristow. It is extraordinarily mature for so young a man. I wonder if you would give me the pleasure of dining with me one night? Are you engaged this evening?"

"As a matter of fact, I am not," said Mr. Bristow, still with no overdone appearance of graciousness.

"Then shall we say 8 o'clock?" said Mr. Satterthwaite. "Here is my card with the address on it."

"Oh, all right," said Mr. Bristow. "Thanks," he added, as a somewhat obvious afterthought.

"A young man who has a poor opinion of himself and is afraid that the world should share it."

Such was Mr. Satterthwaite's summing up as he stepped out into the sunshine of Bond Street, and Mr. Satterthwaite's judgment of his fellow men was seldom far astray.

Frank Bristow arrived about five minutes past 8 to find his host and

another guest awaiting him. The other guest was introduced as a Colonel Monckton. They went into dinner almost immediately. There was a fourth place laid at the oval mahogany table and Mr. Satterthwaite uttered a word of explanation.

"I half expected my friend Mr. Quin might drop in," he said. "I wonder if you have ever met him. Mr. Harley Quin?"

"I never meet people," growled Bristow.

Colonel Monckton stared at the artist with the detached interest he might have accorded to a new species of jellyfish. Mr. Satterthwaite exerted himself to keep the ball of conversation rolling amicably.

"I took a special interest in that picture of yours because I thought I recognized the scene of it as being the Terrace Room at Charnley. Was I right?" As the artist nodded, he went on. "That is very interesting. I have stayed at Charnley several times myself in the past. Perhaps you know some of the family."

"No, I don't!" said Bristow. "That sort of family wouldn't care to know me. I went there in a charabanc."

"Dear me," said Colonel Monckton for the sake of saying something. "In a charabanc! Dear me!"

Frank Bristow scowled at him.

"Why not?" he demanded ferociously.

Poor Colonel Monckton was taken aback. He looked reproachfully at Mr. Satterthwaite as though to say: "These primitive forms of life may be interesting to you as a naturalist, but why drag *me* in?"

"Oh, beastly things, charabancs!" he said. "They jolt you so going over the bumps."

"If you can't afford a Rolls Royce you have got to go in charabancs," said Bristow fiercely.

Colonel Monckton stared at him. Mr. Satterthwaite thought: "Unless I can soon manage to put this young man at his ease we are going to have a very distressing evening."

"Charnley always fascinated me," he said. "I have been there only once since the tragedy. A grim house — and a ghostly one."

"That's true," said Bristow.

"There are actually two authentic ghosts," said Monckton. "They say that Charles I walks up and down the terrace with his head under his arm — I have forgotten why, I'm sure. Then there is the Weeping Lady with the Silver Ewer who is always seen after one of the Charnleys dies."

"Tosh," said Bristow scornfully.

"They have certainly been a very ill-fated family," said Mr. Satterthwaite hurriedly. "Four holders of the title have died violent deaths, and the late Lord Charnley committed suicide."

"A ghastly business," said Monckton. "I was there when it happened."

"Let me see, that must be fourteen years ago," said Mr. Satterthwaite. "The house has been shut up ever since."

"I don't wonder at that," said Monckton. "It must have been a

terrible shock for a young girl. They had been married a month, just home from their honeymoon. Big fancy dress ball to celebrate their homecoming. Just as the guests were starting to arrive Charnley locked himself into the Oak Parlor and shot himself. That sort of thing isn't done. I beg your pardon?"

He turned his head sharply to the left and looked across at Mr. Satterthwaite with an apologetic laugh.

"I am beginning to get the jimjams, Satterthwaite. I thought for a moment there was someone sitting in that empty chair and that he said something to me.

"Yes," he went on after a minute or two. "It was a pretty ghastly shock to Alix Charnley. She was one of the prettiest girls you could see anywhere and cramful of what people call the joy of living, and now they say she is like a ghost herself. Not that I have seen her for years. I believe she lives abroad most of the time."

"And the boy?"

"The boy is at Eton. What he will do when he comes of age I don't know. I don't think, somehow, that he will re-open the old place."

"It would make a good People's Pleasure Park," said Bristow.

Colonel Monckton looked at him with cold abhorrence.

"No, no, you don't really mean that," said Mr. Satterthwaite. "You wouldn't have painted that picture if you did. Tradition and atmosphere are intangible things. They take centuries to build up, and if you destroyed them you couldn't rebuild them again in twenty-four hours."

He rose. "Let us go into the smoking room. I have some photographs there of Charnley which I should like to show you."

One of Mr. Satterthwaite's hobbies was amateur photography. He was also the proud author of a book, *Homes of My Friends*. The friends in question were all rather exalted, and the book itself revealed Mr. Satterthwaite in rather a more snobbish light than was really fair to him.

"That is a photograph I took of the Terrace Room last year," he said. He handed it to Bristow. "You see it is taken at almost the same angle as is shown in your picture. That is rather a wonderful rug — it is a pity that photographs can't show coloring."

"I remember it," said Bristow, "a marvelous bit of color. It glowed like a flame. All the same it looked a bit incongruous there. The wrong size for that big room with its black and white squares. There is no rug anywhere else in the room. It spoils the whole effect — it was like a gigantic bloodstain."

"Perhaps that gave you your idea for your picture?" said Mr. Satterthwaite.

"Perhaps it did," said Bristow thoughtfully. "On the face of it, one would naturally stage a tragedy in the little paneled room leading out of it."

"The Oak Parlor," said Monckton. "Yes, that is the haunted room right enough. There is a Priests' hiding hole

there — a movable panel by the fireplace. Tradition has it that Charles I was concealed there once. There were two deaths from dueling in that room. And it was there, as I say, that Reggie Charnley shot himself."

He took the photograph from Bristow's hand.

"Why, that is the Bokhara rug," he said, "worth a couple of thousand pounds, I believe. When I was there it was in the Oak Parlor — the right place for it. It looks silly on that great expanse of marble flags."

Mr. Satterthwaite was looking at the empty chair which he had drawn up beside his. Then he said thoughtfully, "I wonder when it was moved?"

"It must have been recently. Why, I remember having a conversation about it on the very day of the tragedy. Charnley was saying it really ought to be kept under glass."

Mr. Satterthwaite shook his head. "The house was shut up immediately after the tragedy and everything was left exactly as it was."

Bristow broke in with a question. He had laid aside his aggressive manner.

"Why did Lord Charnley shoot himself?" he asked.

Colonel Monckton shifted uncomfortably in his chair.

"No one ever knew," he said.

"I suppose," said Mr. Satterthwaite slowly, "that it *was* suicide."

The Colonel looked at him in blank astonishment.

"Suicide," he said, "why, of course it was suicide. My dear fellow, I was there in the house myself."

Mr. Satterthwaite looked toward the empty chair at his side and, smiling to himself as though at some hidden joke the others could not see, he said quietly:

"Sometimes one sees things more clearly years afterward than one could possibly at the time."

"Nonsense," spluttered Monckton, "arrant nonsense! How can you possibly see things better when they are vague in your memory instead of clear and sharp?"

But Mr. Satterthwaite was reinforced from an unexpected quarter.

"I know what you mean," said the artist. "I should say that possibly you were right. It is a question of proportion, isn't it? And more than proportion probably. Relativity and all that sort of thing."

"If you ask me," said the Colonel, "all this Einstein business is a lot of dashed nonsense. So are spiritualists and the spook of one's grandmother!" He glared round. "Of course it was suicide," he went on. "Didn't I practically see the thing happen with my own eyes?"

"Tell us about it," said Mr. Satterthwaite, "so that we shall see it with our eyes also."

With a somewhat mollified grunt the Colonel settled himself more comfortably in his chair.

"The whole thing was extraordinarily unexpected," he began. "Charnley had been his usual normal self. There was a big party staying in the house for this ball. No one could ever have guessed he would go and shoot him-

self just as the guests began arriving."

"It would have been better taste if he had waited until they had gone," said Mr. Satterthwaite.

"Of course it would. Damned bad taste — to do a thing like that."

"Uncharacteristic," said Mr. Satterthwaite.

"Yes," admitted Monckton, "it wasn't like Charnley."

"And yet it *was* suicide?"

"Of course it was suicide. Why there were three or four of us there at the top of the stairs. Myself, the Ostrander girl, Algie Darcy — oh, and one or two others. Charnley passed along the hall below and went into the Oak Parlor. The Ostrander girl said there was a ghastly look on his face and his eyes were staring — but of course that is nonsense, she couldn't even see his face from where we were — but he did walk in a hunched-up way as if he had the weight of the world on his shoulders. One of the girls called to him — she was somebody's governess, I think, whom Lady Charnley had included in the party out of kindness. She was looking for him with a message. She called out, 'Lord Charnley, Lady Charnley wants to know —' He paid no attention and went into the Oak Parlor and slammed the door and we heard the key turn in the lock. Then, one minute after, *we heard the shot.*

"We rushed down to the hall. There is another door from the Oak Parlor leading into the Terrace Room. We tried that but it was locked too. In the end we had to break the door down. Charnley was lying on the floor — dead — with a pistol close beside his right hand. Now what could that have been but suicide? Accident? Don't tell me. There is only one other possibility — murder — and you can't have murder without a murderer. You admit that."

"The murderer might have escaped," suggested Mr. Satterthwaite.

"That is impossible. If you have a bit of paper and a pencil I will draw a plan of the place. There are two doors into the Oak Parlor, one into the hall and one into the Terrace Room. Both these doors were locked on the inside *and the keys were in the locks.*"

"The window?"

"Shut, and the shutters fastened across it."

There was a pause.

"So that is that," said Colonel Monckton triumphantly.

"It certainly seems to be," said Mr. Satterthwaite sadly.

"Mind you," said the Colonel, "although I was laughing just now at the spiritualists, I don't mind admitting that there was a deuced rummy atmosphere about the place — about that room in particular. There are several bullet holes in the panels of the walls, the result of the duels that took place in that room, and there is a queer stain on the floor, that always comes back though they have replaced the wood several times. I suppose there will be another bloodstain on the floor now — poor Charnley's blood."

"Was there much blood?" asked Mr. Satterthwaite.

"Very little — curiously little — so the doctor said."

"Where did he shoot himself, through the head?"

"No, through the heart."

"That is not the easy way to do it," said Bristow. "Frightfully difficult to know where one's heart is. I should never do it that way myself."

Mr. Satterthwaite shook his head. He was vaguely dissatisfied. He had hoped to get at something — he hardly knew what. Colonel Monckton went on.

"It is a spooky place, Charnley. Of course *I* didn't see anything."

"You didn't see the Weeping Lady with the Silver Ewer?"

"No, I did not, sir," said the Colonel emphatically, "but I expect every servant in the place swore they did."

"Superstition was the curse of the Middle Ages," said Bristow. "There are still traces of it here and there, but thank goodness, we are getting free from it."

"Superstition," mused Mr. Satterthwaite, his eyes turned again to the empty chair. "Sometimes, don't you think — it might be useful?"

Bristow stared at him. "Useful, that's a queer word."

"Well, I hope you are convinced now, Satterthwaite," said the Colonel.

"Oh, quite," said Mr. Satterthwaite. "On the face of it, it seems odd — so purposeless for a newly married man, young, rich, happy, celebrating his homecoming — curious — but I agree there is no getting away from the facts." He frowned.

"I suppose the interesting thing is a thing we none of us will ever know," said Monckton, "the story behind it all. Of course there were rumors — all sorts of rumors. You know the kind of things people say."

"But no one *knew* anything," said Mr. Satterthwaite thoughtfully.

"It's not a best seller mystery, is it?" remarked Bristow. "No one gained by the man's death."

"No one except an unborn child," said Mr. Satterthwaite.

Monckton gave a sharp chuckle. "Rather a blow to poor Hugo Charnley," he observed. "As soon as it was known that there was going to be a child he had the graceful task of sitting tight and waiting to see if it would be a girl or boy. Rather an anxious wait for his creditors too. In the end a boy it was and a disappointment for the lot of them."

"Was the widow very disconsolate?" asked Bristow.

"Poor child," said Monckton, "I shall never forget her. She didn't cry or break down or anything. She was like something — well, frozen. As I say, she shut up the house shortly afterward and as far as I know it has never been opened since."

"So we are left in the dark as to motive," said Bristow with a slight laugh. "Another man or another woman — it must have been one or the other, eh?"

"It seems like it," said Mr. Satterthwaite.

"And the betting is strongly on another woman," continued Bristow, "since the fair widow has not married again. I hate women," he added dispassionately.

Mr. Satterthwaite smiled a little and Frank Bristow saw the smile and pounced upon it.

"You may smile," he said, "but I do. They upset everything. They interfere. They get between you and your work. They — I only once met a woman who was — well, interesting."

"I thought there would be one," said Mr. Satterthwaite.

"Not in the way you mean. I — I just met her casually. As a matter of fact — it was in a train. After all," he added defiantly, "why shouldn't one meet people in trains?"

"Certainly, certainly," added Mr. Satterthwaite soothingly, "a train is as good a place as anywhere else."

"It was coming down from the North. We had the carriage to ourselves. I don't know why, but we began to talk. I don't know her name and I don't suppose I shall ever meet her again. I don't know that I want to. It might be — a pity." He paused struggling to express himself. "She wasn't quite real, you know. Shadowy. Like one of the people who come out of the hills in Gaelic fairy tales."

Mr. Satterthwaite nodded gently. His imagination pictured the scene easily enough. The very positive and realistic Bristow and a figure that was silvery and ghostly — shadowy, as Bristow had said.

"I suppose if something very terrible had happened, so terrible as to be almost unbearable, one might get like that. One might run away from reality into a half world of one's own and then, of course, after a time, one wouldn't be able to get back."

"Was that what had happened to her?" asked Mr. Satterthwaite curiously.

"I don't know," said Bristow. "She didn't tell me anything, I am only guessing. One has to guess if one is going to get anywhere."

"Yes," said Mr. Satterthwaite slowly. "One has to guess."

He looked up as the door opened. He looked up quickly and expectantly, but the butler's words disappointed him.

"A lady, sir, has called to see you on very urgent business. Miss Aspasia Glen."

Mr. Satterthwaite rose in some astonishment. He knew the name of Aspasia Glen. Who in London did not? First advertised as "The Woman With the Scarf" she had given a series of matinées single-handed that had taken London by storm. With the aid of her scarf she had impersonated rapidly various characters. In turn the scarf had been the coif of a nun, the shawl of a mill worker, the headdress of a peasant, and a dozen other people, and in each impersonation Aspasia Glen had been totally and utterly different. As an artist Mr. Satterthwaite paid full reverence to her. As it happened he had never made her acquaintance. A call upon him at this unusual hour intrigued

him greatly. With a few words of apology to the others he left the room and crossed the hall to the drawing-room.

Miss Glen was sitting in the very centre of a large settee upholstered in gold brocade. So poised she dominated the room. Mr. Satterthwaite perceived at once that she meant to dominate the situation. Curiously enough his first feeling was one of repulsion. He had been a sincere admirer of Aspasia Glen's art. Her personality, as conveyed to him over the footlights, had been appealing and sympathetic. Her effects there had been wistful and suggestive rather than commanding. But now, face to face with the woman herself, he received a totally different impression. There was something hard, bold, forceful about her. She was tall and dark, possibly about 35 years of age. She was undoubtedly very good-looking and she clearly relied upon the fact.

"You must forgive me this unconventional call, Mr. Satterthwaite," she said. Her voice was full and rich and seductive. "I won't say that I have wanted to know you for a long time, but I *am* glad of the excuse. As for coming tonight —" she laughed, "well, when I want a thing, I simply can't wait. When I want a thing, I simply *must* have it."

"Any excuse that has brought me such a charming lady guest must be welcomed by me," said Mr. Satterthwaite in an old-fashioned gallant manner.

"How nice you are to me."

"My dear lady," said Mr. Satterthwaite, "may I thank you here and now for the pleasure you have so often given me — in my seat in the stalls."

She smiled delightfully at him.

"I am coming straight to the point. I was at the Harchester Galleries today. I saw a picture there I simply couldn't live without. I wanted to buy it and I couldn't because you had already bought it. So —" she paused. "I do want it so," she went on. "Dear Mr. Satterthwaite, I simply *must* have it. I brought my check book." She looked at him hopefully. "Everyone tells me you are so frightfully kind. People *are* kind to me, you know. It is very bad for me — but there it is."

So these were Aspasia Glen's methods. Mr. Satterthwaite was inwardly coldly critical of this ultrafemininity and of this spoiled-child pose. It ought to appeal to him, he supposed, but it didn't. Aspasia Glen had made a mistake. She had judged him as an elderly dilettante, easily flattered by a pretty woman. But Mr. Satterthwaite behind his gallant manner had a shrewd and critical mind. He saw people pretty well as they were, not as they wished to appear to him. He saw before him not a charming woman, pleading for a whim, but a ruthless egoist determined to get her own way for some reason which was obscure to him. And he knew quite certainly that Aspasia Glen was not going to get her own way. He was not going to give up the picture of "The Dead

Harlequin" to her. He sought rapidly in his mind for the best way of circumventing her without overt rudeness.

"I am sure," he said, "that everyone gives you your own way as often as they can and is only too delighted to do so."

"Then you are really going to let me have the picture?"

Mr. Satterthwaite shook his head slowly and regretfully.

"I am afraid that is impossible. You see —" he paused. "I bought that picture for a lady. It is a present."

"Oh! but surely —"

The telephone on the table rang sharply. With a murmured word of excuse Mr. Satterthwaite took up the receiver. A voice spoke to him, a small cold voice that sounded very far away.

"May I speak to Mr. Satterthwaite, please?"

"It is Mr. Satterthwaite speaking."

"I am Lady Charnley, Alix Charnley. I daresay you don't remember me, Mr. Satterthwaite; it is a great many years since we met."

"My dear Alix. Of course I remember you."

"There is something I wanted to ask you. I was at the Harchester Galleries at an exhibition of pictures today. There was one called 'The Dead Harlequin,' perhaps you recognized it — it was the Terrace Room at Charnley. I — I want to have that picture. It was sold to you." She paused. "Mr. Satterthwaite, for reasons of my own I want that picture. Will you please resell it to me?"

Mr. Satterthwaite thought to himself, "Why, this is a miracle." As he spoke into the receiver he was thankful that Aspasia Glen could only hear one side of the conversation. "If you will accept my gift, dear lady, it will make me very happy." He heard a sharp exclamation behind him and hurried on. "I bought it for you. I did indeed! But listen, my dear Alix, I want to ask you to do me a great favor, if you will."

"Of course. Mr. Satterthwaite, I am so *very* grateful."

He went on. "I want you to come round now to my house, at once."

There was a slight pause and then she answered quietly, "I will come at once."

Mr. Satterthwaite put down the receiver and turned to Miss Glen.

She said quickly and angrily, "That was the picture you were talking about?"

"Yes," said Mr. Satterthwaite, "the lady to whom I am presenting it is coming round to this house in a few minutes."

Suddenly Aspasia Glen's face broke once more into smiles. "You will give me a chance of persuading her to turn the picture over to me?"

"I will give you a chance of persuading her."

Inwardly he was strangely excited. He was in the midst of a drama that was shaping itself to some foredoomed end. He, the looker-on, was playing a star part. He turned to Miss Glen.

"Will you come into the other room

with me? I should like you to meet some friends of mine."

He held the door open for her and crossing the hall opened the door of the smoking room.

"Miss Glen," he said, "let me introduce to you an old friend of mine, Colonel Monckton. Mr. Bristow, the painter of the picture you admire so much." Then he started as a third figure rose from the chair which he had left empty beside his own.

"I think you expected me this evening," said Mr. Quin. "During your absence I introduced myself to your friends. I am so glad I was able to drop in."

"My dear friend," said Mr. Satterthwaite, "I — I have been carrying on as well as I am able but —" he stopped before the slight sardonic glance of Mr. Quin's dark eyes. "Let me introduce you. Mr. Harley Quin, Miss Aspasia Glen."

Was it his fancy — or did she shrink back slightly? A curious expression flitted over her face. Suddenly Bristow broke in boisterously, "I have got it."

"Got what?"

"Got hold of what was puzzling me. There is a likeness, there is a distinct likeness." He was staring curiously at Mr. Quin. "You see it?" he turned to Mr. Satterthwaite, "don't you see a distinct likeness to the Harlequin of my picture — the man looking in through the window?"

It was no fancy this time. He distinctly heard Miss Glen draw in her breath sharply and even saw that she stepped back one pace.

"I told you that I was expecting someone," said Mr. Satterthwaite. He spoke with an air of triumph. "I must tell you that my friend Mr. Quin is a most extraordinary person. He can unravel mysteries. He can make you see things."

"Are you a medium, sir?"demanded Colonel Monckton, eyeing Mr. Quin doubtfully.

The latter smiled and slowly shook his head.

"Mr. Satterthwaite exaggerates," he said quietly. "Once or twice when I have been with him he has done some extraordinary good deductive work. Why he gives me the credit I can't say. His modesty, I suppose."

"No, no," said Mr. Satterthwaite excitedly. "It isn't. You make me see things — things that I ought to have seen all along — that I actually have seen — but without knowing that I saw them."

"It sounds to me deuced complicated," said Colonel Monckton.

"Not really," said Mr. Quin, "the trouble is that we are not content just to see things — we will tack the wrong interpretation onto the things we see."

Aspasia Glen turned to Frank Bristow.

"I want to know," she said nervously, "what put the idea of painting that picture into your head?"

Bristow shrugged his shoulders. "I don't quite know," he confessed. "Something about the place — about Charnley, I mean — took hold of my imagination. The big empty room,

the terrace outside, the idea of ghosts and things, I suppose. I have just been hearing the tale of the last Lord Charnley who shot himself. Supposing you are dead, and your spirit lives on? It must be odd, you know. You might stand outside on the terrace looking in at the window at your own dead body and you would see everything."

"What do you mean?" said Aspasia Glen. "*See* everything?"

"Well, you would see what happened. You would see —"

The door opened and the butler announced Lady Charnley.

Mr. Satterthwaite went to meet her. He had not seen her for nearly thirteen years. He remembered her as she once was, an eager glowing girl. And now he saw — a Frozen Lady. Very fair, very pale, with an air of drifting rather than walking, a snowflake driven at random by an icy breeze. Something unreal about her. So cold, so far away.

"It was very good of you to come," said Mr. Satterthwaite.

He led her forward. She made a half gesture of recognition toward Miss Glen and then paused as the other made no response.

"I am so sorry," she murmured, "but surely I have met you somewhere, haven't I?"

"Over the footlights perhaps," said Mr. Satterthwaite. "This is Miss Aspasia Glen, Lady Charnley."

"I am very pleased to meet you, Lady Charnley," said Aspasia Glen.

Her voice had suddenly a slight transatlantic tinge to it. Mr. Satterthwaite was reminded of one of her various stage impersonations.

"Colonel Monckton you know," continued Mr. Satterthwaite, "and this is Mr. Bristow."

He saw a sudden faint tinge of color in her cheeks.

"Mr. Bristow and I have met too," she said and smiled. "In a train."

"And Mr. Harley Quin."

He watched her closely, but this time there was no flicker of recognition. He set a chair for her and then seating himself he cleared his throat and spoke a little nervously. "I — this is rather an unusual little gathering. It centers round this picture. I — I think that if we liked we could — clear things up."

"You are not going to hold a séance, Satterthwaite?" asked Colonel Monckton. "You are very odd this evening."

"No," said Mr. Satterthwaite, "not exactly a séance. But my friend, Mr. Quin, believes, and I agree, that by looking back over the past one can see things as they were and not as they appeared to be."

"The past?" said Lady Charnley.

"I am speaking of your husband's suicide, Alix. I know it hurts you —"

"No," said Alix Charnley, "it doesn't hurt me. Nothing hurts me now."

Mr. Satterthwaite thought of Frank Bristow's words: *She wasn't quite real, you know. Shadowy. Like one of the people who come out of the hills in Gaelic fairy tales.*

"Shadowy," he had called her. That described her exactly. A shadow, a reflection of something else. Where then was the real Alix? And his mind answered quickly — "*In the past.* Divided from us by fourteen years of time."

"My dear," he said, "you frighten me. You are like the Weeping Lady with the Silver Ewer."

Crash! The coffee cup on the table by Aspasia Glen's elbow fell shattered to the floor. Mr. Satterthwaite waved aside her apologies. He thought: "We are getting nearer, we are getting nearer every minute — but nearer to what?"

"Let us take our minds back to that night fourteen years ago," he said. "Lord Charnley killed himself. For what reason? No one knows."

Lady Charnley stirred slightly in her chair.

"Lady Charnley knows," said Frank Bristow abruptly.

"Nonsense," said Colonel Monckton, then stopped, frowning at her curiously.

She was looking across at the artist. It was as though he drew the words out of her. She spoke, nodding her head slowly, and her voice was like a snowflake, cold and soft.

"Yes, you are quite right. *I do know.* That is why as long as I live I can never go back to Charnley. That is why when my boy Dick wants me to open the place and live there again, I tell him I can't."

"Will you tell us the reason, Lady Charnley?" asked Mr. Quin.

She looked at him. Then, as though hypnotized, she spoke as quietly and naturally as a child.

"I will tell you if you like. Nothing seems to matter very much now. I found a letter among his papers and I destroyed it."

"What letter?" said Mr. Quin.

"The letter from the girl — from that poor child. She was the Merriams' nursery governess. He had — he had made love to her — yes, while he was engaged to me, just before we were married. And she — she was going to have a child too. She wrote saying so, and that she was going to tell me about it. So, you see, he shot himself."

She looked round at them wearily and dreamily, like a child who has repeated a lesson it knows too well.

Colonel Monckton blew his nose.

"My God," he said, "so that was it. Well, that explains things with a vengeance."

"Does it?" said Mr. Satterthwaite. "It doesn't explain one thing. *It doesn't explain why Mr. Bristow painted that picture.*"

"What do you mean?"

Mr. Satterthwaite looked across at Mr. Quin as though for encouragement and apparently got it, for he proceeded.

"Yes, I know I sound mad to all of you, but that picture is the focus of the whole thing. We are all here tonight because of that picture. That picture *had* to be painted — that is what I mean."

"You mean the uncanny influence

of the Oak Parlor," began Colonel Monckton.

"No," said Mr. Satterthwaite. "Not the Oak Parlor. The Terrace Room. That is it! The spirit of the dead man standing outside the window and looking in and seeing his own dead body on the floor."

"Which he couldn't have done," said the Colonel, "because the body was in the Oak Parlor."

"Supposing it wasn't," said Mr. Satterthwaite. "Supposing it was exactly where Mr. Bristow saw it — saw it imaginatively, I mean, on the black and white flags in front of the window."

"You are talking nonsense," said Colonel Monckton. "If it was there we shouldn't have found it in the Oak Parlor."

"Not unless someone carried it there," said Mr. Satterthwaite.

"And in that case how could we have seen Charnley going in through the door of the Oak Parlor," inquired Colonel Monckton.

"Well, you didn't see his face, did you?" asked Mr. Satterthwaite."What I mean is, you saw a man going into the Oak Parlor in fancy dress, I suppose."

"Brocade things and a wig," said Monckton.

"Just so, and you thought it was Lord Charnley because the girl called out to him as Lord Charnley."

"And because when we broke in a few minutes later there was only Lord Charnley there — dead. You can't get away from that."

"No," said Mr. Satterthwaite, discouraged. "No — unless there was a hiding place of some kind."

"Weren't you saying something about there being a Priests' hole in that room?" put in Frank Bristow.

"Oh!" cried Mr. Satterthwaite. "Supposing —" he waved a hand for silence, sheltered his forehead with his other hand, and then spoke slowly and hesitatingly.

"I have got an idea — it may be just an idea but I think it hangs together. Supposing someone shot Lord Charnley. Shot him in the Terrace Room. Then he — and another person — dragged the body into the Oak Parlor. They laid it down there with the pistol by its right hand. Now we go on to the next step. It must seem absolutely certain that Lord Charnley has committed suicide. I think that could be done very easily. The man in his brocade and wig passes along the hall by the Oak Parlor door and someone, to make sure of things, calls out to him as Lord Charnley from the top of the stairs. He goes in, locks both doors, and fires a shot into the woodwork. There were bullet holes already in that room if you remember, one more wouldn't be noticed. He then hides quietly in the secret chamber — the Priests' hole. The doors are broken open and people rush in. It seems certain that Lord Charnley has committed suicide. No other hypothesis is even entertained."

"Well, I think that is balderdash," said Colonel Monckton. "You forget

that Charnley had a motive right enough for suicide."

"A letter found afterward," said Mr. Satterthwaite. "A lying, cruel letter written by a very clever and unscrupulous little actress who meant one day to be Lady Charnley herself."

"You mean?"

"I mean the girl in league with Hugo Charnley," said Mr. Satterthwaite. "You know, Monckton, everyone knows that man was a blackguard. He thought he was certain to come into the title." He turned sharply to Lady Charnley. "What was the name of the girl who wrote that letter?"

"Monica Ford," said Lady Charnley.

"Was it Monica Ford, Monckton, who called out to Lord Charnley from the top of the stairs?"

"Yes, now you come to speak of it, I believe it was."

"Oh, it's impossible," said Lady Charnley. "I — I went to her about it. She told me it was all true. I only saw her that once afterward but surely she couldn't have been acting the whole time."

Mr. Satterthwaite looked across the room at Aspasia Glen.

"I think she could," he said quietly. "I think she had in her the makings of a very accomplished actress."

"There is one thing you haven't explained," said Frank Bristow. "There would be blood on the floor of the Terrace Room. Bound to be. They couldn't clear that up in a hurry."

"No," admitted Mr. Satterthwaite, "but there is one thing they could do — a thing that would only take a second or two — they could throw the Bokhara rug over the bloodstains. Nobody ever saw the Bokhara rug in the Terrace Room before that night."

"I believe you are right," said Monckton, "but all the same those bloodstains would have to be cleared up some time?"

"Yes," said Mr. Satterthwaite, "in the middle of the night. A woman with a jug and basin could go down the stairs and clean up the bloodstains quite easily."

"But supposing someone saw her?"

"It wouldn't matter," said Mr. Satterthwaite. "I am speaking now of things as they *are*. I said a woman with a jug and basin. But if I had said a Weeping Lady with a Silver Ewer that is what they would have *appeared* to be." He got up and went across to Aspasia Glen. "That is what you did, wasn't it?" he said. "They call you 'The Woman With the Scarf' now but it was that night you played your first part, the Weeping Lady with the Silver Ewer. That is why you knocked the coffee cup off that table just now. You were afraid when you saw that picture. You thought someone knew."

Lady Charnley stretched out a white accusing hand.

"Monica Ford," she breathed. "I recognize you now!"

Aspasia Glen sprang to her feet with a cry. She pushed little Mr. Satterthwaite aside with a shove of the hand and stood shaking in front of Mr. Quin.

"So I was right. Someone *did* know! Oh, I haven't been deceived by this tomfoolery — this pretense of working things out." She pointed at Mr. Quin. "*You* were there. *You* were there outside the window looking in. You saw what we did, Hugo and I. I *knew* there was someone looking in, and I felt it all the time. Yet when I looked up there was nobody there.

"I knew someone was watching us. I thought once I caught a glimpse of a face at the window. It has frightened me all these years. And then I saw that picture with you standing at the window and I recognized your face. You have known all these years! Why did you break silence now? That is what I want to know."

"Perhaps so that the dead may rest in peace," said Mr. Quin.

Suddenly Aspasia Glen made a rush for the door and stood there flinging a few defiant words over her shoulder.

"Do what you like! God knows there are witnesses enough to what I have been saying. I don't care, I don't care! I loved Hugo and I helped him with the ghastly business and he chucked me afterward. He died last year. You can set the police on my tracks if you like but, as that little dried-up fellow there said, 'I am a pretty good actress.' They will find it hard to find me." She crashed the door behind her and a moment later they heard the slam of the front door also.

"Reggie," cried Lady Charnley, "Reggie." The tears were streaming down her face. "Oh, my dear, my dear, I can go back to Charnley now. I can live there with Dickie. I can tell him what his father was, the finest, the most splendid man in all the world."

"We must consult very seriously as to what must be done in the matter," said Colonel Monckton. "Alix, my dear, if you will let me take you home I shall be glad to have a few words with you on the subject."

Lady Charnley rose. She came across to Mr. Satterthwaite and placing both hands on his shoulders she kissed him very gently.

"It is so wonderful to be alive again after being so long dead," she said. "It was like being dead, you know. Thank you, dear Mr. Satterthwaite." She went out of the room with Colonel Monckton. Mr. Satterthwaite gazed after them. A grunt from Frank Bristow, whom he had forgotten, made him turn sharply round.

"She is a lovely creature," said Bristow moodily. "But she's not nearly so interesting as she was," he said gloomily.

"There speaks the artist," said Mr. Satterthwaite.

"Well, she isn't," said Mr. Bristow. "I suppose I should only get the cold shoulder if I ever went butting in at Charnley. I don't want to go where I am not wanted."

"My dear young man," said Mr. Satterthwaite, "if you will think a little less of the impression you are making on other people, you will, I think, be wiser and happier. You

would also do well to disabuse your mind of some very old-fashioned notions, one of which is that birth has any significance at all in our modern conditions. You are one of those large-proportioned young men whom women always consider good-looking, and you have possibly, if not certainly, genius. Just say that over to yourself ten times before you go to bed every night and in a month's time go and call on Lady Charnley. That is my advice to you, and I am an old man with considerable experience of the world."

A very charming smile suddenly spread over the artist's face.

"You have been thunderingly good to me," he said suddenly. He seized Mr. Satterthwaite's hand and wrung it in a powerful grip. "I am no end grateful. I must be off now. Thanks very much for one of the most extraordinary evenings I have ever spent."

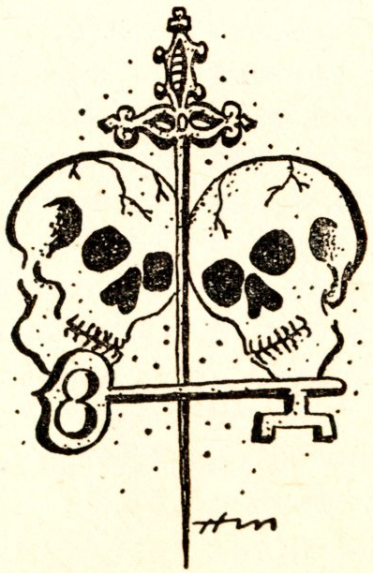
He looked round as though to say goodbye to someone else and then stopped short.

"I say, sir, your friend has gone. I never saw him go. He is rather a queer bird, isn't he?"

He looked puzzled.

"He goes and comes very suddenly," said Mr. Satterthwaite. "That is one of his characteristics."

"Like Harlequin," said Frank Bristow, "he is invisible," and laughed heartily at his own joke.



PRIZE-WINNING STORY

Another original for our* Black Mask *department . . .

We are happy to welcome back to EQMM the erudite columnist of "The Saturday Review of Literature" — Ben Ray Redman. Most of you, we are sure, will remember Mr. Redman's classic short story titled "The Perfect Crime," which we once called The Detective Story to End Detective Stories, and which, paradoxically, still cries out for a companion tale about the same characters. Pending that consummation devoutly to be wish'd, we now offer Ben Ray Redman's newest story — a shrewd and expert yarn in the highest tradition of Black Mask's more restrained toughness — and, it should be added, more realistic toughness. Meet Jerry Clegg, insurance investigator . . . and when you have finished — please, not before! — we will tell you more.

THE TOUGHER THEY COME

by BEN RAY REDMAN

ON THE NIGHT OF JANUARY 15, Mr. and Mrs. Bert Taylor were driving fast on New York City's West Side express highway, heading downtown. As they were taking a slight curve, not far below 50th Street, their sedan went out of control and crashed into the guard-wall. The right-hand front door was flung open and Mrs. Taylor was hurled through it. In fact, she was thrown completely over the wall and onto the street twenty feet below, while the hood of the automobile crumpled behind her. When the first witness of the accident reached her, she was dead with a crushed skull. When a motorcycle cop by the name of Jim Ryan reached the wrecked car, he found Mr. Taylor slumped over the wheel, gasping for the breath that had been knocked out of him, but otherwise unhurt. The moment Mr. Taylor could speak he asked for his wife. When he learned what had happened, he went into a fit of hysterical weeping, terrifying in its intensity, that lasted almost twenty minutes. But after he had recovered he refused to be taken to a hospital, or even to have a physical examination. He insisted that he was perfectly all right, that he hadn't really been hurt at all — and once Mr. Taylor had got his control back, the young ambulance doctor was inclined to agree with him.

"He must be a pretty tough bird," said young Dr. Lawrence to a pal of

his, when he got back to the hospital.

"It's hell to see a big guy like that go all to pieces," Officer Ryan told his wife.

Three days later Mrs. Taylor was buried, after a perfunctory service in a respectable funeral chapel on East 22nd Street. Meanwhile, The American Insurance Company had been notified of Mrs. Taylor's death, and had been requested to pay her husband the $15,000 to which he was entitled as beneficiary of a policy drawn in his favor. This policy was now six years old, and the records showed that Mr. Taylor had taken out a policy for an equal amount, with his wife as beneficiary, on the same day that Mrs. Taylor's had been issued. Jerry Clegg, investigator for American, was assigned to the case and instructed to give it a routine investigation.

Clegg studied the scene of the crash, went over the wrecked car with an expert eye, interviewed Dr. Lawrence, and talked at some length with Officer Ryan. After that he paid an evening call on Mr. Bert Taylor in his three-room, East 19th Street apartment.

He was impressed by Mr. Taylor's handshake. In fact, he was more than impressed, for his own hand hurt for a couple of hours after Mr. Taylor had shaken it.

The bereaved husband was subdued and low-voiced, despite his hearty grip, but he was almost pathetically eager to answer any questions Clegg wished to ask him. He described the accident as well as he could, but he couldn't pretend to explain it. He had been driving for years and had never before been in any kind of crackup. Perhaps he had been doing 50, maybe 55, he couldn't be sure. And then — wham! The only thing he could think was that maybe he had had a blowout. Of course, both front tires were completely blown out after the crash, but perhaps one had gone just before. He couldn't remember hearing anything, but it all happened so quick. It was as quick as . . . Pausing, he made a quick circular motion with the forefinger of his right hand, while he seemed to be searching for a comparison. Then, apparently, he decided that he didn't need a comparison after all, for he left his sentence unfinished and simply added lamely, "Yeah, it was damned quick."

Just before he left, Clegg noticed a framed snapshot on the desk that stood between the two living-room windows.

Leaning towards it, he asked, "Is that you?"

Bert Taylor hesitated for a second. Then he said with a faint grin, "Well, yes and no."

Clegg looked at him for an explanation, and Taylor explained. "It's me twenty years ago. Twenty years can play the devil with a guy. I had hair then."

