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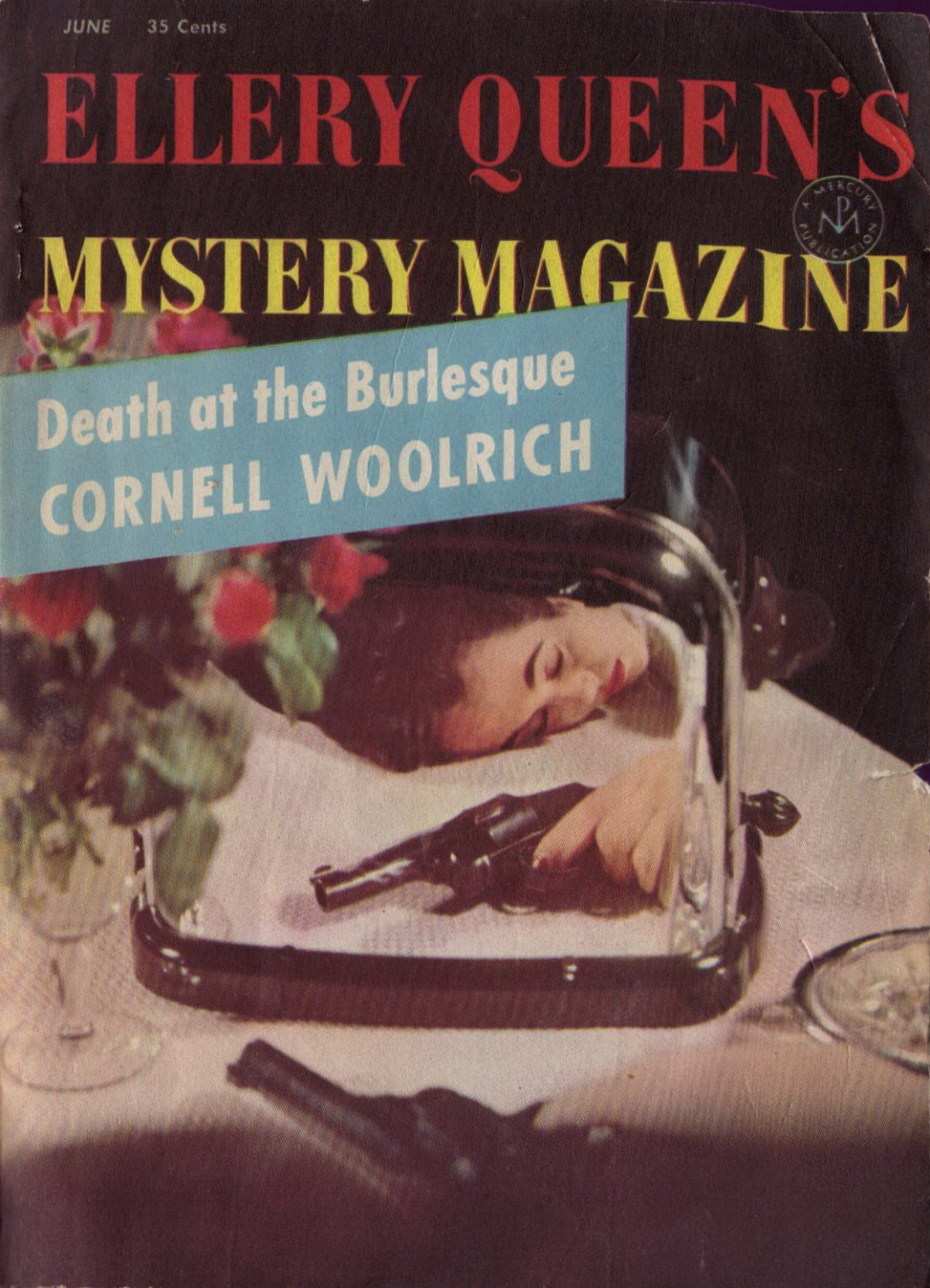

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Pearl S. Buck is the second American novelist to have been awarded the Nobel Prize for literature. Born in the United States, she was taken to China at an early age, and in the city of Chinkiang, on the south bank of the Yangtze Kiang, she spent an exotic childhood, surrounded by rice fields and tea-patches, in a land of silks and spices and slowly drifting junks. Here, too, she heard wondrous tales from her ancient Chinese nurse, and learned from her parents, both of whom were missionaries, "the beauty that lies in words." Thus, out of her intimate knowledge of China and its downtrodden peasants, came the saga of THE GOOD EARTH, *a book that made literary history in 1931. Shortly after, she returned to the United States and began to write of the contemporary American scene. "Ransom" reveals her mastery of what to her was a comparatively new milieu. It is one of the best tales ever written about G-men — a story so timeless and so full of human interest that it withstands the acid test of more than one reading.*

RANSOM

by PEARL S. BUCK

THE BEETHOVEN SYMPHONY stopped abruptly. A clear metallic voice broke across the melody of the third movement.

"Press radio news. The body of Jimmie Lane, kidnaped son of Mr. Headley Lane, has been found on the bank of the Hudson River near his home this afternoon. This ends the search of —"

"Kent, turn it off, please!" Allin exclaimed.

Kent Crothers hesitated a second. Then he turned off the radio.

In the silence Allin sat biting her lower lip. "That poor mother! All these days — not giving up hope."

"I suppose it is better to know something definite," he said quietly, "even though it is the worst."

Perhaps this would be a good time to talk with her, to warn her that she was letting this kidnaping business grow into an obsession. After all, children did grow up in the United States, even in well-to-do families like theirs. The trouble was that they were not quite rich enough and still too rich — not rich enough to hire guards for their children, but rich enough, because his father owned the paper mill, to make them known in the neighborhood, at least.

The thing was to take it for granted

that they did not belong to the millionaire class and therefore were not prize for kidnapers. They should do this for Bruce's sake. He would be starting school next autumn. Bruce would have to walk back and forth on the streets like millions of other American children. Kent wouldn't have his son driven three blocks, even by Peter the outdoor man; it would do him more harm than . . . after all, it was a democracy they lived in, and Bruce had to grow up with the crowd.

"I'll go and see that the children are covered," Allin said. "Betsy throws off the covers whenever she can."

Kent knew that she simply wanted to make sure they were there. But he rose with her, lighting his pipe, thinking how to begin. They walked up the stairs together, their fingers interlaced. Softly she opened the nursery door. It was ridiculous how even he was being affected by her fears. Whenever the door opened his heart stood cold for a second, until he saw the two beds, each with a little head on the pillow.

They were there now, of course. He stood beside Bruce's bed and looked down at his son. Handsome little devil. He was sleeping so soundly that when his mother leaned over him he did not move. His black hair was a tousle; his red lips pouted. He was dark, but he had Allin's blue eyes.

They did not speak. Allin drew the cover gently over his outflung arm, and they stood a moment longer, hand in hand, gazing at the child. Then Allin looked up at Kent and smiled, and he kissed her. He put his arm about her shoulder, and they went to Betsy's bed.

Here was his secret obsession. He could say firmly that Bruce must take his chances with the other children, because a boy had to learn to be brave. But this baby — such a tiny feminine creature, his little daughter. She had Allin's auburn coloring, but by some miracle she had his dark eyes, so that when he looked into them he seemed to be looking into himself.

She was breathing now, a little unevenly, through her tiny nose.

"How's her cold?" he whispered.

"It doesn't seem worse," Allin whispered back. "I put stuff on her chest."

He was always angry when anything happened to this baby. He didn't trust her nurse, Mollie, too much. She was good-hearted, maybe, but easy-going.

The baby stirred and opened her eyes. She blinked, smiled, and put up her arms to him.

"Don't pick her up, darling," Allin counseled. "She'll only want it every time."

So he did not take her. Instead, he put her arms down, one and then the other, playfully, under the cover.

"Go to sleep-bye, honey," he said. And she lay, sleepily smiling. She was a good little thing.

"Come — let's put out the light," Allin whispered. They tiptoed out and went back to the living room.

Kent sat down, puffed on his pipe,

his mind full of what he wanted to say to Allin. It was essential to their life to believe that nothing could happen to their children.

"Kidnaping's like lightning," he began abruptly. "It happens, of course — once in a million. What you have to remember is all the rest of the children who are perfectly safe."

She had sat down on the ottoman before the fire, but she turned to him when he said this. "What would you do, honestly, Kent, if some night when we went upstairs —"

"Nonsense!" he broke in. "That's what I've been trying to tell you. It's so unlikely as to be — it's these damned newspapers! When a thing happens in one part of the country, every little hamlet hears of it."

"Jane Eliot told me there are three times as many kidnapings as ever get into the newspapers," Allin said.

"Jane's a newspaperwoman," Kent said. "You mustn't let her sense of drama —"

"Still, she's been on a lot of kidnaping cases," Allin replied. "She was telling me about the Wyeth case —"

This was the time to speak, now when all Allin's secret anxiety was quivering in her voice. Kent took her hand and fondled it as he spoke. He must remember how deeply she felt everything, and this thing had haunted her before Bruce was born. He had not even thought of it until one night in the darkness she had asked him the same question, "What would we do, Kent, if —" Only then he had not known what she meant.

"If what?" he had asked.

"If our baby were ever kidnaped."

He had answered what he had felt then and believed now to be true. "Why worry about what will never happen?" he had said. Nevertheless, he had followed all the cases since Bruce was born.