"I'll say you had." Clegg looked more closely at the photograph. It was the picture of a man in his early twenties, wearing slacks, and a sports

shirt open at the neck, with a great shock of hair that was apparently being blown about by a stiff breeze. In the background were some vague blurs that looked like a line of high hills.

"Lord, yes. Hair!" said Mr. Taylor wistfully. "The guy who invented something that would keep *that* on your head would have a supercolossal production all right."

"If you hear of anyone who's getting even close," said Clegg cheerfully, "let me know. I'd like to crawl in on the ground floor."

After leaving the 19th Street flat, Clegg had another chat with Officer Ryan.

"I thought you told me he was a big fellow," said Clegg.

"That's right, I did. He is."

"Not in my book," said Clegg. "He isn't any bigger than I am."

"The hell he isn't," said Ryan. "When I said big, I didn't mean tall. I meant husky, big in the chest. Why the guy's built like a bull."

"Not when I saw him he wasn't."

Ryan looked thoughtful. "Did you see him in an overcoat?"

"No, I saw him at his own place — indoors."

"Well," said Ryan, "that's probably it. I saw him only in a coat, one of those heavy winter overcoats. I could never wear one myself, I don't care how cold it is. Maybe it was the overcoat that made him look bulky."

"Could be," agreed Jerry Clegg. "Look me up when you want to have a traffic ticket fixed."

The next day was Thursday, and one of the things that Clegg had learned was that Thursday was Mr. Taylor's day off from work in the big Fourth Avenue liquor store where he was employed as a clerk. Clegg introduced himself to the manager, Mr. Morse, and explained that he would like to ask a few questions about Bert Taylor. Mr. Morse was more than happy to oblige. He was very fond of Bert. Bert was a great guy. Everyone in the store was fond of Bert. What had happened to him shouldn't happen to a dog.

Jerry Clegg remarked that he supposed Mr. and Mrs. Taylor had been a pretty happy couple. Mr. Morse supposed so, too. But he had never met Mrs. Taylor. Bert had intended to bring her to their store party last Christmas Eve, but then he hadn't. Perhaps it was just as well, after all. Mr. Morse chuckled over fond memories. It had been quite a party — yes, *quite* a party. And Bert Taylor had ended up by being the life of it. The things that guy can do! You wouldn't believe it. Mr. Morse pointed.

"See that counter over there?"

Clegg nodded.

"Well, it's three feet high and more than two feet across. I've measured it. And the evening of the party, damned if Bert Taylor didn't take off from a standing start behind that counter, go straight over it in a dive, land on the floor on the back of his neck, and come up on his feet as pretty as you please, all quicker than you could say Hiram Walker."

"Quite a trick," said Clegg.

"I'll say!" agreed Mr. Morse. "Of course, he had a few stiff drinks in him, but I don't see how that would help much even if God is as good to drunks as he is always supposed to be. And the guy must be over forty, if he's a day. I wish I was in that kind of condition." Mr. Morse patted his small paunch.

"Me, too," said Clegg. "I think I'll start running around the reservoir every morning."

After his talk with the store manager, Clegg had a chat with a couple of the clerks and with the bookkeeper, Miss Moroni, a remarkably pretty young woman with large, dark, liquid eyes. There was no doubt about Bert Taylor's popularity among his fellow workers. The two clerks were all for him, and Miss Moroni warmly assured Jerry Clegg that you could travel as far as you liked — all around the world, in fact — and never meet a finer gentleman than Mr. Taylor.

That evening Clegg rang Bert Taylor's bell again, and again he found him in. On the table beside the chair in the living-room, where he had been sitting, there was a Pocket Book with a cover that showed it was a Western, and a half-finished drink.

"Just one to keep the cold outside," explained Mr. Taylor. "What'll you have?"

"I'll sit this one out," said Clegg. "Perhaps later."

"Suit yourself," said Mr. Taylor. "There's plenty more where that came from. Bonded. That chair there's comfortable. What is it — more questions?"

"If you don't mind."

"Why should I?"

"Well, at a time like this . . ."

Taylor nodded. "Oh, if you mean that talking about things connected with Min isn't easy, you're damned right. It isn't easy."

For an instant Clegg was afraid the man was going to burst into tears, but instead he picked up his drink and took a couple of quick swallows. Then he said, "Shoot."

"You were married quite a while, weren't you?" asked Clegg.

"Eighteen years," Bert Taylor told him. "And when you've been married eighteen years and a thing like this happens — well, you feel somehow as if the whole damned world had come to an end. Maybe it would be better if it had — for the guy himself, I mean. Maybe it would be better if you couldn't remember anything. But you can't help remembering — all the time you just can't help it!" He looked at the little book on the table. "I can hear Min right now, laughing at me for reading Westerns so much. She said they were just a waste of time. She liked mysteries."

Clegg nodded sympathetically. "She was a little older than you?"

"Four years, but I don't think you'd ever of known it."

"And where were you married?"

"On the Coast. Los Angeles."

"Los Angeles?"

"Yeah. Well, it wasn't really Los

Angeles. It was Beverly Hills, at the City Hall, and I remember I could only get a day off from my job, so we never had a real honeymoon until a couple of years later. Then we had a week at Laguna."

"The next thing the unions ought to go for," said Clegg, "is honeymoon time for every guy who gets married. That would be a fringe benefit worth fighting for."

"I'll say! But things were a lot tougher in those days. There weren't any fringe benefits."

"What were you doing then?"

"Driving."

"Driving? How do you mean."

"For a laundry," Bert Taylor explained, after the merest hesitation. "You know the sort of thing — pick up and deliver. And what some of those dames tried to get away with! They'd say you'd torn their sheets when the sheets were ripped when they gave 'em to you, and they'd swear you hadn't sent back stuff that they'd never given you at all. What a job!"

"When did you move East?"

"Right after Pearl Harbor. Min was scared to death the Japs were going to ring the doorbell any night. Not that I blamed her much, because I thought they might myself. So we tried Chicago first, and then after the Germans quit we came on to New York."

"And you've been working in the same place ever since."

"That's right."

"All these questions," said Clegg, "must seem an awful waste of time to you, Mr. Taylor. And pretty impertinent, when I come to think of it."

"No, they don't — not at all." The widower looked at his empty glass. "I know it takes time to collect on any insurance. Why, I remember how long it took me to collect on a broken collarbone once. More red tape!"

"How did you do that?"

"Break it, you mean? Why, it was when I was driving — that is, I missed my step jumping out of my laundry truck one time, and damned if it didn't crack as easy as you'd crack an egg."

"They go that way sometimes," said Clegg. "I've seen plenty of them. By the way, was what you said when I came in about my having a drink a firm offer?"

"I'll say." Bert Taylor picked up his own glass enthusiastically. "I'm just about ready for another myself. What'll it be?"

"Is there a lemon in the house?"

"Sure. Every so often I like a collins."

"Then if it isn't too much trouble will you make me a whiskey sour? — just a little sugar and a little lemon juice and not too much bourbon."

"Coming up. *Prontito!*"

Bert Taylor headed for the kitchen, and the kitchen door closed behind him.

As a rule Jerry Clegg didn't like whiskey sours, but he figured it would take Mr. Taylor quite a bit longer to

mix a whiskey sour than to make a highball or pour some straight bourbon over ice. And just at this moment Jerry Clegg wanted a little time.

The kitchen door was out of sight from where he stood in the living room, and the moment he heard it swing shut he stepped to the desk, picked up the framed snapshot, and held it under the light, studying the photograph closely. The leatherette frame was made so that a picture could be slipped in from the top. Almost unconsciously, Clegg began to push the snapshot up and out of the frame with his thumb, but as he did so he told himself sharply that he could never get away with it. Then he noticed that there was a second photograph under the first. He kept on pushing until he saw that the second snapshot was almost a duplicate of the first. But not quite. Obviously it had been taken at the same time as the other one, but not from the same angle. It was more full-face. Taylor or Mrs. Taylor must have put it in the frame and then decided that the other one was better, and slipped the preferred shot over the first one. It was a stroke of luck, Clegg told himself, but sometimes you don't get very far without a little luck.

By the time Bert Taylor came back from the kitchen with the drinks, the frame was back on the desk, the familiar snapshot still in it. The other one, the full-face shot, was in Jerry Clegg's pocket.

Both men enjoyed their drinks, but Clegg firmly refused a second. Some other time, he said. "I'll be seeing you. I'll keep in touch."

When Clegg told his boss what he wanted to do, Emerson looked at him, tapped his desk with the eraser end of a No. 3 pencil, and said, "It seems to me you're playing a whale of a long shot."

"So I'm playing a long shot."

"Sure you don't just want the trip?"

"I could do with it," said Jerry frankly.

"Without using your own money?"

"It isn't my money no matter how it turns out — if you know what I mean."

"I know what you mean," said Emerson. "O.K. Go ahead." He liked Jerry, but he also knew that Jerry had a head on his shoulders and that even longer shots had paid off. "Keep the swindle sheet down," he added, "and take care of yourself. Thar's babes in them thar woods."

Jerry grinned. "I've been there before — and I've brought myself back alive."

Seventeen hours later he checked in at the Roosevelt Hotel on Hollywood Boulevard, slept ten hours, had three eggs for breakfast, and started out on what might or might not prove to be a wild goose chase. In and out of offices he went, with his snapshot of Bert Taylor, and in every office he talked with men and women, but neither Mr. Taylor's name nor Mr. Taylor's likeness meant anything to any man or woman with whom he

talked, and all he seemed to be accomplishing was to give the Yellow Cab Company a hearty boost on the profit side of the ledger.

This went on for two days. At the end of two days he suddenly found himself humming *They tried to tell us we're too young* and he stopped dead in his tracks. That was it! They were probably all too young, or, even if they weren't, the chances are that they wouldn't remember Bert Taylor's face. But who would remember? The question required thought. Its proper consideration also required a thick dinner steak at Chasen's. It would have to be a New York cut, of course — the kind of cut one never hears of in New York.

By the time he had finished the steak he had an inspiration, and the next day, at about noon, he acted on it. To put the inspiration in working order was simple. All he had to do was to step into a cab and tell the driver to drop him off at the corner of Sunset and Gower. In other words, to drop him off in the section known to old-timers as Gower Gulch, the few blocks that had long been the hangout of the more picturesque male extras who scraped a thin living out of motion pictures — cowboys in high-heeled boots, gaunt miners and Canadian trappers, bearded pirates, Mexican bandits, Lascars, Senegalese, rascals from all the ports in the Seven Seas. Of course, the same man might be a trapper one day and a pirate the next, but that didn't detract from the authenticity of appearance, on stage and off, that was the hallmark of Gower Gulch. Some of them were the genuine article, and some were so conscientious in their roles that the Gulch had more than once heard the staccato fire of six-guns and seen the flash of murderous knives. But for the most part they were a friendly, lazy lot, easy to talk to in lunchrooms, easy to buy drinks for at bars. Jerry Clegg began to talk and buy drinks and ask questions. And he struck pay dirt just seven hours after he had hailed a cab in front of his hotel.

It was in the Little Scorpion Cafe, and he struck it in the bearded person of Big Pete. He knew that was the man's name, because that is how he formally introduced himself before he consented to down the first free drink. After the third free drink, Clegg showed Big Pete the snapshot. The seven-footer took one look at it, banged his fist on the bar, and shouted, "Gawdamighty! The old son-of-a-burro!"

"Know him?" asked Clegg.

"Know him?" roared the giant. "I'd know him any place, even in his diapers."

"Taylor?" said Clegg.

"Perkins," said Pete, not paying any attention to the difference in names. "Bert Perkins — but better known as The Cat."

"The Cat? Why?"

"Because he had nine lives, of course. Why, blast it, he had a hundred! He was the best in the business — the very best. Until he went and quit."

"Just what was his business?" asked Clegg as quietly, as gently as possible.

"Why," began Big Pete. Then, suddenly, a shadow of suspicion darkened his usually candid countenance and he said, "But see here, Mister —"

"Clegg," said Clegg.

"Mister Clegg, then. How come you're carrying The Cat's picture round in your pocket and don't seem to know the first thing about him?"

"I know one thing," said Clegg evenly, looking at his drinking companion. "I know he has quite a wad of money coming to him if certain things can be straightened out. I'm trying to straighten them out, and I need some information."

"That's on the level?"

"That's on the level."

"What kind of thing is it you want to know about him."

"Well, it wouldn't do any harm if I knew a little more about his business."

Big Pete grinned. The shadow had gone from his face now. It was obvious that he didn't enjoy being suspicious of anyone, even briefly. "A little?" he said. "I can tell you plenty, if you want to hear it." He looked at his empty glass. "Could I just draw against you, maybe, for another one of these little flea-bites?"

"It's on its way," said Clegg, looking at a table. "But I think we might do better sitting down."

"Wait until you hear about that time at Zodiac with the airplane and the elephant," said Big Pete.

"At Zodiac with the airplane and the elephant?" repeated Clegg.

"That's right. You had to see it to believe it."

They went to the table.

When Jerry Clegg arrived at Zodiac Pictures the next morning, he immediately ran into what looked like a dead end. There was no one at Zodiac who cared who he was or what he wanted, and it seemed for a while that if he wished to indulge in the art of conversation at Zodiac he would have to indulge in it with the policeman at the reception desk, and with no one else. But Clegg was both persistent and persuasive. Having finally driven a wedge into the policeman's hard heart, he made his way step by step, from lower echelon to higher echelon, until he found himself on a very high plane indeed — in the private office of Alec Stein, sitting at the far side of the producer's big desk.

One of the things that Stein prided himself on was that he remembered every man, woman, and child who had ever worked for him. And he certainly remembered Perkins.

"Why wouldn't I remember," he asked, "when I kept him busy right on this lot for five years — no, five years and a half — and he was the best guy at his job I ever had? Or anyone else ever had either. What's this about insurance? The American Insurance Company, is it?" He looked again at Clegg's card. "What do they want to know about Perkins?"

When Clegg told him — not what he wanted to know but what he

wanted to see — Stein threw up his hands.

"Are you crazy?" he asked. "Or just plain nuts. It can't be done. It couldn't be done even if it didn't mean digging out stuff that hasn't been dug out for years, and maybe isn't even here."

Jerry Clegg spoke briefly and to the point. Alec Stein eyed him moodily.

"So that's the way it is," said the producer. "Well, I'll be damned! Bert Perkins."

"No," said the insurance investigator, "that isn't the way it is. That's the way it may be. But that's what we've got to find out."

Clegg spent the next two hours in Projection Room #4, alone with a projectionist. He would have stayed there longer, but it took him only two hours to find what he wanted — to find something much better than anything he had hoped to find. When he went back to Stein's office, the producer said he was very happy to have been of help. But when Clegg said that he wanted the producer to do him one more small favor, and explained what it was, the mogul of Zodiac Pictures almost screamed. This time it definitely could not be done.

Jerry Clegg asked if he could put through a call to New York. Stein shrugged — he called New York almost as often as he called his secretary in the next office.

Clegg spoke to Emerson at American. Emerson said he would speak to one of the top brass and ask him to get in touch with the New York office of Zodiac Pictures. Clegg told Stein what he had done. Stein looked doubtful. Twenty minutes later a call came through from New York.

"Yes, he's here now, right beside me," began the producer, but after that he did little more than listen. Finally, Stein hung up and said, "You win."

When Clegg boarded the plane that night, his suitcase was heavier than it had been on the flight West.

Back in Manhattan, he went to see Detective Lieutenant Duffy of Homicide. Duffy was an old friend of his. After he had told his story and explained his plan, the Lieutenant shook his head wonderingly and exclaimed, "What a lad, what a lad! And what will you be dreaming up next?"

"Can you think of a better way of breaking it?" asked Clegg.

"Not at the moment I can't," said Duffy, scratching his left ear.

"Then it's a date?"

"It's a date."

"And when I say that I want the two boys with you to be big and tough, I really mean big and tough."

"Don't worry," said Duffy, "they'll be big and tough. Everyone on the force isn't a shrimp like me." He stood six feet three inches and stripped at 230.

When Mr. Bert Taylor walked into the handsome American Insurance Company Building on Madison Avenue, keeping an appointment that had been made at the request of Mr.

Jerome Clegg, he did so with the hope that all the technicalities in connection with the settlement of his wife's policy had finally been attended to. Clegg met him in Emerson's office and introduced him to Mr. Emerson. The latter suggested that they all take the elevator to the sixteenth floor, where they could complete their business. When they reached the sixteenth floor, Mr. Emerson led the way to a door, opened it, and ushered them into a long narrow room that had some twenty chairs in it and a motion picture screen at the far end. Three men were already seated in the chairs. They were big men. Mr. Taylor stopped dead in his tracks.

"A projection room!" he exclaimed. "What's the idea?"

"We are going to look at some film," explained Jerry Clegg. "We often have to look at film in connection with accident cases, but it won't take long because we're only going to look at a part of a reel. Here's a good chair right here, Mr. Taylor. Make yourself comfortable. Mr. Brown, Mr. Smith, Mr. Duffy," he waved his hand at the three big men, "let me introduce Mr. Taylor. These gentlemen," he explained to Mr. Taylor, "are what you might call technical experts. And now I think we can all get ourselves settled and be ready to go. I'll sit here at the control desk. I'm sure the projectionist's ready — everything O.K., gentlemen?"

Clegg's words were glib, his voice was smooth. He took his place at the desk, and Mr. Taylor found that he had been steered to a chair that was directly in front of two of the technical experts. Clegg picked up the phone and said to the projectionist, "Any time now, Joe." Then he flicked the light switch and the room was dark. An instant later the screen came alive with a picture that refused to come into focus for a few frames. Suddenly all was clear.

"It's confusing cutting into the middle of the action like this," said Clegg apologetically, "but I think you will be able to pick up the threads in a minute."

The first shots seemed to be of a dance that was breaking up, with everyone saying shrill good nights to everyone else, and everyone more or less high. Women and girls were getting into their minks, men were putting on their overcoats. An exterior shot showed a building that looked like a country club, and a lot of parked cars. Then the camera picked up a young couple and stayed with them. The girl was beautiful, and the young man would have been handsome if he hadn't been a little on the effeminate side. They kissed as they walked towards their car, they kissed in the car before he started it, and they snuggled close together as he stepped on the accelerator. Interior shots of the car alternated with exterior shots of the automobile as it gathered speed on the dark, deserted highway. At this point Clegg could have sworn that he could feel the man

who called himself Bert Taylor stiffening in his chair; but that could hardly be, as Taylor was four chairs away.

The car tore through the night. The lovers clung tighter, while the man held the wheel with only one hand. A long shot showed the car racing down a sweeping curve towards a bridge. The car swerved. Then, as if by magic, the camera moved in as the car crashed against the right-hand railing of the bridge. The right-hand door was flung open, and the girl was hurled through it and thrown over the railing to the river below. Then the camera moved even closer and fastened on the broken figure of the effeminate young man, apparently crushed to death against the wheel.

Jerry Clegg flipped on the lights.

The eyes of five men were fixed on the sixth man in the room.

The sixth man was sweating, sweating in streams, but his lips seemed to be dry for he was trying to moisten them with his tongue. He was looking at Jerry Clegg with a strange expression, as if he were trying to solve a difficult puzzle and couldn't quite make it. Clegg began to speak as easily as before.

"The film you have just seen, gentlemen, is a small part of a picture called *They Die in the Dark*. It was produced by Alec Stein, and directed by Lewis Carr, at Zodiac Pictures in 1935. The girl's part, as you may have recognized, was played by Babs Gordon — it was one of her first — and the boy's part was played by a youngster named Stanley Hunter. The stunt man who drove the car was Bert Perkins — the top stunt man in Hollywood — nicknamed The Cat because he had nine lives, and a few to spare."

Mr. Taylor jerked suddenly in his chair, and the policemen leaned closer to him; but then he was still again.

"You may have thought when you saw the crash," continued Jerry Clegg, "that it was done with miniatures, but it wasn't. Stein always wanted the real thing, even if it was a lot more expensive, and Bert Perkins could always give him what he wanted. He could give him what no other stunt man in Hollywood could — even when Stein dreamed up a sequence with an airplane and an elephant that you wouldn't believe if your own mother swore she had seen it. Isn't that right, Mr. Perkins?" Clegg looked straight at Big Pete's old pal.

Bert Perkins looked back with his eyes staring, and his expression even stranger than before. It was the kind of expression that you might expect to see on the face of a man who suddenly suspects he is going crazy. Then, abruptly, he said something that sounded very silly.

"It wasn't a girl — it was a dummy that was thrown out of that car just now, that you saw on the screen."

For an instant there was silence in the projection room. Then Clegg said very quietly, "But it wasn't a dummy the other night on the express highway — it was your wife."

Bert Perkins twisted his head slowly from side to side, as if his neck were stiff and hurting him.

"It was your wife, Perkins," Clegg repeated. "And you planned to kill her just as carefully as you ever planned one of your most difficult stunt jobs. You knew exactly how to do it because you had done the very same thing before — with a dummy. It was all perfectly planned and the only wonder is that you didn't get away with it. Perhaps I would never have been suspicious at all if Ryan hadn't described you as a big man, husky, built like a bull. When I saw you, I saw you were no bull, and I told Ryan so, and he said that perhaps the overcoat had made you look big. I was still chewing over that when your boss at the store told me about your dive over the counter at the Christmas Eve party, and I asked myself what sort of fellow could get away with a stunt like that — and then the words 'stunt man' flashed into my mind, and I remembered seeing dives like that in Westerns."

Clegg paused. Perkins was absolutely motionless now, except for the tongue that kept licking his lips. But Clegg could feel the tension building up inside the man who was watching him with bulging eyes.

"The moment I thought of a stunt man," Clegg went on, "it suggested possibilities. You fellows often wear crash harnesses, and sometimes they are pretty bulky. That would explain why you looked so big that night to Ryan — if you were wearing a protective harness under your overcoat. Perhaps there is one hidden in your apartment right now. Anyway, I decided to go to Hollywood to see what I could find out."

Jerry Clegg was obviously all set to keep the pressure, but at that instant Perkins sprang from his chair with the violence of a snapped spring. And at precisely the same instant the two big policemen reached out and held him fast. But Perkins did not fight. He slumped like a bag of sand between them, sobbing over and over again, "I did it, I did it! I killed her, I killed her! I killed Min!" And then his sobs became a violent retching that shook his body as if it would tear it into bloody fragments . . .

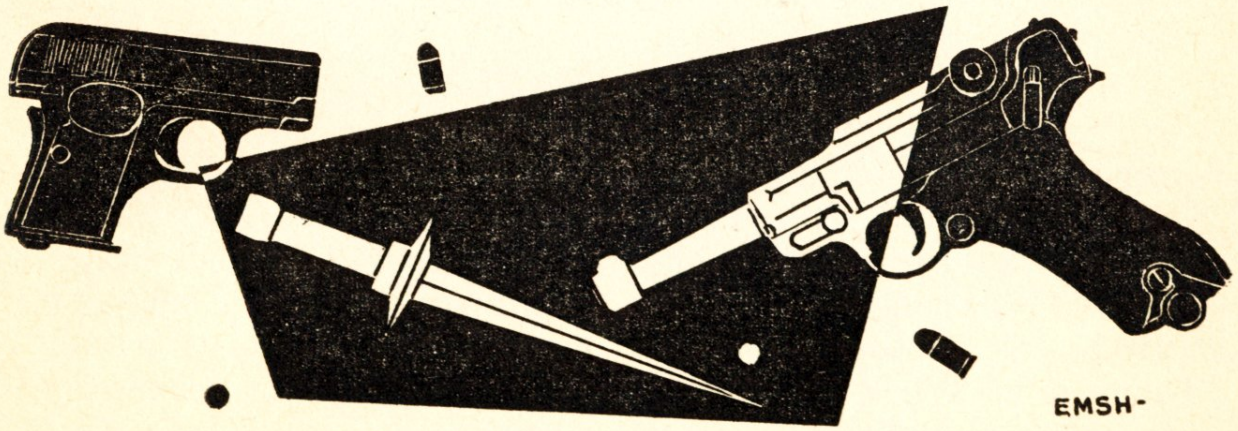
Over drinks, at the bar opposite The American Insurance Company, Duffy remarked to Jerry Clegg, "the ones you think are going to be the toughest — sometimes they go to pieces just like that, all of a sudden."

Jerry Clegg nodded. "Yep, the tougher they come . . ."

Perhaps you would be interested in two real-life anecdotes about Hollywood stunt men . . . One of the most famous gave the following ironic slant on his dangerous occupation, as reported by Hy Gardner in his "Coast to Coast" column in the "New York Herald Tribune": although it meant nothing

at all to this stunt man to fall off cliffs in burning cars, walk on the wings of flying planes, and even jump from an autogiro to a speeding motorboat, there is one stunt this man absolutely refuses to do. In his own words, he will never take his car out of the garage between the hours of 3 P.M. *and 4; that's the hour when teen-agers forge out of school, hop into their souped-up jalopies, and drive hell-bent for oblivion. "A man would be crazy," he said in all seriousness, "to risk his life ducking those characters!"*

Joe Hyams, another by-liner for the "New York Herald Tribune," told this story about Hollywood stunt man Rube Schaffer who in the last 25 years has "died" no less than 275 times on the moving picture screen. Early in 1954, Mr. Schaffer established a new record: in a single day's "shooting" of Columbia's "Pirates of Tripoli," the stunt man "died" six times in six different roles! That's doing it in triple spades! Here are the "gory" details: (1) he was killed by a sniper's bullet; (2) he was knifed trying to scale a palace wall; (3) he was hurled to his death during a roof-top battle; (4) he was run through clean as a whistle in a fencing match; (5) he was drowned in a sea fight; and last but certainly not least (6) he was blown to smithereens as he charged a battery of cannon! How tough can you get?



How did Jack London feel about the writing of his own time, when he himself was just beginning to spread his literary wings? The best picture we have is in Irving Stone's biography, SAILOR ON HORSEBACK. *Mr. Stone wrote that Jack London "was amazed at the enormous amount of printed stuff that was dead: no light, no life, no color shot through it. He was puzzled by the countless short stories written lightly and cleverly but without vitality and realism. Life was so strange and wonderful, filled with an immensity of problems, dreams, and heroic toils, yet these printed fabrications dealt with the sentimental commonplaces. He felt the stress and strain of life, its fevers and sweats and wild insurgences — surely this was the stuff to write about!"*

Indeed it was — it always was and always will be. And did Jack London practice what he preached? He certainly did! We now bring you Jack London's first story — we repeat, his very first published story. It appeared, only a few weeks before his twenty-third birthday, in the January 1899 issue of "Overland Monthly" . . . Read "To the Man on Trail" and marvel at the vitality, the rugged and vigorous style, of a new writer still in his early twenties, living in a Victorian world which we now realize was excessively polite and prudish, and accustomed, in its literary taste, to the ornate, the pretentious, and the elegant. No wonder Jack London's first story marked the debut of a new force — think of the impact it must have had on the gentle and genteel readers of more than half a century ago!

TO THE MAN ON TRAIL

by JACK LONDON

DUMP IT IN."

"But I say, Kid, isn't that going it a little too strong? Whisky and alcohol's bad enough; but when it comes to brandy and peppersauce —"

"Dump it in. Who's making this punch, anyway?" And the Malemute Kid smiled benignantly through the clouds of steam. "By the time you've been in this country as long as I have, my son, and lived on rabbit-tracks and salmon-belly, you'll learn that Christmas comes only once per annum. And a Christmas without punch is sinking a hole to bedrock with nary a pay-streak."

"Stack up on that fer a high cyard," approved Big Jim Belden, who

had come down from his claim on Mazy May to spend Christmas, and who, as everyone knew, had been living the two months past on straight moose meat. "Hain't fergot the hooch we-uns made on the Tanana, hev yeh?"

"Well, I guess yes. Boys, it would have done your hearts good to see that whole tribe fighting drunk — and all because of a glorious ferment of sugar and sour dough. That was before your time," the Malemute Kid said as he turned to Stanley Prince, a young mining expert who had been in two years. "No white women in the country then, and Mason wanted to get married. Ruth's father was chief of the Tananas and objected, like the rest of the tribe. Stiff? Why, I used my last pound of sugar; finest work in that line I ever did in my life. You should have seen the chase, down the river and across the portage. We struck the Yukon just behind the first ice run and the tribe only a quarter of an hour behind. But that saved us; for the second run broke the jam above and shut them out. When they finally got into Nuklukyeto, the whole Post was ready for them. And as to the foregathering, ask Father Roubeau here: he performed the ceremony."

The Jesuit took the pipe from his lips, but could only express his gratification with patriarchal smiles, while Protestant and Catholic applauded.

"By gar!" ejaculated Louis Savoy, who seemed overcome by the romance of it. "By gar!"

Then the first tin cups of punch were passed around, and the Malemute Kid's frightful concoction did its work. The men of the camps and trails unbent in its genial glow, and jest and song and tales of past adventure went round the board. Aliens from a dozen lands, they toasted each and all. It was the Englishman, Prince, who pledged "Uncle Sam, the precocious infant of the New World;" the Yankee, Bettles, who drank to "The Queen, God bless her;" and together, Savoy, and Meyers, the German trader, clanged their cups to Alsace and Lorraine.

The Malemute Kid arose, cup in hand, and glanced at the greased-paper window, where the frost stood full three inches thick. "A health to the man on trail this night; may his grub hold out; may his dogs keep their legs; may his matches never miss fire."

Crack! Crack! — they heard the familiar music of the dogwhip, the whining howl of the huskies, and the crunch of a sled as it drew up to the cabin. Conversation languished while they waited the issue.

"An old-timer; cares for his dogs and then himself," whispered the Malemute Kid to Prince, as they listened to the snapping jaws and the wolfish snarls and yelps of pain which proclaimed to their practiced ears that the stranger was beating back their dogs while he fed his own.

Then came the expected knock, sharp and confident, and the stranger

entered. Dazzled by the light, he hesitated a moment at the door. He was a striking man and a picturesque one in his Arctic dress of wool and fur, standing six foot two or three, with proportionate breadth of shoulders and depth of chest, his smooth-shaven face nipped by the cold to a gleaming pink, his long lashes and eyebrows white with ice, and the ear and neck flaps of his great wolfskin cap loosely raised. Clasped outside his mackinaw jacket, a beaded belt held two large Colt revolvers and a hunting knife; he carried, in addition to the inevitable dogwhip, a smokeless rifle of the largest bore and latest pattern.

As he came forward, for all his step was firm and elastic, they could see that fatigue bore heavily upon him.

An awkward silence had fallen, but his hearty "What cheer, my lads?" put them quickly at ease, and the next instant the Malemute Kid and he had gripped hands. Though they had never met, each had heard of the other and the recognition was mutual. A sweeping introduction and a mug of punch were forced upon him before he could explain his errand.

"How long since that basket-sled, with three men and eight dogs, passed?" he asked.

"An even two days ahead. Are you after them?"

"Yes; my team. Run them off under my very nose, the cusses. I've gained two days on them already — pick them up on the next run."

"Reckon they'll show spunk?" asked Belden in order to keep up the conversation, for the Malemute Kid already had the coffeepot on and was busily frying bacon and moose meat.

The stranger significantly tapped his revolvers.

"When'd yeh leave Dawson?"

"Twelve o'clock."

"Last night?"

"Today."

A murmur of surprise passed round the circle. It was just midnight, and 75 miles of rough river trail was not to be sneered at for a twelve hours' run.

As the stranger ate the rude fare, the Malemute Kid attentively studied his face. Still youthful, the lines had been firmly traced by toil and hardship. Though genial in conversation and mild when at rest, the blue eyes gave promise of hard steel-glitter.

"So thet's how me an' the ol' woman got spliced," said Belden, concluding the exciting tale of his courtship. "How 'bout yerself, stranger — married man?"

For reply, the newcomer opened his watch, slipped it from the thong which served as a chain, and handed it over. Belden pricked up the slush-lamp, surveyed the inside of the case critically, and swearing admiringly to himself, handed it over to Louis Savoy. With numerous "By gars!" Savoy finally surrendered it to Prince, and they noticed that his hands trembled and his eyes took on a peculiar softness. And so it passed from hand to horny hand — the pasted photograph of a woman, with a baby at her breast. Those who had not yet seen

the wonder were keen with curiosity; those who had, became silent and restrospective. They could face the pinch of famine, the grip of scurvy, or quick death by field or flood; but the pictured semblance of a woman and child made women and children of them all.

"Never have seen the youngster yet — he's a boy, she says, and two years old," said the stranger as he received the treasure back. A lingering moment he gazed upon it, then snapped the case and turned away.

The Malemute Kid led him to a bunk and bade him turn in.

"Call me at 4, sharp. Don't fail me," and a moment later he was breathing in the heaviness of exhausted sleep.

"By Jove! he's a plucky chap," commented Prince. "Three hours' sleep after seventy-five miles with the dogs, and then the trail again. Who is he, Kid?"

"Jack Westondale. Been in going on three years, with nothing but the name of working like a horse, and any amount of bad luck to his credit. Sitka Charley's told me about him."

"It seems hard that a man with a sweet young wife like his should be putting in his years in this God-forsaken hole, where every year counts two on the outside."

"The trouble with him is his grit and stubbornness. He's cleaned up twice with a stake, but lost it both times."

Here the conversation was broken off by an uproar from Bettles, for the effect had begun to wear away. And soon the bleak years of monotonous grub and deadening toil were being forgotten in rough merriment. The Malemute Kid alone seemed unable to lose himself and cast many an anxious look at his watch. Once he put on his mittens and beaver-skin cap and, leaving the cabin, fell to rummaging about in the cache.

Nor could he wait the hour designated; for he was fifteen minutes ahead of time in rousing his guest. The young giant had stiffened badly, and brisk rubbing was necessary to bring him to his feet. He tottered out of the cabin to find his dogs harnessed and everything ready for the start. The company wished him good luck and a short chase while Father Roubeau, hurriedly blessing him, led the stampede for the cabin; and small wonder, for it is not good to face sixty-four degrees below zero with naked ears and hands.

The Malemute Kid saw him to the main trail, and there, gripping his hand heartily, gave him advice.

"You'll find a hundred pounds of salmon eggs on the sled," he said. "The dogs will go as far on that as with one hundred and fifty of fish, and you can't get dogfood at Pelly, as you probably expected." The stranger started visibly. "You can't get an ounce of food for dog or man till you reach Five Fingers, and that's a stiff two hundred miles. Watch out for open water on the Thirty Mile River, and be sure you take the big cut-off above Le Barge."

"How did you know it? Surely the news can't be ahead of me already?"

"I don't know it; and what's more, I don't want to know it. But you never owned that team you're chasing. Sitka Charley sold it to them last spring. But he sized you up to me as square once, and I believe him. I've seen your face; I like it. And I've seen — why, damn you, hit the high places for salt water and that wife of yours!"

The Kid unmittened and jerked out his sack.

"No; I don't need it," and the tears froze on his cheeks as Westondale gripped the Malemute Kid's hand.

"Then don't spare the dogs; cut them out of the traces as fast as they drop; buy them, and think they're cheap at ten dollars a pound. You can get them at Five Fingers, Little Salmon, and the Hootalinqua. And watch out for wet feet," was the Kid's parting advice. "Keep a-traveling up to twenty-five, but if it gets below that, build a fire and change your socks."

Fifteen minutes had barely elapsed when the jingle of bells announced new arrivals. The door opened and a mounted policeman of the Northwest Territory entered, followed by two half-breed dog-drivers. Like Westondale, they were heavily armed and showed signs of fatigue. The half-breeds had been born to the trail and bore it easily; but the young policeman was badly exhausted. Still, the dogged obstinacy of his kind held him to the pace, and it would continue to hold him till he dropped in his tracks.

"When did Westondale pull out?" he asked. "He stopped here, didn't he?" This was superfluous, for the tracks told their own tale too well.

The Malemute Kid had caught Belden's eye, and Belden, scenting the wind, replied evasively, "A right peart while back."

"Come, my man, speak up," the policeman admonished.

"Yeh seem to want him right smart. Has he ben gittin' cantankerous down Dawson way?"

"Held up Harry McFarland's for forty thousand; exchanged it at the P. C. store for a check on Seattle; and who's to stop the cashing of it if we don't overtake him? When did he pull out?"

Every eye suppressed its excitement, for the Malemute Kid had given the cue. The young officer encountered wooden faces on every hand.

Striding over to Prince, he put the question to him. Though it hurt him, gazing into the frank, earnest face of his fellow countryman, Prince replied inconsequentially on the state of the trail.

But Father Roubeau could not lie. "A quarter of an hour ago," the priest answered; "but he had four hours' rest for himself and his dogs."

"Fifteen minutes' start, and he's fresh! My God!" The poor fellow staggered back, half fainting from exhaustion and disappointment, murmuring something about the run

from Dawson in ten hours and the dogs being played out.

The Malemute Kid forced a mug of punch upon him; then he turned for the door, ordering the dog-drivers to follow. But the warmth and promise of rest were too tempting, and they objected strenuously. The Kid was conversant with their French patois and followed it anxiously.

They swore that the dogs were done up; that Siwash and Babette would have to be shot before the first mile was covered; that the rest were almost as bad; and that it would be better for all hands to rest up.

"Lend me five dogs?" the policeman asked, turning to the Malemute Kid.

But the Kid shook his head.

"I'll sign a check on Captain Constantine for five thousand — here's my papers. I'm authorized to draw at my own discretion."

Again the silent refusal.

"Then I'll requisition them in the name of the Queen."

Smiling incredulously, the Kid glanced at his well-stocked arsenal. The Englishman, realizing his impotency, turned for the door. But the dog-drivers still objecting, he whirled upon them fiercely, calling them women and curs. The swart face of the older half-breed flushed angrily as he drew himself up and promised in good, round terms that he would travel his leader off his legs, and would then be delighted to plant him in the snow.

The young officer — and it required his whole will — walked steadily to the door, exhibiting a freshness he did not possess. But they all knew and appreciated his proud effort; nor could he veil the twinges of agony that shot across his face. Covered with frost, the dogs were curled up in the snow, and it was almost impossible to get them to their feet. The poor brutes whined under the stinging lash, for the dog-drivers were angry and cruel; not till Babette, the leader, was cut from the traces could they break out the sled and get under way.

"A dirty scoundrel and a liar!"

"By gar! him no good!"

"A thief!"

It was evident that they were angry — first, at the way they had been deceived; and second, at the outraged ethics of the Northland, where honesty above all was man's prime jewel. "An' we gave the cuss a hand, after knowin' what he'd did." All eyes were turned accusingly upon the Malemute Kid, who rose from the corner where he had been making Babette comfortable, and silently emptied the bowl for a final round of punch.