He kissed her palm now. "I can't bear having you afraid," he said. "It isn't necessary, you know, darling. We can't live under the shadow of this thing. We have to come to some rational position on it.

"That's what I want, Kent. I'd be glad not to be afraid — if I knew how."

"After all," he went on, "most people bring up their families without thinking about it."

"Most mothers think of it," she said. "Most of the women I know have said something about it to me — some time or other — enough to make me know they think about it all the time."

"You'd be better off not talking about it," he said.

But she said, "We keep wondering what we would do, Kent."

"That's just it!" he exclaimed. "That's why I think if we decided now what we would do — always bearing in mind that it's only the remotest possibility —"

"What *would* we do, Kent?" she asked.

He answered half playfully, "Promise to remember it's as remote as — an airplane attack on our home?"

She nodded.

"I've always thought that if one of the children were kidnaped I'd simply turn the whole thing over to the police at once."

"What police?" she asked instantly. "Gossipy old Mike O'Brien, who'd tell the newspapers the first thing? It's fatal to let it get into the papers, Jane says."

"Well, the Federal police, then — the G-men."

"How does one get in touch with them?"

He had to confess he did not know. "I'll find out," he promised. "Anyway, it's the principle, darling, that we want to determine. Once we know what we'll do, we can put it out of our minds. No ransom, Allin — that I feel sure about. As long as we keep on paying ransoms, we're going to have kidnapings. Somebody has to be strong enough to take the stand. Then maybe other people will see what they ought to do."

But she did not look convinced. When she spoke, her voice was low and full of dread. "The thing is, Kent, if we decided not to pay ransom, we just couldn't stick to it — not really, I mean. Suppose it were Bruce — suppose he had a cold and it was winter — and he was taken out of his warm bed in his pajamas, we'd do anything. You know we would!" She rushed on. "We wouldn't care about other children, Kent. We would only be thinking of our own little Bruce — and no one else. How to get him back again, at whatever cost."

"Hush, darling," he said. "If you're going to be like this we can't talk about it, after all."

"No, Kent, please. I do want to talk. I want to know what we ought to do. If only I could be not afraid!" she whispered.

"Come here by me," he said. He drew her to the couch beside him. "First of all, you know I love the children as much as you do, don't you?" She nodded, and he went on, "Then, darling, I'd do anything I thought would be best for our children, wouldn't I?"

"You'd do the best you knew, Kent. The question is, do any of us know what to do?"

"I do know," he said gravely, "that until we make the giving and taking of ransoms unlawful we shall have kidnapers. And until somebody begins it, it will never be done. That's the law of democratic government. The people have to begin action before government takes a stand."

"What if they said not to tell the police?" she asked.

Her concreteness confounded him. It was not as if it could happen!

"It all depends," he retorted, "on whether you want to give in to rascals or stand on your principle."

"But if it were our own child?" she persisted. "Be honest, Kent. Please don't retire into principles."

"I am trying to be honest," he said slowly. "I think I would stick by principle and trust somehow to think of some way —" He looked waveringly into her unbelieving eyes. . . .

"Try to remember exactly what happened!" he was shouting at the silly nurse. "Where did you leave her?"

Allin was quieter than he, but Allin's voice on the telephone half an hour ago had been like a scream: "Kent, we can't find Betsy!"

He had been in the mill directors' meeting, but he'd risen instantly. "Sorry," he had said sharply. "I have to leave at once."

"Nothing serious, Kent?" His father's white eyebrows had lifted.

"I think not," he'd answered. He had sense enough not to say what Allin had screamed. "I'll let you know if it is."

He had leaped into his car and driven home like a crazy man. He'd drawn up in a spray of gravel at his own gate. Allin was there, and Mollie, the silly nurse. Mollie was sobbing.

"We was at the gate, sir, watchin' for Brucie to come home from school, like we do every day, and I put 'er down — she's heavy to carry — while I went in to get a clean hankie to wipe her little hands. She'd stooped into a puddle from the rain this morning. When I came back, she wasn't there. I ran around the shrubs, sir, lookin' — and then I screamed for the madam."

"Kent, I've combed the place," Allin whispered.

"The gate!" he gasped.

"It was shut, and the bar across," Mollie wailed. "I'd sense enough to see to that before I went in."

"How long were you gone?" he shouted at her.

"I don't know, sir," Mollie sobbed. "It didn't seem a minute!"

He rushed into the yard. "Betsy, Betsy!" he cried. "Come to Daddy! Here's Daddy!" He stooped under the big lilac bushes. "Have you looked in the garage?" he demanded of Allin.

"Peter's been through it twice," she answered.

"I'll see for myself," he said. "Go into the house, Allin. She may have got inside, somehow."

He tore into the garage. Peter crawled out from under the small car.

"She ain't hyah, suh," he whispered. "Ah done looked ev'ywheah."

But Kent looked again, Peter following him like a dog. In the back of his mind was a telephone number, National 7117. He had found out about that number the year before, after he and Allin had talked that evening. Only he wouldn't call yet. Betsy was sure to be somewhere.

The gate clicked, and he rushed out. But it was Bruce — alone.

"Why, what's the matter with you, Daddy?" Bruce asked.

Kent swallowed — no use scaring Bruce. "Bruce, did you — you didn't see Betsy on the way home, did you?"

"No, Daddy. I didn't see anybody except Mike to help me across the square 'cause there was a notomobile."

"Wha' dat?" Peter was pointing at something. It was a bit of white paper, held down by a stone.

As well as he knew anything, Kent knew what it was. He had read that note a dozen times in the newspaper accounts. He stooped and picked it

up. There it was — the scrawled handwriting.

We been waiting this chanse. The handwriting was there, illiterate, disguised. *Fifty grand is the price. Your dads got it if you aint. Youll hear where to put it. If you tell the police we kill the kid.*

"Daddy, what's —" Bruce began.

"Bring him indoors," he ordered Peter.

Where was Allin? He had to — he had promised her it would not happen! The telephone number was —

"Allin!" he shouted.

He heard her running down from the attic.

"Allin!" he gasped. She was there, white and piteous with terror — and so helpless. God, they were both so helpless! He had to have help; he had to know what to do. But had not he — he *had* decided long ago what he must do, because what did he know about crooks and kidnapers? People gave the ransom and lost their children, too. He had to have advice he could trust.

"I'm going to call National 7117!" he blurted at her.

"No, Kent — wait!" she cried.

"I've got to," he insisted. Before she could move, he ran to the telephone and took up the receiver. "I want National 7117!" he shouted.

Her face went white. He held out his hand with the crumpled note. She read it and snatched at the receiver.

"No, Kent — wait. We don't know. Wait and see what they say!"

But a calm voice was already speaking at the other end of the wire: "This is National 7117." And Kent was shouting hoarsely, "I want to report a kidnaping. It's our baby girl. Kent Crothers, 134 Eastwood Avenue, Greenvale, New York."

He listened while the voice was telling him to do nothing, to wait until tomorrow, and then at a certain village inn, 50 miles away, to meet a certain man who would wear a plain gray suit and have a blue handkerchief in his pocket.

And all the time Allin was whispering, "They'll kill her — they'll kill her, Kent."

"They won't know," he whispered back. "Nobody will know." When he put the receiver down he cried at her angrily, "They won't tell anybody — those fellows in Washington! Besides, I've got to have help, I tell you!"

She stood staring at him with horrified eyes. "They'll kill her," she repeated.

He wanted to get somewhere to weep, only men could not weep. But Allin was not weeping, either. Then suddenly they flung their arms about each other, and together broke into silent terrible tears.

He was not used to waiting, but he had to wait. And he had to help Allin wait. Men were supposed to be stronger.

At first it had been a comfort to have the directions to follow. First, everybody in the house — that was

easy: simply the cook Sarah, the maid Rose, and Mollie and Peter. They of course were beyond blame, except Mollie. Perhaps Mollie was more than just a fool. They all had to be told they were to say absolutely nothing.

"Get everybody together in the dining room," Kent had told Allin. He had gone into the dining room.

"Daddy!" He saw Bruce's terrified figure in the doorway. "What's the matter? Where's Betsy?"

"We can't find her, son," Kent said, trying to make his voice calm. "Of course we will, but just now nobody must know she isn't here."

"Shall I go out in the yard?" Bruce asked. "Maybe I could find her."

"No," Kent said sharply. "I'd rather you went upstairs to your own room. I'll be up — in a minute."

The servants were coming in, Allin behind them.

"I'll go with Bruce," she said.

She was so still and so controlled, but he could tell by the quiver about her lips that she was only waiting for him.

"I'll be up in a very few minutes," he promised her. He stood until she had gone, Bruce's hand in hers. Then he turned to the four waiting figures. Mollie was still crying. He could tell by their faces that they all knew about the note.

"I see you know what has happened," he said. Strange how all these familiar faces looked sinister to him! Peter and Sarah had been in his mother's household. They had known him for years. And Rose was Sarah's niece. But they all looked hostile, or he imagined they did. "And I want not one word said of this to anyone in the town," he said harshly. "Remember, Betsy's life depends on no one outside knowing."

He paused, setting his jaws. He would not have believed he could cry as easily as a woman, but he could.

He cleared his throat. "Her life depends on how we behave now — in the next few hours." Mollie's sobbing burst out into wails. He rose. "That's all," he said. "We must simply wait."