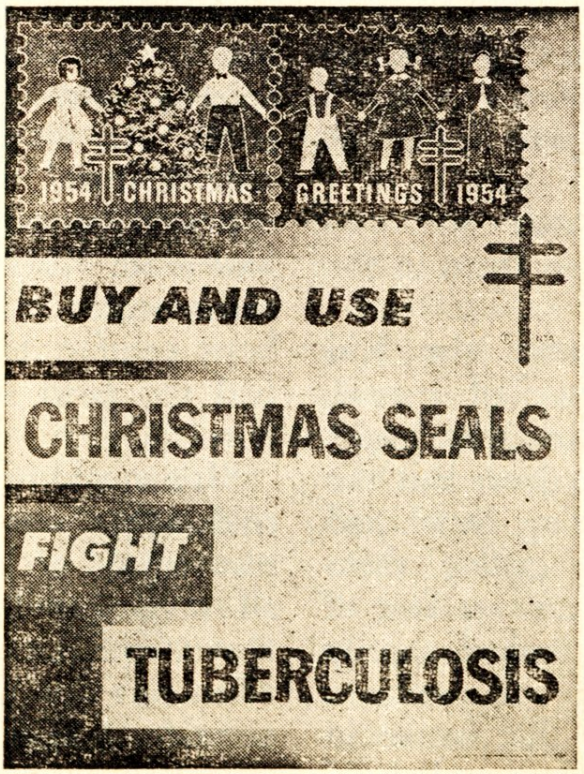
"It's a cold night, boys — a bitter cold night," was the irrelevant commencement of his defense. "You've all traveled trail, and you know what that stands for. Don't jump a dog when he's down. You've only heard one side. A finer man than Jack Westondale never ate from the same pot nor stretched blanket with either you or me.

"Last fall he gave his whole clean-

up, forty thousand, to his partner Joe Castrell to buy in on Dominion. Today he'd be a millionaire. But while he stayed behind at Circle City, what does Castrell do? Goes into McFarland's, jumps the limit, and drops the whole sack. Found him dead in the snow the next day. And poor Jack Westondale laying plans to go out this winter to his wife and the boy he's never seen. You'll notice he took exactly what his partner lost — forty thousand. Well, he's gone out; and what are you going to do about it?"

The Malemute Kid glanced round the circle of his judges, noted the softening of their faces, then raised his mug aloft. "So a health to the man on trail this night; may his grub hold out; may his dogs keep their legs; may his matches never miss fire. God prosper him; good luck go with him; and —"

"Confusion to the Mounted Police!" cried Bettles, to the crash of the empty cups.



"The Telephone Fisherman" (provocative title!) is one of the very best of T. S. Stribling's new stories about Professor Poggioli — and it is decidedly more than a straightforward tale of detection. The air of lightness and good humor, for example, is deceptive: underneath, you will find a sober study of manners — subtle, shrewd, satirical. The plethora of Poggiolian deductions are also somewhat tongue-in-cheek: underneath, however, there is a mature and philosophical story written by a mature and philosophical writer. And the expert blend of the serious and the comic should come as no surprise to Stribling fans: no belly laughs, no loud guffaws — but a chuckling and challenging amusement which is the author's personal and characteristic trademark . . . Have fun!

THE TELEPHONE FISHERMAN

by T. S. STRIBLING

MY FRIEND, PROFESSOR HENRY Poggioli the criminologist, is an incorrigible show-off. When Dawson Bobbs stopped his jalopy in front of my yard, Poggioli looked at him for several moments, then said to Mrs. Alma Lane, his croquet partner, "Your town marshal is looking for me. He has just received a telephone message from a woman reporting a crime on her husband."

Mrs. Lane naturally replied, "Now, Mr. Poggioli, you and Dawson Bobbs have made this up."

I promptly gave Poggioli a character recommendation, for I had seen him do that sort of thing many times. I said, "No, they haven't, Mrs. Alma. Poggioli's analyses are always genuine."

"But how could he possibly know?"

"Well, for instance, he knew that Mr. Bobbs is the Lanesburg marshal by his badge."

"Yes, but that's just a start. How did he . . . ?"

The rest of it, I assured her, was just as simple.

"Mr. Poggioli, won't you please . . . ?"

"I am sure he will," I said. "Instead of hurrying him, you'd better find yourself a soft seat on a bench in the shade."

"You're jealous of him," she said to me in an aside.

"What man wouldn't be," I said, "when he monopolizes the ladies?"

My friend, whose extraordinary genius I am the first to admit, did explain his deductions very simply, just as I was sure he would. He said

he knew by the way Bobbs looked over our group that he was hunting for someone he did not know. The fact that he came to my home indicated that Bobbs had heard there was a criminologist visiting Lanesburg. The marshal did not appear to be an intellectual — therefore his interest in a criminologist must be practical. If that were true, he had just heard of a crime over the telephone . . .

At this point Helen Stevens, the auctioneer's wife, caught him up; she didn't see how the telephone came in.

"That followed very logically, Mrs. Stevens," explained Poggioli. "Mr. Bobbs was clearly in a hurry. He had just heard his news. There is no telegraph line running into Lanesburg, and it has only one mail a day which has not yet arrived. So his information had to come in over the telephone."

At this explanation the astonishment of our Croquet Club decreased, I would say, about 20 per cent. Then Taylor Lane, the banker — Mrs. Alma Lane's husband — asked how Poggioli knew the marshal's message was from a woman.

"Not only did I suspect a woman," replied Poggioli, "but I was almost positive it was some woman telling on her husband. Mr. Bobbs's informant evidently gave him a mere hint and then rang off, or he would never have needed me. If it had been a woman in no way related to the criminal she wouldn't have hinted, she would have given full details. If it had been a man his message would have been terse but complete. Therefore, the message must have come from the criminal's wife."

The astonishment of our club decreased proportionally as Poggioli explained his deductions.

"The wife must have been jealous of some other woman!" exclaimed Mrs. Stevens.

"Good, extremely good, Mrs. Stevens," praised Poggioli, with the pleasure of a college professor who has discovered signs of life in his class.

Poggioli had passed what might be called the Q.E.D. of his original proposition. The interest of the crowd now turned to Marshal Bobbs, who stood in my gate amazed, no doubt, at hearing a stranger tell so much about himself. Mrs. Stevens now turned to the marshal.

"Exactly what did the woman say to you over the phone, Mr. Bobbs?"

"She said Sam Wagham had committed a hanging offense," repeated the marshal, and this corroboration followed so naturally that nobody was surprised at it.

"And what did you want to find out from Mr. Poggioli, Mr. Bobbs?" asked Mrs. Alma.

"Nothin' from him. I wanted to ast Jim Stevens did he know any Sam Wagham around here?"

At this everyone was amazed. "And you weren't looking for Mr. Poggioli at all!" cried Taylor Lane.

"No, I was looking for Sam Wagham!"

"Then what made you study Mr. Poggioli the way you did, Mr. Bobbs?" asked Mrs. Stevens.

"Because I thought maybe he was him," said the marshal, in the complaining tone of a person who is explaining something too simple to require an explanation.

At this, everyone began laughing with the unrestraint of small-town folk. I think Poggioli was a bit disconcerted, but he observed with surprising aplomb that pulling out a single brick didn't necessarily tear down a wall.

Mrs. Stevens, who was good-natured, relieved the situation by saying, "Jim, do you know any Sam Wagham, and where he lives?" And Mr. Stevens, who had the waggishness of an auctioneer, replied, "No, I don't, but undoubtedly Mr. Poggioli does." Mrs. Stevens gave her husband a reproving look.

Poggioli, however, was like a derailed engine that had been put back on the track; he steamed ahead as briskly as ever.

"Mr. Bobbs, are you acquainted with the people of this village?"

"Absolutely ever'body, Mr. Poggioli."

"But Wagham evidently lives in Lanesburg or his wife never would have telephoned you?"

"Mm — mm, y-e-es, I guess that must be so."

"Now there you are," said Poggioli brightly, turning to the group. "That is what I call an indicative contradiction. It is an X marking the spot where you must search."

"What spot?" asked the officer literally.

"One that is clear enough," said Poggioli. "You know every man in town, yet you don't know Sam Wagham who is *in* town. Therefore, Wagham must be a transient, one of your floating population."

Marshal Bobbs was suddenly enlightened. "Oh, you mean the fishermen in their shackboats on the river!"

"You don't know them?"

"No, I don't know them — they come an' go. But it ain't likely they committed any hangin' crime. A little telephone fishin' maybe, but they don't do nothin' of importance."

"But a jealous wife sometimes exaggerates things, Mr. Bobbs," put in Mrs. Stevens, who had started the jealousy idea.

"I'll say they do," nodded Mr. Stevens, mainly at his wife.

"You ought to find him on a houseboat, Mr. Bobbs," suggested Poggioli briskly. "Since his wife has run off and left him, you will find him living alone. All the other boats will have couples on them."

Mrs. Helen Stevens was so pleased with having dipped her thumb into Poggioli's criminological pie that she exclaimed, "Let's all go down and see how Mr. Poggioli's explanation turns out!"

"Come on, come on," invited the marshal heartily. "I debbytize all of you to come down and he'p me arrest Sam Wagham. If he resists, I'll let you-all take a shot apiece at him with my Police Special." And he indicated the gun in his inside coat pocket, where it didn't show.

Under this compulsion of the law, The Croquet Club piled into the marshal's jalopy and set out for the fishermen's boats moored below the village.

There proved to be three of them that week: a down-river boat, a middle boat, and an up-river boat. We took them in that order.

The down-river boat had on it a woman, twin babies, three other assorted children, and a sign, *Fish, 25 cts a poun.*

Mr. Bobbs called out, "Is this Sam Wagham's boat?" No reply came, and when he repeated his question a woman's nasal voice yelled back, "What do you-all want to know fer?"

"Want to buy some fish!"

"We-all sell fish!"

"But is this Sam Wagham's boat?"

"We-all sell fish same as Sam Wagham."

"This isn't the boat," diagnosed Mrs. Stevens. "Let's go to the next one."

"How do you know it isn't, Helen?" asked Mrs. Lane.

"Because if it had been she would have said, 'Yes, you-all come aboard.'"

The rest of them laughed at Mrs. Stevens's imitation of the poor white dialect, but it didn't amuse me. It has always seemed to me if the rest of the country could express itself with the delicate pronominal precision of the Southern poor whites, it would represent a considerable advance for the less vocal masses of Americans.

The next shackboat was empty. A crude pigsty stood on the bank in front of it. The bottom of the sty was still muddy, but it had no pigs in it. Bobbs was about to drive on when Poggioli suggested we go aboard.

"What's the use lookin' in a empty boat for a missin' man?" asked the marshal.

"Trained men like Mr. Poggioli," I answered for the criminologist, "will observe details, Mr. Bobbs, which an ordinary man would miss."

"I could see the sense to it," said Bobbs, "if we was lookin' fer whiskey, but not if we're lookin' fer a man."

Nevertheless, we teetered across a narrow, cleated plank, got aboard, and looked in the cabin. Mrs. Lane said it was cleaner than she could get her maid to keep her home.

"This has been kept by a Northern woman," diagnosed Poggioli. When Mrs. Stevens inquired into the why and wherefore of this, he added, "To be exact, it has been occupied by a Vermont woman. Those are the sort of curtains Vermont women put over their windows."

"She is not very particular about her bedstead," criticized Mrs. Alma Lane, who was an actively defensive pro-Southerner.

Poggioli went in and examined the bedpost, which had a missing finial. "This knob was broken off recently," he stated, "at about the same time the occupants took their pig out of the sty."

"What pig and what sty?" asked Jim Stevens.

"I don't know whose . . . yet. The sty is there on the bank."

"Mr. Poggioli," asked Mrs. Alma, "what connection has the broken bedpost with the sty?"

"None that I know of, Mrs. Lane, except in point of time. Everything that occurs at about the same time may possibly have some causal connection; then, of course, they may not have any such connection."

Poggioli always answered such questions in the most uninteresting way, but of course he had been a professor in a university for a great many years of his life.

At this point we were interrupted by a woman calling out with an incisive Northern pronunciation, "What are you persons doing on that boat?"

The moment we heard her, Mrs. Lane said to Poggioli, "There's your Northern woman, but she's on the wrong boat."

We turned briskly out on deck, for the shouter was in no pleasant temper. Marshal Bobbs called back to say that we were looking for fish. We could now see the woman standing on the aft deck of the up-river boat.

"Where did you persons expect to find the fish," she inquired with Yankee pointedness, "in the bedroom?"

"We wasn't expectin' to fin' the fish in here, Ma'am," explained Mr. Bobbs with hill courtesy. "We was hopin' to find Mr. Wagham in here an' git the fish from him."

"Well, you can come on up an' 'git' your fish from him up here," mimicked the up-river woman.

"She is not only a Vermont woman," said Poggioli, "but at some time in her life she has taught in a girls' private school in the East."

Our two women glanced at each other and lifted their brows to indicate how clever the marshal was to get at the identity of his man without asking his name. The Northern woman naturally suspected no trap; she asked us to come on up and Mr. Wagham would attend to us.

As we got into the car and rode up to the third boat, Mrs. Alma said a little uncertainly, "I thought we were going to find Mr. Wagham on a boat by himself." But we had no time to develop this thought before we were getting out again.

We found a hulking, whiskery, leathery man aboard the up-river boat who answered to the name of Wagham. As he came out on deck the woman, who wore a snood, went into the cabin where we could glimpse her through the door, returning to work. Mr. Wagham said, with a touch of apology in his Southern hill voice, "She's a workin' womern. Well, how much fish do you-all want?"

We skirted around another pigsty with a sow in it. "What sort of fish you got?" asked the marshal.

Mr. Wagham picked up a dip net and began stirring in a fish box in front of his home. "I reckon you-all'll want cat. I got any kind an' size of cat you want — yaller cat, channel cat, spotted cat . . ."

"Ever'body here wants a two or

three poun' cat, don't they?" asked Mr. Bobbs of us.

We guessed that for some reason it was expedient for us to want "a two or three pound cat" — so we all did.

"Gertie," called Mr. Wagham to the woman in the cabin, "can you step out here a minute an' string these cat when I dip 'em out?"

The woman said, "Certainly, Sam," her clipped enunciation sounding almost droll after the way her husband talked. She came out on deck again.

"All them cat?" queried Mr. Bobbs peering into the fishbox.

"Mm — mm. Yeh, they're all cat. Say, you-all want jest one apiece?"

"B'lieve I'll take two," said Mr. Bobbs. "I've got a frien' who'll want a good cat, if you'll let me telephone him." He indicated an old-fashioned wall telephone fastened to a plank leaning against the front of the cabin.

"Why, I'm afeard that phone ain't connected," said Mr. Wagham.

"Oh, it ain't," said Mr. Bobbs, and he stopped.

Poggioli stood surveying the peaceful scene. "You'll excuse me, Mr. Wagham, but you two certainly are a congenial couple."

"Mm — mm, I guess we air at that, don't you, Gert?"

The woman said, "I feel that way, Sam. I don't know how you feel."

"Naw, I'm shore you don't," and the grizzled fisherman laughed.

"How long have you been married, Mr. Wagham?" continued Poggioli, with the admiration everyone feels for a happy couple.

"Mm — mm, six year," said the shackboat man.

"And where did you meet your wife?"

"In Decatur, Alabama."

"Right up the river a hundred or so miles and floated down?"

"That's right," said Sam.

"Jim," said Mrs. Helen Stevens to her husband idyllically, "why can't we live on a fish boat, too?"

With that we paid for our fish and went back to the car, each of us carrying a cat on a string. On the way Mrs. Alma Lane said, "I never would have dreamed detective work was like this. What's this we've got — evidence?"

"A kind of evidence," said the marshal dryly.

"Evidence what of — murder?"

"Naw, the little ol' misdemeanor of telephoning fishes. It was like that fool woman on the boat to telephone me her husband committed a hangin' crime, then rush back to him an he'p him out when I come to git him."

"Mr. Bobbs, what do you mean by 'telephoning fishes'?" asked Mrs. Lane.

"That's what he uses that telephone fer on deck. I knowed it wasn't connected. It's a new way of ketchin' fish an' it's agin' the law. All you do is to throw yore telephone wire in the water an' ring yore bell, an' up floats all the fish in yore neighborhood. I mean up floats all the slick fishes like cats an' eel. Scaly fishes like carp an' buffalo, it don't do nothin' to. That's why his box was full of cat."

Such was the mystery we had come to fathom. It was disappointing — like hunting a lion and jumping a rabbit.

"Are you going to arrest them?" asked Mrs. Stevens.

"Mm—mm . . . naw. I'm not the game warden. Besides, I've telephoned up fish myself. Of course, I don't want you-all to mention that."

"Why did his wife phone you word that Wagham had committed a hanging offense, then come back and help him with the very crime she was complaining about?"

"Oh, that's jest like a woman," said Bobbs, "mad one minute, over it the next."

Poggioli interposed, "I can't quite agree with you, Mr. Bobbs, in the light of the other evidence."

"What other evidence? All the evidence they is point to Wagham's guilt. Telephone box settin' out in plain view, his fishbox full o' nothin' but cat . . ."

"It struck me, in the light of the other evidence," persisted Poggioli, politely but didactically, "that those things may have been put out as a blind to make you *think* he had been telephoning catfish, as you call it, and to hide a crime of violence. Possibly murder."

This came as a shock to everyone. "What in the worl' makes you think that?" asked the marshal.

"Primarily, his *stressing* the idea of telephoning fish."

Mr. Bobbs blinked his eyes. "What do you think he is trying to hide?"

"His wife practically accused him of murder over the phone."

"Yeh, but she's come back to him, as honey-dovey as pie."

"I'm certain she is not his wife," said Poggioli.

"What do you mean?" asked Mrs. Lane, with a woman's quick interest in such things.

Poggioli turned to her. "Did you ever know a wife of six years' standing to stop in the middle of housework and help her husband string fish without a complaint?"

Everyone saw this at once. "She really isn't his wife!" agreed both women.

"I don't think so. And the rest of the evidence corroborates my suspicion."

"What is the rest of the evidence?" asked Taylor Lane.

"The pigsties, the clean and unclean boats, and the fact that the woman owns the lower houseboat while the man owns the upper."

When pressed by everyone to explain his explanation, Poggioli began with the last item.

"I knew the woman owned the middle boat, because when we were on it, it was she who shouted down for us to get off. If the man had owned it he would have walked down and inquired into the matter. So, you see, although the two are living together they are not married; and they have a very clear understanding of what property belongs to each of them."

"Now, what's the next point?"

asked Mrs. Stevens, evidently determining to make a better showing on that?

"The next," said Poggioli, smiling, "are the pigsties."

We fell into a deep study over this problem, but none of us could make anything out of it.

"The two sties," elucidated Poggioli, "show that Wagham and the woman intend to make their relation permanent. The pen in front of the middle boat was old and empty, the one beside the Wagham boat was recently constructed and had a hog in it. Evidently when Wagham's wife left him, this woman's husband deserted her and she came up to Wagham's boat."

"How do you know she had a husband, Mr. Poggioli?" interrupted the banker.

"Because women never live alone in houseboats; men do occasionally, but women never do."

"Mm — mm, I follow you there. Now, go ahead about the sties."

"There's nothing more to it. The woman brought the pig up from her sty because she was sure this new arrangement with Wagham will be permanent and that her own husband would never return."

A faint grue came over us at the end of Poggioli's statement. Mrs. Lane asked, "What do you suppose happened to her husband?"

"Since the present Mrs. Wagham, in fleeing her first husband, telephoned Marshal Bobbs that Sam Wagham had committed a hanging offense, the most natural conclusion to come to is that Wagham killed him. It could be something else, but it isn't likely."

The simplicity of Poggioli's reasoning amazed us. Indeed, whenever I heard his conclusions I wondered why I hadn't thought of them myself.

"Are those all the implications of the affair?" inquired the banker.

"We could never possibly analyze *all* the implications," said Poggioli professionally, "because every new arrangement readjusts all the units in it. Of course, the greater part are unobservable by the human senses. In this instance, the very clean downriver boat and the woman beginning to clean up Wagham's boat show conclusively that she had just moved in with Wagham, and that fact may have some bearing on the crime itself. But I can't follow that indication to any positive conclusion; it simply leads off into the unknown."

Marshal Bobbs wanted to know if Wagham murdered the woman's husband with a gun or a knife? Poggioli thought neither; Wagham was not the type of man, Poggioli said, to use either a knife or a gun; the broken bedpost suggested a rough and tumble affair.

The Marshal was distraught. "How're we ever goin' to git a case aginst him with nothin' but pigpens an' bedpost knobs and a house-cleanin' Yankee woman for proof?"

Poggioli made a gesture. "Legal proof is an entirely different matter, I know. All I can suggest is to sub-

poena the real Mrs. Wagham and have her testify as to what she knows."

"Yeh, subpoeny the real — Where *is* the real Mrs. Wagham?"

"I would say she is in Decatur, Alabama, Mr. Bobbs."

Our whole Croquet Club wanted to know Poggioli's source of information on this point.

"That was why I asked Mr. Wagham when and where he had been married," explained the psychologist. "I was sure that on the spur of the question he would tell me where he married his real wife. The first Mrs. Wagham is obviously a poor housekeeper, suggesting that she may have come from some indolent Southern family. The condition of her houseboat confirms Wagham's statement that he was married in Decatur, Alabama. Since such a woman could not and would not make a living for herself, she undoubtedly has returned to her people in Decatur."

After a while Poggioli's prescience palls. He was like an adding machine: punch the numbers and receive the correct answer.

Marshal Bobbs said, "I'm going to Decatur and git that woman, then I'm comin' back here with her an' hang Sam Wagham!" After driving on a little further he cautioned us, "Looky here, don't none of you-uns talk none of this; it would jest make it harder for me to ketch ever'body an git 'em together in Square Smith's courtroom."

We all promised we wouldn't discuss the Wagham case. But I am afraid Mrs. Lane and Mrs. Stevens did mention our junket confidentially to some of their women friends, and they in turn confidentially to other women friends, and so on. I am putting this on the women purely through custom. Our expedition had not been particualy exciting, but it was a very talkable affair; of course, the men could have discussed it just as easily as the women. But the upshot was the same: Wagham received news of his danger from some source. He did not run away, as I think Marshal Bobbs anticipated. He did a much more devastating thing from a social and sociological standpoint: he retained the Honorable H. Hall Hickerson of Savannah to defend him.

The Honorable H. Hall Hickerson was a criminal lawyer famous for never having lost a case. An admiring people praised and honored him for having set free in their midst sundry thieves, firebugs, burglars, murderers, and whatnot. Whether he really never lost a case or not, I don't know; but as a dramatic counterbalance to the invincible H. Hall Hickerson there arose on every tongue an equal fame for Poggioli. He, it was said, was a detective who had never failed to hang his man. I knew for a fact this was not true. Poggioli had never convicted anybody for anything. He pursued his investigations purely for his own entertainment and, I suspect, to amaze and bewilder his various audiences. Now his deadliness arose purely as an echo of the Honorable H. Hall Hickerson's invincibility.

The result was that on the day of Wagham's trial one of the largest crowds Lanesburg had ever known funneled into our town.

Nor was it an altogether peaceable gathering. Friction immediately broke out between the partisans of the Honorable H. Hall Hickerson and those of Poggioli. The Poggioli men were the scattering of Yankees in and around Lanesburg, while Hickerson's adherents were, of course, the native-born. Several quarrels arose, including a few street fights over the relative merits of the two heroes, but usually the antagonism took the form of betting. Gambling may be looked upon with disfavor by press and pulpit, but there is no telling how many public affrays it has prevented. No partisan is going to club the opponent from whom he hopes to collect a wager, although he may feel like doing both. It was fortunate that Wagham's preliminary trial was not going to be held before a jury, for there were not twelve unprejudiced men in all Lanesburg.

Squire Smith heard the case in the lock-up down the alley from the Universal Feed, Furniture & Undertaking Company. Marshal Bobbs summoned The Croquet Club as witnesses — not that he ever used us, but merely to get us front seats in the lock-up; other auditors stood behind us, while the main crowd swarmed about the doors and barred windows and filled up the alley.

The only witness used was the real Mrs. Wagham, whom Marshal Bobbs had brought back from Decatur. She was a pretty woman in a kind of wild-deer way, the sort a man picks out in a crowd, vaguely regretting that her good looks are wasted on a woman of her class.

The warrant Marshal Bobbs had written out for Sam Wagham was complicated: it charged Wagham with murder in the first degree, in the second degree, with voluntary manslaughter, with involuntary manslaughter — for he had no idea what sort of testimony Mrs. Wagham would offer.

There was no State's Attorney in the case; there seldom is in a preliminary hearing. So the great criminologist, Professor Henry Poggioli, conducted the State's side.

I am embarrassed to relate that the odds on the Honorable H. Hall Hickerson gradually went up as the trial progressed. The great criminal lawyer objected to nearly every question the great criminologist put and to nearly every answer Mrs. Wagham gave. When Poggioli asked her if she were the wife of Sam Wagham, the defendant, she faltered out that she "reckoned she was" and the Honorable H. Hall promptly objected to this "on the ground that it sounds like hearsay evidence!"

Poggioli, however, pressed the point. "What do you mean, Mrs. Wagham, by 'you reckon you are'?"

"I mean I don't know sence Gertie Longmire moved in."

"Did you move out when Mrs. Longmire moved in?"

The Honorable H. Hall Hickerson lifted a bored voice. "Your Honor, I object to the prosecution leading the witness. Let her tell her own straightforward story with no suggestions from anyone."

This disconcerted Poggioli. "All right, Mrs. Wagham, tell your story."

"What story?"

"Why you left Mr. Wagham."

"Mm — mm. . . . Hit was because he traded me off."

"He did what!"

"Traded me off to Bill Longmire for Gertie there."

A sensation buzzed through the courtroom as the Honorable H. Hall got to his feet.

"Your Honor, I object. My client is indicted for murder in all its various degrees. I don't know what this woman means by 'trading her off' — my client is not arraigned for illegal merchandising, merely for murder. So I object to both the question and answer."

But the court had become interested along with the crowd. "Go on, Mrs. Wagham, what do you mean by Sam 'tradin' you off'?"

The woman spread her shapely hands. "Jedge, it's like this; me'n Sam got on fine tull we landed alongside of Bill and Gertie Longmire. . . ."

"Mrs. Wagham, will you confine your answer to the question His Honor asked you?"

Mrs. Wagham became silent; like many simple persons she could not pick a particular answer out of her experience, she had to tell everything.

The Judge started her again. "You said until Bill and Gertie Longmire landed alongside of you-all."

"Oh, yeh, yeh. Then Sam begun to complain about me: Why couldn't I cook like Gertie, why couldn't I keep house like Gertie, why couldn't I do this an' that like Gertie? I got sick an' tired of hit an fin'ly one day I says to him, 'If you think Gertie Longmire is so much smarter'n I am, whyn't you trade me off fer her?' He said Bill wouldn't trade. I says, 'I bet he would,' for I seen Bill noticin' me though Sam hadn't. . . ."

"Your Honor, I object! All this is utterly irrelevant, superfluous —"

"Go on with your testimony, Mrs. Wagham. Did Sam an' Bill ever ackshelly trade?"

"They shore did, Jedge. Bill brung Gertie up halfway betwixt our boats an' Sam brung me and they swopped us an' me an' Gertie went to each other's boats."

It required minutes for Squire Smith to obtain order and hush the laughter, the gasps of horror, and the ejaculations of amazement in his court.

Poggioli, as chief interrogator, interposed again. "How did this trading of wives lead to Bill Longmire's murder, Mrs. Wagham?"

The Honorable H. H. H. jumped to his feet.

"Your Honor, the counsel for the State is putting words in the mouth of the witness. She has said nothing about murder!"

"How did the men start quarreling

after you women done all you could to please 'em?" asked the judge of his own volition.

The woman hesitated; the court rapped for order so that she could be heard. Then Gertie Longmire, who was sitting beside Sam in the dock, spoke up in her clipped voice, "Go on, admit it, Sarah. Admit my Bill wanted to trade back quick enough and your Sam wouldn't do it!"

The pretty woman nodded reluctantly and her answer was lost in another outbreak of laughter from the room, windows, and doors.

Poggioli lifted his voice. "Is that how the murder happened, Mrs. Wagham — Bill Longmire trying to trade you back for Gertie Longmire?"

Mrs. Wagham flushed as the courtroom quieted for her answer. "Yeh, Bill brought me up to Sam's boat; he said he had come to swap back. Sam said he wouldn't do it. They argued, then got to cussin', an' fin'ly Bill grabbed Gertie an' begun draggin' her back to his boat, yellin' out it was against the laws of God an' man the way we was doin'. All three of 'em went into Bill's boat together. Pretty soon I heard a big rumpus in there an' Gertie yellin', 'Sam, you killed him!' Then I cleared out. I half run and half walked to town, caught a truck goin' out to the highway, bought a ticket for Decatur, an' then while I was waitin' for the bus to come, I telephoned Marshal Bobbs what had happened."

When Squire Smith rapped down the uproar he asked, "Is that all?"

"That's all, Jedge."

"Mr. Hickerson," directed the court, "you may take the witness."

The great criminal lawyer lifted a declining hand. "No questions, Your Honor. The defense rests."

"Rests?"

"Yes, Your Honor, and the defense moves that all the testimony the court has just heard be stricken from the record."

"On what grounds, Mr. Hickerson?"

"On the grounds that Sarah Wagham is the wife of Sam Wagham and a wife cannot testify against her husband."

A queer kind of shock went through the courtroom. The oddness of it arose from the fact that everyone knew the point of law but somehow had overlooked it in the strain of the trial. Now the ease with which the great criminal lawyer quashed the indictment lifted him to new heights in the public esteem and caused especial rejoicing among the men who had played him for a favorite. When the alleyway learned the news the lucky sportsmen whooped and hollered and beat their hats against boxes, telephone poles, and, in extreme cases, the ground.

For once, I believe Poggioli was really disconcerted. Usually he had not the slightest interest in convicting a wrongdoer; indeed, he had never actually brought a criminal to justice and had never attempted to. I had always supposed that his interest in crime was purely intellectual, following the tradition of our finest amateur sleuths. Now a painful suspicion filled

me that he really got his pleasure out of astonishing his audiences with his feats of ratiocination, and when his audience were not intellectuals and did not appreciate his amazing mental performances, he was driven to the vulgar objective of hanging his man. I had never before realized that my idol had feet of clay. My disillusionment was especially painful, for it came suddenly and without warning when Poggioli arose in court and asked Squire Smith to recess the court and give the State opportunity to produce the dead man's body. What a sordid alternative for my usually transcendental criminologist!

The Honorable H. Hall Hickerson moved the case be dismissed, and I for one heartily agreed with him. But the bettors who had put their money on Poggioli were tremendously excited; out in the alleyway they argued they should be given a sporting chance for their money. A general sentiment that this was only fair gradually crept through the crowd. Of course, this had no influence whatever on Squire Smith beyond the fact that our J.P.'s hold elective offices; at any rate, the Honorable H. Hall Hickerson's motion was dismissed.

At this a new rash of betting broke out. The whole trial now hung on finding the body. There was no question but that Wagham had murdered Longmire and flung his body into the river. The crux of the case now emerged: Would Poggioli find the body, and if so, how? The odds teetered now up, now down. The Lane County spectators figured that a great modern criminologist would have some new hydro-electric device for placing a finger instantly on the drowned man. Hill Davis, who ran a garage and had four mechanics working for him, picked on the exact term, "hydro-electric device," because it sounded to him like something that would work under water. At this, the odds on Poggioli went up. But as soon as the crowd flowed down to the river bank and learned that Marshal Bobbs was going to resort to the old-fashioned method of dynamiting the river to raise the body of the missing man, the betting evened off again. The officials always dynamited the river to bring up drowned persons but nobody had ever seen one actually brought up. However, there was one good feature about dynamiting the river for the drowned: it had high entertainment value.

Marshal Bobbs deputized three mussel-shell scows and their crews to handle the court and three well-drillers to handle the dynamite; then we all set out to raise up the dead. We began above the town and floated down. When the muffled thumps of the dynamite began piling up mounds of roiled water in the blue-green river, the crowd on the banks saw dead men everywhere. They shouted, "Yander it is, Mr. Bobbs!"

"I see it! Looky yonder, Square Smith!"

"There she floats right at you!"

But it all turned out to be dead fish or débris from the bottom.

In the midst of all this, the boat containing Mr. Bobbs and his two prisoners, Wagham and Mrs. Longmire, and their attorney drew by our scow. The Honorable H. Hall had a request to make of the court. He asked the court's permission for his client to pick up the dead fish. He explained that since Wagham had been unjustly accused and his good name libeled, the least the State could do to repair these injuries was to allow his client to recover and sell the dynamited fish. Squire Smith was a good-hearted man, lenient toward criminals, or he never would have been elected squire; so he told the men in the opposite scow to go ahead, he didn't want to waste any fish.

They proceeded when a very shocking situation came to light. Wagham brought the fish to an ice truck which in the confusion had parked unnoticed at the regular boat landing. When this obviously premeditated arrangement fell under the eyes of the crowd, an astonishing variety of opinions were bawled out from the bank.

"What kind of a skin game is this?"

"That crook, Hall Hickerson, worked this whole racket so Wagham could pay his fee!"

"Watch 'em, Mr. Bobbs, they'll stow the dead man on ice an' sell *him*, too!"

"Call the game warden an' have him arrest the whole shootin' match!"

The people were genuinely angry that somebody other than themselves was cleaning the river of fish. Squire Smith was also incensed. He did not object to Wagham having the fish so long as it was purely incidental; but the moment he saw the ice truck and realized it had been planned, he was outraged. He called out to the mussel digger who ran our scow, "Ketch up with them fish thieves. I'm goin' to put a stop to this business!"

I asked Squire Smith what he was going to do with the fish — let them spoil?

"Naw, I ain't goin' to let 'em spoil. I'm goin' to distribute them free among these people. They're the people's fish an' I'm goin' to give 'em back to the people!"

I began to see why the Squire had been elected Justice of the Peace these past eighteen years. His heart went out to the people, at the right time and in the right place. We sped our boat toward Marshal Bobbs's scow on our patriotic errand.

Now, I don't really know if this too was prearranged on the part of the Honorable H. Hall Hickerson or was improvised, but the moment we came within call he began waving his hand and shouting to us to help them drag Mr. Wagham's net out of the way of the dynamiters, so it wouldn't be damaged.

The court was outraged again. "Us drag it out! Why should we drag it out?"

"This whole operation, Your Honor, is under your direction!"

"Then I direct Sam Wagham to git his own net out of the way. These fish he's pickin' up, I can't give 'em

to him. They belong to the people!"

"Very well, Your Honor, all we wanted was your authority to drag Sam's net out of the way." And Bobbs's boat turned and set off down the river.

My friend, Professor Poggioli, the great criminologist, had sat in the stern of our scow all through this, wrapped in what I can only call analytical divination or some such paradoxical state. Suddenly he came out of his trance, and said sharply to Squire Smith, "Help him move his net!"

"Help that —? Let him move it hisse'f!"

Poggioli turned to the mussel digger who was running our scow. "Lend Marshal Bobbs's boat a hand!" he ordered. "Cut between it and the net!"

There is an authority about Poggioli in moments like this that is not to be denied. Our boat cut in, and Squire Smith did not object.

When we hitched onto their line, Bobbs's and Hickerson's boats had already dragged the net forty or fifty yards. I had not the faintest notion what all this stir was about until Poggioli turned to the justice himself and snapped, "Here, Squire, lend a hand. Let's raise this net and see what Sam Wagham has caught!"

I must say that single sentence clarified the whole macabre situation for all of us. Poggioli explained to me afterwards how he had come to see the truth. Wagham's cold-bloodedness in asking for the dead fish and his having arranged in advance for an ice truck revealed the fisherman's crime. Then, as corroborative proof, there was the box of catfish which Wagham tried to pretend he had caught by telephone fishing; Poggioli knew cats were a scavenger fish and would be attracted by exactly such bait — a dead body.

Strangely enough, neither Wagham nor the Honorable H. Hall Hickerson seemed at all perturbed at our boatman cutting inside and running the net. They came up in their own boat to watch us, and as the telltale contents of the net appeared above the surface of the water, the Honorable H. Hall Hickerson actually stepped over into our scow to inspect it.

He shook his head. "Your Honor," he said, "isn't it too bad that the court has no means whatever of identifying these pathetic human bones! Whom did they belong to? No one knows, and there is no way to find out. You see, the net tore as it dragged along the bottom, and somehow it picked up these old disarticulated bones. I wish I knew their origin. If it be an accidental drowning, I would hasten as a patriotic Southerner to telegraph the next of kin; if it be a crime, I would be the first, as an American citizen, to demand that the culprit be brought to justice. But as I say, all that is in the realm of idle speculation. All this honorable court can do is to convey these remains to the city cemetery, bury them, and carve on a headstone: *Name Unknown, Sex Unknown, Age Unknown, Date of*

Death Unknown. Found in the Tennessee River and Buried in the Lanesburg Cemetery by order of Malcolm R. Smith, Justice of the Peace for the Second Civil District of Lane County, Tennessee. R.I.P."

It was a moving funeral oration. I almost forgot that Longmire had been murdered, in my sympathy for his anonymous and lonely death.

Poggioli, however, was not victimized by Southern eloquence. He fished the skull out of the net, turned it over in his hands, and said factually, "Your Honor, I want you to notice the fracture in this temporal bone; it has been crushed in by some rounded object. Let us take it to the Longmire houseboat and fit it onto one of the three remaining knobs on Longmire's bedposts. I want to show you where Sam Wagham lifted Bill Longmire bodily, smashed him down on his own bedstead, and killed him!"

Naturally, the Honorable H. Hall Hickerson hooted at such sleazy proof, such diaphanous accusations. But when it turned out that the knobs, any one of them, actually did fit the fracture in the skull, Squire Smith bound Wagham and Mrs. Longmire over to the Circuit Court under a five-hundred dollar cash bond. The fisherman, I feel certain, could have made the bond if the Squire hadn't changed his mind about the fish and given them away to the crowd. But by the time Wagham had paid the rental for his ice truck and the fee to his lawyer, he didn't have enough cash left; so he and Mrs. Longmire had to spend the entire summer in the hot Lane County jail, which isn't a pleasant place to be, anyway.

The whole affair was a run of bad luck for Wagham. I am sure he never meant to kill Longmire; he was not that sort of a man. Then, if only his lawyer had told Squire Smith in an eloquent sort of way that Wagham had gone to the trouble to save the State's fish, or something like that, everything would have come out all right for him: the Squire never would have got mad and given away the fish; Wagham could then have made his bond; and by the time Quarterly Court came around, the two defendants would have been gone and forgotten, the money would have been in the court's pocket, and the whole case would have blown over.

Marian Lloyd Dix's "Probation" is one of the thirteen "first stories" which won special awards in EQMM's Ninth Annual Contest . . . First, about the author: she was born and went to school in Los Angeles. Looking backward, she now realizes that like so many writers she has worked at numerous kinds of jobs: at nineteen, editor of a weekly advertising throw-away for a chain-food company; girl-of-odd-work on newspapers; singer with a dance band and in night clubs; little theater and summer stock. She once left a high-priced secretarial job to work for almost nothing in a Hollywood motion picture studio (she wanted to see real *writers up close and learn what it took to be a scenarist; she learned; it took hard work). She sold a movie script; the picture was never released. She wrote some children's plays; the purchaser left town before making payment. She wrote some television shows for an independent company; they never paid. Miss Dix's luck wasn't* all *bad, so she kept on.*

Some years ago she was psychoanalyzed. That began to pull her together, to focus and channel her efforts. Where previously, like Stephen Leacock's horseman, she was riding off in all directions, now she settled down. Now she is a wife and homemaker; a writer with a novel in progress, two plays in outline, and short stories a-growing; and an actress, working with her husband, the stage director and artist, Clark Smith. Settled down, indeed!

And now about her first published story: harsher critics than your Editors might be captious about certain technical aspects of Miss Dix's story, but the sternest critic could not deny the author's honesty and sincerity, the importance of her theme, and the crying need for this kind of story to be published. It is the sympathetic and understanding tale of three boys who narrowly missed being sent to reform school. The boys are not criminals, yet there is a crime in the story — a crime so big, so obvious, that perhaps it illustrates that old caveat lector *about not seeing the forest for the trees . . .*

PROBATION

by MARIAN LLOYD DIX

THERE WERE THREE OF THEM AND they walked in softly, not quite on their tiptoes but unlike little boys. More like hunters who were often in the wilds. Or Indians . . . yes, like Indians, she thought as she watched them come in.

She was studying to be a probation

officer and this was one of her first tasks: interviewing the boys back from Reforestation Camp — the little boys too young, the Chief Probation Officer had pleaded when he launched the Reforestation Camp campaign, to go to The Michaels.

Sylvia had visited The Michaels, the state reform school, in her junior year at college. She remembered all too clearly the boys who looked like old men and who seemed to smile, if they ever did smile, only to gain favor from an attendant. And she had agreed with the Chief Probation Officer that there *were* boys too young to be sent to The Michaels.

It was 11 o'clock and the dreary morning stood at headache-time when the three boys padded in. It wasn't professional for Sylvia to indulge in that sweeping emotional reaction to them. She could see that Mr. Caldwell, the Head Counsellor from Reforestation Camp Number Three, wasn't at all emotional about the three boys.

But then, she excused herself, it was Jose Ramirez who was really responsible for her emotionalism. The rules of her sociology professor and her child-psych professor notwithstanding, Jose Ramirez was the kind of boy to upset any student's clinical attitude. Doubtless it was the very fact that she was putting Jose's card into the huge *Ramirez* file that made the earlier interview with Jose still so vivid in her mind — and which now made her reaction to the three boys entering her office the very opposite of the detached and objective view she *should* have. Jose had shaken her; he had left her vulnerable to emotion.

Jose was a golden little boy with eyes as soft as those of a fawn Sylvia had once seen in the park. His eyes had glowed softly and pleadingly as he looked up at Mr. Caldwell.

"Finally finished, didn't we, Jose?" Mr. Caldwell had said.

"Yes, sir."

"Glad to be going home?"

Jose hadn't answered. Mr. Caldwell leaned forward and squeezed the boy's shoulder. He spoke to Sylvia warmly of Jose.

"Jose here was Mayor before he left Camp, Miss —"

"Lane," Sylvia said. "I'm new here, Mr. Caldwell. My name is Sylvia Lane."

Mr. Caldwell smiled, his hand strong and white on Jose's bony shoulder. "And who is coming down for Jose, Miss Lane?"

She looked at the file, at the tightly typed page beginning *Case History*, and read, "Nearest responsible relative, sister, Mrs. Maria (Rudolfo) Delsa."

Mr. Caldwell was reading over her shoulder. "Oh, Maria," he said. He looked around the room.

"Mrs. Delsa," Sylvia called out.

A full-bosomed young woman with long inky hair and a magenta dress swathed tight around her hips swung toward the desk.

"Hello, Maria," Mr. Caldwell said.

"He's ready to go?" The girl didn't

look at Mr. Caldwell or at Sylvia, or even at her brother.

"That's right," Mr. Caldwell answered. "You'll be home nights to — to keep Jose company, Maria?"

The girl looked at him then. Above her head bent over the file, Sylvia could feel Maria's eyes — not like Jose's, not like a fawn's — but angry and black; angry and cold as the eyes of a snake, cornered and eager to strike but without hope of hitting the mark.

"Where you think I go, Señor Caldwell? Dancing? With three kids and no more Relief if I leave them?"

Sylvia quickly scanned the file. After the name, Mrs. Maria (Rudolfo) Delsa, she read, "Age: 21" . . . younger than Sylvia herself, and three children of her own besides Jose.

The boy was looking at his sister with no expression.

"You ready?" she asked him. "You ready to come home and be good boy?"

He shrugged and his face was empty, like the faces of those who learn too early to blank out emotion.

"Goodbye, Mr. Caldwell," he said, the remnants of a child's laughter faint around his mouth and hero-worship in his eyes.

"*Buenas días*, Jose. And watch those fingers."

Sylvia looked back at the *Case History* . . . Jose had been convicted of petty theft and his sentence to Reforestation Camp had lasted unusually long because he was the boy who ran away. Twice. Each time on the last night of his term. There were thirteen weeks in a term and if a boy ran away at any time during the thirteen weeks, he had to go back and begin his term over. The Reforestation Camps were Honor Camps where the boys themselves were elected to offices — first, janitor; then fireman; and on up to the highest posts; Jose had become Mayor. To be Mayor, a boy had to be approved by the Camp Counsellors before his election. Jose had been approved and elected twice. He had never committed a misdemeanor during either term — not until each last night when he had run away. Though Jose was fleet and small and wary, he was caught easily. Despite his knowledge of trapping and hunting lore learned at Camp, and the stealth and cunning of a slum child who must always run and escape, he had been caught near the Camp both times.

It had been Mr. Caldwell who first understood. "Jose ran away because he *wanted* to get caught, *wanted* to begin his term again. It's simple enough — the boy doesn't want to go home."

Jose had admitted it when Mr. Caldwell questioned him. "This is the first time I got sheets on my bed and a bed by myself and for breakfast something besides frijoles and chili."

"Jose," Mr. Caldwell had said, "if you don't go home, some other fellow will have to go to The Michaels. Some fellow who should have a chance to come here to Camp Three. Suppose some fellow at Camp had done

that when it was *your* turn to come up here? Then you would have had to go to The Michaels instead. What would you think of that fellow?"

"I guess," Jose had said, not looking up, "I guess I'd hate him, all right."

So, as Sylvia put the official stamp on Jose Ramirez' *Case History*, and filed it away, she had looked unhappy. It was her first case, and it was a painful and serious business. Jose was only eleven.

Now he was going out the door with his sister, Maria — going home. Maria and Jose walked far apart, the girl with her buttocks kneading the magenta crepe of her skirt and Jose walking as tall as he could, remembering Mr. Caldwell's words, "Watch those fingers," and breathing hard inside him, "I will, Mr. Caldwell. I ain't — aren't — ever gonna steal again, so help me Jesus."

Watching them leave, Sylvia first felt that unseemly emotion she was tempted to call hunger or weariness — or Monday morning blues in the cramped quarters of the Juvenile Probation Office . . .

The three boys walked in with their hands linked, smiling and without self-consciousness. It was because Jose had so unnerved her, Sylvia told herself, that the sight of the three disturbed her so sharply.

The one on the far end was slight and shy. He was a handsome boy, his hair still golden even after thirteen weeks in the mountain sun. One of his delicate hands lay white in the huge black hand of the boy in the middle. The second of the pair of black hands held another white hand which showed square and blunt just under a frayed sleeve.

"Richard Tarrington. Abraham Lincoln Jones. Benjamin Ginsberg," Mr. Caldwell said to Sylvia. She pulled three files toward her on the flat shine of the desk.

"Richard Tarrington," she said. The boy with the golden hair stood a little forward, not dropping the black hand.

"Hello, Dick," Mr. Caldwell said. "Who is coming after you, do you know?"

"My father, I guess," the boy answered. "That's what his secretary wrote to me, so I guess he is. She always knows what he is going to do."

"Mr. Tarrington," Sylvia announced, but no one answered. Among the figures seated on the straight-backed chairs there was a little stir of curiosity. Parents' heads turned. Mr. Caldwell's eyes combed the room quickly, then came back to the boys.

"I expect he'll be along, Dick. Sorry he's late. I know you're anxious to leave."

"Oh, no, Mr. Caldwell," Dick said. He looked at his two companions, his face bright with a quick smile. "I don't mind waiting for Abe and Ben. I don't mind at all."

"Mrs. Hattie Jones," Sylvia called out.

A woman stood up from one of the benches. She moved forward, squat

and black, as sedate as a trim tugboat.

"Hello, Mrs. Jones," Mr. Caldwell said. "Here's your young man. He's shot up some, hasn't he?"

Mrs. Lincoln looked at Abraham — up and up. It seemed as though her eyes would never reach the top of his round head, nor her eyes the top of their love and their pain.

"Yes, sir. He sure has."

"He's going to be a good boy from now on, aren't you, Abe?" Mr. Caldwell smiled.

The boy's head fell forward loosely, the velvety lids veiling his big eyes.

"Answer up to Mr. Caldwell, son," Mrs. Jones prodded, but not sharply.

"Yes, ma'am."

"He *am* a good boy," Mrs. Jones said. "He *am* a good boy, Mr. Caldwell." She didn't look at the Head Counsellor but, with fierce protective conviction, at the tall boy in the middle of the trio — a boy in the shape of a pair of scissors with the sharp thin blades of his legs planted astraddle beneath the long bones of his body. "He *am* a good boy. It ain't none of his fault —"

"Now, Mrs. Jones, some of it *must* have been his fault or the Judge wouldn't have decided to send him to Camp."

She opened her mouth to answer. Her eyes were a little fearful, a little hunted. Finally she closed her mouth without having spoken and held out her hand toward the long bony hand of her son.

Abe looked at it and then at his own hands and the hands of friendship clasped in each of them.

"I gotta wait, Mama," he said. "You stay by a minute." He frowned earnestly. "I gotta wait for the fellas."

Mrs. Jones moved back a little, anxious and defensive.

"Mr. Aaron Ginsberg," Sylvia said. She forced the summons quickly through her dry throat into the hot dry room.

From the dark shadows a hunched figure shuffled out. Beneath a round black hat and above a loose black sack of a suit, an ancient face peered at her. With the movement of the bent body, a long white beard also moved. The beard caught the light and shimmered silver, and in the sharp blue eyes were glints of the same kindly old silver.

"Hello, Mr. Ginsberg," said Mr. Caldwell, leaning over the desk and holding out his hand. "It's good to see you. You've had a long trip for a hot day like this."

"Nothing, Mr. Caldwell." The voice was slow-moving and rich. Like molasses. "It's a good mission to get back our boy." The old man took the empty hand of the boy on the other side of Abraham Lincoln Jones. "Are you ready, my son?"

As Benjamin turned his head to look at his comrades, the sun struck his round eyeglasses. Through the flash of light his eyes were piercing — and desperate.

"I can't yet, Grandpa. Dick's papa's not here yet. We can't *one* go until we can *all* go. We got a pact. We're buddies. The Three Muske-

teers of Camp Three. See, Grandpa?"

"I see."

The door opened. A hot wave of street air, heavy with the smell of asphalt and traffic, poured in. All the eyes in the room swung toward the door. A tall man stood there, cool and slim in expensive, lightweight clothes. He stood still a moment, then walked to Sylvia's desk, his heels tapping crisply against the floor.

"I'm Richard Tarrington, Senior," he said with authority. "I've a notice to call for this young criminal." He looked down without humor at Dick's golden head. "Is everything in order, Rick? Have you had enough of prison?"

"That's not quite right, Mr. Tarrington," said Mr. Caldwell softly. "Dick hasn't been in prison yet. And no one is a criminal in the eyes of the law until he has reached his majority."

Mr. Tarrington didn't answer. He was finished with the official part of the Probation Department. His eyes turned to the boys and absorbed their linked hands. Quickly he reached down and pulled Dick away.

"Father," the boy said, "I have to say goodbye! I *have* to! It's a pact. We're buddies — The Three —"

"I shouldn't think you'd relish any further fraternization with — with boys beneath you. I see I'll have to talk to you, Rick — you're not very smart for a boy ten years old. But not now. Come on, I'm in a hurry."

He began tugging Dick toward the door.

"Just a moment, Mr. Tarrington," Mr. Caldwell said. His voice was even softer — softer, and yet harder, Sylvia thought. "These boys are friends. They want to say goodbye to each other."

"Rubbish! I've got my car double parked. I haven't time to wait — haven't time these days to go around fixing tickets. Rick —"

"I insist, Mr. Tarrington." Mr. Caldwell smiled. Mr. Tarrington saw the smile and heard the voice of Officialdom.

"I'll wait in the car, Rick."

He marched out. The door hushed open and shut behind him.

"Well," Dick said, turning to the other boys, "well — so long, fellas."

"Look, we'll meet Saturday," Ben said eagerly, quickly. His eyes shone blue and earnest behind his glasses. "Every Saturday. We'll all meet at the Main Lib'ary. Huh, fellas? Like we said, huh?"

"Sure we will, Ben." Abe's voice was firm. "Like we said — every Saturday. The Three Musketeers. An' I'll oil my little ole skates up an' Dick's gonna ride down on his little ole bike an' you, Ben, you bring your little ole pooch . . ."

"An' I'll get Bertha to give me sandwiches an' we'll go over to the zoo —" That was Dick turning his future slowly before the devotion of past friendship, the way a small cold animal warms itself in front of a fire.

Mrs. Jones leaned forward and touched her son. Softly and delicately she touched the faces of the other two

boys. Then her hands dropped slowly, the palms open as if in prayer.

"Don't you go plannin', boys. It ain't true. This is goodbye for sure — goodbye for keeps."

The three pairs of eyes swung to hers. They looked like the same pair of wounded, stunned eyes.

"It ain't good you should dream," Mrs. Jones went on slowly. "Somebody's got to tell you. You done forgot in that there Camp. Nobody ain't gonna *let* you be friends. Never again. Unless maybe you is in trouble. Bad trouble like prison or —" she took a deep, jagged sigh as though it were medicine "— war. Nowhere in this outside place they ain't nobody gonna let you know each other. Nohow. Not till you git to Heaven. Maybe not even there. Maybe they is a Heaven for black boys and a Heaven for white boys and —" she looked at little Ben, "— and all kinds of boys. You gotta know it some time. You gotta look it straight in the face and say 'goodbye' now. An' don't go huggin' tag-ends of things that's only gonna hurt you an' trouble you . . ."

The three pairs of eyes moved back to Mr. Caldwell.

"He ain't gonna tell you because he don't lie. An' he knows what I'm sayin' is the truth. He ain't sayin' it because he don't want to make you feel bad."

Ben looked from the Counsellor to his grandfather.

"An' he ain't gonna tell you, boy. He's an old man. He done forgot how it is," the woman sighed.

"I haven't forgotten, Mrs. Jones." The old man's voice was like music in a minor key. "They never let us forget, either."

A horn blared outside the window. Dick started.

"Your Daddy ain't gonna let you go to no lib'ary, boy. Not to meet Abe or Ben or nobody like that," Mrs. Jones went on, like a doctor making a clean amputation. "He ain't got no truck with that stuff. He say you gonna git smart an' he ain't gonna let you get in no more trouble. He gonna teach you to *sideskirt* trouble. All kinds of trouble. Best you hear it now."

She turned away. Sylvia saw through a dimness, as through a rain-smeared glass, Mrs. Jones's angry dry eyes.

"Abraham Lincoln Jones, you say goodbye now an' git."

She started toward the door. The grandfather shuffled behind her.

"Well, goodbye, fellas . . ." Abe looked at his empty hands and then thrust them into his pockets. He turned to follow his mother. He moved slowly, but not lingering.

"Goodbye," said Ben.

Dick grasped them each by an elbow. "Look, fellas. It won't be like that. Honest! My father'll let me come. He didn't mean it. He's just mad because he hadda come after me. He'll get over it. Or I can sneak out. Honest I can! Next Saturday! I'll be there an' I'll have sandwiches an' my little ole bike, like Abe said, an' —"

"Sure, Dick," said Ben. He took

the slender hand off his sleeve, gripped it hard, then dropped it quickly.

Abe did not turn around. He stopped when Dick grabbed him, stood motionless a moment, watching Ben and his grandfather leave.

"Next Saturday, huh, Abe?" Dick's voice stumbled and came out cracked. "You'll oil your little ole skates . . . Huh, Abe, huh?"

"Sure. I guess so, Dick. So long."

The door swung open and shut.

Dick stood alone in the middle of the office. Then he turned his body a little toward Sylvia's desk. But he did not turn his head to look at her, or at the Head Counsellor.

"Well, goodbye, Mr. Caldwell."

He was still looking down.

"Goodbye, Dick."

Once more the blare of the horn came through the window. Dick pushed the door open with one hand. He looked down at the other, the hand that had clutched friendship so briefly. Then he buried it in his pocket and went out.

Sylvia reached for the purple ink-pad and the rubber-stamp. As she lifted the official stamp, she noticed her hand was trembling a little. She stamped the three files and then stared down at them.

Across the face of each *Case History*, tipped at an uncertain angle, was the heavy word PROBATION.

A ghost story with a subtle and satisfying difference . . .

A SUDDEN DREAD OF . . . NOTHING

by A. H. Z. CARR

FOR A MAN WHO HAS ALWAYS regarded himself as a skeptic it is embarrassing and perhaps a little ridiculous to write about — well, ghosts. Once, when I related the facts to a group of friends, they simply jeered. A haunted house, or a haunted wood, they might have accepted, but a haunted automobile — ! That cannot be helped, I suppose. I have made up my mind to tell the story; the essential facts can be verified, and let him jeer who will.

The car belonged to Fred Keller — you may recall the name — and I was with him when he bought it. We were at his place in the Poconos that weekend, and he came up to the tennis courts, where I was watching a match between two other guests, and proposed that I run into town with him.

Town was New York, two dusty hours away. Trying to cover my reluctance, I said, "Something urgent come up?"

He nodded carelessly, and said, "We'll be back by dinner. Don't bother to change. Let's go." And he started for the garage.

That was like Keller — I mean, the bland disregard of other people's preferences and the calm assumption that no request of his could be refused.

Our friendship was old, and beginning to wear thin. It is hard for a millionaire and a poor man to maintain the equality essential to a warm intimacy. I sometimes thought that his main interest in urging me to visit him was to demonstrate that he was not a snob. The traditional self-made millionaire, if he has social pretensions, hastens to rid himself of the acquaintances who "knew him when." Keller was far too canny to fall into that obvious pitfall. Seeking frankly to break into the circles of the socially elect, he never tried to disguise his humble origins.

I followed him to the garage, of course. The garage was a rambling brick affair, with about a dozen stalls, most of which were occupied by the guests' cars. Keller said to his chauffeur, who was busy with some mechanical job, "I'm going into New York, Mawson. You don't have to come; I'll drive myself. Get out the Rolls, and put the top down."

Mawson said, "I'm sorry, sir, but Mrs. Keller took the Rolls out an hour ago."

Keller looked rather blank, then said, "Oh. That means you'll have to drive, Mawson."

I suggested that we could take my small car which was perfectly adequate.

"No," Keller said. "We'll take the limousine, and Mawson will drive. Get ready, Mawson."

I could see that he was irritated, as always when some small desire was frustrated. He tapped his foot while Mawson was getting into his coat; and finally he said, "We need another open car."

I laughed. At that time, besides the limousine, Keller had the Rolls touring car, a station-wagon, a town car in a New York garage, and a small car of some kind at his camp in the Adirondacks; not to mention a plane at a nearby flying field. "It's hardly a pressing need, is it?" I said.

Without answering, he got into the limousine which Mawson had backed out. When we had been driving for about an hour with the most casual kind of conversation, he suddenly volunteered the reason for the trip. "Today is six months since we've been married," he said. "I just remembered. I want to get something for Alma."

One makes allowances for men in love, and Keller was obviously, almost pathetically, in love with his wife; but the spectacle of a serious man of 45, a harsh realist who has made a fortune in grain speculations, sentimentalizing over a semi-anniversary has its ludicrous aspect. I said something jocular about setting a dangerous precedent. Would he be willing to dash into New York for a gift ten years from now?

He growled, "Don't be a fool," and lapsed into bad-tempered silence.

When we reached New York, we went directly to Tiffany's, where Keller purchased a bracelet, an elaborate affair of platinum and diamonds. As he wrote a check, he asked me for the first time whether I liked it. I had to say, "Not much." He frowned, and said, "Tastes differ," and handed the check to the clerk.

I hoped he would have forgotten about the new car; but not Keller. Mawson drove us to Busby's, the dealer who specializes in expensive foreign makes of automobiles. As we got out, we saw behind the huge plate-glass front of the establishment a long, low, black roadster, canvas top down; a magnificent machine — a Tornetto. Keller made up his mind at once. He said, "That's the car I want." We went inside, and Keller cut through Busby's effusive greeting with, "How much is that Tornetto?"

"Oh," said Busby. "That's a used car. You want a new one, of course, Mr. Keller."

"I know what I want," Keller replied. "How much is it?"

Busby said at once, "Twelve thousand. It's a fine job, Mr. Keller. Cost sixteen thousand new. In perfect condition. Only five thousand miles. Signor Collini — the famous author, you know — brought it over from Italy just last month."

"Never mind all that. Do you guarantee it?"

"Of course, Mr. Keller. The usual guarantee. Every car that goes out of here —"

"Is it in shape to take out now?"

"Now?"

"Now. Right away," Keller snapped.

"Why, yes. But you'll need license tags —"

"Take the plates from the limousine and we'll leave it here until you can get some new ones. I'll give you ten thousand for the Tornetto."

They haggled; Keller got the car for eleven thousand; and within twenty minutes we drove it away, with Keller at the wheel and Mawson in the rear seat.

That Tornetto was close to perfection in automobiles — a wonderful engineering achievement, beautifully caparisoned. It gave no hint on this first drive of any extra-mechanical character. It moved in a kind of swift silence, like a black wind-driven cloud. Under the spell of its effortless speed, Keller, who was a good driver, relaxed; he forgot for a while to be the iron man, and was animated and cheerful.

When we were not far from The Eyrie, as Keller called his mountain-top mansion, he remarked, "Alma will be crazy about this car."

He was all agog, like an eager schoolboy, to show off his new possession. I remember thinking that Keller's pose of irresistible strength, his air of always getting what he wanted, his lavishness — virtually everything that he did was intended primarily to enlarge him in his wife's eyes.

Anyone could see why. Alma Keller — she had been Alma Vereker — was obviously, almost embarrassingly, his superior. Really a beautiful woman, a natural blonde, about 30, with a distinguished face and a magnificent figure; intelligent, articulate, and witty; well-born, traveled, on terms of friendship with scores of genuinely interesting people. Keller, on the other hand, had to fight constantly to keep his stockiness from burgeoning into frank stoutness; his hair was thinning rapidly; he was not clever in conversation, not talented, not a man of cultivated mind. Many people said that she had married him because her income had dwindled and he had $30,000,000. I never thought this view quite fair to Keller; there was a ruggedness, a brutal self-assurance and force about him that women might have found attractive.

He was far more dependent on her for happiness than she on him. He had retired from business. What was he, a gregarious egoist without hobbies or intellectual interests, to do with the rest of his life? Disinclined to politics, diplomacy, or high finance, Keller determined to take a place in the world of international elegance; in the world which hunts in Scotland, goes yachting at Nassau, swims at Antibes, and merely pays taxes in America. Alma represented much more to him than companionship and gratification. She was the means of achieving this new and terribly earnest ambition to call Dukes by their first names.

He was sensitive enough to perceive that even as her husband he would not be accepted at once, and to resent the humiliation of being accepted

merely as her husband. Methodically he set about the business of making friends of her friends. He saw to it that his house was filled with people whom she liked; and with these people he was courteous, quiet, and considerate; he avoided obvious pretenses, and he spent money discreetly. Already significant invitations were coming to him; he was beginning to rise above mere plutocracy.

But as I have said, he needed to swagger a little before his wife, to command her surprise and admiration and gratitude. He was painfully disappointed when we arrived at The Eyrie in the Tornetto and did not find her. Half a dozen people, drinking cocktails on the terrace, noticed and admired the car, but without Alma the occasion was meaningless for Keller.

An inquiry revealed that she had not yet returned from her drive. I heard Keller ask Mawson, in a low voice, "Was Mrs. Keller alone when she took out the Rolls?"

"No, sir," Mawson replied. "Mr. Wrenn was with her."

Keller nodded, and looked thoughtful.

Gideon Wrenn's presence in his house was an excellent illustration of the intensity of purpose that was Keller's chief asset in life. He must have found Alma's frank liking for Wrenn distasteful. Wrenn was everything the word "aristocrat" conjures up in the imagination — a handsome Englishman of famous family, barely middle-aged, a respected amateur of archeology, the intimate of great men and women in a dozen countries — a man who had mastered the difficult arts of behavior and self-expression, the sort of man to whom a woman like Alma seemed a natural complement. But Keller would not let himself be jealous. The prestige conferred by Wrenn's friendship was an honor card in the hand he was playing against society; and he was able to hide away in some corner of his mind the suspicion that it was more than friendship for Alma that brought Wrenn to The Eyrie.

At the dinner hour Alma and Wrenn had not yet returned, and Keller became nervous. Then a telephone call came through. She was twenty miles away; there had been a minor accident to the Rolls; it was being repaired; she and Gideon would get something to eat at a nearby farmhouse; Keller was not to worry. He was partially relieved, but when dinner was finished, he drew me aside, and said, "I'm going to drive down to meet them, just in case something's gone wrong. Come along."

It was quite dark, but I could see the long shape of the Tornetto glimmering in the driveway. We got in.

Keller's big house was situated on the crest of a long, wooded mountain, virtually the whole of which he owned. His mile of private road, while steep and winding, was admirably paved and banked; and he was accustomed to drive it rapidly. We started down at perhaps 40 miles an hour, with the twin beams of our headlights

cutting into the blackness ahead.

We had barely got under way when Keller turned to me and said, "What did you say?"

I told him I had not said anything. He stared at me incredulously. A few seconds later I turned to speak to him. A glimpse of his profile shocked me into open-mouthed silence. Even in the dim light of the dashboard his face showed haggard and tense, and he was breathing hard. I asked him what the matter was. He pulled the car to one side and stopped it. After a moment he said, "That was strange."

"What?"

"You didn't notice anything?"

"Not a thing."

He sat quiet for a while, then shook his head, as if to clear it, and started the engine again.

A few yards farther on, I said curiously again, "What was wrong, Keller?" No reply. I was vaguely uneasy; I had a sense of physical depression, not unlike what one feels in a stuffy room. Turning to Keller I saw to my astonishment a look of unmistakable panic in his face. And now, as if by instant contagion, I felt it too.

I want to avoid if I can the adjectives of terror that come to mind when I recall that drive. As the lawyers say, remembered sensation is not evidence. Yet to write merely that I was frightened, and nothing more, would be a grotesque understatement of fact. I have heard the sputter of a failing airplane motor a mile above the earth; I know the sick awareness of disaster as a skidding car lurches to an inevitable crash; but such fears are commonplace, simply not of the same order as the one I speak of. It was not a fear of any specific thing, of death or accident, for example, that can be faced or rationalized. It was like the unreasonable hysteria that seizes little children in dark rooms — a sudden dread of . . . nothing. It was like a gas that envelops the feebly fighting brain and strangles it, in a dozen seconds, into abject surrender.

I kept thinking that someone was saying something that I could not quite make out. I remember crying, "What? What?" Keller did not look at me, or speak.

Up to this point our speed had not been excessive, but now the car gained momentum, and as we came to the first bend, the Tornetto swayed dangerously. I managed to gasp, "Fred." He did not answer. We plunged downward at a sharp dip. I grasped his arm and screamed, "Keller!"

He was not insensible; he was guiding the car, but he seemed like a man in a hypnotic trance. I saw his foot pressing on the accelerator pedal. Instinctively I pulled at his knee, shouting to him, but the Tornetto continued to rush fantastically through the night. I could do nothing — or at least, I did nothing. I sat there in an agony of helplessness.

Once our headlights picked out a stone culvert at a bend in the road. We rode straight for it; at the last instant, when I had closed my eyes

in anticipation of the crash, Keller must have pulled at the wheel, for the car twisted away and swept drunkenly around the curve.

I have mentioned my impression of unspoken speech. Somewhere on that ride the impression crystallized into a desperate command, without words or voice, that sent my hand groping for the unfamiliar handle of the door. Later, it was easy to believe that this was merely such an impulse as might come to any badly scared man in a runaway automobile. I did not actually want to jump out of the flying car — every instinct warned me that I would be smashed. I opened that door because I had to, as if there was a physical need in me to obey a will that was not mine.

What saved me was a new frantic swaying that sent me reeling against Keller's taut body as we took another curve. He shouted; and the contact and the sound somehow released me from that suicidal compulsion. Immediately afterward, the Tornetto entered the public highway, where the steep gradient of Keller's road changed to a gentle slope. The car slowed down, and Keller, who had come to life, stopped it. The entire descent could not have taken even a minute.

We sat in silence for a long time. Both of us were sweating, although the night was cool; and I remember that Keller trembled, as I have seen a dog tremble after a severe beating. Gradually my nerves ceased to jump and tingle, until I was able to say, in a fairly steady voice, "What happened?"

Keller muttered something that I could not understand. Already my mind was endeavoring to give the incident a rational construction. "You must have had a blackout of some kind," I said.

"Oh, you fool," he yelled at me, all at once, "you fool! Do you think it was me?"

"My God, Fred," I said, taken aback, "what else could it have been?"

"Something. It got me. I knew what was happening. I couldn't help it, I tell you. I couldn't help it!"

At the end of half an hour he felt better, and was beginning to accept my theory, unpleasant as it was to him, that he had had some kind of attack, and that I, on my part, had merely been frightened. "The thing for you to do," I said, "is get home and send for a doctor."

He changed places with me in the car, and with some misgivings I started the motor. It ran as usual, silently, powerfully, perfectly. Neither of us felt the slightest disturbance.

While I was slowly swinging the Tornetto around, another car came speeding along the highway, and in the glare of our headlights we recognized the Rolls, and called out. Wrenn, who was driving, pulled up, and Alma said, "Fred? Is that you?"

Keller whispered to me, "Don't say anything about it." I believe he felt that his recent terror was a

reflection on his manhood, or, at least, on his physical condition, and so was loath to confess it to Alma. From similar motives, no doubt, to avoid the implication of jealousy, he did not tell her that we were on our way to find them. He said, instead, "Look at the new car. We were just trying it out."

She cooed with delight over the Tornetto. "What a beauty! Let me drive it," she pleaded.

Keller glanced at me, hesitated, and said, "Oh, you'll have plenty of chances. You and Gideon must be tired. Let's get on home."

We followed them up the mountain without any unusual circumstance. By the time we reached the top, Keller felt sufficiently restored to scoff at my suggestion of medical attention. He brought out the bracelet and put it on Alma's wrist in our presence. It struck me that she was embarrassed. Certainly she was surprised to learn the occasion for the gift. Keller took advantage of the opportunity to claim a kiss from her, with one eye, it seemed to me, on the impassive Wrenn.

Very early the next morning a servant woke me, and said that Mr. Keller would like me to join him for breakfast, if I were awake. I suppressed the obvious retort, got into my clothes, and went downstairs to the breakfast room. Keller was alone. He said, "Look here, I've been thinking. There was something funny about that ride last night; I've never had a blackout of any kind in my life. I can't believe it. I want to know what happened to me. I've got a notion" — He hesitated. "Anyway, are you willing to take the car down the hill this morning? I'll be passenger."

On a crisp, autumn day, in all the sanity of sunlight and growing things, that grotesque ride and its accompanying sensations seemed faintly ridiculous. I laughed and said, "What do you expect to happen?"

We went to the garage. I backed out the Tornetto, and guided it cautiously down the first slope. Keller, I thought, was speaking, and I turned to him saying, "What?" He shook his head.

At the same time I felt again that warning oppression, like a dead weight in my brain. But I was too thoroughly convinced of my own explanation of the previous night's terrors to admit the possibility that they might recur. Keller was wiser than I. He said, "Stop!" I laughed uneasily and he cried again, "Stop, you fool!"

By then it was too late to stop. I had an extraordinary feeling in the pit of my stomach — a kind of internal collapse, as if I had been struck a sudden, shocking blow; yet there was no actual pain. I remember in that first appalling moment thinking that Keller must be right: there must be something wrong with the car.

That was my last coherent thought . . .

So far as I can judge, my subsequent experience was identical with Keller's on the preceding night: a

temporary, partial paralysis. My muscles tightened like those of a corpse in rigor mortis; my brain felt as if it were being constricted by invisible fingers, squeezing all self-control out of me. I was not conscious of accelerating, yet the Tornetto took on speed like an avalanche under way. Automatically, I turned the wheel at curves, but I was incapable of any voluntary action. And over and above everything else I was afraid, swallowed up in that nameless fear.

Somewhere within me was a last tiny spark of conscious will that fought against extinction. Just as in a nightmare one lifts leaden feet to run, so now for an instant I tried to force my body to obey me. I succeeded so far as to release the accelerator pedal before all volition was snuffed out.

In the intolerable seconds of that ride I was aware, as from a long distance, of a cry from Keller, an agonized, "No! No!" That he was about to leap out neither he nor I ever doubted; the need was on him as it had been on me. The road was his salvation; we swayed around a final curve to the juncture with the highway, where the gradient flattened out; and the presence in the car, whatever it was, lifted from us, almost like a tangible thing.

We stopped and lay back gasping, wiping heavy sweat from our faces.

Keller was first able to talk. He said as if to himself, "Queer."

I began to laugh and could not stop. "Queer!" I kept repeating. "Queer!" Eventually I beat down my hysteria. "Keller," I gasped, "run this car into a lake before it kills you."

"Good lord, yes," he said, and it was the only time I had ever heard awe in his voice.

Finally, with Keller driving, we went back up the mountain, without difficulty. As we reached the house, Keller said, "Let's keep this to ourselves. Alma would think it was a joke, and want to try it. I'll tell her I'm returning the car."

We went back to the breakfast room, feeling that coffee would be welcome. Alma and Wrenn, wearing riding clothes, were at the sideboard, helping themselves. Wrenn nodded toward the large window, which faced the drive. "Beautiful thing, that Tornetto. How does it run?"

Keller gulped, and said, "Fine." We poured ourselves coffee, and Wrenn went on casually, "I've only seen one like it. That was when I was in Italy some months ago. A man I knew had a Tornetto, the same model."

Alma said, "Was that the car you told me about, Gideon?" When he nodded, she commented, "That was a horrible thing."

Keller glanced from one to the other. "Smash up?" he asked.

"No," Wrenn replied. "An accident, but the car wasn't hurt."

Alma said, "That's a particularly gruesome touch, I think."

Wrenn smiled at her. "I know what you mean. It does make it uglier, somehow, the car escaping while the girls died."

"What happened?" Keller broke in impatiently.

"Two deaths," Wrenn said. "My friend who had the Tornetto lived on a mountain top. Near the Adriatic. Not unlike this location, Keller, except that his place is higher. His daughter and another girl, her best friend, came down the mountain in the Tornetto, very fast. The other girl was driving. Halfway down, the daughter must have got frightened. She jumped out of the car and was killed. The car went on and stopped in a field at the base of the mountain. When some peasants who had seen what happened reached it, the other girl was still sitting at the wheel, dead. Heart failure was the reason the newspapers gave. But this is too fine a morning for tragedy," he concluded abruptly, and busied himself with his breakfast.

Alma said, "You've left out the really wicked part."

"Oh," Wrenn said reluctantly, "the rest is mere gossip. A story got around that the accident was not altogether an act of God. The other girl was somewhat older than the daughter, and was reported to have gained some kind of ascendancy over her. It's possible, no doubt. Francesca — that was the daughter's name — struck me, the one time I saw her, as an hysterical type. The story goes that she had fallen in love with an Italian army officer. The other girl, the supposed best friend, became jealous — mad with jealousy, if you accept this theory of the affair. Perhaps she was in love with the same man; I don't know.

"At any rate, a peasant who was working near the point on the road where Francesca was killed swore that he heard the friend who was driving scream something like 'Jump, save yourself!' And he said that after Francesca jumped, the friend first slowed the car and looked back, laughing madly, and then went on down the mountain. Now there's probably no truth in it whatever, but one can conceive that the friend was pretending she had lost control of the car, and was deliberately urging Francesca to a practically certain death. If you assume a fit of jealous insanity on the part of the friend, and allow for Francesca's type of mind, the thing's possible, I suppose. Certainly, it would have been an ingenious method of murder without responsibility. If it was, the murderess didn't have much opportunity for gloating. But as I say, it's just a morbid rumor. Highly improbable."

Keller and I shared the same thought. Trying to conceal his excitement, he said, "What was your friend's name?"

One could see that Wrenn disliked the question; but he shrugged slightly, and said, "Collini."

"The famous author?" Keller persisted.

"Yes. Do you know him?" Wrenn asked.

"No." I could see Keller hesitate, tempted, as I was also, to give Wrenn's story its proper climax by pointing

out of the window and crying, "That's the car, there!" But he said, "Didn't I hear that Collini is in this country now?"

"Yes. He's lecturing, I think. I haven't seen him; I never really knew him well."

Keller looked at me and rose. I followed him outside. He began agitatedly, "Look here, that would account for everything, wouldn't it?"

I tried to be judicious. "The question is, can a tragedy like that leave some kind of — of aura that we can't yet explain by known physical laws?"

"Oh, the hell with that," Keller snapped. "The damned car's haunted!" He added, "You don't think Wrenn knows about it, do you? I mean the haunting."

"Hardly," I said. "He wouldn't have left it out of his story."

"That's the way I feel about it, too," Keller said. "Look here, I've got an idea. It strikes me we're on the track of something. There's some society that investigates this kind of thing, isn't there?"

"The Society for Psychical Research," I said.

"Whatever it is. Why can't we get some people from the Society down here, and have them make a report on it?"

I knew Keller well enough to guess what was in his mind. He was the last man in the world to be interested in scientific investigation for its own sake. But instinctively he sought to adapt this affair, like every other, to his own purposes. The publicity which such an investigation would be sure to receive, and in which his name would be coupled with Wrenn's and Collini's, was what he really wanted. I said, "I suppose it could be done. Of course, you'd have to verify Wrenn's story."

"Why not?" he said. "We can go ahead for the time being without saying anything to him." He sensed, no doubt, that Wrenn would disapprove the project; he wanted to present him with a *fait accompli.*

He went on, with great animation, "Will you do something for me? Call up the lecture bureaus in New York. Find out where Collini is now. Take my plane. I'll have you flown to wherever he is. See him. Don't tell him what we have in mind, of course. And better not mention Wrenn's name. But make sure Wrenn has the facts straight. Check his story. See if Collini has ever noticed anything queer about the car. Then come back here, and we'll take the next step."