The telephone rang, and he hurried to it. There was no way of knowing how the next message would come. But it was his father's peremptory voice: "Anything wrong over there, Kent?"

He knew now it would never do for his father to know what had happened. His father could keep nothing to himself.

"Everything is all right, Dad," he answered. "Allin's not feeling very well, that's all."

"Have you had the doctor?" his father shouted.

"We will if it is necessary, Dad," he answered and put up the receiver abruptly.

He thought of Bruce and went to find him. He was eating his supper in the nursery, and Allin was with him. She had told Mollie to stay downstairs. She could not bear to see the girl any more than he could.

But the nursery was unbearable, too. This was the time when Betsy, fresh from her bath . . .

"I'm — I'll be downstairs in the library," he told Allin hurriedly, and she nodded.

In the library the silence was torture. They could only wait.

And all the time who knew what was happening to the child? Tomorrow, the man had said an hour ago. Wait, he had said. But what about tonight? In what sort of place would the child be sleeping?

Kent leaped to his feet. Something had to be done. He would have a look around the yard. There might be another letter.

He went out into the early autumn twilight. He had to hold himself together to keep from breaking into foolish shouts and curses. It was the agony of not being able to do anything. Then he controlled himself. The thing was to go on following a rational plan. He had come out to see if he could find anything.

He searched every inch of the yard. There was no message of any sort.

Then in the gathering darkness he saw a man at the gate. "Mist' Crothers!" it was Peter's voice. "Fo' God, Mist' Crothers, Ah don' know why they should pick on mah ole 'ooman. When Ah come home fo' suppah, she give it to me — she cain't read, so she don' know what wuz in it."

Kent snatched a paper from Peter's shaking hand and ran to the house. In the lighted hall he read:

Get the dough ready all banknotes dont mark any or well get the other kid too. Dont try double-crossing us. You cant get away with nothing. Put it in a box by the dead oak at the mill creek. You know where. At twelve o'clock tomorrow night.

He knew where, indeed. He had fished there from the time he was a little boy. The lightning had struck that oak tree one summer when he had been only a hundred yards away, standing in the doorway of the mill during a thunderstorm. How did they know he knew?

He turned on Peter. "Who brought this?" he demanded.

"Ah don' know, suh," Peter stammered. "She couldn't tell me nothin' 'cep'n' it wuz a white man. He chuck it at 'er and say, 'Give it to yo' ole man.' So she give it to me, and Ah come a-runnin'."

Kent stared at Peter, trying to ferret into his brain. Was Peter being used by someone — bribed, perhaps, to take a part? Did he know anything?

"If I thought you knew anything about Betsy, I'd kill you myself," he said.

"Fo' God, Ah don', Mist' Crothers — you know me, suh! Ah done gyardened for yo' since yo' and Miss Allin got mah'ied. 'Sides, whut Ah want in such devilment? Ah got all Ah want — mah house and a sal'ry. Ah don' want nuthin'."

It was all true, of course. The thing was, you suspected everybody.

"You tell Flossie to tell no one," he commanded Peter.

"Ah done tole 'er," Peter replied

fervently. "Ah tole 'er Ah'd split 'er open if she tole anybody 'bout dat white man."

"Get along, then," said Kent. "And remember what I told you."

"Yassuh," Peter replied.

"Of course we'll pay the ransom!" Allin was insisting.

They were in their own room, the door open into the narrow passage, and beyond that the door into the nursery was open, too. They sat where, in the shadowy light of a night lamp, they could see Bruce's dark head on the pillow. Impossible, of course, to sleep. Sarah had sent up some cold chicken and they had eaten it here, and later Kent had made Allin take a hot bath and get into a warm robe and lie down on the chaise longue. He did not undress. Someone might call.

"I'll have to see what the man says tomorrow," he answered.

Terrifying to think how he was pinning everything on that fellow tomorrow — a man whose name, even, he did not know. All he knew was he'd wear a plain gray suit and he'd have a blue handkerchief in his pocket. That was all he had to save Betsy's life. No, that wasn't true. Behind that one man were hundreds of others, alert, strong, and ready to help.

"We've got to pay it," Allin was saying hysterically. "What's money now?"

"Allin!" he cried. "You don't think I'm trying to save the money, in God's name!"

"We have about twenty thousand, haven't we, in the bank?" she said hurriedly. "Your father would have the rest, though, and we could give him the securities. It isn't as if we didn't have it."

"Allin, you're being absurd! The thing is to know how to —"

But she flew at him fiercely. "The thing is to save Betsy — that's all; there's nothing else — absolutely nothing. I don't care if it takes everything your father has.

"Allin, be quiet!" he shouted at her. "Do you mean my father would begrudge anything — ?"

"You're afraid of him, Kent," she retorted. "Well, I'm not! If you don't go to him, I will."

They were quarreling now, like two insane people. They were both stretched beyond normal reason.

Suddenly Allin was sobbing. "I can't forget what you said that night," she cried. "All that standing on principle! Oh, Kent, she's with strangers, horrible people, crying her little heart out; perhaps they're even — hurting her, trying to make her keep quiet. Oh, Kent, Kent!

He took her in his arms. They must not draw apart now. He must think of her.

"I'll do anything, darling," he said. "The first thing in the morning I'll get hold of Dad and have the money ready."

"If they could only *know* it," she said.

"I could put something in the paper, perhaps," he said. "I believe I

could word something that no one else would understand."

"Let's try, Kent!"

He took a pencil and envelope from his pocket and wrote. "How's this?" he asked. "Fifty agreed by dead oak at twelve."

"I can't see how it could do any harm," she said eagerly. "And if they see it, they'll understand we're willing to do anything."

"I'll go around to the newspaper office and pay for this in cash," he said. "Then I won't have to give names."

"Yes, yes!" she urged him. "It's something more than just sitting here!"

He drove through the darkness the two miles to the small town and parked in front of the ramshackle newspaper office. A red-eyed night clerk took his advertisement and read it off.

"This is a funny one," he said. "We get some, now and then. That'll be a dollar, Mr. —"

Kent did not answer. He put a dollar bill on the desk.

"I don't know what I've done, even so," he groaned to himself.

He drove back quietly through the intense darkness. The storm had not yet come, and the air was strangely silent. He kept his motor at its most noiseless, expecting somehow to hear through the sleeping stillness Betsy's voice, crying.

They scarcely slept, and yet when they looked at each other the next morning the miracle was that they had slept at all. But he had made Allin go to bed at last, and then, still dressed, he had lain down on his own bed near her. It was Bruce who waked them. He stood hesitatingly between their beds. They heard his voice.

"Betsy hasn't come back yet, Mommie."

The name waked them. And they looked at each other.

"How could we!" Allin whispered.

"It may be a long pull, dearest," he said, trying to be steady. He got up, feeling exhausted.

"Will she come back today?" Bruce asked.

"I think so, son."

At least it was Saturday, and Bruce need not go to school today.

"I'm going to get her tonight," Kent said after a moment.

Instantly he felt better. They must not give up hope — not by a great deal. There was too much to do: his father to see and the money to get. Secretly, he still reserved his own judgment about the ransom. If the man in gray was against it, he would tell Allin nothing — he simply would not give it. The responsibility would be his.

"You and Mommie will have to get Betsy's things ready for her tonight," he said cheerfully. He would take a bath and get into a fresh suit. He had to have all his wits about him today, every moment — listen to everybody, and use his own judgment finally. In an emergency, one person had to act.

He paused at the sight of himself in

the mirror. Would he be able to keep it from Allin if he made a mistake? Suppose they never got Betsy back. Suppose she just — disappeared. Or suppose they found her little body somewhere.

This was the way all those other parents had felt — this sickness and faintness. If he did not pay the ransom and *that* happened, would he be able *not* to tell Allin — or to tell her it was his fault? Both were impossible.

"I'll just have to go on from one thing to the next," he decided.

The chief thing was to try to be hopeful. He dressed and went back into the bedroom. Bruce had come in to dress in their room. But Allin was still in bed, lying against the pillows, white and exhausted.

He bent over her and kissed her. "I'll send your breakfast up," he said. "I'm going to see Father first. If any message comes through, I'll be there — then at the bank."

She nodded, glanced up at him, and closed her eyes. He stood looking down into her tortured face. Every nerve in it was quivering under the set stillness.

"Can't break yet," he said sharply. "The crisis is ahead."

"I know," she whispered. Then she sat up. "I can't lie here!" she exclaimed. "It's like lying on a bed of swords, being tortured. I'll be down, Kent — Bruce and I."

She flew into the bathroom. He heard the shower turned on instantly and strongly. But he could wait for no one.

"Come down with Mother, son," he said. And he went on alone.

"If you could let me have thirty thousand today," he said to his father, "I can give it back as soon as I sell some stock."

"I don't care when I get it back," his father said irritably. "Good God, Kent, it's not that. It's just that I — it's none of my business, of course, but thirty thousand in cold cash! I'd like to ask what on earth you've been doing, but I won't."

Kent had made up his mind at the breakfast table that if he could keep the thing out of the papers, he would also keep it from his father and mother. He'd turned to the personals in the morning paper. There it was, his answer to those scoundrels. Well, he wouldn't stick to it unless it were best for Betsy. Meanwhile, silence!

To Rose, bringing in the toast, he had said sharply, "Tell everybody to come in now before your mistress comes down."