As usual, I agreed. I learned over the long-distance telephone that Collini was in Baltimore. Within an hour, Mawson drove me to the flying field, where Keller's plane was waiting for me; and that afternoon I inquired for Collini at his hotel.

A male secretary told me that Signor Collini could see no one. I said, "Please tell him that I have called in reference to the automobile he recently sold." After a brief interval I was asked to go up at once.

Collini himself met me at the door — big, forceful, self-possessed, with

ascetic features and a gray beard. He asked me my name, bowed, motioned me to a chair, and said, with obvious anxiety, "You have come, I think you told my secretary, with regard to a motor car, a Tornetto, that I once owned?" He spoke excellent English.

"Yes," I said, "a friend of mine bought it. Fred Keller — you may have heard of him."

He shook his head.

"The fact is," I began awkwardly, "we've had some queer experiences in that car."

"No one," he asked quickly, "has been hurt?" From the way he asked the question, I knew that he understood.

"No," I said. "Only frightened. I should say, paralyzed by fear."

He took a deep breath. "This fear, as you call it, is not always in the car? Only at times?"

"So far as we know," I said, "only when we go down the mountain from Keller's house."

"Ah!" he said. "He lives on a mountain, then. Very steep?"

I nodded, and went on to relate our experiences. Then I said, "Mr. Keller and I wondered whether there was anything in the history of the car —" I hesitated.

He sat in silence for several seconds, watching me, and said, "Yes. You have a right to know."

He then told me, somewhat more circumstantially, the factual story Wrenn had outlined. Although he made no reference to murder, a certain brusqueness in his mention of the girl who died of heart failure made me think he entertained a suspicion of it. He went on to say, "I am a realist, as men go, not superstitious or sentimental. After the — accident — I tried to master my grief and to be as little foolish as possible. I had had great satisfaction in that car, the Tornetto, and I was unwilling to sell it or destroy it as some might have done. It had not been damaged, except for some scratches on the body; and I had it repainted. Perhaps a week after the accident, my secretary and I drove down the mountain in it, and here for the first time I experienced the — the force, shall we call it? The ride was such as you have described, worse, perhaps, because my mountain road is longer than that of your friend. We escaped accident only because I was driving slowly, and was able finally to stop the car. My secretary, a superstitious fellow, fainted.

"At first, like yourself, I did not really believe it. Yet I was enough impressed to make my further tests with certain precautions. In brief, I discovered that there was a — a force, which came only when I descended my mountain. At all other times the car was a normal piece of machinery. As you have found it, also."

At this point in his narrative he interrupted himself. "But perhaps all this is not to the purpose. In fairness to your friend, I should no doubt offer to repurchase the car for what he paid."

I assured him that Keller wanted

the Tornetto and being a millionaire, could afford to indulge his whims. Collini was frankly relieved. "I am glad," he said simply. "I could not well afford such an expense. People in Italy do not now buy many novels. That was why I brought the Tornetto with me, to sell in New York — I needed the money so badly."

I said curiously, "How did you finally get the Tornetto down the mountain?"

"I drove it in low gear, creeping slowly all the way. The force did not appear. I believed that once I left my house it would trouble me no more. And in fact, I never experienced it again. I sold it, you understand, in good faith, thinking the force gone." He hesitated for a moment and then added, "I thought for a while to publish an account of the force but now that I no longer have the Tornetto —" He shrugged. "However, I have some notes that I made at that time. You read Italian?"

"A little," I said.

"You and your friend may be interested. They are of no further use to me." He went to a desk, extracted a slim sheaf of notes from a file, and gave them to me.

I read the notes in Keller's plane, on the way back, and was struck especially by Collini's description of his sensations in the car:

"Instinctively one looks for comparisons not in the world of actuality, but in the world of dreams. If the final terror in a dream of falling, just before one strikes, were to be indefinitely prolonged. . . . Normal fears come and go without marking the mind. The Force leaves an evil, enduring sore in the memory. I remember an incident of my childhood. I was knocked down by heavy ocean surf, and hurled off my feet again and again each time that I tried to get up — until I was too weak to stand erect, and crawled shuddering and gasping to the beach, through a nightmare of soft, reluctant sand and crushing sea. The Force similarly engulfs the mind in wave after wave of suffocating dread."

When I returned to The Eyrie that night I asked for Keller, and was told that he was expecting me in the library. The door was open, and I went into the big room before I saw that Alma, Wrenn, and Keller were talking there together. I heard Alma say, and she was obviously moved, "I'm sorry, Fred. We had to face it. Thank you for taking it this way."

As I stopped short, Wrenn saw me, and they all turned. I murmured an apology. "I was told you were alone, Fred. I'll come back later."

"No," Alma said to me with a friendly smile, "don't go. I must change for dinner." She went out of the room, and after a moment of silent cigarette-lighting Wrenn followed her. He left for New York immediately afterward.

Keller had slumped into a chair. I guessed what had happened; I think I may have been expecting it. I said, "Perhaps you'd rather not talk now?"

He seemed not to hear me. "Civ-

ilized people," he muttered, and struck the arm of the chair with his clenched fist, like a man in pain.

I can reconstruct, with some confidence, what had passed between them. I can visualize Alma — gentle, even tender, and yet determined; Wrenn — cool, urbane, correct; and Keller, trying to smother his misery and rage, trying to live up to their notions of how such things should be done, trying in a single moment to discard his own instincts and to act like a character in a Broadway society drama. To them it was a regrettable situation; they were no doubt genuinely sorry to hurt Keller, but they were in love. And from their point of view they were taking the frank, decent course. The marriage had been a mistake. A divorce was the natural consequence. What could Keller do? Protest that she should not have married him if she had not loved him? Reproach her? Threaten Wrenn? Fly into a passion? He must have wanted to do all these things. Instead, he forced himself to play the part of the magnanimous husband; he wanted only her happiness, he would not stand in her way, and so on.

Then, when they were gone, when there was no further occasion for posturing, he gave way to a revulsion of feeling. The loss of Alma had emptied his life, left it hollow. He was thinking, I suspect, that he had been a fool, that he should have fought back, threatened, asserted himself.

As I turned in some embarrassment to leave him, he said, hoarsely, "Wait." I waited. He made a remarkable effort at self-control. "I'm all right. Sit down. Tell me," he went on, and his voice was colorless and mechanical, the voice of a man who is talking to forget his thoughts, "did you see Collini?"

Thinking to distract him, I related, very circumstantially, what Collini had said. From time to time his attention would wander back to his own concerns, and a spasm would cross his face; but on the whole he gave a creditable imitation of interest.

"Now," I said, "about investigating this business scientifically."

He said wearily, "I'm not up to that now." Then his pretense of composure suddenly broke down; he buried his face in his hands.

Shocked, I tried feebly to comfort him; and not wishing to ring for a servant, I went out to get him a drink. When I returned he was staring out of the window, apparently recovered. I offered him the drink but he paid no attention. "Keller," I said. He did not turn around but began in a low voice to curse Alma and Wrenn.

His language startled me by its foulness and bitterness. "For heaven's sake," I said, as I glimpsed his contorted, passionate face, "pull yourself together. Here, take this drink."

He took the glass and dashed it to the floor, and while I stared at him, pushed me violently aside and rushed out of the room.

He did not appear at dinner. Late that night, while I was talking to a

fellow-guest on the terrace, I heard a car roar up the hill and saw the Tornetto turn into the drive. After a few seconds Keller got out, alone, and began to walk unsteadily toward the house. "Our host seems to be a little under the influence," my companion said, laughing. I went up to Keller; in the light I saw his face, a white expressionless mask. "Fred!" I began, genuinely horrified. "You don't mean to —"

He shook me off, and went on without a word, swaying on the stairs like a drunken man. But I did not think he was drunk.

That was my last meeting with Keller. When the party broke up next day, and I was leaving, Alma apologized for him: he was indisposed, and it was better that he should not be seen. Under her poised exterior, I sensed a great tension. As we shook hands, she said to me, "I may ask you, a little later, to do me a favor."

"Anything," I said.

A week later I received a letter from her, sent from a New York hotel.

"As you must have guessed, Fred and I have separated. I am sailing tomorrow for Europe, where I intend to live. I'm afraid that my decision was a terrible shock to Fred. Of course he'll get over it, but I'm worried about him. I should feel easier if I knew you were in touch with him. Will you — as a favor to him and to me — make a point of seeing him soon?

"One more thing, if I may impose on you. You know how generous Fred has been in the past — heaping gifts on me. He still seems to think he has some obligation to me. It hurt him when I returned the jewelry he had given me, but of course I could not keep it. Then he hit upon a new idea — to buy me some elaborate property abroad, and give me an income to support it. In his excited state of mind he would not listen to my refusal, and I'm very much afraid he may still have some notion of 'surprising' me. Please, if you find an opportunity — and I'm sure he'll confide in you — discourage the idea. I want him to forget all about our unfortunate marriage as soon as possible.

"Please forgive me for dragging you into this unpleasant family business. Need I say that I shall be very grateful?"

I wrote Keller immediately, proposing a hunting trip which we had vaguely discussed. He did not reply. After an interval, I wrote him again, with the same result, or lack of it. It took me a month to digest this injury to my pride. Then I sent him a brief note, asking him whether he still intended to investigate the Tornetto's "supernatural" manifestations. In a few days a formal letter came from an attorney, stating that Mr. Keller was ill, and that his private mail was being referred to the attorney, but when Mr. Keller had recovered, he would reply.

Later I heard that during the months following Alma's departure,

Keller had steadily disintegrated, physically and mentally. His relatives, from whom he had always kept aloof, but who gathered around him now, were quietly arranging to place him in a sanatorium, when one day, without any hint of his intention, he shot and killed himself in his garage.

The contents of his will were briefly reported to the press. It had been made recently, I guessed, in one of his lucid intervals. His family inherited the bulk of his wealth. He had, however, left a legacy to Alma, realizing no doubt that people will accept from the dead what their pride may refuse from the living. The newspaper account described this legacy as "property in Europe, acquired shortly before Mr. Keller's decease, and left to Mrs. Alma Vereker, the former Mrs. Keller."

About this time, I recounted the story of the Tornetto to a psychologist of my acquaintance, and he laughed at the notion that there was anything in it that could not be explained in psychological terms. His theory assumed that Keller had heard the story of Francesca Collini's death from Alma, who knew it; but that he had forgotten it. That his "attack" when driving the car downhill for the first time was the subconscious response of an already diseased mind. That my experience as a passenger was the result of natural fright; as driver, a mere imitative reaction of my shocked nervous system. That Collini's "force" was the product of paternal grief operating on an inventive imagination, and that the similarity of his experiences to mine was an unremarkable coincidence.

This hypothesis struck me as being only one degree less improbable than a frankly supernatural explanation, but as the memory of my experience in the car faded, I began to accept it, for want of a better.

Then the newspapers reported the fatal accident to Alma and Wrenn.

I did not see the first accounts, but a few days after the tragedy, I was shocked to find the following item in my newspaper, under the caption, *Superstition Grows Around Auto Crash:*

"Ravenna, Italy. The unfortunate automobile accident which resulted two days ago in the deaths of Mrs. Alma Vereker, American socialite, and of Gideon Wrenn, well-known British archeologist, has had a curious aftermath. An outbreak of superstitious fear among the peasants in this vicinity has reached such proportions that the authorities find it impossible to hire caretakers for the property owned by Mrs. Vereker. Mrs. Vereker had taken possession only the day before of a restored Fourteenth Century castle, situated on the crest of a mountain, the bequest of her late husband, Fred Keller, known as the American 'wheat king,' whom she had divorced shortly before his death. The castle had formerly been the property of Umberto Collini, the famous Italian novelist now visiting America.

"According to local gossip, Mrs. Vereker's death, the result of leaping

or falling from the car as it raced down the mountainside with Mr. Wrenn driving, took place in exactly the same manner and at the same spot as the death last year of Signorina Francesca Collini, the author's daughter. In that catastrophe as in this, the driver of the car also perished, with the difference that Signorina Collini's companion, a young lady, succumbed to a heart attack, while Mr. Wrenn died in the crash of the car when it plunged off the steep road.

"A favorite rumor among the peasant women near the estate is that Mrs. Vereker's car was the same one involved in the previous accident, but this seems to lack any foundation other than the fact that the cars were of the same expensive Italian make and model, and ignores the fact that Mrs. Vereker's car was also a legacy of the late Mr. Keller, whose property it had been. The belief that the castle is 'haunted,' however, has taken firm hold throughout the province."

Perhaps in time I shall be able to attribute this to psychological causes and effects. But my present notion is that Keller managed his vengeance cleverly — cleverly, indeed . . . "which, if not victory, is yet revenge."

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THE MYSTERY OF THE MISSING MANUSCRIPT

Let us recall a story we first told you in QUEEN'S QUORUM *(of beloved memory) . . . Fifty years after the publication in 1895 of M. P. Shiel's* PRINCE ZALESKI, *which contained only three short stories, Mr. Shiel revived his fin-de-siècle sleuth by writing a fourth short story about the eccentric Prince. This fourth, and last, Zaleski story was written in October 1945, when the author was past 80, and its creation nearly cost Mr. Shiel his life. When the manuscript was finished, the author walked to Horsham post office to mail it to EQMM's First Annual Contest. Apparently the effort was too much for that grand old man: he fainted and was taken to a hospital. When he recovered, Mr. Shiel was uncertain whether or not he had actually mailed the manuscript. In any event, the story never reached the offices of Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine.*

Mr. Shiel died on February 17, 1947, and the mystery of the missing manuscript seemed destined to remain a mystery forever. As we commented at that time, a truly precious possession — the only original Prince Zaleski manuscript extant — was lost to the world.

But the tale was not told.

Seven years passed after the writing of the fourth Zaleski story. Late in 1952 we received a letter from John Gawsworth, the distinguished English poet and the literary executor of M. P. Shiel. It seemed that the manuscript Mr. Shiel had tried to mail to EQMM in 1945 was not the original handwritten one but the original typescript prepared by the author's secretary or secretarial service. Mr. Gawsworth was sure of this because among the Shiel literary effects he had found a carbon copy of that typescript. Would we still be interested in the fourth adventure of Prince Zaleski? We would indeed! — and asked Mr. Gawsworth to send it post-haste, as an entry in EQMM's Eighth Annual Contest. Mr. Gawsworth did some editing of the duplicate typescript, chiefly cutting it and changing the end so that Prince Zaleski was restored to his original status of arm-chair detective; but the result, as Mr. Gawsworth himself expressed it, "is 98 per cent the Old Master."

So the return of Prince Zaleski was finally consummated — seven years after its transatlantic voyage was supposed to have begun — and we were happy and honored to give the story a Special Posthumous Award.

But still the tale was not told.

Two more years passed. Early in 1954 we got a telephone call from David A. Randall, head of the rare book department at Scribner's, who had just received an advance copy of Catalogue 135 from the British booksellers, Elkin Mathews, Ltd. Mr. Randall read us over the phone Item 247 — which offered, believe it or not, the "original signed holograph manuscript" of the fourth Prince Zaleski story! It seemed that Mr. Gawsworth had made another discovery among the Shiel literary effects — the original handwritten version of "The Return of Prince Zaleski" from which the typescript had been copied.

Of course you know what happened next. Surely, of all people in the world, we had the closest tie to that original manuscript. We asked Mr. Randall to cable its purchase, and in due course the manuscript came into our hands. It consists of 45 small pages, written throughout in Mr. Shiel's fascinating, though slightly archaic, handwriting. And now the only holograph Prince Zaleski manuscript is part of the Ellery Queen collection; now, after nine years, the tale is told and a truly precious possession is no longer lost to the world.

As to the story itself, we hope you will welcome it to your heart in true connoisseur spirit. Remember that it was written by the Old Master a half century after the original Zaleski tales. And the Old Master was near the end of his brilliant career. You will find some of the redolent romanticism of the earlier tales, some of the bizarre bravado of style and flamboyant felony of conception. For, whatever his age, M. P. Shiel was himself an "original": his work was completely individual — in the sleuth genre he was sui generis.

THE RETURN OF PRINCE ZALESKI

by M. P. SHIEL

THE MIST DRIBBLED A LITTLE DRIZZLE IN BITTER MOOD AS THE MURENA funeral moved through a London that turned up coat collars in response to that October blur. To Captain Campos of the Spanish Embassy, who was with me in my cab, I remarked, "All these people going about their little businesses have in them the same one care — an apprehension of death, a sense of *I may be the next.*"

"Of a certainty," my diplomat friend answered, "evil is in the air — corrup-

tion like the offensive breath of vampires, and ghouls, and bats of darkness, that foully suck the blood of carcasses. This killing of Murena is the thirteenth within a month, and the seventh murder of a Spaniard."

"Inefficiency of the police!" I said. "Moreover, I think, in every case — your seven Spaniards and our six Londoners — the monster has left a note with his victim — as if the murderer were challenging us to catch him."

"Say, Señor Shiel," Campos suddenly said, "why should *you* not intervene? It is Inspector Chamberlain's suggestion to us that you approach your friend, Prince Zaleski, and ask his help."

"Well, well," I answered, "but then Zaleski, you understand, is a man who has deliberately elected to live a hermit existence. No man sees his face but his Nubian servant, Ham, who keeps his organ's wind-chests going and cooks his porridge. His address is a Mommouthshire abbey — mainly a ruin, Zaleski and Ham being its hermit monks. Still, I will think of it."

And I did. After watching that wounded body of Juan Murena lowered into its solitary crib, I wrote to Prince Zaleski, who presently sent me a "Come" of invitation; and, not without peril, I clambered over broken stone in a growing gloom to that apartment on high that was my anchorite's habitat, whereupon Zaleski sprang to welcome me in his brisk way, saying: "The very face I craved to see! You know, my friend, how Newton assumed that the velocity of light is infinite, and all we like geese have gone agabbling after. I have been thinking . . . You will now pull my semantic reactions into harmony with the facts, and make of me an intellect clean-shaven."

"I have come on a practical matter," I mentioned.

And he: "I *know* what you have come on; for my Ham, who reads 'the papers,' has told me of what is now rousing the outside world to commotion. But you will hardly, I think, find me eager to pit my wits against the lady's, who without doubt is an egregious priestess of outrage."

"Lady!" I exclaimed. "You say to me, Zaleski, that these demoniacal crimes are being committed by a woman?"

He answered, "Are they not womanly crimes? Half of them, anyway. There is a certain needless world-challenge, self-assertiveness, which is female. She even dares to publish her address."

Where did she dare? When? But now in came Ham, bearing trays, and we sat under the moonshine of a hanging *lampas* to one of Zaleski's repasts. That night long we talked of velocities, of space-time, entropy, and of Newton's *hypotheses non fingo* — of anything, in fact, but what was really interesting me.

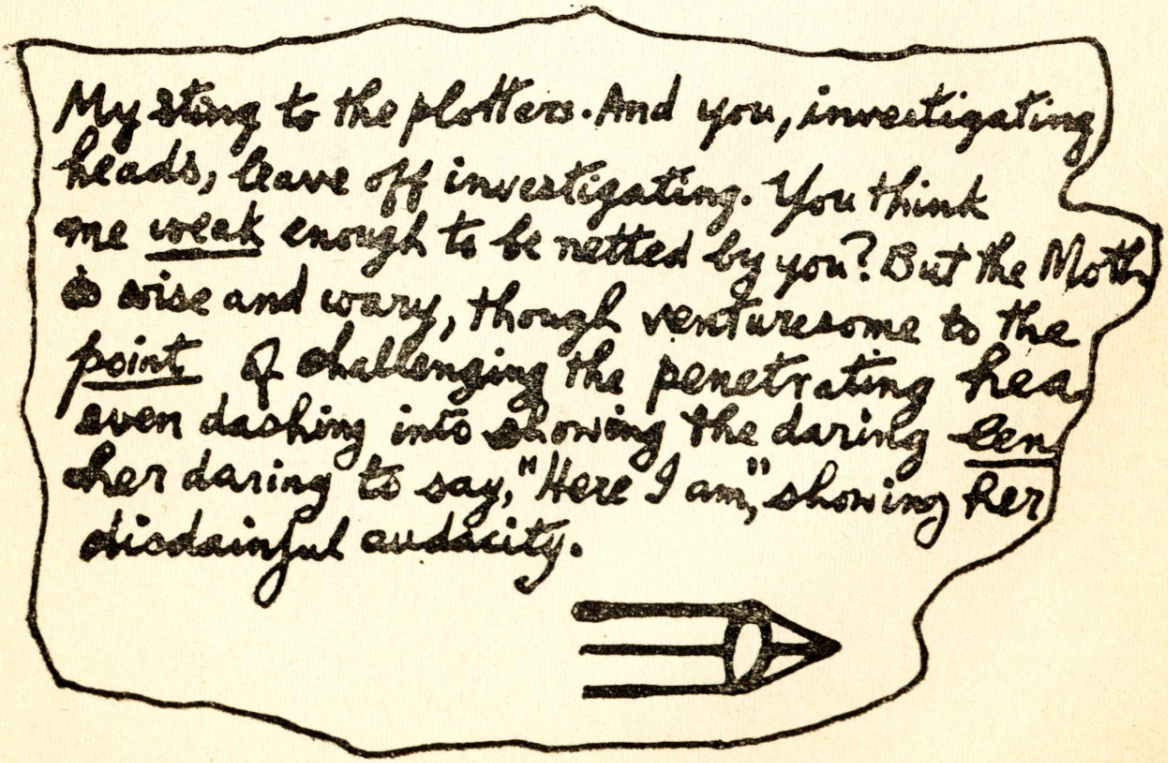
It was the following afternoon before I could broach my subject again; when I said to Zaleski: "But, after all, in respect to those atrocities, it is a question of rescuing yet other lives from atrocity, so that the notion of duty comes in."

"Let it be so, then," he answered. "The relation between the woman, or

her wraith, and me, and between her wraith and Ham, is nearer than you know — whatever species of thing a 'wraith' may be. Certainly she is dreadful, and I have a dread of her, as I frankly said to one Chamberlain of the police when he succeeded in coming here. But you, Shiel, tell me the facts as you know them; perhaps we two will see some way out."

Whereupon I spent two hours of telling, with Zaleski reclining, smoking a narghile, his eyes shut, save when he sat sharply up with increasing interest. I began at the end with visiting Juan Murena, Press Secretary of the new Spanish King. Murena was in a waltzing mood that night at his Embassy's ball; he was talking in the ballroom with a group (two of the group being friends of mine), and he led the talk, his theme being the New Spain, as it often was, claiming Spain would be a World Power again and was romping straight to own an Empire such as it never before had owned. "I at least," he declared, "mean to live to see it." But he did not; just then a message came to him to say that somebody in the Code Writer's Room was waiting to see him, and thither Murena's doomed feet took him. That "somebody" was later said to be "a young man in an opera cloak." Whoever he was, there in that Code Writer's Room the patriotic Murena was found butchered, ghastly, his throat gashed, and in his grasp a scrap of paper scribbled on, as in all previous cases.

A reproduction of this scrap, taken from an article in the *Times* commenting on the crime, I handed to Zaleski. The scrap, as reproduced, read as follows:



"You would learn its meaning, Shiel?" Zaleski laid the newspaper clipping between us upon a small inlaid table of Algerian workmanship. "It is quite simple. Here we have a mother and a son, the son an adorer of the mother, who thinks it well to mystify the *investigating heads* who in turn have the fixed idea that the murders are all perpetrated by one person — to mystify those heads by embarrassing that fixed idea of theirs with a new concept that the murders may possibly have been done by two persons. Those *heads* are now certain to revert with even more fixity to the conviction that the perpetrator is one person — now certain to conclude that two is an untrue ruse of the perpetrator to disburden himself of half his criminality. It is rather a deep move of the mother; she even gives her address in cipher. The son, it appears, does not quite like giving an address; but then, in giving it, as in everything, he is acting under her direction. However, the reporter of the *Times* catches no glimpse of this giving of an address for the reason that his intellect is all occupied with the idea that the writer of the note was scribbling about a *moth*, whereas he was scribbling about a *Mother* — just the capital *M* alone should prove that Mother was meant, not moth. And the *her* of the script! It is not, as a matter of fact, the female moth that has the *daring* to *dash* itself into the *penetrating heat* (the reporter thinks *hea* to mean *heat*) of a candle's flame! It appears that the female moth emits a luminosity to tempt the male's mentation, as the female glowworm does, so that when the male catches sight of a light of Man, he thinks within himself, 'Here, by Heaven, is femininity!' and perniciously dashes himself to a flaming death. So, if moth was really meant in the script, not *her* but *him* should have been written! Nor is it as to moth and Mother alone that we have confusion in the reporter's *investigating head:* for, space being scanty in the scrap of paper, when the writer was near the end of some lines he made an estimate, in a dim light, as to whether he could get the next word in on that line, and ventured; but in three cases he failed to get the whole word in, so left out a last letter, or two, of the word. Hence in the reproduction of the note we have the syncopations *Moth*, *hea*, and *len*, the reporter thinking that the writer meant *moth*, *heat*, and *lent*, the whole for the reporter reading:

> My sting to the plotters. And you, investigating heads, leave off investigating. You think me *weak* enough to be netted by you? But the Moth is wise and wary, though venturesome to the *point* of challenging the penetrating heat, even dashing into showing the daring *lent* her, daring to say, 'Here I am,' showing her disdainful audacity.

Then follows the curious geometric drawing, like a signature, giving her address and, I think, her name. But to read *heat* for *hea* can only be due to a preoccupation with the conviction that *Moth* means, not mother, but moth: for *hea* we should read, I easily see, not *heat*, but *head*, since we already have

investigating heads to guide us, nor can the heat of a candle's flame be described as *penetrating*. As for *len*, to read *lent* seems to me merely feeble. Shakespeare wrote 'The heavens such grace did lend her,' but why did the heavens lend? Why not give? Shakespeare wrote 'lend' simply because 'lend' happens to rhyme with commend. But to make *len* mean *lent*, the reporter actually assumes and adds a comma after *her* — a comma which is not in the reproduction of the note — ignoring that a lens is in the drawing of the signature. So for *len* I read, not *lent*, but *lens*, and I get for the whole note as follows:

> My sting to the plotters. And you, investigating heads, leave off investigating. You think me *weak* enough to be netted by you? But the Mother is wise and wary, though venturesome to the *point* of challenging the penetrating head, even dashing into showing the daring *lens*, her daring to say, 'Here I am,' showing her disdainful audacity.

As to the signature, that is clearly the drawing of a double-convex lens having three parallel rays striking upon it, these meeting, as usual, at the principal focus of the lens. If the signature is in fact an address, these three rays can only be three streets, as the two curved sides of the lens can only be crescents; and the fact that the middle line is not continued through the center of the lens demonstrates that the drawing is not of a lens of glass or of light-rays, but depicts a system of streets. Moreover, certain words in the script are underlined, where the underlining is senseless, unless it means to emphasize a pun or double-meaning that indicates name and address: *weak* (or week), for instance, is underlined; *point* is underlined; *len* is underlined; and since *Here I am* means the writer's address, and since the number seven is associated with week, I read the hidden message of the signature as 'Mrs. Point, or Pointer, Number 7 Lens Street, or, more likely, Lens Crescent.' "

"But," I exclaimed, "that is the address of my friend, Lady Poynting — 7 Lens Crescent!"

"Ah?" said Zaleski, quiet satisfaction in his tone.

"Yes, widow of the Marquess of Markstow, a former Ambassador to Madrid, and then widow of Sir Peter Poynting, who was her first husband's attaché. She is a Spaniard, passionate and artistic, and every fourth Sunday she holds a reception that Society scrambles to attend. And yes! — she has a son, Carlos, by her first husband. He is the present Marquess of Markstow."

Zaleski, his eyes closed, now musingly said, "I divine, I know, her; for in some species of reverie six midnights ago I somehow experienced the visit of the apparition of a lady, and — in some way or other — I received the impression that this lady and I were destined to come into a mortal combat of wits. I wonder . . . it may have been no more than fancy, but I think that this Lady Poynting is overpatriotic."

"Well, hardly," I answered; "and yet I do not know, for the lady is undoubtedly strange. One Sunday I was the first of her guests to arrive and on approaching the chair in which she was seated, expected some species of greeting from her; but none came; and I had no idea that she might be asleep, for her eyes were open; but then she breathed audibly, like a person who is asleep, though staring at me."

And Zaleski: "Abnormal, you see. What is she like, this lady?"

"Forty-five to fifty years old, tall, thin, colorless, dry as chips, some little faded hairs at the lip corners; some of her tones quite bass in quality; her breath has a faint odor of humanity, of damp earth, of oak leaves, and she gives an impression of shivering or fluttering — whether she actually shivers I don't know, but somehow she gives that impression."

"But *the* characteristic of her face," Zaleski continued, his eyes still closed, in the voice of one entranced, "is that the top of her forehead, the bottom of her forehead, the lips, and the chin are all in one straight line when seen in profile — with only the nose projecting beyond the dead verticality of the face. And she has a mania which she preaches. Am I not right?"

"Yes," I answered, "her face is certainly as you say; and I suppose that her antipathy to all her countrymen, save Carlists, might be called a mania."

"So that," Zaleski said, "while we two are comfortably chatting here, the life of some outcast in the East End of London is steadily approaching death's door. It seems that we should make a move, Shiel."

Zaleski spread a map of London before me; a ring in red ink marked a small central area.

"Make a move?" I asked.

"Yes, for you must understand that, unless we successfully intervene, an assassination will take place tomorrow at about two hours after midnight on a certain Dene Street, near a certain charity Shelter there," — he pointed to the spot — "as the dates, hours, and places of the murders of the six London outcasts tell us. For the murderer's motive in assassinating those Londoners of both sexes and of the lowest class is not obscure, but stares us in the face: that motive is simply to throw dust in the eyes, and conceal the motive for the assassination of the seven Spaniards; for all the murders are either of London prostitutes and beggars, or of Spaniards, with the Spaniards being all officials, politicians, people of influence, serving the new King. The motive for killing them would have been evident, if their killings were not complicated, obscured, by the murders of London wastrels. And the *order* in which the murders have occurred cries out for our attention: first a Spaniard, *then* a London prostitute, beggar, or thief, like a sound and its echo, the Spaniards being 1, 3, 5, 7, 9, 11, 13, while the Londoners were 2, 4, 6, 8, 10, 12. Now, if it is assumed, as it has been, that the murders were all committed by one person,

how inscrutable the motive of that person becomes! But you and I now perceive that the murders were done by two persons — by a son and by a mother, the mother's to make the motive of the son's inscrutable. Hence our need for making a move at once, for as I have noted and pointed out, all the murders of Londoners have occurred in the early-morning hours near a charity Shelter on Dene Street, of which Shelter the woman-assassin is, I feel sure, an official; she poses, no doubt, as a philanthropist, and is thus above suspicion."

Now Zaleski called aloud: "Ham, come!"

It was with a face of care that the Negro appeared; he had probably been listening to our talk, for he addressed his master, saying, "Do not go to her!"

"But suppose I thought that I must, Ham," — from the Prince.

And Ham: "Oh, good God, do not! I have a feeling — I have seen her face in a dream. Go and you never come back! Hear me this once — do not go!"

"It is true there is danger," Zaleski said smiling. It was clear that he was pleased by his servant's loyal concern. "But it is not danger to us, Ham."

The Prince moved to his ivory escritoire where he penned a few words on a sheet of paper and handed it to his anxious Ham, with the order to take my trap and drive with the message in all haste to the nearest telegraph office.

"That message," he said, resuming his place amid the cushions, "is the last word on the murders, and will, no doubt, insure their end. And now, Shiel, let us sit together and talk of more cosmic matters."

"But this murder that is to occur!" I protested.

"Quite so," said Zaleski calmly. "If our good Inspector Chamberlain is swift, it will be avoided. I have suggested a decoy to him — to surround Dene Street until dawn — and a search warrant for 7 Lens Crescent. Be at ease, Shiel — *la justice dérangera ton enfer*. This little affair is over. Let us now go on to matters of real concern, I beg. I see you, alas, far too seldom."

The suicide of Lady Poynting by a knife thrust to the heart when she was cornered in a mews off Dene Street, and the execution of her son, the Marquess of Markstow, with a silken rope, as befitted his rank, after Inspector Chamberlain had secured ample evidences of guilt in their rooms, including even a list of future victims, were "Society Sensations" that kept chatter long busy.

The *Times* announcing that a grateful King of Spain had bestowed the Golden Fleece on Zaleski, I wrote to congratulate him. He replied: "I sent it back, suggesting your name. Mundane affairs are not for me. Come soon, with or without a problem. How do you explain Wallace's *On Miracles* or that Ham is mastering the Art of the Omelette?"

But, alas, I was destined never to see my friend again . . .

A strange and moving tale of a man haunted by Christmas . . .

NOEL, NOEL

by BARRY PEROWNE

IT WAS ON A GRAY DECEMBER MORNing, under a sky threatening snow, that I called by request at the Colonial Office (Pacific Section) in the matter of my brother, recently deceased. As his only relative surviving in England, I was handed a letter written by the Resident Commissioner of the remote archipelago where my brother's life had come to an end. The letter was accompanied by a photograph of his grave, and I was given also a small box or chest, carved with strange island designs, which had been found in his palm-thatched house and contained, I was told, a manuscript he had left, of an autobiographical nature.

The official who interviewed me was a young-old individual, impeccably dressed in black jacket and striped trousers, and of great urbanity. When I took my leave, he helped me into my tweed overcoat, handed me my gray bowler hat and my cane. No doubt in deference to my frailty and my silver hair, he insisted on carrying the chest out to the waiting taxi.

The snow had set in by now, in earnest.

"Christmas in a few days," said my official, as we shook hands through the taxi window. "It'll be a white one."

He gave me a rather odd look, and I had no doubt, as the taxi set off for Victoria Station, that he was thinking about my brother, who had been born on a Christmas Day and named, accordingly, Noel.

I lived in the country, and returning home in the train, I had a first-class compartment to myself. Prior to opening the chest on the seat beside me, I studied again the photograph of my brother's far-off memorial. A small obelisk of what looked like white coral, it bore the curious epitaph "1°.58′ N., 157°.27′ W.," together with two sets of initials, my brother's and, I had been told, those of the woman to whom he had been for a great many years (though today was the first I had heard of it) most happily married.

Touching those years, the terms used by the Resident Commissioner to describe them, filled me with astonishment as I glanced over his letter again: "Beloved by this small community of forty-two souls — a source of comfort — sage in council — kind, courageous, selfless —"

With the best will in the world, I could not recognize in this picture my brother as I had known him. I turned for enlightenment to the chest on the seat beside me. I studied the carving

for a moment — designs of outrigger canoes, paddles, coconut palms, turtles, and land crabs; and when, with an uncomfortable sense of intrusion, I lifted the lid, there came from the chest a subtle aroma that suggested to my imagination palm fibre and seashells, sunshine and coral grottoes, baked breadfruit and petals of frangipani. I breathed again, it seemed to me — in that train rocking through the December snowfall — the trade winds which had blown from the pages of my boyhood reading, which was as near as I had ever got to the Pacific.

I took from the chest my brother's manuscript book, ran my fingers over its frayed binding, turned the yellowed leaves at random. They were covered with faded writing in a hand which, even after all the long years, I recognized as my brother's. And at the opening sentence, simple and conventional — *My earliest memory is of Christmas in the year 1880* — I nodded to myself, remembering that and many another Christmas at home.

I was five years older than Noel. We were a large family, living in a rambling country house, and our father, an awesome man normally, was always rollicking and jovial at Christmastime. For us, his eight children, it was always, outstandingly, the happiest time of the year. Especially was it so, in boyhood and adolescence, for Noel, the youngest of us, being his birthday as well as the season for which he was named. For Noel it was a time of pure magic. His eyes shone with excitement. He was a handsome boy, sensitive and imaginative, not a bit like the rest of us, who were rather homely looking and stodgy. Yes, at Yuletide my brother Noel, as a boy, was always at his best — though later, in young manhood, by a kind of reaction to a most unfortunate circumstance, he was to be always at his disastrous worst.

My sister Emily once remarked, "I suppose it's natural that Christmas should mean even more to Noel than to the rest of us, but, you know, I wonder at times if his excitement is quite healthy. His anxiety that we should all be here together, his intense preoccupation with whether it will snow at just the right time, the utter extravagance with which he'd reward the waits if we didn't restrain him — it all makes me wonder if there's not perhaps a slight instability in him somewhere. Really, I tremble at times to think of his future."

She had good reason. At sixteen he began to get into scrapes. At eighteen his behavior gave rise to a deeper disquiet. At twenty, while articled to an estate agent in Shropshire, he kicked over the traces so seriously that my father told him never to show his face at home again.

Poor Noel. Christmas was not the same for him without us — or for us without him. Some of us were married by then, but we always foregathered in the old home in deference to our father. Our natural stodginess, lacking the inspiration of Noel's presence, was quite stupefying.

As for Noel, the very next Christmas season after he had been cast out, he was brought before a London magistrate and charged with drunkenness and insulting behavior. We heard about it later. Asked if he had anything to say, he blamed his misdemeanor on the need he had felt to drown the memory of past joyous Christmases in the home from which his own folly had barred him forever.

"Young man," said the magistrate, "your trouble is less unique than you fancy. We are all prone to self-pity at this season. We all have memories and regrets. We are all sensitive at Christmastime, but it is a sign of immaturity in you that you have allowed such a universal feeling to become, in your case, morbidly developed. Case dismissed, but don't leave the court. I haven't finished with you."

What followed was surprising. The magistrate, moved perhaps by Noel's good looks and charm of manner, and by a certain pathos in his aberration, invited him into his own home as a guest over Christmas. The visit grew extended. Long after the holly had been taken down, my brother continued to loll in the magistrate's house. Instead of resenting this, the magistrate and his good lady felt a growing affection for him. In a sense, they adopted him; but, not liking to see him idle, they found him a sound position in a South Coast town.

The following Christmas found Noel in trouble again. It was so serious that, instead of returning "home" to the magistrate's house, where he was expected on Christmas Eve, he sent the unfortunate man a telegram announcing his intention of throwing himself from Beachy Head at midnight.

The harassed magistrate caused police to be rushed to the spot. Noel, however, having sent his telegram, had succumbed to drink and was later found insensible in a snow-covered beach shelter. The magistrate, though furious, yielded to his wife's insistence that he smooth over the trouble Noel was in; but he told my brother that thenceforth he could go to the devil in his own way.

The magistrate and his wife, on the other hand, went to Aix-les-Bains to recuperate from their undeserved anxieties. One morning, as they were walking from their hotel to the curative baths, in the pleasant winter sunshine, a man darted out from behind a date palm and planted himself squarely in their path.

It was my brother Noel, handsome as ever, but much disheveled and in that state of excitement, peculiar to himself, which my sister Emily had once described as "unhealthy."

"Go to the devil, can I?" he shouted at the magistrate. "In my own way? All right, watch me! *This* is my way!"

His hand flashed to his mouth. A cloaked gendarme came running towards the scene, blowing his whistle. My brother Noel lurched heavily to the left. He lurched heavily to the right. His knees buckled. The magis-

trate's good lady screamed. My brother Noel fell contorted at her feet with a white froth on his lips.

It was proved afterward that he had eaten soap.

His object had been to frighten the couple into taking him back into their good graces. The extraordinary thing was that the magistrate did not have him jailed. He was eager to do so, but his good lady took the view that it was no good sending Noel to prison, since he would be out in a month or two, and free to plague them again. She would be terrified to put a foot outside her house, she said, for fear he might spring at her from the shrubbery and open his veins with a razor before her very eyes. He must be sent, she insisted, somewhere very far away.

The magistrate provided funds for Noel's emigration to Australia.

At home, we of his family heard of all this later. Our father had passed away in the interim — our sister Emily too — and those of us who were still living in the family home had resolved to let bygones be bygones and to make Noel welcome among us, should he ever show up.

But we heard nothing from him, and it was only now, as I sat in the train reading his manuscript, that I came to that part of it which dealt with adventures of which I had had no previous inkling.

I laid down the book on my knees for a moment. The lights had come on in the compartment. Outside, the snow was falling thickly, and the woods and fields glimmered under their mantle of white as the December evening drew in.

Poor Noel, I thought again; he had been worthless through and through when he had left England. I marveled again at the letter, so full of praise of my brother, which I had been handed at the Colonial Office. What experience had befallen him, I wondered, to have changed him so greatly?

I picked up the book again, to read of a continuing succession of disasters and infamies. Within a year, he had made Australia too hot to hold him. He was compelled to leave clandestinely aboard a trading schooner, the *Ellis P. Harkness*, skippered by a toothless Cockney named Larkin, as incorrigible a scoundrel as my brother.

The third member of the schooner's company was a slim, brown, silent, smiling boy, a native of Tokelau, called Rahpi. He was far too good for the precious pair he sailed with, but through months of their hucksterings and rogueries among the archipelagos he served them loyally, and for my brother the boy conceived an inexplicable devotion.

One day, as the two men were drinking morosely in the cabin, an excited hail from Rahpi, at the wheel, sent them staggering up the companionway. The boy pointed off to starboard. Far across the shining water, under the blue Pacific sky, was an open boat. The prevailing easterly blew light and fitful; the boat's sail trembled, in irons. It was clear there was no hand at the helm.

By mid-afternoon the schooner came up with the boat. There lay in it the sun-blackened body of a man. My brother Noel dropped down into the boat to examine the corpse. Clutched in its brittle fingers was a wash-leather bag. Noel loosed it from the dead man's grip and shook the contents onto his palm. His heart gave a great thud.

Pearls!

He felt the boat rock as Larkin leaped down into it.

"Halves, mate!" Larkin said. "How about it, mate?"

Noel looked at him. Larkin's eyes were narrowed, his tongue moved round over his toothless gums, his right hand rested tensely on the bulge of the revolver in the pocket of his tattered ducks.

My brother smiled. "Halves it is," he said.

Larkin looked with sly gloating at the pearls on Noel's palm. "What a Christmas present, mate!" Larkin said. "Eh, mate?"

The bright day seemed to my brother Noel suddenly, strangely to darken. He said slowly, "Christmas present?"

Larkin flared up. It was as though, all at once, he were anxious to find cause for offense, an excuse for a fight.

"Why, you lowdown, busted boozer," he shouted, "ain't you got a spark of decency left in you? Ain't you got a family back home to bow your head in shame to think of at a time like this? Don't you know tomorrow's Christmas Eve?"

The pearls spilled unheeded from my brother's hand to the bottom of the boat. Larkin plunged to his knees, pouring curses on the corpse as he shoved it aside to get at the boat's bilges. Noel swung himself back to the schooner's deck. He thrust past the staring Rahpi and went below. He flung his broken-peaked cap across the cabin and reached for a bottle.

That night, swaying on his feet as he stood his trick at the wheel, he brooded alcoholically, heedless of the star-bright sky. More acutely than ever before, the memory of long-lost happy Yuletides returned to plague him. He could neither relive them nor forget them. That nostalgia known to all men — but developed in my brother Noel to a destructive morbidity — made him as desperate as a trapped animal. He had a blind urge to flight, which in his befuddled mind shaped itself into a plan to seize the schooner and the pearls and *be rid of Larkin* —

Suddenly, leaving the wheel spokes spinning aimlessly, he lurched down the companion into the cabin. The lamp there, swaying in gimbals, cast an oily yellow gleam that made the shadows move. Larkin lay on his back in his bunk, snoring, his toothless mouth agape, his gums glistening pink in a tangle of beard.

My brother, holding his breath, slid a hand under the man's pillow. He felt the wash-leather bag, the butt of the revolver. He drew them out cautiously. He raised the revolver to Larkin's head, but then the thought

of the boy Rahpi flashed into his mind. The Tokelau boy was asleep in the forepeak. He would hear a shot. My brother stood biting his lips. His rage flamed up again. Kill one, kill both! Rahpi must go, too. He must be hounded out and ruthlessly shot down.

Again my brother raised the revolver to Larkin's head. But now the schooner, to a sudden freshening of the wind, and with the wheel spinning free, broached-to with a jerk that sent Noel staggering. Before he could recover himself, the squall struck — one of those Pacific squalls which an alert wheelsman could see coming from afar, in good time to reef down and make all snug. But there was no wheelsman, and with a rush and hiss of rain, a screaming wind, the squall was on them. Larkin woke with a shout as the schooner was lifted high on the first of the rollers, then dropped dizzily into its trough. Glass crashed as the lamp blacked out.

The two men were flung together, struggling, fighting with each other to be first up the companion. Finally both gained the deck and clung where they could as a sea swept over them. Through the tumult about them sounded a deeper, more distant note, a rumbling note like thunder.

"Breakers!" Larkin yelled.

After that, according to the account in the manuscript, my brother Noel had no clear idea of what happened, no recollection of clawing a handhold on the reef as the schooner struck. He did not know how many hours passed before he regained consciousness. His whole body stung from the cruel abrasions of the coral. His head seemed to weigh a ton as he raised it.

He struggled to his knees. The vast sky of morning was sheened over with radiant tints of pearl. The passing of the squall had left the sea shining and level to the horizon, though here and there along the curve of the reef spray leaped with a white flash against the blue. At some distance from him, two figures were picking their way along the reef, slowly and painfully, sometimes stumbling.

Noel watched them, conscious of the heavy, measured thumping in his chest. Larkin and Rahpi! Alive! With a creeping horror he remembered how a few hours before, in his madness, he had stood at the very brink of murder. Mere chance had plucked him back from that awful precipice. They were alive, and he drew in his breath, deeply, in relief and gratitude.

A shout reached him, not from the men on the reef, but from the lagoon within its shelter. Noel got to his feet with difficulty, his salt-soaked body smarting, and turned. The lagoon lay tranquil, edged in the distance by a white beach and leaning palms. A canoe, driven swiftly by paddles that flashed as they rose and fell, was coming towards him. There were two people in it, a young man and a girl. The *pareus* they wore were gaily colored, and the girl's shining dark hair streamed over her brown shoulders.

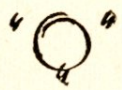
"Hello?" the young man called to Noel. "All right, there? Hello?"

My brother lifted a hand slowly in reply. He wondered where he was. The young man had spoken in English. Nearing the reef, the couple, obviously brother and sister, and Tahitian in appearance, backed with their paddles, and beached the canoe.

The girl looked up at my brother with dark, gentle eyes that seemed to hold a puzzled look. She was very beautiful. My brother had a strange feeling that this meeting between them had been inevitable — that he had come to the one place in the world where he could find peace — that before him, here, lay the beginning of his real life.

There had been nobody here to greet Captain Cook when he had discovered the island on December 24, 1777, at precisely 1°.58′ N., 157°.27′ W. But for my brother Noel there was this girl, and she smiled at him gravely, yet with a kind of wonder in her eyes, as though she had been waiting for him for a long time and could not quite believe that he had come, at last.

"Welcome," she said, "to Christmas Island."



A 'TECHNICALITY

Many detective novelettes, if not most of them, are written the wrong way — with topsy-turvy technique. Too many are written originally as full-length novels of, say, 60,000 words, and then abridged to about 20,000 words for magazine publication (the original length being used for subsequent publication in book form). Now, it is virtually impossible to condense 60,000 words to one-third of that number without emasculating the characters and skeletonizing the plot. We have read some of these abridgements, especially in national magazines, and have found ourselves writhing; too often the drastic cuts have produced a bloodless story so lacking in smooth transitions and in clear continuity that the final effect is that of a grasshopper-tale. We remember one instance in particular of a story that later became a contemporary classic as a full-length book; we would defy any reader to try to analyze the shortened magazine version and explain what happened to whom — when — where — and why.

On the other hand, there are also too many novelettes of 20,000 words that should have been written originally as short stories of 7000 to 10,000 words. In these cases, the evil of overexpansion is no less heinous than that of supercondensation. It takes more than a basic understanding of craftsmanship to extend a short story to novelette length and still conceal the obvious process of deliberate padding. Or to put it another way, it does not take an X-ray critical mind to see through the fat of inflation.

The fundamental truth is that the novelette is a difficult and demanding form unto itself. It should not be merely a stretched short story or a compressed novel. Of present-day detective writers the two who have probably come closest to mastering the novelette form are Rex Stout and Hugh Pentecost. Both know how to build action and suspense in the framework of a true novelette, without sacrificing either characterization or texture; both know how to trim their plot material to the shape and size of a novelette, without resorting to shrinking a longer story or swelling a shorter one. Both probably agree with the French definition of the word novelette — une composition littéraire qui tient le milieu entre le conte et le roman *— that is to say, a literary composition which steers a middle course between the short story and the novel. And we think that both have learned how, within the scope of a novelette, to tell that most exciting of mysteries — to quote Mr. Pentecost, the "digging into the subconscious portion of the human mind."*

IF I SHOULD DIE

by HUGH PENTECOST

O'CONNEL'S THIRD AVENUE BAR and Grill was long and narrow and there was no escape through the kitchen at the rear, despite the fire laws. Baxter knew that and he had no place to go when he saw John Spence come in off the street.

It wasn't that Baxter was afraid of Spence. There was nothing Spence could do to him that was worse than he'd already done to himself. Perhaps the fact that Spence was a kind of policeman raised an instinctive emotion of fear. But it wasn't real — just as most of the things that terrified Paul Baxter weren't real. The fact was that the law can't do anything to you for drinking yourself to death. If you break windows, or punch inoffensive strangers, or wreck automobiles, you can be pulled in. But the law can't do a thing about your sitting quietly at a table in a legally licensed place and drinking if you can pay.

Baxter ran his tongue across teeth that had a fuzzy taste. Spence, the policeman, was not to be feared. And Spence was not his father, or any father, with a razor strop concealed behind his back. Spence was simply an ex-friend and Penny's current lover. If anyone should feel guilt or fear it was Spence. Spence and Penny!

Spence stopped at the head of the bar and spoke to Dennis, the bartender. Then he looked down at the table where Baxter was sitting and started toward it. It seemed a long way to Baxter. John Spence was very tall, and dark, and menacing. He stopped by the table and stood there for a moment without speaking.

"Hello, Paul," he said quietly.

Baxter raised his eyes. At close range Spence's face looked blurred.

"If you have come here to be a reformer," Baxter said, "go away! I'm not buying any."

Spence pulled out the chair opposite Baxter and sat down.

"You look terrible, Paul," he said.

"I look terrible, I feel terrible, I am terrible," Baxter said. "End of report. Look, John, take a powder, huh?" He looked down at the empty whiskey glass in front of him and rapped it on the table to attract Dennis's attention.

Spence's eyes narrowed. "Are you ever sober enough to understand anything clearly?" he asked.

"Not," Baxter said, "if I can help it. Because when I understand things clearly, John, I can't take it. Do I make myself plain? Now, it was nice to have seen you. Good night."

Spence didn't move. Suddenly Baxter pounded the empty glass savagely on the table top. "What the

hell do I have to do to get attention here, Dennis?" he shouted at the top of his lungs.

Along the bar, heads turned.

"Take it easy, Mr. Baxter," Dennis said, coming over to the table. "There's other customers. The same?"

"Doubled in spades," Baxter said.

"And your friend here?"

"If my friend here wants a drink," Baxter said, "let him order it."

Spence shook his head and Dennis went away.

"All right," Baxter said, "I suppose you've brought the divorce papers. I've never stood in your way, have I? Pull 'em out and I'll sign 'em."

"Penny doesn't want a divorce," Spence said in a bleak voice. "Penny, God help her, is determined to ride to the end of the line with you, Paul. When Penny loves she loves. But you've got to move, Paul!" Spence's voice shook. "You've got to start to live again, or you've got to die. You can't just leave her hanging in space — waiting, waiting, *waiting!*"

"I regret my inability to hurry the process of dying," Baxter said, but he felt his heart pounding hard against his ribs. Penny was going to ride to the end of the line! When she loved, she loved. Penny! Penny, my darling, my sweet!

It was hard to remember back — back to the days when he and Penny and Spence, and usually some girl Spence had dated, used to go to the beach on Saturdays or Sundays. It was hard to remember the warm sand, the blue-green sea, the sun, hot and life-giving. It was hard to remember tanned, healthy skins, and laughter, and Penny's hand in his, with its occasional pressures that said, "I love you." It was hard to remember the talk — Spence's talk about the F.B.I. school from which he'd just graduated, Penny's plans for their future. And, his own talk about his job as a newspaper reporter, about the novel he was working on at night. It was a brilliant, technicolor world without fear or anxiety. That was it! Technicolor — phony. It was hard to remember because it wasn't real. It couldn't have been real or it couldn't have been lost. Or could it? Penny is determined to ride to the end of the line!

"There you are, Mr. Baxter," Dennis said, putting the double shot down.

Baxter grabbed it, drank half of it.

"I'll be honest," Spence said. "I'm beyond doing anything just for you, Paul. I'm sorry for you. I know enough about these things to know that what you've done to Penny and to yourself isn't willful viciousness. I know you can't help it, for reasons that I *don't* understand. But for Penny — well, I'd do almost anything to help Penny."

"I'll bet," Baxter said, bitterly. "I'll just bet!"

It was as though John Spence were an echo — an echo of Baxter himself. Once Baxter had felt and said those same words — "I'd do almost anything for Penny." And then some

irresistible, strangling force had kept him from it. The impulse to flee from Penny had become overpowering. Why? *Why?* It had been put into words for him once by a psychiatrist to whom he'd gone in a moment of desperation. He could hear the calm, impersonal voice now.

"It is not hard to understand, Mr. Baxter. As a child you were in the middle of particularly nasty and widely publicized divorce proceedings. As any child would, you tried to hold your parents together, but you failed. You were rejected, pushed into the background, sent away alone to boarding schools and college. That rejection became an obsession with you. You have been afraid to grab hold of the things you want for fear it will happen again. That's why you can't do the big story for your paper — you might fail, and be fired. That's why you can't finish your novel — it might be turned down. That's why you can't accept the responsibility of marriage and fatherhood. You might fail and be rejected by the person you love most in the world, your wife. Better not try for any of these things. Better run from them. So, Mr. Baxter, you are forever in flight, not daring to take what is offered you for fear it will be withdrawn just as you reach for it."

Words. Carefully, scientifically thought-out words. Yet fear was there — so great at moments that he would get a little drunk to blot it out. Then those moments had come closer and closer together until everything that mattered had been thrown away.

A nerve twitched in Spence's cheek. "I'm going to offer you a chance, Paul. Penny thinks things are so hopeless because no one will give you a chance any more. I happen to disagree. I think you wouldn't or couldn't take a chance if it was offered to you. If I'm right, then Penny may, at last, believe me. If I'm wrong — well, then Penny may get what she wants."

"Which is . . ."

"You," Spence said.

Baxter's heart beat intolerably. "And what is this chance?" he asked.

"It's a chance," Spence said, "at one of the biggest scoops any newspaperman ever made. If you got this story, Paul, you could sell it to any newspaper or news syndicate in the country. You could write your own ticket, which would include a job."

Baxter narrowed his eyes shrewdly. "But you'd rather I didn't take it, so you'd be right and Penny would get off before the end of the line?"

"You couldn't possibly be more correct," Spence said grimly.

Suddenly tears welled up into Baxter's eyes. "For God's sake, John, don't hate me so much! Don't hate me so much!"

John Spence drew deeply on his cigarette, letting out the smoke slowly. "Let's get out of here," he said.

Paul Baxter opened his eyes, then he closed them quickly because the sun was shining brightly and pain-

fully in at the window. He wasn't quite sure where he was for a moment, because there was no sunlight in the hall bedroom where he lived. Then he remembered coming home with Spence and talk of a chance — of a scoop — but he must have passed out when he got here because he didn't remember anything more.

There were familiar things, though. He could feel a pain in his head, like an awl driven through his skull. The aroma of fresh coffee reached him and almost nauseated him. He wiped beads of clammy sweat off his forehead. Then he began to shake. There was only one cure for that. He tried moistening his lips, but his tongue was dry and hot.

Baxter opened his eyes again and forced himself to keep them open. He was in Spence's bedroom, could see the neatly pressed suits hanging in the closet, the neckties on the rack, the shoes on shelves at the side. Spence had always been neat. They used to kid him about it. Then he saw Penny's picture in a leather frame on the bureau. The awl drove in further.

His Penny's picture on John Spence's bureau!

A sudden terror seized Baxter. Maybe Penny was here, somewhere in the apartment. He touched his unshaven jaw with the tips of his fingers. She mustn't see him this way! She must never see him this way. Then he closed his eyes, and his throat ached with the urge to weep. God help him, she *had* seen him this way, many, many, times before he had finally fled from her in shame.

John Spence was standing in the doorway.

"I'm sorry to get you up," Spence said. "If I'm to tell you about this thing it will have to be before I go to the office. There's a bathrobe in the closet. Put it on and come out and we'll talk while I have breakfast."

"You — you don't happen to have a drink, do you, John?" Baxter asked.

"No," Spence said, sharply. "And if I did I wouldn't give it to you. You've got to be sober to get this through your head. After that you can get as blind as you like — somewhere else."

Baxter went into the bathroom and doused his face and head with cold water. God, he looked awful. He brushed his hair and then, after wrapping himself in the bathrobe, he went out to join Spence.

Spence was sitting at a table in the kitchenette. There were coffee and bacon and eggs in front of him. He had a manila-paper folder at his left and he was looking at some papers and clippings in it. He glanced up.

"Drink that," he said, indicating a steaming cup at Baxter's place.

"I'm afraid I couldn't get coffee down," Baxter said.

"It isn't coffee."

Baxter took a step forward and looked down at the cup. It was filled with hot tomato juice. The strangling urge for tears seized him again. In the old days, when hangovers had been a rarity, a time after a special celebra-

tion or a big outing, when everybody moaned and groaned about how awful they felt, and made bad jokes, Baxter had never been able to face coffee. His peculiar need was for hot tomato juice. John Spence had remembered.

Baxter sat down. He lifted the cup and gulped. The juice scalded the inside of his mouth. He put the cup down and sat there, holding to the table to keep from shaking.

"You know who Dutch Hayden is?" Spence asked.

"Kidnaper, murderer, bank robber — an all-around handy man."

"He's the number-one bad man in the country today," Spence said. "He's here in New York."

"How nice for New York. You want me to interview him? Is that the scoop? Really, John, I —"

"No," Spence said, "I want you to witness his execution."

Baxter shook his head. "I haven't followed the papers for weeks," he said. "You mean he's been arrested and tried and they're going to —"

"I mean he's going to be shot to death outside a Tenth Avenue saloon between 9 and 10 o'clock tonight. Stay sober that long and you'll be the only reporter in the country to see it."

"But how do you know he'll be —"

"I'm going to kill him," Spence said.

"Now, wait a minute, John —"

"Let me tell you," Spence said, "because there isn't much time." He lifted his eyes to Baxter for the first time, clear, gray, honest eyes. "Hayden's last job was a bank robbery in Indiana. He was taken by the local police but he escaped, after killing two guards and the local sheriff. Bank robbery brought us in — the F.B.I. But Hayden had disappeared completely. We've never been able to find hide nor hair of him till four days ago. Then he was handed to us on a platter."

"How?" Baxter asked.

"A woman," Spence said. "We got the whole picture from her. Hayden's had a plastic job done on his face. His fingerprints have been altered by some kind of acid treatment. He's been here in New York for three months, still heading up his old gang."

"It must have killed him to have his face changed," Baxter said. "He was always a good-looking guy — swell-headed about it."

"That was his trouble," Spence said. "Too much publicity. He was pretty nearly as famous as a Hollywood star. It was better to have his face changed than to die on account of it."

"Why is the woman turning him in?"

"Just a little more kidding around than she could stand, I guess. She reached us in a roundabout way — too long to tell about now. Tonight she's having dinner with Hayden at this Tenth Avenue dive. When they come out she'll give us the sign. We'll be waiting for him."

"And you are going to kill him?"

Spence shrugged. "I'm assuming

we won't get close enough to arrest him without his drawing a gun."

"Are you certain the babe is on the level?"

"We've checked and double-checked," Spence said. "She gave us the name of the plastic surgeon. We put the heat on him and he talked to save his own hide. Now listen, Paul. This is a strict secret. If it came out that I'd told you, I'd lose my job — probably wind up in jail myself. I'm taking the chance of telling you for just one reason."

"Penny?"

"Right. There's a brownstone, three stories high, across the street from the restaurant. You could see the whole thing from the roof. If you can stay sober enough to see it, and can write it afterward, it's the key to another chance for you."

Baxter didn't say anything. He was hanging onto the table again in an attempt to fight the shakes.

"There's a mass of background detail on Hayden — photographs, news stories — in this folder," Spence said. "You can stay here and read them so that you'll have the color material you'll need. On this slip of paper is the address of the brownstone and directions on how to get up to the roof. It's your baby, Paul. It's up to you."

High above the roof of the brownstone house was an electric sign on a neighboring building. It advertised tires and it blinked on and off, regularly, monotonously, like a giant pulse. One instant the roof was dark, then suddenly it was brighter than daylight.

Paul Baxter crouched near the parapet, looking down at the street below. It was a warm August night, but Baxter felt chilled and shaky. He had spent one of the worst days of his life. The pulsing of the sign was symbolic of it — first light, then dark. The light phases were filled with hope, the dark phases awful with terror. Part of the time he told himself that John Spence, for all his grimness, was the finest friend a man ever had. Part of the time he cursed Spence for a torturer and a sadist. Spence knew he would fail. Spence wanted him to fail. Hell, he'd go to O'Connel's, get good and plastered, forget the whole thing.

Then he thought of Penny, and what it could mean if he pulled this off. If he could win himself a job and have Penny to help him, he might get back on his feet. Penny was prepared to go along to the end of the line. And where was that? Well, specific failure, failure to take advantage of a chance, was the end of the line. Spence knew that. That's why he had set this up.

Black and white, light and dark, rhythmic perpetual motion like the thumping of his heart — round and round, over and over, yes and no.

He had stayed in Spence's apartment all morning, trying to read and absorb the stuff in the folder on Dutch Hayden. It was a diabolic career, filled with murder and vio-

lence. It was a pattern ruthlessly vicious. Here, he thought, he had found one human being worse than himself.

But was that true? His crimes were just as ruthless and meaningless as Hayden's. Hadn't he murdered his own career, his marriage, Penny's happiness, their unborn children? He and Hayden were twins, he told himself. One killed the flesh, the other the spirit and the heart.

Penny! He could see her, with her pert, upturned nose and her grave blue eyes. He could hear the warmth of her husky voice. He could remember the anguish that her patience had caused him.

"Why don't you get out?" he had shouted at her. "Why don't you leave me? Why don't you get a decent guy like John Spence?"

"You're my guy," she had whispered in the darkness, trying to hold him close to her.

He couldn't stand that in view of what he was doing to her. His guilt was too oppressive, too terrifying. Finally he had fled. He had been running away forever — from school as a kid, from jobs, from friends, from his novel, from Penny. Now he had a chance — his last chance — and he wanted nothing so much in the world as to run away from that.

At noon Baxter decided it was no use. He couldn't face it. He couldn't face another ten minutes without drinking, and he knew if he started he could never cover the story. Okay, okay. This *was* the end of the line. He would call Penny on the phone and tell her that he had tried, but he just couldn't make it. She would be free.

He went to the phone, struggling clumsily with the dial mechanism. He heard the ringing, then Penny's "Hello!"

The sound of her voice jolted him, set his teeth to chattering.

"Hello!"

He couldn't speak. He could see her, standing by the phone, frowning in bewilderment.

"Paul, is that you?" she said.

She knew! She knew he was reaching out to her. He sat there frozen, staring at the instrument.

"Paul!" There was despair in her voice now.

He jammed the receiver down violently. Then, when she was beyond hearing, he shouted at the top of his lungs, "Penny! Penny!" John Spence's apartment echoed with the shout.

Baxter went back to the folder and to the criminal career of Dutch Hayden. Calm, despairing determination took hold of him. He would see this one day out. Anybody could see one day out. Dutch Hayden was expected to emerge from the Tenth Avenue restaurant about nine. It would take a couple of hours after that to phone his story to a rewrite man on his old paper, then write the detailed account of what he saw, filling it in with the background material from the folder. That would be eleven — eleven hours from now.

Somehow he lasted. About 7 o'clock in the evening he went across town

to the brownstone on Tenth Avenue, fighting almost physically with himself to get by the drinking places. A hundred times he told himself that one drink wouldn't hurt, and it would stop the almost perpetual shaking. But he lasted.

At twenty minutes to 8 he was on the roof of the brownstone, crouching in the angle made by the corner of the building. By 8:30 it was dark and the electric sign began to flash on and off.

At ten minutes to 9 he heard the crunch of footsteps on the graveled roof. He lowered himself into the shadow and looked back over his shoulder. A man had come out on the roof and was sauntering over toward the parapet. In the "on" flashes from the sign he saw that the man was fairly well-dressed. Probably a tenant. Possibly, even, one of Spence's men.

Baxter raised himself so that he could see the street. There was a dingy yellow sign over the door of the restaurant. MONAHAN'S. It was probably a steak-and-chop place. Baxter found himself thinking of the glittering array of bottles behind the bar.

He glanced at his wrist watch. Two minutes to 9. He turned back to watch the restaurant door. Spence's plan had been outlined on a sheet of notes in the folder. As close to nine as possible, the girl, one Florence Knapp, a former burlesque performer, would get Dutch Hayden to leave Monahan's. Once on the street she would pretend to have left something behind and go back into the restaurant to get it. Then Spence and his men would close in on Hayden.

Baxter couldn't see them in the darkness, but he knew that Spence and a dozen others were located in doorways on both sides of the street, blocking off escape both ways, guarding any alleys that might lie between the buildings. One of the men would approach Hayden and order him to surrender. If he made any sort of move to resist they would let him have it.

Baxter glanced at his watch again. Three minutes past nine! He felt sweat break out on his body. Suppose Florence Knapp had failed! Suppose Hayden had got wise! *Suppose this interminable day of torture had been for nothing!*

The door of Monahan's opened and a man and woman came out together. Baxter gripped the parapet, leaning forward. The man was evidently looking for a cab. The woman said something to him and went back into the restaurant. The man lit a cigarette. Even from the roof you could see the flare of the match plainly. Then, from an adjoining doorway another man stepped. Baxter recognized the tall, angular figure instantly. It was John Spence.

Somehow Spence was like an actor walking out of the wings onto the stage. He headed straight toward Hayden. Suddenly Hayden jerked his head up. Spence must have spoken his name. Baxter saw his hand go for a shoulder holster. At the same instant guns flashed from half a dozen differ-

ent points. Hayden went up on his toes like a ballet dancer, clutching vaguely at his throat. Then he spun around and pitched, face forward, into the gutter. Men who had been in hiding appeared, swarming toward the prostrate figure. John Spence stood very still, looking down at the body.

Baxter reached for his handkerchief to wipe his face. Then he heard a sound that curdled his blood. It was the sound of laughter — greedy, bubbling laughter. He turned to look at the man who had come out onto the roof. It was he who was laughing — staring down at the tableau on the street — and laughing. Suddenly he turned and saw Baxter, evidently for the first time. They stood peering at each other in the darkness. Then the electric sign pulsed on.

Stark terror struck at Baxter, terror so great he thought he was going to faint. The sign blinked off. He couldn't move. He couldn't speak. He heard the crunch of gravel as the man took a step toward him. Baxter knew who the man was. In spite of the evidence of his own eyes, in spite of the drama on the street, in spite of the facts in Spence's folder, Baxter knew the man.

The sign flashed on again revealing the face of the other man, untouched by any plastic surgeon's art, perfectly familiar to Baxter from hours of study.

"Don't move, brother, unless you want to get your head blown off," Dutch Hayden said.

Paul Baxter's instinct for flight, without analysis or reason, probably saved his life at that particular moment. The paralysis that prevented him from screaming out his terror did not affect his muscular movement. As the electric sign blinked off, he turned, and in blind panic hurled himself over the parapet into space. It was not that he preferred the almost certain death accompanying a three-story drop to the pavement below. He had only one thought — to get away from Dutch Hayden, supposedly dead on the street, actually very much alive on the roof of the brownstone.

The part which Providence played was simple. Baxter's leap for safety was over the side parapet, and not six feet below was the flat roof of a storage garage. Baxter sprawled on the tar-and-gravel surface, tearing the flesh in the palms of his hands, twisting a leg under himself painfully, skinning one side of his face.

Again instinct made him cover his head with his arms as he lay there waiting for the bullets from Dutch Hayden's gun to tear into his back. They didn't come, and in the eternity of the next few seconds Baxter's brain began to work, like a motor struggling to turn in frozen oil. Hayden wouldn't shoot! He wouldn't dare, with the neighborhood swarming with John Spence's men and the police. But he would almost certainly make an effort to keep Baxter from getting away.

It was an incredible situation and Baxter didn't try to think it through at that moment. Somehow Spence

had fallen for a phony. Dutch Hayden had not had his face altered. Dutch Hayden had not dined at Monahan's with Florence Knapp. The man who had been shot to death on the street was some kind of stooge, some kind of stand-in, tricked into taking the rap for Hayden.

The purpose of it all was clear. Hayden was apparently dead, so Hayden could live now unmolested and unhunted. Except for one circumstance, Hayden was free. Baxter's presence on the roof of the brownstone was that circumstance. Hayden had been unable to resist the ironic temptation to witness his own supposed execution, and there had been someone else there to see him witness it. If Baxter got away, Hayden would not be free, unmolested, unhunted. The further irony of the situation was that Baxter didn't really give a damn whether Hayden was caught or not. All he wanted was to get away from here, to safety, to O'Connel's saloon on Third Avenue.

Baxter struggled to his feet. His right leg hurt, but he could put some weight on it. He limped off toward a little penthouse tower in the center of the roof, which was probably the top of an elevator shaft and in which he saw a fire door. Fortunately, it opened from the outside.

Inside the tower were the cables and wheels of the elevator, and the heavy smell of oil and gasoline and exhaust fumes. A circular iron stairway led down, around the shaft to the second floor of the garage. Baxter went down it as quickly as his leg would let him, praying that he would make no sound. He found himself in a loft, packed tightly with bright, shiny cars. He crouched behind one of them, listening. He could hear nothing — no footsteps, no voices, no activity of any kind. He moved out from behind the car, looking for a stairway that would lead to the street level. He must get down there before Dutch Hayden found him.

At last he located the stairway and went down to the main floor, which was also crowded with cars. He still saw no one. He limped forward toward the doorway. There was a chair just outside the main entrance with an old blanket folded on the seat. Baxter guessed that this was where the night watchman sat. Staying in the shadows he moved to the door. About twenty-five feet down the pavement he saw a man talking with a couple of women. They were looking up the street to where the bogus Dutch Hayden had been shot.

Baxter had a choice. He could find the nearest policeman and tell his story, or he could get just as far away as possible and do something about his shattered nerves. He could get in touch with Spence later and tell him. Later would do. Later would *have* to do. He couldn't talk to anyone until he had himself under control. And there was still the problem of getting away. Dutch Hayden might be just around the corner, or hiding in a doorway across the street, or sitting in one of those parked cars at the curb.

Then Baxter had a bright idea. People always leave their keys in garaged cars so that they can be re-parked and moved around. All he had to do was get into a car that he could drive straight out the door and he would be safe. He went back into the garage. There was a black coupé headed straight for the open door. Baxter got in. He was shaking from head to foot as he peered at the dash, looking for the starter button, the ignition key, the choke. This had to work the first time!

He turned the key, pulled the choke out a short way, and pressed the starter button. The motor purred. Sweat ran down inside Baxter's clothes as he released the emergency brake and put the car in gear. It moved easily toward the open door. Baxter drove out, turned right, and stepped hard on the throttle.

He drove about six blocks downtown, cut east toward Broadway, and when he was finally stopped by a red light at Eighth Avenue he pulled up to the curb and abandoned the car. Five minutes later he was swallowed up in the Broadway crowd.

He began to breathe a little easier as there was no sign of Dutch Hayden. But as he relaxed he realized that he had almost no strength left. The emotional and physical exertion had exhausted him. O'Connel's seemed miles away. He could have stopped somewhere else for the drink he needed so badly, but somehow O'Connel's seemed like a distant oasis of safety. Once there, nothing could happen to him. People stared at him as he staggered eastward across the city. He didn't realize just how he looked — face and hands bleeding, trouser-leg torn, the whole front of his suit smeared with dirt and tar, and hollow, haunted eyes that peered back at the starers.

At last, when he couldn't go another yard, he saw the dreary sign over the door of O'Connel's. He staggered in.

"Holy smoke, Mr. Baxter, you look terrible!" Dennis said. "Your face and hands! What happened? Did you get run over or something?"

"Or something," Baxter said. "For God's sake, Dennis, get me a drink!"

Dennis put a jigger on the bar and the usual glass of water for a chaser. He started to pour whiskey into the jigger. Baxter reached out and snatched the bottle away from him. He took the water glass and threw the water on the floor. Then he filled the water glass with whiskey, the neck of the bottle chattering against the glass.

He drank, with a kind of sobbing, choking sound. He put the glass down empty. He felt the stab of pain in his stomach, the slow, spreading warmth. He bent forward until his forehead rested on the cool surface of the bar.

He was safe — safe, safe!

For the second time in a row the dread moment of awakening came to Paul Baxter in a room other than his own. He opened his eyes on semi-darkness and lay still, trying to dredge up the memories of lost time.

At last orientation became complete. He was lying on the old leather sofa in Pat O'Connel's back room, somewhat optimistically called "the office." He didn't remember getting here, but it must be morning because thin slits of light were creeping through the closed venetian blind at the window.

He moved, groaned. His whole body was a mass of bruises from the fall he'd taken. He managed to struggle up to a sitting position, and discovered that he was without his trousers. His coat was hung over the chair by Pat's rolltop desk, but there were no trousers in sight. What the hell kind of a game was this?

He stood up, and hobbled to the door. He opened it.

"Dennis!" he shouted. "Dennis!"

A moment later Dennis appeared, carrying the trousers.

"What's the idea of taking my pants?" Baxter demanded. "What am I supposed to be, a case?"

"Gee, no, Mr. Baxter," Dennis said. "I don't know if you remember, but your pants got torn. I had the tailor down the block mend them for you. Then I got busy and didn't have a chance to bring 'em back in here."

"What time is it?" Baxter asked.

"Four o'clock, Mr. Baxter. In the afternoon. You slept nearly fourteen hours. Do you good."

"A double shot would do me more good," Baxter said.

"I figured that," Dennis said. He reached into his hip pocket and pulled out a pint of bourbon. "I figured you'd be in pretty bad shape."

Baxter reached for the bottle and took the cork out. Disconnected ideas were running through his head as he drank. But with the spreading warmth they became centralized. "Have you got a paper, Dennis? Today's paper?"

"Sure," Dennis said. "I'll bring it. Plenty of excitement. The F.B.I. got Dutch Hayden last night. On Tenth Avenue. Shot the hell out of him."

Baxter moistened his lips. "Let me see the paper, will you, Dennis? And have you got a razor?"

"Electric."

"That'll do. Will you bring it back in here?"

"Sure, Mr. Baxter."

Dennis brought the paper and the electric razor, and went away. Baxter sat down on the edge of the couch and looked at the tabloid. They'd done it up brown. There was a picture of Hayden "after the plastic operation, taken from the surgeon's files." Then there was a picture of that second face, lying in the gutter, mouth open and streaming blood, eyes wide and staring. Under it was the caption: END OF A MAD DOG.

Maybe, Baxter thought. Maybe the dead man was a mad dog, but his name wasn't Dutch Hayden. Baxter reached for the bottle on the floor beside him, but he had become so absorbed in the story that he didn't drink. There were flowing words for Special Agent John Spence. There was a cheesecake photograph of Florence Knapp, the girl who'd turned

Hayden in. There was a picture of the plastic surgeon who'd "operated on Dutch Hayden at the point of a gun."

Baxter sat there scowling at the photographs. From somewhere inside him the remnants of a newspaperman were struggling to the surface. Those photographs were a mistake, he told himself. They were the second mistake in a very slick deal to make the world think Dutch Hayden was dead.

The first mistake was Hayden's irresistible impulse to be present at his own "killing," the risk he'd run of being seen. These photographs were the second mistake. Even John Spence ought to smell a rat there. This girl, letting herself be photographed, giving out her name! Hayden had friends. If his death was on the level those friends would square accounts with his betrayers, yet here was this babe letting herself be photographed, giving out her name, even the address of her hotel. This was inviting death — except for the fact that Dutch Hayden *wasn't* dead and his friends would leave the girl strictly alone, probably laughing themselves sick that Spence had killed the wrong man, and didn't know it.

Then Baxter realized he had a responsibility. He had to go to Spence and tell him.

He plugged in the electric razor and began shaving in front of a dusty mirror on the wall. The pint of bourbon, with only the first drink gone out of it, stood on the floor beside the sofa.

Baxter was surprised to realize that he hadn't thought about the pint of bourbon until now. Now he was sitting in the waiting room of John Spence's office, had been sitting there for twenty minutes. As long as he'd had a purpose that involved doing something, he'd forgotten about the whiskey. Now, just sitting and waiting, the shakes were creeping up on him again and he cursed himself for not having brought the pint on his hip. He thought of going out for a quick one.

Then the buzzer rang on the secretary's desk. She turned. "You can go in now, Mr. Baxter," she said.