They had filed in, subdued and drooping, looking at him with frightened eyes.

"Oh, sir!" Mollie had cried hysterically.

"Please!" he had exclaimed, glancing at her. Maybe the man in gray ought to see her. But last night he had distrusted Peter. This morning Peter looked like a faithful old dog, and as incapable of evil.

"I only want to thank you for obeying me so far," he said wearily. "If we can keep our trouble out of the

papers, perhaps we can get Betsy back. At least, it's the only hope. If you succeed in letting no one know until we know — the end, I shall give each of you a hundred dollars as a token of my gratitude."

"Thank you, sir," Sarah and Rose had said. Mollie only sobbed. Peter was murmuring, "Ah don' wan' no hundred dollahs, Mist' Crothers. All Ah wan' is dat little chile back."

How could Peter be distrusted? Kent had wrung his hand. "That's all I want, too, Peter," he had said fervently.

Strange how shaky and emotional he had felt!

Now, under his father's penetrating eyes, he held himself calm. "I know it sounds outrageous, Father," he admitted, "but I simply ask you to trust me for a few days."

"You're not speculating, I hope. It's no time for that. The market's uncertain."

It was, Kent thought grimly, the wildest kind of speculation — with his own child's life.

"It's not ordinary speculation, certainly," he said. "I can manage through the bank, Dad," he said. "Never mind. I'll mortgage the house."

"Oh, nonsense!" his father retorted. He had his checkbook out and was writing. "I'm not going to have it get around that my son had to go mortgaging his place. Here you are."

"Thanks," Kent said briefly.

Now for the bank . . .

Step by step the day went. It was amazing how quickly the hours passed. It was noon before he knew it, and in an hour he must start for the inn. He went home and found Allin on the front porch in the sunshine. She had a book in her hand, and Bruce was playing with his red truck out in the yard. Anyone passing would never dream there was tragedy here.

"Do you have it?" she asked him.

He touched his breast pocket. "All ready," he answered.

They sat through a silent meal, listening to Bruce's chatter. Allin ate nothing and he very little, but he was grateful to her for being there, for keeping the outward shape of the day usual.

"Good sport!" he said to her across the table in the midst of Bruce's conversation. She smiled faintly. "Thank you, no more coffee," he said to Rose. "I must be going, Allin."

"Yes," she said, and added. "I wish it were I — instead of waiting."

"I know," he replied, and kissed her.

Yesterday, waiting had seemed intolerable to him, too. But now that he was going towards the hour for which he had been waiting, he clung to the hopefulness of uncertainty.

He drove alone to the inn. The well-paved roads, the tended fields and comfortable farmhouses were not different from the landscape any day. He would have said, only yesterday, that it was impossible that underneath all this peace and plenty there could be men so evil as to take a child out

of its home, away from its parents, for money.

There was, he pondered, driving steadily west, no other possible reason. He had no enemies; none, that is, whom he knew. There were always discontented people, of course, who hated anyone who seemed successful. There was, of course, too, the chance that his father had enemies — he was ruthless with idle workers.

"I can't blame a man if he is born a fool," Kent had heard his father maintain stoutly, "but I can blame even a fool for being lazy." It might be one of these. If only it were not some perverted mind!

He drove into the yard of the inn and parked his car. His heart was thudding in his breast, but he said casually to the woman at the door, "Have you a bar?"

"To the right," she answered quickly. It was Saturday afternoon, and business was good. She did not even look at him as he sauntered away.

The moment he entered the door of the bar he saw the man. He stood at the end of the bar, small, inconspicuous, in a gray suit and a blue-striped shirt. He wore a solid blue tie, and in his pocket was the blue handkerchief. Kent walked slowly to his side.

"Whiskey and soda, please," he said to the bartender. The room was full of people at tables, drinking and talking noisily. He turned to the man in gray and smiled. "Rather unusual to find a bar like this in a village inn."

"Yes, it is," the little man agreed. He had a kind, brisk voice, and he was drinking a tall glass of something clear, which he finished. "Give me another of the same," he remarked to the bartender. "London Washerwoman's Treat, it's called," he explained to Kent.

It was hard to imagine that this small hatchet-faced man had any importance.

"Going my way?" Kent asked suddenly.

"If you'll give me a lift," the little man replied.

Kent's heart subsided. The man knew him, then. He nodded. They paid for their drinks and went out to the car.

"Drive due north into a country road," the little man said with sudden sharpness. All his dreaminess was gone. He sat beside Kent, his arms folded. "Please tell me exactly what's happened, Mr. Crothers."

And Kent, driving along, told him.

He was grateful for the man's coldness; for the distrust of everything and everybody. He was like a lean hound in a life-and-death chase. Because of his coldness, Kent could talk without fear of breaking.

"I don't know your name," Kent said.

"Doesn't matter," said the man. "I'm detailed for the job."

"As I was saying," Kent went on, "we have no enemies — at least, none I know."

"Fellow always has enemies," the little man murmured.

"It hardly seems like a gangster would —" Kent began again.

"No, gangsters don't kidnap children," the little man told him. "Adults, yes. But they don't monkey with kids. It's too dangerous, for one thing. Kidnaping children's the most dangerous job there is in crime, and the smart ones know it. It's always some little fellow does it — him and a couple of friends, maybe."

"Why dangerous?" Kent demanded.

"Always get caught," the little man said, shrugging. "Always!"

There was something so reassuring about this strange sharp creature that Kent said abruptly, "My wife wants to pay the ransom. I suppose you think that's wrong, don't you?"

"Perfectly *right*," the man said. "Absolutely! We aren't magicians, Mr. Crothers. We got to get in touch somehow. The only two cases I ever knew where nothing was solved was where the parents wouldn't pay. So we couldn't get a clue."

Kent set his lips. "Children killed?"

"Who knows?" the little man said, shrugging again. "Anyway, one of them was. And the other never came back."

There might be comfort, then, in death, Kent thought. He had infinitely rather hold Betsy's dead body in his arms than never know . . .

"Tell me what to do and I'll do it," he said.

The little man lighted a cigarette. "Go on just as though you'd never told us. Go on and pay your ransom. Make a note of the numbers of the notes, of course — no matter what that letter says. How's he going to know? But pay it over — and do what he says next. You can call me up here." He took a paper out of his coat pocket and put it in Kent's pocket. "I maybe ought to tell you, though, we'll tap your telephone wire."

"Do anything you like," Kent said.

"That's all I need!" the man exclaimed. "That's our orders — to do what the parents want. You're a sensible one. Fellow I knew once walked around with a shotgun to keep off the police. Said he'd handle things himself."

"Did he get his child back?"

"Nope — paid the ransom, too. Paying the ransom's all right — that's the way we get 'em. But he went roarin' around the neighborhood trying to be his own law. We didn't have a chance."

Kent thought of one more thing. "I don't want anything spared — money or trouble. I'll pay anything, of course."

"Oh, sure," the man said. "Well, I guess that'll be all. You might let me off near the inn. I'll go in and get another drink."

He lapsed into dreaminess again, and in silence Kent drove back to the village.

"All right," the little man said. "So long. Good luck to you." He leaped out and disappeared into the bar.

And Kent, driving home through the early sunset, thought how little there was to tell Allin — really noth-

ing at all, except that he liked and trusted the man in gray. No, it was much more than that: the fellow stood for something far greater than himself — he stood for all the power of the government organized against crimes like this. That was the comfort of the thing. Behind that man was the nation's police, all for him, Kent Crothers, helping him find his child.

When he reached home, Allin was in the hall waiting.

"He really said nothing, darling," Kent said, kissing her, "except you were right about the ransom. We have to pay that. Still, he was extraordinary. Somehow I feel — if she's still alive, we'll get her back. He's that sort of fellow." He did not let her break, though he felt her trembling against him. He said very practically, "We must check these banknotes, Allin."

And then, when they were checking them upstairs in their bedroom with doors locked, he kept insisting that what they were doing was right.

At a quarter to 12 he was bumping down the rutted road to the forks. He knew every turn the road made, having traveled it on foot from the time he was a little boy. But that boy out on holiday had nothing to do with himself as he was tonight, an anxious, harried man.

He drew up beneath the dead oak and took the cardboard box in which he and Allin had packed the money and stepped out of the car. There was not a sound in the dark night, yet he knew that somewhere not far away were the men who had his child.

He listened, suddenly swept again with the conviction he had had the night before, that she would cry out. She might even be this moment in the old mill. But there was not a sound. He stooped and put the box at the root of the tree.

And as he did this, he stumbled over a string raised from the ground about a foot. What was this? He followed it with his hands. It encircled the tree — a common piece of twine. Then it went under a stone, and under the stone was a piece of paper. He seized it, snapped on his cigarette lighter, and read the clumsy writing.

If everything turns out like we told you to do, go to your hired mans house at twelve tomorrow night for the kid. If you double-cross us you get it back dead.

He snapped off the light. He'd get her back dead! It all depended on what he did. And what he did, he would have to do alone. He would not go home to Allin until he had decided every step.

He drove steadily away. If he did not call the man in gray, Betsy might be at Peter's alive. If he called, and they did not find out, she might be alive anyway. But if the man fumbled and they did find out, she would be dead.

He knew what Allin would say: "Just so we get her home, Kent, nothing else! People have to think for themselves, first." Yes, she was right.