Spence sat at his desk, frowning down at some papers. He didn't look up when Baxter came in. He didn't speak. Baxter stood in front of the desk fumbling for a cigarette, but the shakes were too severe to manage it.

"Hail, the conquering hero," he said, bitterly, after the silence had become too oppressive.

Spence looked up for the first time. His gray eyes were tired. "So you muffed it," he said in a flat voice.

"*I* muffed it!"

Spence gestured with his hand toward the newspapers on his desk. "I thought perhaps you'd miss the morning editions. I knew you had connections with a couple of the afternoon papers. But you muffed it all around. All anyone has to do is look at you to know that you got blind."

"Now wait!" Baxter said, rage accentuating the shakes. "I was there

— on the roof. I saw it all. I know —"

"But you just couldn't stay sober long enough to write it."

"Will you give me a chance to tell you?" Baxter shouted. "I *did* get drunk. I admit it. I got drunk because the hell was scared out of me."

"I can imagine."

"I got scared because *you* muffed it!"

Spence's eyebrows lifted in an expression of mild astonishment.

"You didn't get Dutch Hayden last night," Baxter said. "You got the wrong guy. That's a story I couldn't write without spoiling your chances of still getting Hayden. I admit I should have been here sooner, but, frankly, I did get drunk because I was scared."

Spence sighed. "Let's just skip the whole thing, Paul. I don't need or want any fancy explanations."

"Damn it, listen to me!" Baxter shouted. "I was there, on that roof! Hours before you pulled off your show, I was there. I hadn't had a drink all day. *Not one drink*, do you understand? A few minutes before 9 someone else came out on the roof. A man. I stayed hidden because I didn't want to get kicked out of there at the last minute. I saw the guy and the girl come out of Monahan's. I saw you walk up to the guy. I saw him draw his gun. I saw you and your boys shoot him. Isn't that what happened?"

"It's written up in detail in every paper in the country," Spence said in his weary voice.

"Well, *this* wasn't written up!" Baxter said. "When the guy was dead I heard someone laughing. It was the man on the roof. I turned to look at him. There was a big electric sign, flashing on and off. When it flashed on I saw his face. It was Dutch Hayden! No plastic operation. No nothing. They pulled a fast one on you, John. You fell for their clay pigeon."

"I suppose," Spence said, dully, "you and Dutch Hayden had a good laugh over it."

"I got out, fast," Baxter said.

"Ah. Hayden just let you go?"

"I jumped over the parapet."

"Fell three stories to the street and miraculously lived to tell the tale."

"I fell onto the roof of a garage next door. It was only about a six-foot drop. I made it, all right."

"Go on," Spence said. The color of his voice had changed to something a trifle ominous.

"I figured Hayden would try to stop me getting away. I went down into the garage, stole a car, and got out of there. I ditched the car near Eighth Avenue and went to O'Connel's. I know I should have got in touch with you, but I was beat up, John. I was scared silly. After I'd had a couple of drinks — well, I slept till an hour ago."

"And who was the man we got?"

"How the hell should I know? I just know it wasn't Hayden because Hayden was on the roof with me. I've got a scoop all right, John. But in all decency I have to hold it until you can make your plans."

Spence was silent for a long moment, then he leaned back in his chair and looked at Baxter, his eyes sad and reproachful.

"It was a gamble, Paul," he said. "I know the odds were against your succeeding. Maybe you were there. Maybe you did see us get Hayden. But this — this fantastic excuse —"

Baxter's mouth was cotton-dry. "You don't believe me?"

"You didn't have to invent one for me, Paul."

Baxter's hand came out of his pocket and he pounded it on Spence's desk. "I tell you Hayden's alive! He was on the roof of that house! *I saw him!*"

"Okay," Spence said. "Okay." He pushed back his chair and stood up. It was a dismissal.

"John, listen to me!" Baxter said. "It's true, I tell you. Hayden is alive!" Sweat stood out on his face. "John! Doesn't it strike you as odd that Knapp dame should give herself so much publicity? Won't Hayden's mob get her?"

"What mob?" Spence said. "We've got them all tabbed."

"They'd get her — if Hayden was really dead."

"Sure, sure," Spence said. "Let's call it *her* problem."

"John, I'm not lying!" Baxter said, pleading. "Whatever I've done, I've never lied. You know that."

"We'll just call it a fancy invention," Spence said. "It would make good fiction. Why not try your hand at it?" His voice was scornful.

Tears of frustration welled up into Baxter's eyes. His voice trembled. "Then you don't mind if I give this story to the papers?"

"No," Spence said, "I don't mind. But don't try it, Paul. It won't make it any truer to keep trying to convince people of it. Now, if you'll excuse me, I've got to go. I have a date."

"With — with Penny?"

Spence's voice hardened. "That really isn't any of your business any more, is it, Paul?"

Baxter sat in the subway, rocking with the motion of the express, as it headed uptown. It was incredible, what had happened to him in Spence's office. He had expected Spence to be sore at him for delaying so long in reporting what he knew, but he had not expected to be accused of lying. The fact was, he had never been untruthful to Penny or anyone else. He felt both indignant and helpless as he remembered Spence's cold, disbelieving eyes.

Well, the hell with it! Dutch Hayden wasn't his responsibility. If Spence wanted to live in a fool's paradise that was his business. Some day Dutch would break loose again and then Spence would know. Baxter could wait, he told himself.

Then he thought of John Spence and Penny. They would be together in a few minutes and Spence would tell her what had happened and she'd think he'd muffed it, too, think he had descended to a crazy invention to explain it away. That *would* be the

end of the line. The truth was he couldn't afford to wait. If Penny gave up — if she gave up . . .

He got off the train at Grand Central and started toward Third Avenue and O'Connel's. Then he remembered something. Every day at about 6 o'clock, Sam Carewe, his old city editor, stopped at the Biltmore Men's Bar for a drink with the boys before he took the train to Westchester. Baxter spotted a clock and saw it was only five minutes to 6. He could get Sam Carewe and tell him the story. Sam knew, whatever else, that he was — or had been — an honest reporter who never embroidered the facts.

Baxter cut through the station to the Biltmore. He walked into the Men's Bar, a long oval shape, crowded three deep with commuters having a quick one before they got their trains home. Baxter's face twitched as he inhaled the smell of liquor. That could wait. He walked slowly around the bar, looking for Sam. At last he spotted him across the way. He went around to that side and plucked at Sam Carewe's coat-sleeve. Sam turned his face, freezing slightly when he saw Baxter.

"Hello, Paul," he said.

"Can I speak to you in private for a minute, Sam?"

Carewe hesitated, shrugged, and stepped away from his friends.

"Here's a table," Baxter said.

"I've got only a minute, Paul. Got to catch my train," Carewe said. Then in an embarrassed voice, "If a couple of bucks would help . . ."

"I didn't come here to make a touch!" Baxter said, furious.

"Sorry, Paul. I'd heard . . ."

"I came to give you the biggest scoop you ever ran in your paper," Baxter said. "And when I tell you, you won't worry about your train. Sit down."

Baxter began to talk, eagerly, the words spilling out. As he talked he noticed that frozen look spreading over Carewe's face again. It frightened him and he put more urgency into the telling. Before he'd finished Carewe arose.

"Sam, this is on the level. Please sit down and listen!"

Carewe started away and Baxter reached out and grabbed his arm.

Carewe shook himself free. "Now don't start anything. I'd hate to have you thrown out of here on your ear."

Baxter sat, too paralyzed by the jolt of the encounter to move. He waved away a waiter who came for an order. Then he stood up and made for the side exit onto Madison Avenue. This was crazy! This was cockeyed! What could happen to a man that he could tell the plain, unvarnished truth and people would react to it as if he were trying to take advantage of them!

He turned east. O'Connel's lay eastward. He had to think this out. He would tell Dennis. Dennis would believe him. Dennis would *say* he believed him. Dennis really believed nothing he heard. It wouldn't help if Dennis said he believed.

The police? If Spence didn't believe him, if Sam Carewe didn't believe

him, could he expect it of a tough-minded desk sergeant?

Penny! It was a name like a soft caress, like a cool breeze. Penny knew that one thing about him — that he never lied.

Baxter stopped dead in his tracks, looking around him. He spotted a drug store on a Lexington Avenue corner. He hurried toward it, fumbling in his pocket for change. Inside he made for a telephone booth at the rear, struggled with shaking fingers to put the nickel in the slot, dialed the number correctly on the third attempt. He listened to the ringing, then: "Hello?"

"Penny!"

He could hear the intake of her breath, with a catch in it. "Oh, Paul!"

"Penny, is John there?"

"Yes."

"Then you know."

"Yes."

"Penny, listen to me. Every word I told John is the truth."

"Paul, I —"

"Every word, Penny! Have I ever lied to you?"

"I don't think so, Paul. But —"

"And every word of *this* is true. Every detail. I was there. I saw the shooting on the street. Then I saw Hayden. He was right next to me, there on the roof."

"I'm sure you think it's true, Paul. I'm sure you were there. I'm sure you think you saw Hayden. But —"

"Penny, I saw him! I'd studied his pictures all day! I'd seen him in news reels. If it wasn't Hayden, why did he threaten to shoot me?"

"Paul, dear —" Her voice trembled.

"There isn't any question, Penny! It wasn't a — an hallucination! I didn't imagine it. *I saw him!* You've got to believe me."

"Paul, it's all right. I —"

"Stop it!" he said, sharply.

"I don't understand, Paul."

"Stop soothing me! Stop talking to me as if I were a kid who's had a bad dream! This is real."

"Paul, I know you think —"

He jammed the receiver back on the hook, cutting off the sound of her voice. So that was it! She still believed he *intended* to tell the truth, but now he couldn't distinguish truth from fantasy. That's what she thought.

Baxter leaned against the wall of the phone booth, exhausted. Well, he had stolen all there was to steal from Penny, and now she didn't believe him — which meant there was no love left, no faith left, no time left. Good old Baxter! A great pity, it was. His word used to be his bond, but now he imagines things. Wake up, Paul. It's just a bad dream.

"I saw Dutch Hayden, by God!" he shouted. "And I'll prove it!"

He walked out of the phone booth, streaming sweat.

Baxter made his way toward Third Avenue, slowly but without the earlier wavering. He had made a decision — and that was a remarkable thing for him to have accomplished. He hadn't made a positive decision in a long time. He was going to prove

his story about Dutch Hayden was true. He hadn't any idea how, but he was going to prove it.

At the corner of Third Avenue he hesitated. O'Connel's was two blocks north. In view of his shattered condition, O'Connel's would be a nice place to spend a couple of hours figuring things out. But he might have to talk to people, and this was something he had to figure out alone. He turned south toward the brownstone rooming house where he lived.

He stopped at a liquor store and bought himself a fifth of bourbon. When he got to his room it was hot. He took off his coat and tie, poured a tumbler half-full of whiskey, put it on the bedside table and lit a cigarette. Then he lay down on the bed with his hands locked behind his head.

Okay, if you had a problem you analyzed it. Hayden was alive. He had been here in New York last night and it was a fair gamble that he was still in New York. Hayden must be feeling fine. The press accepted his death as a fact. He must be thinking that the man he had encountered on the roof hadn't really recognized him, or the news would have leaked. So he would think of himself as safe. There was a good chance he was still in New York, a place as safe for him as any other place — probably safer, since everyone here knew he was dead.

So what? You do a little detective work and try to locate him. You call a cop. You say, "There's Dutch Hayden. He isn't dead after all." And the cop tells you to go peddle your papers and he has a little laugh with Hayden. "You *do* look a little like the Dutchman, sir. Can't blame the poor bum for seeing things!"

No, just pointing him out on the street or in a restaurant or night club wasn't enough. But if you could get Dutch Hayden into action, if you could get him to draw a gun, if you could somehow get him in a position where he'd be arrested, where they'd take his fingerprints . . . But how?

There was only one way. Produce Hayden in action in front of Spence and his men. So you might get killed. Well, so had a kidnaped child, and a dozen innocent bystanders, and a stooge on Tenth Avenue. So if this was the end of the line — if Penny and Spence and the whole world had decided he was a sort of walking hysteric, there wasn't much point in living. The thing was, how to produce Hayden in action in front of Spence?

It was a problem that called for all the skill he'd ever had as a reporter. It was a scoop, all right — much bigger than John Spence dreamed. If he could pull it off, he'd not only prove he'd been telling the truth. He'd prove he was a reporter, a man Sam Carewe needed and could use. He could win or lose at this game, once and for all. This would be the big gamble for the works — the chance for all or nothing.

The prickling sensation he felt along his spine was not fear. It was the excitement that came with a working idea. It was a kind of excitement he hadn't felt for months.

The cigarette burned his fingers and he dropped it on the floor. He lowered a foot to tramp it out. The glass of whiskey remained untouched on the bedside table. He'd wait, he told himself, till he had this thing figured out. He had to be perfectly clear while he was planning. Oddly enough, it never occurred to him that two days ago he couldn't have waited.

It was crazy, but Spence ought to be suspicious of that girl, Florence Knapp. Florence Knapp, sitting on the edge of a table with her skirts raised above her knees for the benefit of the photographer. Florence Knapp, glibly announcing that she was staying at the Hotel Chandler and that she hoped to get a job somewhere in the city. Spence should see that was phony. Florence Knapp . . .

Baxter lay very still, scowling at the ceiling, tapping an unlighted cigarette on the back of his hand. Florence Knapp! He got up and walked over to look at himself in the dressing table mirror. He ran his fingers over his chin. Dennis's electric razor had done a pretty good job. He unbuttoned his shirt, slipped it off, opened the middle bureau drawer. White or blue? He decided on the blue, with the polka-dot bow tie. He tied the tie carefully, his fingers surprisingly steady. He brushed his hair, put on his jacket again, adjusted the snap-brim hat at a jaunty angle. He gave himself a wry smile. Not too bad for a guy in the last stages of decomposition.

He walked out of the room, switching off the light at the door. As he took out his key ring to lock the door he stood staring at it for a long time. There were two keys on it he hadn't used for months. One of them was to Penny's apartment. He locked the apartment door and went downstairs.

Back in the room the whiskey glass remained untouched on the bedside table.

The Hotel Chandler had seen better days. The uprights in the lobby were decorated with harp-playing angels from which most of the gold paint had been chipped. The clock over the desk showed Baxter that it was ten minutes to 8. He walked over to the desk and waited for the room clerk to look up from his work.

"Yes, sir?"

"I want to speak to Miss Florence Knapp on the house phone," Baxter said. "Will you give me her room number, please?"

"Are you a friend of Miss Knapp's?"

"Naturally."

"May I have your name?"

"Look, just give me the room number," Baxter said.

"I can't do that, but I'll announce you if you'll give me your name," the clerk said.

"Can you think of a good name?" Baxter said.

The young man drew himself up. "You're a reporter! Miss Knapp left strict instructions — no more reporters! She was very firm about it."

"Could we make a deal?" Baxter asked.

"*Please!*" the clerk said indignantly. Then his manner changed. "But if you want to see Miss Knapp, there she is coming out of the elevator with that gentleman."

Baxter turned, giving his hat brim a downward tug. If Hayden was with her . . . But that, he sensed, was improbable. They wouldn't risk being seen in public together.

The "gentleman" was not Hayden. Baxter recognized him as a notorious Broadway columnist. Undoubtedly Miss Knapp's life story would bring a nice price from one of the tabloids. It ought to be good, too — since she would have free rein for invention.

Baxter watched them go out to the curb and get into a cab. He made no attempt to follow. He could wait. He had to see Miss Knapp alone and uninterrupted. His heart beat faster as he watched the cab drive away.

Florence Knapp was quite real, looking very much as she had in her pictures. She was at the very core of Dutch Hayden's conspiracy. She was a part of the kidnapings, the murders, the death of the stooge on Tenth Avenue. For all her blonde glitter and sparkle, it was as though a cold, graveyard wind had passed, making his heart pound and starting the old, familiar shakes. Not really the same shakes, because this was fear of another kind. That laughing, blonde girl would be laughing at his funeral unless he played his cards with extreme caution.

He looked around him. There was a dimly lit bar opening off the lobby. He started toward it, then stopped. He'd have to wait just a little longer. He couldn't muff this one. He went over to the cigar counter, bought himself a chocolate bar and an evening paper, and camped in one of the sagging leather arm chairs in the lobby.

It was a nervous business. He didn't dare leave the lobby, yet it might be hours before Florence Knapp came back. The columnist would dine her; they might do the night clubs. Miss Knapp must be riding high. The payoff for betraying that stooge at Monahan's must have run into big dough.

By the time Florence Knapp returned, earlier than he had dared hope, Baxter's mouth was dry and his tongue felt thick. Every nerve in his body was screaming. The juke box in the bar had become a siren call, and he had been sitting for a long time, gripping the arms of the chair, reciting poetry to himself, trying to remember the names of the boys who'd been in his class in grade school — anything to block out the music, the faint tinkle of glasses, the occasional bursts of laughter.

Then at about ten minutes after midnight Florence Knapp came through the revolving door from the street. The columnist was still with her. Baxter stood up. He had a plan. If the columnist went into the elevator with the Knapp girl he would go, too. Fortunately, the clerk at the desk had come on only a few minutes before.

But the columnist was saying good

night. Presently Florence Knapp started briskly across the lobby toward the elevator.

"May I speak to you a moment, Miss Knapp?" Baxter's voice was hoarse, dry-sounding as his throat felt.

The girl's eyes were not friendly. "I'm sorry," she said. She started to move around him but Baxter blocked her way.

"It's very important," he said.

"What are you, a reporter? I've talked to all the reporters I can stand for one day."

"I'm not a reporter," Baxter said. "I'm not an autograph collector. I want to talk to you."

"What about?"

"Dutch Hayden," Baxter said.

"Now, look, I've told you —"

"I want to know how to get in touch with Dutch," Baxter said, as casually as he could.

The girl's eyes widened. Her fingers tightened spasmodically around the bag she was carrying. *Touché*, Baxter thought.

"Who the hell are you — Rip Van Winkle?" she said harshly. "Don't you read the papers? Dutch Hayden was killed by the cops last night."

"Was he?" Baxter glanced around. The lobby was deserted except for the two of them. "I'm the guy who was on the roof," he said.

Florence Knapp opened her mouth to speak, then closed it. Her eyes narrowed. They were calculating and shrewd. "All right, I'll talk to you. Let's go into the bar."

"No," Baxter said.

"Where, then?"

"We'll go out. Ride around in a cab. I don't want you signaling friends — or pointing me out to someone who can identify me later for Dutch."

He could see she didn't like it at all.

"You're in this, too, you know," he said. "The F.B.I. aren't going to like it if they find out everything they got from you was a fairy story. And they *know* where to find you."

She took a deep breath. "All right. Let's go."

There was a cab standing at the curb outside the Chandler and they got in. Baxter told the driver just to drive around. He made sure the glass partition between the back seat and the front was tightly closed.

"Well, Miss Knapp?"

"I think you're crazy," she said. "I don't know what you're talking about. Dutch Hayden died last night."

"Why did you come with me?" Baxter asked. "I'm not that cute. I haven't told anyone what happened on the roof last night." He smiled faintly. "But shall I give you a blow by blow description? I assure you it will check with what you know. Because you do know what happened."

"Why do you want to get in touch with Hayden?" she asked. No more fencing, apparently.

"Do I look as though I were in the chips?" Baxter asked.

"A shake-down," she said.

"Live and let live, I always say," Baxter said.

"Even if I knew where Dutch is, you don't really expect me to tell you." He felt her shiver. "I like to live, too."

"No, I don't expect you to tell me," Baxter said. "But I do expect you to get a message to Hayden tonight. I want you to tell him that you met me and that I want to see him."

"And if he says yes, how do I reach you?" she asked.

"Stop kidding," Baxter said. "Here's the way the script reads. I want to see Hayden tomorrow afternoon at 4:15. I want him to come to where I'll be and we'll talk."

"And where will you be?"

"Tomorrow I'll send you a note by messenger with exact instructions as to how Hayden can find me. You'll get it at a quarter to 4. That will give Hayden half an hour to get to me."

"Suppose he refuses?"

"At 4:30 I go to the F.B.I.," Baxter said, trying to make it sound as good as he could. She couldn't know, and Hayden couldn't know, that the F.B.I. had already laughed in his face. "Tell Hayden he doesn't have to come alone, but he's got to come himself. I'll know before he gets to the place whether he's coming, or whether he's just sending some of his boys. Remember to tell him that."

"I'll tell him," the girl said. She was frowning, evidently trying to figure out just what the scheme was.

"I won't talk to anybody but Hayden himself," Baxter said. "And tell him it would be a good idea to talk to me before he tries gunning me down. There are some dead men who can talk — unlike your friend on Tenth Avenue last night."

"What do you mean?" the girl said.

"Your dinner companion last night," Baxter said. "He never got a chance to talk because he never knew what was coming. I can imagine the set-up — a badly wanted guy who had his face lifted and his fingerprints obliterated, befriended by Hayden, made up to by you, feeling safe, unaware that he was being set up to die. I have no illusions about myself, Miss Knapp. I'm not walking into this wide open. The truth will come out if I should happen to get it."

The girl was silent.

"Well, Miss Knapp?"

"I'll pass your message along. It's all I can promise. You'll send me directions tomorrow at quarter to 4?"

"On the dot." Baxter rapped on the glass. "You can let me out here, driver, and then take the lady back to the Chandler."

The cab pulled up at the curb. Baxter took a bill from his pocket and handed it to the driver. "That ought to cover it, plus tip." He turned to the girl. "Good night."

She looked at him, shaking her head slowly. "Brother, are you playing with fire!" she said.

Baxter had noticed that they were near Grand Central. He ducked quickly into the station and did some

fancy backtracking until he was quite certain Florence Knapp had made no effort to follow him. Then he went out the Lexington Avenue entrance and across town to his room.

He unlocked the door, switched on the light, and stood there, looking down at his keys, jiggling them in the palm of his hand. There were two extras. And one of them was Penny's. He glanced at the whiskey-filled tumbler on the bedside table. He still had strength to pass it up, he told himself. There were one or two things he had to do. He couldn't count on how he would feel later.

From the bureau he took a box of letter paper, pen, ink. He sat down at the table, lit a cigarette, and after a moment wrote in a bold, clear hand:

> 125 East 37th Street. Ring bell opposite empty name plate. Take automatic elevator to fifth floor. The apartment door will be open.

He folded the paper and put it in an envelope. He sealed it and addressed it to Florence Knapp at the Hotel Chandler, inscribing in the corner, "By Hand." He looked once more at the glass, then took another sheet of paper from the box. He sat there smoking for a long time before he began to write: "Dear, darling Penny . . ."

It was a careful, factual account he wrote, from John Spence's appearance at O'Connel's through his interview with Florence Knapp.

"If the plan I have works," he wrote, "you and John will know that I have been telling you the truth. If it fails, perhaps *you* at least will believe it.

"I don't quite know how to explain the way I feel. The chances of my coming out of this alive are only fair. Am I frightened? I'm scared sick, if you want the truth. Yet there is no question about my facing it. What's been wrong with me, Penny? How is it that I can face this real danger, and yet run like a frightened infant from the responsibilities of a job and a marriage? Is there such a thing as that death wish the bright boys are always discussing? I feel I want to live — more than I can tell you. Somehow I have the notion — a crazy, wild hope it is — that facing this real danger will make everything else seem like child's-play. Do you suppose, if I come through it, and I'm right about it, that you . . . Well, we've done too much supposing in the past. Let's see how it comes out. Perhaps I will see you before you get this, perhaps Dutch Hayden will have polished me off. In either case, know that I love you with all my heart, Penny dear, and that there either will or might have been a real second chance for us."

There was already morning light at the window when he put down his pen.

It was nearly noon when Baxter woke. He felt physically better than he had in a long time, but the instant his thoughts began to collect he could feel his heart start to pound. In four

hours and fifteen minutes he would come face to face again with Dutch Hayden — and that might very well be the end of that.

When he had finished dressing he left his room and headed for the corner cafeteria. He stopped at a mailbox, hesitated a moment, and dropped in the letter to Penny. She would get it tomorrow morning after it was all over — one way or another.

He ordered coffee and orange juice, and when he'd finished that he decided to have bacon, eggs, toast, and more coffee. He couldn't remember a breakfast like that in months. The prisoner ate a hearty breakfast! Was there something about the inexorable approach of the end that made food seem attractive? Was it just an infantile sucking for security in the face of fear? Because he was afraid, terribly afraid.

When he had finished his breakfast he lit a cigarette, smoked it as though it were a ritual. Finally there was no reason to sit in the cafeteria any longer. He got up and went out. He walked over to Lexington Avenue to a Western Union office. There he made arrangements for the letter to be delivered to Florence Knapp at the Hotel Chandler.

"Be sure you understand this," he told the clerk. "It *must not* be delivered before a quarter to 4. I'm perfectly willing to pay extra for the messenger to insure that the timing is exact. A man's life may depend on it."

The clerk gave him a startled look.

"My life!" Baxter said.

At a quarter past 2 Baxter stood outside a remodeled house on East 37th Street. It had a pale bluish stucco front, with casement windows running straight across each floor like glass bands.

Baxter walked into the foyer. He glanced at the brass name-plate holder with the little buttons beside each name. "No. 5 — John Spence." Baxter pressed the button and waited. It was just a chance, but he was certain Spence wouldn't be there unless he'd been given a day off after yesterday's heroics. Unlikely, because there'd still be a lot of paper work to close the Hayden case. Baxter laughed. Spence and his paper work!

He took his keys out of his pocket and with the end of one he forced Spence's card out of the name holder and put it in his pocket. "Ring bell opposite empty name plate." Then he looked at the keys — the two extra keys, one of which was Penny's and one of which John Spence had given him nearly two years ago when he'd been planning a feature article for his paper on the F.B.I. Baxter fitted Spence's key in the lock, opened the door. Inside he got into the small automatic elevator, big enough for only two people, pressed the proper button, and started up. The elevator mechanism made a curious whirring, clicking sound. At the fifth floor it stopped, the door slid open and Baxter stepped out. He fitted the key in the door of Spence's apartment and let himself in.

The place was bright and sunny. The casements were open and a cool breeze stirred through the place. Neat as a pin! Good old Spence. He's going to be sore as hell if we spill blood on his spotless gray rug.

Plenty of time — an hour and three quarters before he could expect company. He sat down on the window seat and lit a cigarette. There was one more important step to be taken in his plan, but it mustn't be too soon, or Spence might spoil things. He looked out over the smoke-blue haze of the city and remembered how lovely it had seemed to Penny when he had first brought her here to live. They used to sit on the roof of their apartment house, playing a game about what went on behind each of the thousand windows they saw. Had they, he wondered, ever imagined a down-and-out reporter, sitting in a friend's apartment, waiting to be murdered by a man whose death was being celebrated across the nation? It would make a good fiction piece. Good old Spence! Some fiction!

At exactly quarter past 3 Baxter called Spence's office and asked to speak to him.

"Mr. Spence isn't in, Mr. Baxter," Spence's secretary said.

"When do you expect him back?"

"He said not to expect him back again today."

"*What!*"

"I don't expect him back."

Baxter's mouth was full of dust. "Look here, I'm at his apartment. This is extremely important. I've got to get in touch with him before 4 o'clock."

"I don't know how to help you, Mr. Baxter. Mr. Spence didn't say where he was going."

Baxter's voice trembled. "If he calls in, give him a message. Tell him I called and that Dutch Hayden will be at his apartment at 4:15."

"Dutch Hayden?"

"Never mind what that sounds like to you," Baxter said. "Tell him that, word for word. Tell him if he isn't here by 4:15 he may have to have the joint redecorated."

The girl sounded as though she accepted the idea of talking to a lunatic quite calmly. "I'll tell him, if he calls in, Mr. Baxter. But I don't expect he will. There's nothing important on his schedule."

"That's a joke, son," Baxter said and laughed without humor.

It was insane, but he simply hadn't counted on the possibility that Spence might be unavailable. He had held off calling so that there wouldn't be time for Spence to spoil things. Spence hadn't believed him and he, planning his dramatic revelation, had thought of Spence's own apartment as the perfect place for the climax. "Reporter, Laughed at by F.B.I. Agent, Traps Criminal in Agent's Own Apartment." But he had counted on reaching Spence and having him here, ready to help.

The thing to do was to get out. He started for the door, but stopped before he reached it. If Hayden got the message he would come here, and if

there wasn't anyone here he would wait in the corridor, if necessary. Then, when Spence came home . . . Hayden would love to catch Spence off guard. He couldn't let that happen. He couldn't let Spence walk into the trap. No, flight was impossible this time. He had to see it through. At last he had to face reality.

Twenty past 3. He almost shouted. There might still be time to stop the Western Union messenger from delivering the message. His fingers were thick and clumsy as bananas as he tried to find "Western Union" in the phone book, searched down the long column of addresses for the Lexington Avenue office he'd been to. There it was. Take it easy, son. Take it easy! He dialed slowly and carefully. Presently he had the clerk. That message going to the Chandler . . .

"The messenger's left, Mr. Baxter. He had other messages to deliver. You can depend on his delivering it on time."

"I don't want him to deliver it! Can you stop him?"

"I don't see how, Mr. Baxter. I —"

"Oh, for God's sake, never mind!"

Baxter stood in front of the phone, trembling from head to foot. The Chandler! Maybe he could keep Florence Knapp from getting the message. Again the painful search through the phone book for the right number, the clumsy dialing.

"Hotel Chandler? Desk clerk, please." Come on! Come on! "Desk clerk? Listen carefully. A Western Union messenger will deliver a note for Miss Florence Knapp at a quarter to four. It's a mistake. It's not to be delivered to her."

"Who is this speaking?"

"I sent it to her," Baxter said. "It was a mistake. It's very important that it *not* be delivered."

"Well, sir, I'm afraid without knowing more about it I couldn't take the responsibility."

"But I sent the letter! I —"

"You say you sent the letter, sir, but how do I know? I — I'm afraid I couldn't take the responsibility of —"

"Forget it," Baxter said hoarsely.

The sweat ran down his face, inside his clothes. So clever, so damn clever. If he left, Spence would die. If he stayed, *he* would die. Unless . . . An F.B.I. agent must have a gun in the place. If he could find a gun he would at least keep from being just a fish in a barrel. He could put up a fight.

He tried the desk first, then the highboy, more and more frantic as he found nothing. He went into the bedroom, ripped open the bureau drawers, throwing shirts and underwear out on the floor. An F.B.I. man *had* to have a gun somewhere!

Then he found it. In the bottom drawer of the bureau in a box he'd almost brushed aside. It was some kind of automatic and there were several clips of cartridges. Baxter hadn't ever fired any kind of pistol in his life. But he saw presently where the ammunition clip fitted. It snapped into place. The gun fitted snugly into the palm of his hand. He raised the barrel, then brought it down

level with his eyes, as he'd seen duelists do in the movies. It felt good. It felt wonderful.

He went back into the living-room. It had taken forever to find the gun and make those calls. Five minutes to 4! He tried Spence's office again.

"No, he hasn't called in, Mr. Baxter. As I told you, I'm afraid he won't."

Penny! Could he be with Penny? He called her number. No answer. Maybe she and Spence were riding around somewhere in Spence's convertible. The hell with him! Let him die! The thing to do was get out of here.

But Baxter didn't move. He stayed by the casements, looking down at the street. Once he went to the rear window and looked down from the back window into the yard. Someone had set up a green-and-white sun umbrella there, very gay, very cute. He went back to the front window. His heart beat so loud now that the inside of his head roared like a giant conch shell.

Ten minutes past 4. Eleven minutes past 4. A gray sedan pulled up in front of the house across the street. Some men got out of it — four men. They stood, looking across at the house. Two of them came across the street and went into the alley between houses, headed for the back yard. Two of them came toward the front door. One of those two was Dutch Hayden.

The apartment's foyer was windowless and dark. Coming in out of the hall you were in shadow. Standing in the room you were in bright light, a perfect target.

Baxter walked, stiff-legged, to a position directly opposite the front door. He hefted the gun in his hand. Then he brought his elbow back, pointing the barrel toward the ceiling. He waited for the sound of the elevator.

He could hear the clock on the mantel. It made a faint noise that sounded very loud and fast. What was going on? A minute passed, two minutes, five minutes. For one awful moment he visioned those two men in the back yard climbing the fire escape to take him from the rear. Then he remembered that the fire escape opened off the hall. They'd all have to converge on the front door.

"Why don't you come, you dirty killer! Why don't you come!" Baxter said, between his teeth.

As if in answer, he heard the whirring, clicking sound of the automatic elevator — coming up.

When you're drowning you remember everything. When you're falling you remember everything. But Baxter found this was a little different. The things that kept flashing through his mind, over and above the accompaniment of the elevator mechanism, were the "might-have-beens." He might have had a wife and family. He might have been secure and successful in his job. *He might not have run!* Now that there was really something

to run from he stood immobile, in the grotesque attitude of a Nineteenth-Century duelist, waiting to die.

Underneath all this was a faint itch of curiosity. Why had Hayden taken so long to get upstairs? He had arrived in plenty of time to keep the appointment on the nose, yet he had stalled for more than ten minutes. Just making sure, Baxter thought, plugging up all the holes. Every contingency taken care of. This time there would be no garage roof, no life net. This time Hayden meant to make absolutely sure.

Whirr and click, whirr and click. Then a metallic rattle as the elevator stopped. Count to six and you would hear the sound of the door sliding back. There it was. Now footsteps. There should be the sound of footsteps. Baxter couldn't hear them. It must be the roaring in his head, so thunderous now that the whole room seemed to billow on the waves of sound.

No footsteps. But something far more ominous. The doorknob was turning, soundlessly. Baxter's cold hand tightened on the butt of the gun. Come on, Hayden, let's get it over with.

Then the door burst open. For a moment Baxter saw the silhouette of a tall man in a snap-brim hat, framed in the doorway. He brought the gun barrel down slowly, his arm stiff as a rusty machine. There was a sharp cry from the figure in the doorway, and the man plunged face forward on the rug as Baxter pulled the trigger. Pulled the trigger, and heard nothing. No sound. No click.

"Paul, for God's sake, hold it!" John Spence cried from his prone position on the floor.

Baxter didn't pass out. He remained standing, rigid, erect. But he never had any memory of the next few seconds — seconds in which John Spence scrambled to his feet, led Baxter slowly to the big armchair, then gently took the gun away from him.

Spence looked at the gun and laughed in a curious, half-hysterical way.

"You crazy loon," he said, "don't you know this is a German Luger? It's a war souvenir — been de-activated — no firing pin."

"The back yard," Baxter whispered. "There are two of them out there in the back yard."

"Got 'em," Spence said, grimly. "Got all of them, including Hayden — thanks to you."

"Me?" Baxter moistened his lips. "What do you mean, me?"

"You want a drink?" Spence asked. "You must be pretty well shot, waiting here for Hayden to come and get you."

Baxter shook his head. "Just tell me what happened."

Spence took two cigarettes from his pocket, lit them both, and handed one to Baxter. "It was Penny," Spence said. "Mostly Penny. She kept insisting that you were telling the truth, that at least you thought you were. She kept insisting you

wouldn't invent something just to explain away your failure. I got to thinking. You were right about the Knapp girl. She was being much too open. This afternoon I took one of my men back to Tenth Avenue with me. We checked on your story of the stolen car. It turned out to be true. We found the marks on the roof where you'd fallen. Your story was adding up. I decided to have a chat with Florence Knapp. My partner and I went to the Chandler. Just as we got there we saw a gray sedan driving away. The doorman was acting like a man who'd seen a ghost. 'If I didn't know he was dead,' he said, 'I'd swear one of the guys in that car was Dutch Hayden. He's a dead ringer for him.'

"We didn't wait to see Miss Knapp, Paul. We started after that sedan. You can imagine how I felt when they pulled up across the street from here. My partner took the men in the back yard. I was waiting for Hayden and his chum in the foyer."

"Just like that," Baxter said.

Spence grinned. "Just like that. They weren't expecting us, it seems. Now, Paul, you fill in! What the devil are you doing here?"

Baxter told him. "It looks as though I've got my scoop, John," he said at the finish. "And this is one that nobody can steal from me."

"Use my phone," Spence said. "You can also use my portable. It's a good deal pleasanter here than in that hall bedroom of yours."

Baxter's smile was tremulous. "I — I think I'll go home," he said.

Spence understood and there was a wistful look in his eyes. "Good luck to both of you," he said.

Ten minutes later Baxter was ringing the doorbell of Penny's apartment, feeling half-suffocated with suspense. There was no answer to his ringing and for a moment he felt a despair that was more than he could bear.

He never knew how long it was before he saw the bus stop at the corner and Penny start down the block. He started toward her, walking rapidly at first. Then she saw him and came toward him, holding out her hands. Baxter broke into a run.

As he reached Penny he hesitated, stammering in an effort to find the right words to begin with. But Penny didn't hesitate. She was in his arms, and her blue eyes were very bright.

"You don't have to tell me, darling. I can see it in your face. The details don't matter."

"Penny! Penny darling, I love you so. If I could only make you understand. If I could only —"

She touched his lips with her fingers, silencing him. "There's nothing to understand, Paul. You're here. That's all that matters. Haven't I always told you? You're my guy!"

EQMM's DETECTIVE DIRECTORY

edited by ROBERT P. MILLS

THE GINGERBREAD MAN *by RICHARD PARKER* (SCRIBNER'S, $2.75)	". . . a fine job in every respect—off-trail, refreshing and exciting." (AB)	"You will not find a dull page among these 254." (H-M)
INSPECTOR MAIGRET AND THE STRANGLED STRIPPER *by GEORGES SIMENON* (CRIME CLUB, $2.75)	". . . atmospheric study . . . well-characterized victims . . . adroitly handled sub-plot . . ." (AB)	"Treatment realistic; much Q & A; murky characters predominate. Lively and clinical." (SC)
MY SON, THE MURDERER *by PATRICK QUENTIN* (SIMON & SCHUSTER, $2.50)	". . . a powerful situation . . . a flawless puzzle-plot with a fine . . . denouement." (AB)	". . . provides throbbing interest in strikingly unusual tale of murder . . ." (DD)
DEATH AND THE GENTLE BULL *by RICHARD and FRANCES LOCKRIDGE* (LIPPINCOTT, $2.50)	"One of the Lockridges' best." (FC)	"Background unusual, authentic; characters all talk alike. Not hard to take." (SC)
MISCAST FOR MURDER *by RUTH FENISONG* (CRIME CLUB, $2.75)	". . . has minor imperfections . . . a smooth and pleasing novel about likable people." (AB)	"Dramatic elements and fair puzzle, but sadly subpar for this author." (DD)
CORK IN BOTTLE *by MACDONALD HASTINGS* (KNOPF, $2.75)	"One of the most amusing and exciting murder novels in months." (FC)	"Fisticuffs abound, fowling-pieces sound, in rustic melodrama. Good, but first was better." (SC)
FOUR DEAD MICE *by THOMAS BLACK* (RINEHART, $2.75)	". . . honest toughness . . . but . . . many complications . . . C plus." (LGO)	"Noisy gals, tough eggs get in on act, which is heavily overgagged. Medium." (SC)
FIND A VICTIM *by JOHN ROSS MACDONALD* (KNOPF, $2.75)	". . . about as good as the hardboiled story can get." (AB)	". . . excellent . . . smashing climax. This author has never been better." (FC)

Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine rounds up the judgment of reviewers across the country. The key on the right gives sources.