He would keep quiet; anyway, he would give the kidnapers a chance. If she were safe and alive, that would be justification for anything. If she were dead . . .

Then he remembered that there was something courageous and reassuring about that little man. He alone had seemed to know what to do. And anyway, what about those parents who had tried to manage it all themselves? Their children had never come back, either. No, he had better do what he knew he ought to do.

He tramped into the house. Allin was lying upstairs on her bed, her eyes closed.

"Darling," he said gently. Instantly she opened her eyes and sat up. He handed her the paper and sat down on her bed. She lifted miserable eyes to him.

"Twenty-four more hours!" she whispered. "I can't do it, Kent."

"Yes, you can," he said harshly. "You'll do it because you damned well have to." He thought. She can't break now, if I have to whip her! "We've got to wait," he went on. "Is there anything else we can do? Tell Mike O'Brien? Let the newspapers get it and ruin everything?"

She shook her head. "No."

He got up. He longed to take her in his arms, but he did not dare. If this was ever over, he would tell her what he thought of her — how wonderful she was, how brave and game — but he could not now. It was better for them both to stay away from that edge of breaking.

"Get up," he said. "Let's have something to eat. I haven't really eaten all day."

It would be good for her to get up and busy herself. She had not eaten either.

"All right, Kent," she said. "I'll wash my face in cold water and be down."

"I'll be waiting," he replied.

This gave him the moment he had made up his mind he would use — damned if he wouldn't use it! The scoundrels had his money now, and he would take the chance on that quiet little man. He called the number, and almost instantly he heard the fellow's drawl.

"Hello?" the man said.

"This is Kent Crothers," he answered. "I've had that invitation."

"Yes?" The voice was alert.

"Twelve tomorrow."

"Yes? Where? Midnight, of course. They always make it midnight."

"My gardener's house."

"Okay, Mr. Crothers. Go right ahead as if you hadn't told us." The phone clicked.

Kent listened, but there was nothing more. Everything seemed exactly the same, but nothing was the same. This very telephone wire was cut somewhere, by someone. Someone was listening to every word anyone spoke to and from his house. It was sinister and yet reassuring — sinister if you were the criminal.

He heard Allin's step on the stair and went out to meet her. "I have a hunch," he told her, smiling.

"What?" She tried to smile back.

He drew her towards the dining room. "We're going to win," he said.

Within himself he added, If she were still alive, that little heart of his life. Then he put the memory of Betsy's face away from him resolutely.

"I'm going to eat," he declared, "and so must you. We'll beat them tomorrow."

But tomorrow very nearly beat them. Time stood still — there was no making it pass. They filled it full of a score of odd jobs about the house. Lucky for them it was Sunday; luckier that Kent's mother had a cold and telephoned that she and Kent's father would not be over for their usual weekly visit.

They stayed together, a little band of three. By mid-afternoon Kent had cleaned up everything — a year's odd jobs — and there were hours to go.

They played games with Bruce, and at last it was his supper-time and they put him to bed. Then they sat upstairs in their bedroom again, near the nursery, each with a book.

Sometime, after these hours were over, he would have to think about a lot of things again. But everything had to wait now, until this life ended at midnight. Beyond that no thought could reach.

At 11 he rose. "I'm going now," he said, and stooped to kiss her. She clung to him, and then in an instant they drew apart. In strong accord they knew it was not yet time to give way.

He ran the car as noiselessly as he could and left it at the end of the street, six blocks away. Then he walked past the few tumbledown bungalows, past two empty lots, to Peter's rickety gate. There was no light in the house. He went to the door and knocked softly. He heard Peter's mumble: "Who's dat?"

"Let me in, Peter," he called in a low voice. The door opened. "It's I, Peter — Kent Crothers. Let me in. Peter, they're bringing the baby here."

"To mah house? Lemme git de light on."

"No, Peter, no light. I'll just sit down here in the darkness, like this. Only don't lock the door, see? I'll sit by the door. Where's a chair? That's it." He was trembling so that he stumbled into the chair Peter pushed forward.

"Mist' Crothers, suh, will yo' have a drink? Ah got some corn likker."

"Thanks, Peter."

He heard Peter's footsteps shuffling away, and in a moment a tin cup was thrust into his hand. He drank the reeking stuff down. It burned him like indrawn flame, but he felt steadier for it.

"Ain't a thing Ah can do, Mist' Crothers?" Peter's whisper came ghostly out of the darkness.

"Not a thing. Just wait."

"Ah'll wait here, then. Mah ole 'ooman's asleep. Ah'll jest git thrashin' round if Ah go back to bed."

"Yes, only we mustn't talk," Kent whispered back.

"Nosuh."

This was the supremest agony of waiting in all the long agony that this day had been. To sit perfectly still, straining to hear, knowing nothing, wondering . . .

Suppose something went wrong with the man in gray, and they fumbled, and frightened the man who brought Betsy back. Suppose he just sat here waiting and waiting until dawn came. And at home Allin was waiting.

The long day had been nothing to this. He sat reviewing all his life, pondering on the horror of this monstrous situation in which he and Allin now were. A free country, was it? No one was free when his lips were locked against crime, because he dared not speak lest his child be murdered. If Betsy were dead, if they didn't bring her back, he'd never tell Allin he had telephoned the man in gray. He was still glad he had done it. After all, were respectable men and women to be at the mercy of — but if Betsy were dead, he'd wish he had killed himself before he had anything to do with the fellow!

He sat, his hands interlocked so tightly he felt them grow cold and bloodless and stinging, but he could not move. Someone came down the street roaring out a song.

"Thass a drunk man," Peter whispered.

Kent did not answer. The street grew still again.

And then in the darkness — hours after midnight, it seemed to him — he heard a car come up to the gate and stop. The gate creaked open and then shut, and the car drove away.

"Guide me down the steps," he told Peter.

It was the blackest night he had ever seen. But the stars were shining when he stepped out. Peter pulled him along the path. Then, by the gate, Peter stooped.

"She's here," he said.

And Kent, wavering and dizzy, felt her in his arms again, limp and heavy. "She's warm," he muttered. "That's something."

He carried her into the house, and Peter lighted a candle and held it up. It was she — his little Betsy, her white dress filthy and a man's sweater drawn over her. She was breathing heavily.

"Look lak she done got a dose of sumpin," Peter muttered.

"I must get her home," Kent whispered frantically. "Help me to the car, Peter."

"Yassah," Peter said, and blew out the candle.

They walked silently down the street, Peter's hand on Kent's arm. When he got Betsy home, he — he—

"Want I should drive you?" Peter was asking him.

"I — maybe you'd better," he replied.

He climbed into the seat with her. She was so fearfully limp. Thank God he could hear her breathing! In a few minutes he would put Betsy into her mother's arms.

"Don't stay, Peter," he said.

"Nosuh," Peter answered.

Allin was at the door, waiting. She opened it and without a word reached for the child. He closed the door behind them.

Then he felt himself grow sick. "I was going to tell you," he gasped, "I didn't know whether to tell you —" He swayed and felt himself fall upon the floor.

Allin was a miracle; Allin was wonderful, a rock of a woman. This tender thing who had endured the torture of these days was at his bedside when he woke next day, smiling, and only a little pale.

"The doctor says you're not to go to work, darling," she told him.

"The doctor?" he repeated.

"I had him last night for both of you — you and Betsy. He won't tell anyone."

"I've been crazy," he said, dazed. "Where is she? How —"

"She's going to be all right," Allin said.

"No, but — you're not telling me!"

"Come in here and see," she replied.

He got up, staggering a little. Funny how his legs had collapsed under him last night!

They went into the nursery. There in her bed she lay, his beloved child. She was more naturally asleep now, and her face bore no other mark than pallor.

"She won't even remember it," Allin said. "I'm glad it wasn't Bruce."

He did not answer. He couldn't think — nothing had to be thought about now.

"Come back to bed, Kent," Allin was saying. "I'm going to bring your breakfast up. Bruce is having his downstairs."

He climbed back into bed, shamefaced at his weakness. "I'll be all right after a little coffee. I'll get up then, maybe."

But his bed felt wonderfully good. He lay back, profoundly grateful to it — to everything. But as long as he lived he would wake up to sweat in the night with memory.

The telephone by his bed rang, and he picked it up. "Hello?" he called.

"Hello, Mr. Crothers," a voice answered. It was the voice of the man in gray. "Say, was the little girl hurt?"

"No!" Kent cried. "She's all right!"

"Fine. Well, I just wanted to tell you we caught the fellow last night."

"You *did!*" Kent leaped up. "No! Why, that's extraordinary."

"We had a cordon around the place for blocks and got him. You'll get your money back, too."

"That — it doesn't seem to matter. Who was he?"

"Fellow named Harry Brown — a young chap in a drug store."

"I never heard of him!"

"No, he says you don't know him — but his dad went to school with yours, and he's heard a lot of talk about you. His dad's a poor stick, I guess, and got jealous of yours. That's about it, probably. Fellow says he figured you sort of owed him something. Crazy, of course. Well, it was an easy case — he wasn't smart, and

scared to death, besides. You were sensible about it. Most people ruin their chances with their own fuss. So long, Mr. Crothers. Mighty glad."

The telephone clicked. That was all. Everything was incredible, impossible. Kent gazed around the familiar room. Had this all happened? It had happened, and it was over.

When he went downstairs he would give the servants their hundred dollars apiece. Mollie had had nothing to do with it, after all. The mystery had dissolved like a mist at morning.

Allin was at the door with his tray. Behind her came Bruce, ready for school. She said, so casually Kent could hardly catch the tremor underneath her voice, "What would you say, darling, if we let Peter walk to school with Bruce today?"

Her eyes pleaded with him: "No? Oughtn't we to? What shall we do?"

Then he thought of something else that indomitable man in gray had said, that man whose name he would never know, one among all those other men trying to keep the law for the nation.

"We're a lawless people," the little man had said that afternoon in the car. "If we made a law against paying ransoms, nobody would obey it any more than they did Prohibition. No, when the Americans don't like a law, they break it. And so we still have kidnapers. It's one of the prices you pay for a democracy."

Yes, it was one of the prices. Everybody paid — he and Allin; the child they had so nearly lost; that boy locked up in prison.

"Bruce has to live in his own country," he said. "I guess you can go alone, can't you, son?"

"'Course I can," Bruce said sturdily.

WINNER OF A SECOND PRIZE

"Mom Makes a Wish" is perhaps the best "Mom" story James Yaffe has written to date . . . It occurs to us that we have never said in so many words that Mr. Yaffe's tales of a Bronx Mom are modern examples of pure "armchair detection" — contemporary versions of that great 'tec tradition which includes such famous sedentary sleuths as M. P. Shiel's Prince Zaleski, Baroness Orczy's The Old Man in the Corner, and Georges Simenon's Joseph Leborgne. And now that we have put in it words, we find a curious reassurance in them: for in this rather chaotic period in "the life and times of the detective story" — when not only publishers and critics but many writers themselves consider a "mystery," a "detective story," a "tale of suspense," and a "thriller" virtually synonymous — amid such "confusion worse confounded" it is reassuring to discover that some 'tec traditions are still being kept alive and vital; that some classic patterns are neither dead nor moribund — nor even passé. The perpetuation of Old Masters' techniques is more than mere ancestor worship; such perpetuation, continually refreshed and modernized, serves as a sort of literary balance wheel for old pros and beginners alike . . . at least, we think so.

In Mom of the Bronx, solving her son's cases over Friday-night suppers, between the noodle soup and the nesselrode pie, we have a heart-warming and human character who carries on the intellectual rôle of The Great Detectives of Fiction — and carries it on by combining the two classic criminological methods. She reaches the truth through her understanding of human nature and her heart-as-big-as-life — the intuitional method — and through her mind-as-sharp-as-a-kosher-butcher's-knife — the logical method. In a phrase, by using common sense — or, as Mom herself would express it, through sechel.

MOM MAKES A WISH

by JAMES YAFFE

ORDINARILY MY WIFE SHIRLEY AND I have dinner in the Bronx with my mother on Friday nights. This is the most convenient night for me, because Saturday is my day off from the Homicide Squad. Once a year, though, we show up even if it isn't Friday — since the night of Decem-

ber eighteenth is Mom's birthday.

Another hard-and-fast custom gets upset on this night. Mom doesn't do any of the work on the dinner. Shirley cooks it, and I wash the dishes, so that Mom can sit back in her easy chair and relax and enjoy the television or gossip with her friends over the telephone. She does this relaxing, of course, under protest. Her suspicion of Shirley's abilities as a cook is deep-rooted. "So where did you learn how to cook? Nowadays, the way they bring up the young girls, if she knows how to boil an egg she considers herself a regular Oscar of the Walgreen." And when Shirley explains about the Home Economics course she took at Wellesley, Mom simply gives one of her magnificent snorts. "Wellesley yet! So answer me please, how good was the *gefuelte* fish at Wellesley?"

As for my dish-washing, Mom's opinion of it couldn't be lower. All she can do is throw up her hands and bemoan, "Once a *schlimazl* always a *schlimazl*!"

But Shirley and I have a stubborn streak of our own, so inevitably we win out over Mom's protests. And she usually has a pleasant birthday party in the end.

At last year's celebration there was a special treat. I brought along Inspector Millner. Inspector Millner is my superior, and also the most eligible bachelor on the Homicide Squad. He's a short heavy man in his fifties, with grayish hair, a square tough jaw, and a curiously delicate melancholy look in his eyes which makes him very attractive to motherly ladies of his own age. For a while now, Shirley and I have been trying a little mild matchmaking between Inspector Millner and Mom.

She was delighted to see him. She clapped him on the back and brought out all her heartiest jokes about policemen. He smiled sheepishly, enjoying his own embarrassment. And then, towards the middle of the meal, Mom suddenly gave him a shrewd sharp look.

"So why don't you finish your chicken leg?" she said. "It's a nice chicken — considering it wasn't cooked, it was home-economized. You got some worry on your mind, don't you?"

Inspector Millner attempted a smile. "You see right inside of a man, as usual," he said. "Okay, I admit it. David can tell you what it is."

"It's this new case we're on, Mom," I said. "A pretty depressing business."

"A mystery?" Mom said, cocking her head forward. The keen interest that Mom takes in my cases is surpassed only by her uncanny talent for solving them long before I can.

"No mystery," I said. "It's a murder, and we know who did it, and we'll probably make the arrest before the end of the week."

Inspector Millner heaved a long sad sigh.

"So come on, come on," Mom said, with extra cheerfulness. "Tell me all about this, spit it out of your chest!"

I took a breath, and started in:

"First of all, you have to know about this college professor. This *ex*-professor, that is. Professor Putnam. He's a man over fifty now, and he lives in a small three-room walk-up apartment near Washington Square with his daughter Joan. Ten years ago Putnam used to teach English Literature at the college downtown. He was considered quite a brilliant man. Then his wife died, and he seems to have gone almost completely to seed. He would sit in his room for long periods of time, just staring at the ceiling. He showed up late for his classes — and after a while he stopped showing up at all. He wouldn't read his students' essays, and he began to skip his conferences with graduate students. He was warned several times by the Dean about his conduct, and because of his fine record and the tragedy in his life great allowances were made for him. But finally, after two years of this, the college decided that they couldn't keep him on. So the Dean told him he was dismissed."

"And this daughter that you mentioned?" Mom said. "She was what age at this time?"

"She was seventeen," I said, "just starting at college herself. But when her father lost his job, she had to quit school. And since he wasn't doing anything to help himself, she found that she had the responsibility of supporting both of them. She learned typing and shorthand, and got a job as secretary in a law office, and she's been doing nicely ever since. They don't live in luxury, you understand."

"And the old man," Mom said, "he never snapped himself up again?"

With another long sigh, Inspector Millner took the story over from me. "He went from bad to worse, I'm afraid. Shortly after he lost his job, he took to drinking. Twice a week — every Thursday and Monday night — he left the apartment after dinner and didn't come home till after midnight, reeking of whiskey, so drunk that he could hardly walk. Joan Putnam was always waiting up for him to put him to bed. Several times in the last ten years she's tried to break him of the habit, but with no success. Because in addition to his twice-a-week binges, he keeps bottles of whiskey hidden around the house. Every so often she finds one, big full bottle of the cheapest stuff, and she throws it away. But he always manages to think of a new hiding place."

"And that's not the worst of it," I broke in. "When Professor Putnam lost his job, he blamed the Dean for it. Dean Duckworth was about his own age — the two men had started at the college together as young instructors and had been friends for many years. When Dean Duckworth told him he was dismissed, Professor Putnam made a terrific scene — it's still remembered by other people on the faculty. He accused the Dean of forcing him out of his job because of jealousy, of ruining his career, of bringing about his wife's death — of all sorts of things. He threatened to get even with him some day. And ever since, old Professor Putnam has

gone on hating Dean Duckworth just as loudly and publicly as he did ten years ago. Recently, though, the whole business came to a head —"

"I think I can guess this head," Mom said. "Dean Ducksoup has got a young bachelor son, am I wrong?"

"Amazing," Inspector Millner murmured, under his breath. "We could use a brain like that on the Homicide Squad."

"For all practical purposes," Mom said, "you're already using it."

"Well, to get on with the story," I said quickly — because even Inspector Millner doesn't know exactly to what extent Mom helps me out with my knottier cases. "You're absolutely right, Mom. Dean Duckworth's son Ted is an instructor at the college. He's in his early thirties and still unmarried. And a few months ago he became engaged to Joan Putnam. The engagement was perfectly satisfactory to Dean Duckworth. But Putnam raised a terrific row. He told his daughter that he refused to let her marry the son of the man who had ruined his life. He wouldn't let the boy set foot in his apartment when he came to make friends. And one night, a week ago, he stormed right into Dean Duckworth's home — the Dean has a two-story house off Washington Square — and made a scene in front of a room full of guests. He yelled out that Dean Duckworth had taken his job away from him, his wife away from him, his self-respect away from him, and now he was trying to rob him of the only thing he had left in the world, his daughter. He told the Dean that he was going to kill him for that. 'And it won't be murder,' he said, 'it'll be an execution.' The upshot of it all was that his daughter Joan told young Ted Duckworth that she couldn't go through with the marriage right now — she insisted on postponing it until her father sees reason."

"Which will be never," Shirley put in. "The case is really quite a common one. He justifies his neurotic dependence upon his daughter by transferring his feelings of guilt to a third party —"

"Very common," Mom put in, with that edge that always comes into her voice when Shirley pops out with her Wellesley Psychology course. "What a big help to the people that's involved, to tell them that they're really quite a common case."