"It's fun in its own way, but it lacks true humor . . ." (DBH)	"Fine suspense, good characterization and intelligent writing . . ." (EW)	
". . . deliberately sordid realism . . . seems unusually drab and chilling . . ." (LGO)	"Atmosphere . . . very good, also plot, also people. A Winner." (EW)	
". . . an extra good story . . ." (DBH)	"Nice, sensitive approach keeps this from getting mawkish. Able job." (EW)	
"Heimrich . . . does one of his neatest jobs on tenuous evidence . . . good background . . ." (LGO)	". . . solution is telegraphed way ahead. But it's an expert job of befuddlement." (AdV)	
". . . another of her pleasant, well-written mysteries . . ." (DBH)	"It's neatly plotted and the people are completely credible. Good." (EW)	
"Hastings with his characterizations, settings and style, is . . . never to be missed." (DBH)	". . . exciting, humorous, and completely absorbing. Excellent." (AdV)	
". . . a relief from today's usual private eyes . . ." (DBH)	"Al Delaney is back to unwind this one with appropriate blonde distractions." (EW)	
". . . falls somewhat below his best work . . ." (LGO)	". . . a moderately tough number that doesn't have to assault the reader . . . Good." (EW)	

KEY TO REVIEW SOURCES

AB: *Anthony Boucher in the New York Times*

FC: *Frances Crane in the Evansville Press*

SC: *Sergeant Cuff in The Saturday Review*

DD: *Drexel Drake in the Chicago Tribune*

H-M: *Brett Halliday and Helen McCloy in the Fairfield County Fair*

DBH: *Dorothy B. Hughes in the Albuquerque Tribune*

LGO: *Lenore Glen Offord in the San Francisco Chronicle*

AdV: *Avis de Voto in the Boston Globe*

EW: *Elizabeth Watt in the Boston Globe*

William O'Farrell has had a dozen books published, under his own name and under the rather whimsical pseudonym of "William Grew." His short stories have appeared in "Collier's," "Good Housekeeping," "Cosmopolitan," and other national magazines, and in years past he has labored in the vineyards of Hollywood — at MGM, RKO, and Columbia. He has a wife named Page (which is unusual) and he admits that without her he would never get any work done (which, for writers, is usual, though seldom confessed); his dog is named Peanut (which is unusual) and has been described euphemistically as a cross-bred terrier (which is usual — that is, the cross-breeding); the O'Farrell family likes to travel (which is usual) and they really do (which, even for writers, is unusual — it is surprising what stay-at-homes most writers are!).

Mr. O'Farrell's story — to continue the pattern — is unusual. It is about a man with a hobby — which is usual. But this particular man found the answers to his frustrations and ambitions in his hobby: it might even be said that through his hobby this man found a way of life (which is usual) — and a way of death (which is unusual).

EXHIBIT A

by WILLIAM O'FARRELL

"YOU'LL BE NICE TO JOE HALLER, won't you?" I asked Felicity. "It's only for one evening. He's leaving for California tomorrow."

My wife pretended to yawn. "I always am, aren't I?"

"Aren't you what, dear?"

"Nice to these characters you bring home from your trips."

That requires an explanation. I'm an art dealer; my business takes me to the Coast a couple of times a year and to Europe only a little less often. It's true that I sometimes run into people who might be described as "characters," and that I occasionally invite one to drop in at our apartment in New York. Felicity gives them drinks and her attention, and usually discovers in them the same traits which I had previously found and liked. Under her pose of aloofness my wife is as interested in people as I am, and I was curious to see how she'd react to Joe.

He was different, unlike any of his predecessors. For the last five days, coming across from England, he had

shared my table in the dining room, and I still wasn't sure whether I liked him or not. I only knew that he fascinated me, but the exact nature of this fascination was more than I could figure out.

"He'll probably bring his camera," I told Felicity. "He has some money and a beautiful camera, and he won't be here five minutes before he starts showing you photographs of himself. You'll find them interesting. Joe's photographs have to be seen to be disbelieved."

"Disbelieved?"

"I use the word advisedly," I said.

The doorbell rang. "Five minutes," I reminded her, getting up.

Joe beat my estimated time by four minutes and fifteen seconds. He started his monologue precisely three-quarters of a minute after he arrived — he was a plumpish young man with a round face and the innocent blue eyes of a startled baby. I clocked him while he shook hands with Felicity, explaining shyly why he'd brought his camera — he'd been buying some new lighting equipment, and there to prove it were the lights. He then sat down in a chair and, pulling out his handkerchief, just happened to dislodge a pack of photographs.

I think it was less the implausibility of his snapshots that interested me than the effect they seemed to have on him. He'd come out with a picture of himself wearing a hooded parka, for instance, and tell you that it was snapped in a concentration camp near Murmansk. When you said, "Really?" — as invariably you did — he would add that the blurred figure in the background was his fellow prisoner, a White Russian ex-prince and counter-revolutionist who had been shot the same afternoon the picture was taken. At this point his round blue eyes would watch you keenly, and if you appeared to believe him — as, of course, you tried to do — a small contented smile would start to spread across his face. Then Joe Haller, the essentially timid Joe, would disappear. The man of action, hero of a hundred romantic adventures around the world, would take his place.

Joe in the uniform of a Central American republic's army. Joe in India sighting a rifle while riding an elephant. Joe in a Venetian gondola with a beautiful woman who, according to him, was an Italian movie star whose uncle was a count. All of Joe's women were either actresses or related to nobility, or both. When he asked me to snap him with Felicity, I said I didn't want her getting ideas above her station. I said a number of other things, but Felicity shushed me with a look. She had been hooked in the same manner I had been. People did not steal money from blind men, or kick small dogs — or hurt Joe Haller's feelings. It wouldn't have been fair.

"Tell you what," Joe compromised. "We'll take all three of us together. I can do it with this camera. See this?" He pointed to a little gadget.

I saw. His camera was equipped with one of those timing devices, the photographic fanatic's delight. He posed us on a couch; then, when everything was set, he pressed a gadget and hurried over to squeeze between us. It was not until ten whirring seconds later that the camera clicked. When that happened I was watching Joe. On his face was the same smile that he had worn in all the other pictures. It was an I-told-you-so smile that almost bordered on gloating, and it worried me.

I continued to worry after he had gone. "It's all right as far as you're concerned," I told Felicity. "You'll be exhibited as the beautiful *première danseuse* he once knew in Egypt, the one who turned out to be related to a King. But what's he going to make of me?"

"What's the difference? It's just a game he's playing. And I think it's a shame."

"What is?"

"That any man's life should be so empty that he has to escape that far from it," she said.

Anyway, Joe left, and I didn't think of him or of the photograph again until one morning months later when Felicity looked up from her newspaper. "Remember Joe Haller? Didn't you give him letters of introduction to some people on the Coast?"

I said I had, and asked her why.

"He's married an old friend of yours, Martha Maynard."

"I didn't give him a letter to Martha. I wouldn't have done a dirty trick like that to Joe," I said.

Everyone over a certain age remembers Martha Maynard as a picture star, and everyone under that age has at least read about her in the papers. When she was twenty her lovely face was on the cover of every other movie magazine; and twenty years later she still rated a paragraph whenever she got married, and half a column whenever she got divorced. Her divorces rated more space because they were more sensational. A quotation from Martha, the middle-aged bride, that "This one is for good" was an old story, but it was always fun a few years later to read an interview with the ex-groom. Morbid, of course, but fun.

It isn't often that peoples' lives recross each other often enough for one person to keep track of another person, and add up a series of facts and impressions into a complete and rounded history. But it does happen occasionally. It was in the cards that I would encounter Joe twice more.

The first time was about two years later. Felicity and I were aboard a ship that had just left Le Havre for New York. We were having dinner when Felicity whispered, "Martha Maynard's with us. Martha and what is left of your old pal."

I saw what she meant. Their table was only twenty feet away. Except for certain natural ravages, Martha hadn't changed much from the scornful Roman debutante who, back in the old super-colossals, had sat in

Caesar's Colosseum box and egged on the lions to eat their dinner. Joe had the resigned look of a Christian martyr who has been tentatively nibbled at and knows what's coming next. I took one hasty glance at him and turned away.

They had to pass our table when they left. I spotted their approach by watching Felicity. At the critical moment, just before she would either have to speak or develop a sudden interest elsewhere, I got up. "Hello," I said. "Nice to see both of you again."

Joe stopped dead. He started to speak, but Martha beat him to it. "Hello," she said in the rasping voice which had ended her career in pictures. "How are you, Felicity?" She turned back to me without waiting for an answer. "That's right. You used to know my husband, didn't you?"

"Yes," I said. "We're old friends, aren't we, Joe?"

Martha answered for him. "So he tells me. Well, nice to have seen you. Come along, Joseph."

Joe managed a weak smile before he followed her. "We'll get together later on," he said.

We did get together, but not until the last night of the voyage. Occasionally, before then, I'd catch him watching us from the far table to which Martha had removed him after that first meal. He had a strange expression. As Felicity said, with feminine disregard for the mechanics of men's clothing, he looked as though he were loaded down with brand-new photographs but all the zippers on his pockets had got stuck.

On that last night, however, when he slipped away to join us in the smoking room, he produced no pictures. I don't know why that saddened me, but somehow it did. Joe's life as a man of action may have been based on fiction, but in the old days he had at least been fictionally alive.

The funereal atmosphere affected Felicity as it did me. She tried at last to rouse him with a question. "Do you still have that lovely camera, Joe?"

He looked up quickly. His hand darted toward his pocket but he caught it just in time. "It's in my cabin. I don't use it much these days."

But I had seen that eager, darting gesture. "Let's see some of your latest photographs," I said.

"No." He stared down at his still untasted drink. "I haven't taken a picture since my marriage. Honest, that's the truth."

Then it happened. A rasping voice said, "Show them the old ones, then," and Martha suddenly appeared behind Joe's chair. "Give them to me," she went on, sitting down beside him. "You mustn't be so modest, dear."

"Really, Martha —" Joe was a little wild-eyed. "Really, I'd rather not."

"Give me the pictures. I'll do it for you," Martha said.

So we were treated to Joe's adventures, after all; and I'll say this much

for Martha — she put them over with a bang. She had his whole routine down pat, and she delivered it with interpolations of her own. She'd gone to a lot of trouble to learn the inside history of those photographs, and when she had finished with Joe's highly colored versions, she would rip each one to pieces. It wasn't hard. Just a few caustic words telling how much he'd paid to rent his Central American uniform, for instance, did the trick. It was easy to show him up as a cheap pretender, more at home with a trick camera than a gun. Anyone could have done it. Anyone with a taste for torturing small children, that is.

That's what Joe looked like when she finally stopped — like a small boy who has been badly beaten up. He didn't say anything; he just kept staring at the table. I didn't say anything, either. Martha was too tough for me.

She was too tough for Felicity too, but that didn't stop my brave spouse from trying. "That performance rates about C-minus, Martha. Satirical comedy requires a lighter touch," she said.

Martha smiled nastily. "Perhaps. But when I want dramatic criticism I won't come to the daughter of a South American dictator who only learned to speak English after she was twenty-five." She flipped another snapshot on the table, one we hadn't seen before.

Felicity and I examined it together. I'd always wanted to know what Joe had made of the photograph he'd taken in our apartment, and it was an interesting job. He had blocked out our sober domestic background and replaced it with a suggestion of a gaudy palace. Joe sat on a marble veranda between Felicity and myself, and by my side was a tall, expensive-looking drink.

"By the way," Martha said, and I realized uneasily that she was now addressing me, "after the revolution when Felicity's father was deposed and Joseph saved your life and then lent you money to get married and buy a business, did you ever pay him back? Don't bother answering," she added, rising and giving Joe a sharp nudge on the shoulder. "Joseph, say good night to your friends."

Joe's face was scarlet. He got up and followed Martha, but he didn't say good night. I kept my eyes on him and, just before he left the room, he looked back once.

Felicity, who was facing the other way, said sadly, "Martha really meant it when she told the reporters that *this* marriage was for good. She's found the perfect whipping boy. We've seen the last of Joe."

"I'm not so sure," I told her. Across the smoke-filled room I'd had a good look at his face.

We didn't meet him in the morning; they took him off before the other passengers were allowed to disembark. We didn't see him again until Felicity and I were called as witnesses at his trial. We did our best, but there was never any doubt about

the outcome. They convicted him, all right.

The funny thing is, Joe didn't seem unhappy. In fact, at the crucial moment when the district attorney handed *Exhibit A* to the jury, he leaned forward eagerly. He watched the jury examine the self-taken photograph which showed him in the very act of strangling his wife; and, as one by one each juror looked up from the picture to stare at him incredulously, a small contented smile spread across his lips.

A Good Sell

Detectives have highly enjoyed a real sell perpetrated on a Coroner of a Western city, and repeat it with great gusto. Here it is:

Recently, an excited individual, with his hat standing on two hairs, and his eyes projecting from his head like the horns of a snail, rushed into the office of Coroner Holmes. The coroner is by profession a dentist, and his first thought as he glanced at the man was that he was well-nigh distracted with toothache. He was soon undeceived, however, as the frenzied individual cried out, as soon as he could catch his breath after running up the stairs: "Been a man murdered!"

"A man murdered?" cried the coroner, "How? Where?"

"In a garden, I believe; with a club or a rock."

"How long ago?" cried the coroner, seizing his hat and cane.

"Been done a good while, and no police nor constable has done nothin' about it. Never been no coroner set on the body, nor nothin' of the kind; no verdict —"

"What's the dead man's name? Who was he?" cried the coroner.

"His name was Abel."

"Abel? Abel who?"

"Don't know. Never heard nothin' but his first name."

"Well, what is the name of the man who killed him? Do you know? Anyone suspected?"

"Well, I've heard that a fellow named Cain put out his light. Cain was the brother of Abel —"

Coroner smells a mouse, and flourishing his cane, cries, "You get down them stairs, my fine fellow. Git, and don't you show yourself here again!" With a loud guffaw the fellow went down the stairs three steps at a time, the doctor calling after him, "How dare you trifle with an officer in this way, sir?"

AMERICANA *(circa 1890)*

In QUEEN'S QUORUM *(of beloved memory) we said that Ben Hecht can write a blue streak — tough or sentimental, lusty or romantic, always with sharp, shrewd irony, and often with brimstone brilliance. Well, you will find the whole paradoxical mixture in this hair-raising adventure in criminal psychology. Ben Hecht has long had a fondness for impaling doctors and psychoanalysts — did it grow out of his earlier fondness for dissecting newspapermen? Perhaps there is no connection, but here is the story of a typical Hechtian character — a rococo sage and bantam braggart adept in Freudian froth and psychiatric abracadabra (we're quoting, so help us!). Yes, Ben Hecht can write a blue streak — and it reads even faster. It's atomic lightning!*

REHEARSAL FOR MURDER

by BEN HECHT

MY ACQUAINTANCESHIP WITH DR. Charles Skyro began with the case of the trick throat, or "Laryngeus Legerdemain," as he dubbed it in the private journal wherein the torments of his patients were sometimes whimsically catalogued.

I had heard of Skyro before that time as one of the more rococo sages of psychoanalysis. He seemed to have a double standing in the medical gossip — one, as a rattlebrained charlatan who should be jugged for malpractice; two, as one of the most brilliant minds ever devoted to the Freudian froth.

Accompanying my disturbed friend and attorney, Mark Cantwell, on his first fateful trip to Skyro's office, I was struck to find that the source of all this controversy was a dehydrated little man past 60 who looked like a dead locust. Bulbous-eyed, glossy-skinned, wire-necked, and with a tubercular curve to his 110 pounds, Skyro reminded me of the interstellar characters who people the comic strips.

He greeted us from his desk without rising, peered at us for a moment through glasses as thick as paperweights, and then started an hour's monologue that permitted no interruption. I have never heard a man boast more shamelessly.

I had come merely as social ballast for the disturbed Cantwell, intending to vanish as soon as he was firmly docked alongside the analyst. But after Skyro had finished his discourse he turned his attention to me.

I was, he began, an oral sadist with a sucide complex, as anyone could tell by merely glancing through my books.

"I'm not here for treatment," I

said coldly, convinced by this time we had wandered into the lair of a Coney Island weight-guesser. "Mr. Cantwell is your customer."

"What's the matter with Mr. Cantwell?" Skyro looked at him irritably.

"He'll tell you," I said, "if you'll give him a chance to get a word in edgeways."

"I seldom take patients," Dr. Skyro said. "I find them too boring. Mania is a cliché to me, and the disarrangements of the human psyche are too obvious for an intellect like mine. I am a man of great energy, physical as well as mental. I punch a bag every morning for five rounds. And I read a major work of philosophy and walk five miles every night, rain or snow, before going to bed. I never wear a hat or overcoat. Physicians are always astounded by my physique. Every organ perfect. Tissues those of a boy."

I finally managed to silence the bantam braggart by standing up as if to leave. Skyro then turned to Cantwell.

"What did you say was bothering you?" he inquired fretfully.

"I'll be going," I said.

"No, you remain," Skyro said. "Cantwell doesn't like me. He'll talk more easily in front of you."

"How do you know he doesn't like you?" I asked. "You haven't given him a chance to say a word."

"He's said plenty," Skyro beamed.

"I wasn't aware I had spoken," Cantwell frowned.

"Your stomach has been speaking for you," Skyro said. "Stomach rumblings are an important form of speech — to the trained ear."

"What's it said?" I asked.

"Chiefly that it hates me," Skyro beamed, "and that its owner is afraid of me — desperately afraid. I've seldom heard such low-toned rumblings of terror. What's your profession, Cantwell?"

"I'm a lawyer."

"And what do you think is the matter with you?"

"Well," Cantwell said, "I've been very nervous of late."

"Come, come!" Skyro cried. "You haven't sought me out because you bite your fingernails. Nobody comes to a doctor with so horrible a reputation as mine unless he is practically *in extremis*. You, my friend, are in just that — in horrible trouble. I've been aware of it for an hour. Most analysts like to spend a year examining their patients. I don't. I haven't the time. I'm sixty-four. I'll undoubtedly live to be a hundred. But I still haven't the time. You tell me frankly what's the matter with you. And I'll be equally frank. I'll tell you whether I can cure you. Either I cure you in a few days and make a sane man out of you — or I do not undertake the task at all. I work in this fashion because —"

"Give him a chance to speak, for God's sake!" I interrupted.

"Oral sadism, highly developed." Skyro glared at me.

"My chief trouble is my throat," Cantwell said. "My voice disappears — at intervals."

"How old are you?" Skyro asked.

"Thirty-five." Cantwell said.

"Married?"

"Yes."

"Happily?"

"Oh, yes, very."

"You're a liar," Skyro said, "as the two extra words in your answer prove. Go on. Your voice disappears. On what sort of occasion?"

"It happens usually in the courtroom," said Cantwell.

"When you rise to address the judge or jury, I suppose," Skyro said.

"That's right."

"Guilt," Skyro beamed. "Obviously you are guilty of something. And when you appear in court as a lawyer, your subconscious fancies you are there as a criminal and you are stricken dumb with fear."

"I've committed no crime."

"Not yet," Skyro said, "but you are in rehearsal. The criminal act itself — the performance for the world — is a brief gesture for which we often rehearse a lifetime. The subconscious makes no distinction between rehearsal and performance — as you can determine by consulting the Bible: As a man thinks, so is he. To the soul, a thought is a deed — a desire is a fact."

The bloodless Dr. Skyro looked intently at Cantwell and added quietly: "You're guilty as hell, Cantwell, and very likely of a murder you've been committing in the recesses of your psyche."

"A murder!" Cantwell mopped his dark face. "That's absurd."

"Is it?" Skyro mused. "Is it, really?" He chuckled, winked at me, and went on, "Notice the enlargement of your friend's eye pupils. And the contraction of his vocal cords, resulting in hoarsened, difficult speech. In a few minutes I could knock his voice out entirely, if I wanted to. Notice also the perspiring palms. From here you can see that his pulse has jumped to at least a hundred. All those are symptoms of guilt. An accomplished murderer with a genuine corpse on his hands suffers less than your friend does in his phantom abattoir. For which statement we move from the Bible to Shakespeare: Present fears are less than horrible imaginings. Are you dining at home tonight?" he asked Cantwell suddenly.

Mark nodded.

"I'd like to be your guest." Skyro beamed and, turning to me, added, "You're invited."

The Cantwells live in a house beyond New York in one of those suburbs to which all the virtues and lawn mowers seem to have retired. There were three Cantwells — Mark; his soft-spoken and pretty wife, Ruth; and his calliope of a mother, Margot. They lived in a colonial house full of old mahogany furniture, old Oriental rugs, old books, and old anecdotes — all the property of Madam Margot. For that shapely, black-satined beldam not only lived in the house, she flooded it from cellar to attic with her personality. She was that most triumphant of females, the wife-obliterating

mother. For her part, Ruth bore up silently and sweetly, winning my own sympathy at all times, although I did yearn for the day when she would assert herself in some way.

The prospect of Dr. Skyro turned loose in such a bed of psychological catnip almost kept me from dinner. I dreaded his effect upon the mild-mannered Ruth, but I was curious to witness Madam Margot's response to our little know-it-all. She was a woman of powerful aversions. The evening, I felt certain, would be one of those social blitzes in which cannons roar and homes are wrecked. Yet it turned out to be nothing of the sort. Our browbeating savant struck his colors on arrival and sat smirking at his case-history hostess without firing a diagnosis.

And I had never seen the queen-mother gayer or heard her more sprightly. She owned a stilted sort of wit, full of heavy cuteness. Aware that the wispy fellow at her right was somehow investigating Mark's inner life, she offered numerous anecdotes about her son in which he starred always as an incompetent hero guided by a whimsical and doting mama. It was all rather nauseating — but endurable in the absence of counterblasts.

Ruth, as was her way, deferred in everything to the terrifying dowager, and for her pains was awarded the negligence and disregard of one and all. Cantwell seemed scarcely aware of her presence.

After dinner Madam Margot was persuaded by the conquered Skyro to show off the rooms which she had recently redecorated. And here, for the first time, I sensed that our sage was mysteriously at work behind his sycophantic front. He pranced along beside the mother, cooing over her achievements and throwing chummy little queries at her. But his manner had become as alert as that of a burglar "casing" a house.

"And this is Mark's room." Madam Margot stopped in front of a door. "It hasn't been remodeled yet."

"I'd love to see it," Skyro purred. "Just to see what the house looked like before you took it in hand."

Mark opened the door for us. It opened slowly, brushing over the carpet with difficulty. We looked into a skimpily furnished bedroom. While it was clearly a refuge which he shared with Ruth, I noticed that it was called "Mark's room" and that no one else even seemed conscious of the reference.

"I suppose you're going to change this fireplace, too." Skyro pointed at a gas-log grate. "It's rather out of place in such a palace of antiques as your home really is."

"I've insisted for months on turning that into a real, cozy fireplace," Madam Margot sighed with a pout at her son. "I think gas logs are utterly without mood."

"But Mark likes it," Skyro said, "and, of course, a man is always boss in his own bedroom." Looking down, he added tenderly, "May I ask who bought this rug? It doesn't seem your taste at all, Mrs. Cantwell."

"Another of poor Mark's efforts at

decoration," his mother answered. "It's an awful thing, isn't it? The auctioneer's delight, I call it. Much too thick a pile, and *such* a bilious color!"

"I like it," Mark said.

His wife Ruth smiled loyally. "It makes the room look very manly," she said.

"Dear little Mark." Madam Margot slid her arm under her son's. "He was always an unmanageable brat. But I always forgave him — everything. Horrid rugs, wrong fireplaces and all."

And she kissed her frowning son tenderly.

Dr. Skyro greeted me the next day with a limp but friendly handshake.

"I sent for you," he said, "because we are approaching the third step in your friend's cure."

"I was unaware of *any* progress," I said.

Skyro rolled his beetle eyes behind the thick lenses. He was being rollicking.

"There will be five steps in all," he said. "You witnessed step number one last night. I doubt, however, if you were aware of it."

I shook my head.

"The gas log," Skyro beamed.

"What about the gas log?"

"The gas log is responsible for Mark's loss of voice," Skyro said. "I knew your friend was guilty of plotting a murder, as I told you yesterday. And that this inner guilt deprived him of his voice in the courtroom. But I saw last night that Mark has not only dreamed subconsciously of murdering his wife; he has —"

"His *wife!*" I interrupted. "You must mean his mother!"

"But no. Your tormented friend feels he must murder his wife as a love sacrifice to his goddess-mother; he has also rigged up the mechanics of that phantom crime. And the mechanics are by no means phantomish. He has refused to have his gas log turned into a genuine and cozy fireplace, *because the gas log is the murder weapon.* And he has insured the efficiency of his weapon by laying down that hideous carpet. You see, when he finally decides to murder Ruth and when he turns on the gas and leaves it escaping, there will be no chance of the gas leaking out through any cracks under the door."

"I don't believe a word of it," I said. "Mark is incapable of plotting so ugly and stupid a business as all that."

"Go on," Skyro beamed.

"He would obviously not have come to you for help," I continued, "if he knew he were at work on a crime. A criminal doesn't call on the police to advertise the crime he's going to commit."

"A crude analogy," Skyro said. "Mark is not a criminal. He is only a half-criminal. His personality is split. What says the Bible — about the right hand not knowing what the left hand is doing? Mark's left hand is his subconscious. It is very busy buying rugs, rigging up gas logs, and preparing a crime. His right hand knows nothing

of these activities. Hence his recourse to the police, as you call me."

"I've always found it hard to believe in the Jekyll-Hyde idea," I said. "But granting that a man may be blind to the things he is doing, your deductions still seem a bit arbitrary. How do you know it's the gas log?"

"Mark's throat trouble tells me," Skyro said. "You see, it is not only guilt that closes his throat. He suffers also from gas-asphyxiation symptoms. When he is in the courtroom he becomes in his own mind a murderer instead of a lawyer. And, having become the murderer, he has a desire to atone; to punish himself for the crime of which he feels guilty. He does this by participating in his wife's death. He also inhales the gas fumes — and starts choking along with her. Thus he murders and then atones for the crime by committing suicide — all on an unconscious level."

Skyro's glib conclusions were irritating, and I indicated as much.

"Don't argue with me," the little doctor smiled. "We are well past the discursive stage in the case. Step three has already been taken."

"In what direction?" I asked.

"I have cast Madam Cantwell out of the house."

"Mark's *mother!*" I stared at the happy sage. "Impossible!"

"To the contrary — very simple," Skyro said. "I spent less than an hour with her. She's moving all her things to the Winden Hotel this afternoon."

I inquired how this miracle had been accomplished.

"By humoring the psychotic dreams of that wretched woman." Skyro said. "I've assured her that the only way to wreck her son's marriage is to leave the house. He will suffer so from need of her that he will quarrel with his wife, abandon her, and come to Madam Margot as her adoring son and slave."

"She wants the marriage wrecked? I mean, she wants it that openly?" I asked.

"The old one loathes Ruth," Skyro said. "She dreams only of winning her son to her side. It is a type of reverse motherhood that's very common. The mother has a curious and impractical desire to recall her child."

"What," I interrupted him, "is your purpose in ousting Madam Margot?"

"That is step number four — and must remain vested," Skyro said, "for the time."

I was alarmed. The little man's machinations seemed to me suddenly more than an adventure in psychology.

"If you're even remotely right in your analysis," I said, "and Mark has really been plotting his wife's death — then good God — what are you up to?"

Skyro nodded. "Your fears are very flattering," he said. "They show that you believe in me."

"They show nothing of the sort," I said. "I'm going to call on Mark and pull him out of this."

"You'll do nothing." Skyro glared at me. "His life is in my hands. So is his wife's. I hold them — like this."

He lifted both palms. "If you want your friend saved leave him here. There is no other haven for him."

I was silent for several minutes.

"Luckily I believe in none of your abracadabra," I said at length, "so I will not interfere with your little Halloween games."

I stayed away from both Mark and Skyro for two days. On the third day Ruth telephoned me. She spoke in a spent voice.

"I'd like to see you," she said.

I said I was busy.

"It's about Mark," she went on dully. "He's drinking. And he's beside himself. I have to do something. He blames me for his mother's leaving us. I didn't ask her to go. I didn't want her to. But he won't believe me. I don't know what to do."

"I don't, either," I said, "but I'll talk to Dr. Skyro."

"That horrible man!" Ruth began weeping. "He's responsible for every thing. I know he is. He's in a plot against me."

"I'll talk to him," I repeated firmly. "And see you tomorrow."

I was wakened by the telephone at 6 the next morning. It was Skyro.

"Come to the Winden Hotel at once," he said in a queer voice. "Suite seven hundred five. I'll be there. Please hurry."

"What's happened?" I asked.

"I can't discuss it over the phone," the breathless voice answered. "Get dressed and hurry."

Skyro arrived at the Winden a few minutes before me. He was standing in the hall talking to Mark's mother when I opened the door. Mark, glowering and disheveled, was sitting hunched on the couch.

"The police should be here in a half hour," Skyro was saying. "We have very little time to prepare ourselves. Very little time."

"The police will be here for what?" I asked.

"For Mark." Skyro stared at the collapsed lawyer.

Mark's eyes were red. His attention was elsewhere. He seemingly had failed to recognize me. His mother, voluptuous in a cream-colored satin negligee, hovered over him like a Valkyrie.

"I was called at 5:30 this morning," Skyro went on. "The facts are simple and complete. There is no chance of our altering them."

"What are they?" I asked.

"Mark arrived at home around midnight last night," said Skyro. "He was under the influence of alcohol. He quarreled with Ruth and then induced her to take two sleeping pills. His fingerprints are on the box of pills. They are also on the jet of the gas log. He turned the gas on around 2 A.M. Ruth was sound asleep, drugged. He shut off the damper in the fireplace. His fingerprints are also on the damper-iron. Then he left the bedroom, closing and locking the door behind him, and arrived at this apartment around 3:30 A.M. The clerk downstairs has the record of his

arrival. The police have already traced his trip from Long Island to this hotel."

Madam Margot smiled.

"That is no evidence," she said. "Any good lawyer will be able to free Mark. He has done nothing wrong."

A groan came from the couch.

"Have you, Mark?"

"Your son is unable to speak," Skyro said quickly. "He is suffering from gas-poisoning symptoms, in an effort to atone for what he has done."

"Nonsense." Madam Margot raised her own uninhibited voice. "I won't listen to such talk against Mark."

"Your attitude isn't going to help him," Skyro said. "The police will consider it maternal bias."

"That stupid, horrible misfit of a Ruth!" Madam Margot cried suddenly. "I'm *glad* she's dead. For his sake. The woman drove him to it. She was a human botch. No jury will convict Mark for getting rid of her. If ever homicide was justifiable it's this one."

"Did you hate her as much as that?" Skyro asked unexpectedly.

"Hate her!" Madam Margot snorted. "I despised her! From the very first day Mark brought her home. I hated her every hour of their marriage. My God, they can't touch Mark for ridding himself of such a foul incubus. She belongs where she is now!"

Mark stood up and stared at his mother. She held her arms out to him. He knocked them down.

"I thought you loved me," he said, and Skyro beamed at the sound of his voice. "But that's not true. You were only interesting in destroying *her*."

"Darling, darling!" Madam Margot cried. "You mustn't worry. I'll stand by you. We have money."

"I came home last night" — Mark stared at her — "to kill her. I gave her the sleeping pills. I turned on the gas. Now I know what I've been dreaming about. Her death. Her killing."

"You mustn't say that!" Madam Margot cried. "Darling, sit down. Let me take care of you."

"You gloating, evil creature." Mark's eyes were still on her. "It was your hatred that worked in me. It made me crazy. And I thought *you* were the sweet one, the tender one! I thought it was you who loved me. I've been mad! You loved no one — you had only hate. And I killed with your hate!" Mark's voice rose to a raging pitch.

"Get out!" he cried. "I never want to see you again — or hear your voice. Gloat all you want, and keep on gloating! After I'm executed you'll know your hatred won."

"They won't touch you!" Madam Margot cried. "Because you're mad! Every word you're saying is mad."

"I'm sane," Mark answered quietly. "My horror of you proves it — if nothing else does." He turned to Skyro and added, "Where are the police?"

"We can forget about them," the

little sage beamed. "I'm more interested in the fact that you seem to be cured of your laryngeus legerdemain. Also of your mother fixation, which was the cause of it."

"Good God!" I exploded. "What good is a cure going to do him *now!*" I was glaring murderously into the beetle eyes. "You're an accessory to this crime," I cried. "You *knew* it would happen. You engineered its happening. You egged Mark on to it."

"True, true," Skyro smiled, "but I'm a very brilliant accessory. I'm accessory to a crime *that never happened* — to a phantom murder."

"Ruth, Ruth," Mark moaned, covering his eyes.

"You can go back to her," Skyro said. "She's sleeping off the drug you gave her."

"But the gas," Mark whispered. "I turned it on."

"True enough," Skyro nodded, "but I took the liberty of disconnecting the gas log when I dined at your home. You turned it on — but no gas came out."

"I smelled it," Mark whispered.

"A natural part of your delusions," Skyro beamed.

Mark swayed.

"You've saved her life — and mine," he said.

"I prefer to consider that I've merely cured a throat affliction," said Skyro.

I looked at Madam Margot. Her face was bloodless. Her body seemed to have aged as if under some more of Skyro's necromancy.

"Aren't you going to kiss me goodbye?" she wailed as Mark started out of the door.

"Neither goodbye nor hello," said Mark. And was gone.

"I had the case planned the moment I saw the gas log," Skyro beamed across a lunch table. "I needed only one bit of luck to cure our friend of his ugly dreams. That was a blurt of truth from his mother. Madam Margot really cured her son, not I. As I will assure her when I take her under my wing tonight. A fascinating woman. Maternal cannibalism is a rare thing. As is her other trouble — a need to destroy her own mother — for having held the love of her father. You see, this all began when Margot herself was a child —"

"Please," I interrupted, "I have little interest and less belief in your theories of psychoanalysis. And I'm averse to looking miracles in the mouth. You've reconciled a husband and wife, prevented a murder, solved a crime, given an evil woman her comeuppance — why not rest on these obvious laurels?"

Dr. Skyro shook his head sadly.

"To a man of my genius," he said, "This thing you call a miracle is hardly more than the working out of a childish crossword puzzle. Call on me tomorrow — and I'll tell you the tale of a real miracle!"

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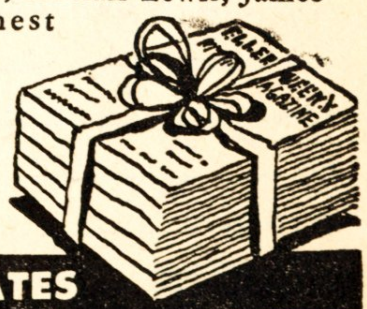

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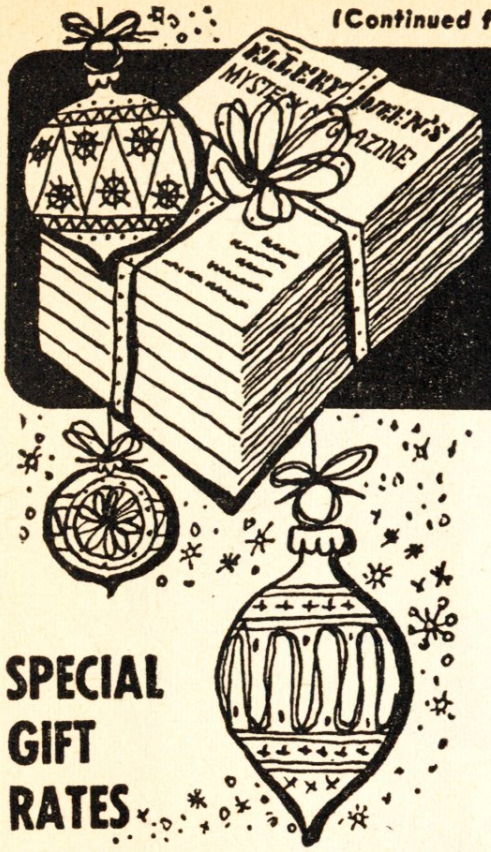

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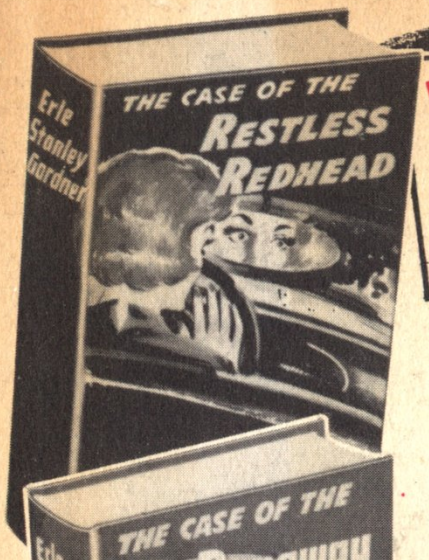

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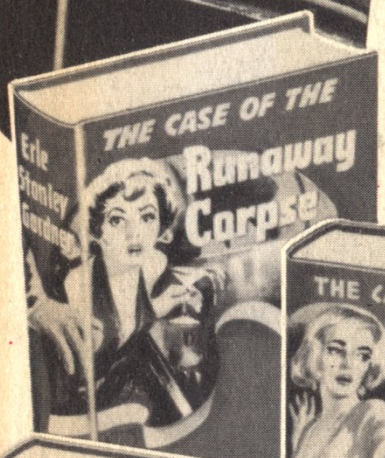

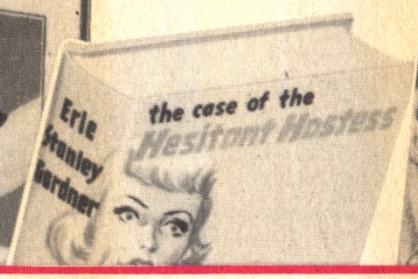

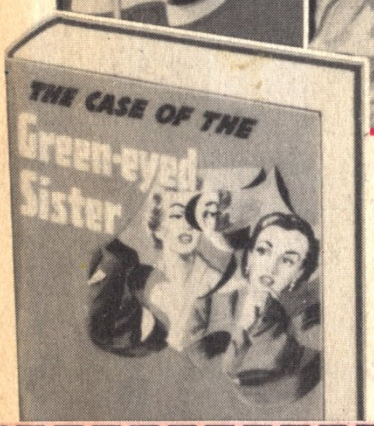

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