"Anyway, you can guess what happened, Mom," I went on. "Last Monday night after dinner, Professor Putnam left his apartment for his regular drunken bout. Joan waited up for him as usual. Only he wasn't in by midnight. He didn't get in till 1:30. He was staggering and reeking with whiskey, of course. And around the same time a policeman in the Washington Square area found Dean Duckworth's body. He was lying on the sidewalk about a block from his own house. He had been brutally beaten to death, and the weapon was right by the body — a broken whiskey bottle.

"Well, we were on the job all morning. We found out from his son and his wife that he had left his house

around 12:30 to buy a late newspaper at the subway station. But he had no paper on him, and the news vendor didn't remember seeing him, so he must have met his murderer on the way. Mrs. Duckworth and Ted were together all night, incidentally, waiting for him to come home, so they alibi each other. We also found out, in no time at all, the whole background of his feud with Professor Putnam. By 6 o'clock in the morning we were at Professor Putnam's door, to question him about his whereabouts all night."

"The poor fellow," Inspector Millner said, shaking his head. "He was completely muddled and bleary-eyed. His daughter had a lot of trouble waking him up. When we told him what had happened to Dean Duckworth, he blinked at us for a while as if he couldn't understand what we were saying. Then he started crying. And then he started talking about the old days, the days when Duckworth and he were idealistic young men, starting off in the teaching profession together. And all the time his daughter, that poor kid, was staring back and forth from us to her father, with a kind of horror in her eyes because she knew what was coming."

"It was terrible, Mom," I said, shuddering a little at the memory. "Finally we had to interrupt him and ask him pointblank to account for his actions that night. Well, he refused to do it."

Mom narrowed her eyes at this. "He refused? Or he couldn't remember because he'd been drinking so much?"

"He refused. He didn't even claim he couldn't remember. He just said that he wouldn't tell us. We warned him how incriminating it looked, and his daughter pleaded with him. She said that he didn't have to be ashamed if he was in a bar drinking somewhere, because everybody knew about his habit anyway. But he still refused. Well, what could we do, Mom? We didn't exactly charge him with murder yet, but we took him down to headquarters for questioning."

Mom nodded wisely. "Third degree."

"No, not third degree," I answered, a little annoyed. Even though she knows better, Mom likes to pretend that the police department is still using the methods they used a hundred years ago. This is Mom's idea of making fun of me. "Nobody laid a finger on him. But we did question him pretty thoroughly, on and off, for over twelve hours."

"We have to do it that way," Inspector Millner put in apologetically. "Murderers are pretty jumpy usually, right after their crime. The sooner we get to them and work at them, the better chance there is of getting a confession. Don't think I enjoyed it," he added hastily. "That poor old man — really old, though he's actually the same age as I am — God knows I didn't enjoy it."

Mom's voice and face softened immediately. "Of course you didn't enjoy it," she said to Inspector Mill-

ner. "I'm a dope if I even hinted that you did."

"And the point is," I said, "Professor Putnam *didn't* confess. He insisted he hadn't committed the murder, but he refused to tell us where he was at the time. Well, we didn't really have enough evidence yet to hold him, so we took him back to his home and his daughter."

Inspector Millner reddened slightly. "She had some pretty strong things to say to us, I'm afraid." He sighed. "Well, a policeman gets used to it —"

"We were pretty sure Putnam was guilty," I said, "so our next step was to find witnesses who could place him in the neighborhood that night. Naturally it wasn't hard. When a man goes out on a drunk — even if he's like Putnam, and prefers to do it alone, without drinking companions — sure enough somebody is bound to notice him. We went to all the bars in the vicinity of the house and showed Putnam's photograph around. Finally we got results at a bar only three blocks from the Duckworth house. Harry Sloan, the bartender and also the owner of the place, remembered Putnam. He'd seen Putnam in his place off and on during the last few years. And the night of the murder, he saw Putnam again. It was around a quarter of 1 in the morning. Harry and his wife were closing the place up — they do their business mostly with the college kids, and since this is vacation time they take the opportunity to close up shortly after midnight and get some sleep. Well, Putnam came knocking on the door, making a terrible ruckus. They opened the door and told him they were closed, but he insisted he had to have a drink, and he showed them the money to pay for it. Harry figured it would be easier to give him what he wanted and then send him away. So he let Putnam in, and Harry and his wife say that the old man killed nearly half a bottle of bourbon before they could get rid of him at a quarter past 1. He wasn't just drinking for the pleasure of it, they say. He really seemed to have something on his mind. Mrs. Sloan says he looked scared of something to her."

"So this don't prove he committed a murder."

"No. But along with everything else it's pretty strong evidence. First of all, he had the motive. Second of all, he had the opportunity. The time schedule is just right. Duckworth leaves his house at 12:30 to get a paper. On the way — by accident or on purpose — he's met by Putnam. Putnam is carrying a bottle, which he uses to hit Duckworth. That's around a quarter of 1. Putnam is then so upset and scared at what he's done that he makes for the nearest bar, desperate for a drink. He leaves the bar at a quarter past 1, and gets home, by his daughter's own testimony, at 1:30. Third of all, his behavior fits in perfectly with this theory — his urgent need for a drink in Sloan's bar, his refusal to tell us what he was doing all night. It's an open-and-shut case, Mom."

And Inspector Millner joined in mournfully. "Open-and-shut. There's no other way to look at the evidence."

There was a long silence, and then Mom produced a snort. "There's *one* other way," she said. "The *right* way!"

We all lifted our heads and stared at her. How many times has Mom done this to me — but every time it takes me by surprise!

"Really, Mother," Shirley was the first one to react, "you *can't* mean that you've got some *other* solution —"

"Now you're kidding, Mom," I said.

"Impossible, impossible," said Inspector Millner, shaking his head. "I wish it could be — that poor old man — but it's impossible."

"We'll see how impossible," Mom said. "Only first I'd like to ask three simple questions."

I tightened up a little. Mom's "simple questions" have a way of confusing things beyond all understanding — until Mom herself shows how simple and relevant those questions really are. "Go ahead and ask them," I said, in a wary voice.

"Question One: A little bit of information please about this Dean Duckpond. What was his opinion of Professor Putnam being such a big drunk? Of drunkenness did he approve or disapprove?"

I had been afraid the question wouldn't make any sense, but I answered patiently all the same. "He didn't approve at all," I said. "Dean Duckworth was a big teetotaler — he was running a crusade against college students drinking, and trying to pass rules, and so forth. He used to tell his wife and his son that Putnam's taking to drink was proof of his weak moral character. It showed how right Duckworth had been to fire him from his job ten years ago."

Mom beamed with satisfaction. "That's a good answer," she said. "Question Two: When you got through giving Professor Putnam his third degree down at police headquarters and you then took him home to his daughter, what did he do?"

"What did he do, Mom?"

"*I'm* the one that's asking."

Again it didn't seem to make any sense, but again I was patient. "As a matter of fact, we know what he did, Mom, because we kept a man in the apartment to make sure Putnam didn't try to skip out. He went to sleep on the couch, right in front of his daughter and our man. The next morning he woke up and had breakfast. Orange juice, toast, and coffee. Two lumps of sugar. Is that an important clue?"

Mom ignored my sarcasm and went on beaming. "It's a clue if you got the brains to see it. Final Question: Is it possible that one of the movie houses in the neighborhood was playing *Gone With the Wind* on the night of the murder?"

This was too much for me. "Honestly, Mom! This is a murder investigation, not a joke!" And Shirley and Inspector Millner also made sounds of bewilderment.

"So who's joking?" Mom answered serenely. "Do I get my answer?"

It was Inspector Millner who answered, in a voice of respect. "I don't see how it fits in," he said, "but as a matter of fact, the neighboring Loew's *was* playing *Gone With the Wind*. I remember passing it on my way to question Professor Putnam for the first time."

"Exactly like I thought," Mom said, with her nod of triumph. "The case is now sewed in the bag."

"That's very interesting, Mother," Shirley said, as sweet as she could. "But of course, David and Inspector Millner *already* have the case sewed in the — sewed up, that is. They know who the murderer is, and they're ready to arrest him."

"Whether we like it or not," Inspector Millner muttered.

But Mom's look of triumph wasn't disturbed a bit. She simply turned it on Inspector Millner, and a touch of tenderness mingled in it. "Maybe you'll end up liking it," she said. "Professor Putnam didn't do the murder."

Again we all stared at her.

Inspector Millner blinked uncertainly — half relieved, and half unwilling to believe in his relief. "Do you — do you honestly have some proof of that?"

"It's such a simple thing," Mom said, spreading her hands. "It's my cousin Millie the Complainer all over again."

"Your cousin Millie — ?" Inspector Millner's relief began to waver.

"The Complainer," Mom said, with a nod. "Never did she stop complaining, that woman. Always about her health. Her heart was weak. Her legs hurt. She had a pain in her back. Her stomach wasn't digesting. Her head was giving a headache. A physical wreck she was — every year a *different* kind of a physical wreck. She wasn't married either, and her poor brother Morris, her younger brother, he lived with her and supported her. He never got married either. If he so much as looked once at a girl, cousin Millie's aches would start aching separate and all together, harder than ever. One day she died. She was climbing on a chair up to the kitchen cupboard to get for herself a piece of cheesecake, and she lost her step, and hit her head on the floor, and the concussion killed her. When the doctor examined her, he told her brother Morris that, except for the bump on her head, she was absolutely the healthiest corpse he ever saw. Only by that time poor Morris was already fifty-seven years old, with a bald head and a pot belly that no woman would look at."

Mom stopped talking, and we all thought hard.

Finally Shirley said, "Mother, I just don't see the connection."

"The connection," Mom said, "it's right in front of your nose. It was the timing that gave me first an inkling of it."

"The timing, Mom?"

"The timing of this Professor Putnam. He's a drunk, you told me, who goes out every Thursday night and every Monday, always at the same

time, always after dinner, and always he comes in at the same time, around midnight, staggering a little and smelling from whiskey. Right away this to me is peculiar. A drunk who keeps such regular hours, on a schedule almost, like a businessman. When a man gets drunk — extra special drunk like this Professor — he don't look at his watch so careful. Chances are he couldn't see his watch even if he looked at it. Besides which, this timing of his — Thursdays and Mondays from after dinner to midnight — this reminds me of something else. This reminds me of the schedule at a movie house. On Thursday and Monday the picture changes, and the complete double bill runs from after dinner till before midnight."

"Mom," I broke in, "do you mean — ?"

"Quiet," Mom said. "You didn't see it from the beginning, so you got to give me the pleasure of telling it at the end. The timing makes me suspicious, so I ask you a question: After he left the police headquarters, where he was questioned for twelve hours, what did this Professor Putnam do? He went home, he went to bed and slept, he woke up and had breakfast. He didn't have a single drink! Not once even did he *ask* for a drink! A man who's supposed to be a regular drunk, and who's just been twelve hours with the third degree — and he isn't even interested in taking a drink afterwards? Excuse me, this isn't sensible. So my original suspicion is positively proved —"

"He wasn't a drunkard at all," said Inspector Millner in a voice of wonder.

"Absolutely," Mom said. "Chances are he didn't even like the stuff. He was only *pretending* at being a drunk. Every Thursday night and Monday night for ten years, out he goes to the new show at the neighborhood movie house. He stays there till the show is over. Then he buys himself a bottle of whiskey maybe, he soaks his collar and his hands with it, he comes home and staggers for his daughter's benefit. Add on to this — he hides whiskey bottles around the house — always *full* whiskey bottles; his daughter, you notice, don't ever find any half-empty whiskey bottles. Also add on to this that he's very careful to explain that he's a lonely drunk, he don't ever have any companions to drink with."

"But why?" I said. "Why did he fool his daughter that way all these years?"

"My cousin Millie the Complainer," Mom said, with a smile. "This Professor loses his job, also he loses his manliness, he loses his grip on life. His daughter comes to take care of him, and he's happy to let her. But always he's afraid some day she'll get married and leave him. He needs something besides his own weakness to keep her with him. So he turns himself into a drunk. How can a nice kind-hearted affectionate daughter go away and leave a poor drunk father all by himself? And it works. It works with poor Joan just like it worked with my poor cousin Morris. Only

this time maybe it's not too late."

We were all silent for a while. In our minds we saw the picture of that broken old man, with still enough craftiness in him to plot holding on to his daughter. "And he was so ashamed of himself," Inspector Millner said, "that he preferred to face a murder charge than to admit that he *hadn't* been out drinking on Monday night."

"Just a minute," Shirley spoke up sharply. "You said he always went to the movies on Monday night, Mother, and that's why he always got home around midnight — the length of a double feature, you said. But on the night of the murder he didn't get home till 1:30. Now doesn't that prove that he committed the murder after all?"

Mom laughed. "You don't remember my final question. It proves only what I thought — that *Gone With the Wind* was playing at the neighborhood movie house. And *Gone With the Wind* takes a good hour longer than the average double feature."

Shirley subsided, looking rather squelched.

"And now," Mom said, "we're all finished with the main course. So isn't somebody going to bring in the dessert? If I'm not running things myself —"

"I'll get it, Mom," I said. I rose to my feet and started to the kitchen door. But I was stopped by Shirley's voice.

"Wait!" Shirley turned to Mother with satisfaction. "You haven't really given us a solution to the crime at all. So Professor Putnam wasn't really a drunk. That doesn't tell us who *did* commit the murder."

"Don't it?" Mom smiled slyly. "It tells us absolutely and positively. Professor Putnam wasn't a drunk. We know this for a fact. So how, please, could he go into Harry Sloan's bar after closing time and drink up half a bottle of bourbon? And how, please, could Harry Sloan and his wife have seen him in that bar off and on for the last few years?"

Inspector Millner and I looked up sharply at this. And a determined, grim look came over the Inspector's face. "Sloan and his wife were lying?" he said.

"What else? This Sloan, he killed Dean Duckling himself. You told me his motive yourself. The Dean was a big crusader against drinking. He was trying to pass rules that the college students couldn't drink. This meant that the college students would go to bars that were far away from the college, so the Dean wouldn't catch them. And like you told me, this Sloan did most of his business with college students. The Dean was going to ruin his business — a pretty good motive to kill somebody in this day and age. Even so, in my opinion he didn't plan it out. He was on the street Monday night, and the Dean came by, going for his newspaper. And Sloan was maybe a little drunk himself and had a bottle with him. So he stopped the Dean and he tried to argue him out of his crusade maybe, and one word led to another, and all

of a sudden he's killed him. So back he goes and tells his wife —"

"And the next night," I said, with a groan, "*we* came along and gave him his big opportunity. We showed him Putnam's picture, and told him that Putnam had no alibi for the time of the murder — so Sloan and his wife thought it was safe to be the witnesses against him."

"And they would've got away with it," Inspector Millner said solemnly, "if it hadn't been for —" He broke off in a small flurry of embarrassment and admiration. Shirley and I exchanged our usual significant glance.

Shortly after, Inspector Millner got up and phoned headquarters to pick up Sloan and his wife. And I went out to the kitchen and lit the candles on Shirley's cake. Three candles — one for Mom's real age, one for the age she admitted to, and one for good luck. Then I marched the cake in, and we all sang "Happy Birthday to you," and Mom blushed prettily.

Then the cake was put in front of her, and Shirley and I shouted for her to make a wish and blow out the candles.

But she hesitated, with a look at Inspector Millner. "You're still feeling bad about something," she said.

"I'm sorry," he said, looking up and grinning. "I just can't seem to stop thinking about that poor old man. His daughter will find out the truth now, and then she'll be leaving him to get married. What will happen to him when he's all alone?"

There was a touch of urgency in Inspector Millner's voice. And Mom's reply was curious. She ignored his question completely, and said in her positive voice, "Old! Who's old?"

Then, as if she had said something a little too revealing, she turned quickly to the cake. "First a wish, and then a blow," she said. So she shut her eyes tightly, and her lips moved soundlessly for a moment. Then she opened her eyes, leaned over the cake, and gave a blow.

Whatever it was that Mom wished, she wasn't talking about it — not that night, anyway.

Winner of EQMM'S English Ford Contest

In last February's EQMM we invited our readers to tell us which six stories in the issue they thought would prove to be most popular, and in what order those six would finish. Further, we offered a handsome new English Ford to the reader who came closest to being right (in case of a tie, the earliest postmark was to determine the winner).

We are pleased to announce that the winner of the English Ford was:

Jack J. Rowe
Miami, Florida

DEPARTMENT OF "FIRST STORIES"

Lee Sheridan Cox's "A Simple Incident" (full title opposite) is one of the thirteen "first stories" which won special awards in EQMM's Tenth Annual Contest. It is the appealing tale of Andy Blair and his best friend Willie Perkins, teen-agers who have set up as Private Eyes, and Their First Case — a small matter involving blackmail, theft, slander, and other assorted mischiefs among the older teen-agers — and all, we hasten to assure you, without the slightest taint of what is commonly referred to as juvenile delinquency! Yes, this story about two boy detectives is of the gentler school of crime — or to put it another way, in the 'tec tradition of American Boyhood whose lineage includes Tom Sawyer, Huckleberry Finn, Plupy Shute, Penrod — yes, and the Merriwells, the Rover Boys, the Katzenjammer Kids, and even Peck's Bad Boy. What a roster for eternity!

Most of us, when we think abstractly of boys (if that is possible), remember the classic definition (Robert Southey's, believe it or not) of what little boys are made of: "Snips and snails and puppy dog tails." But you will find a more penetrating and more realistic definition in Clyde Brion Davis's Introduction to his admirable anthology, EYES OF BOYHOOD; *Mr. Davis wrote: "I have a conviction, drawn from memory and observation, that the average American boy from the age of say nine to about fifteen is a tough little tribesman, intensely loyal to his own group; cruel, amoral, recklessly adventurous, a congenital showoff, noisy, brawling, boastful, scornful of the outlanders on the other side of town, and at the same time quite wistful with the sort of primitive mysticism common to savages and which one may suppose was the rule with his caveman progenitors. He instinctively believes in portents and fetishes and . . . he frequently makes obeisance to strange gods and supernatural forces." In a phrase, the embryonic private eye!*

You will not be surprised to learn that the author of "A Simple Incident" is a schoolteacher. She teaches seventh, tenth, and twelfth grade English in Lebanon, Indiana, and, to quote from her letter to your Editors, "often gets student papers in the style and spirit" of her own story. She has found that teaching "has compensations for the would-be writer: for one thing, it is a job that practically guarantees laughter every day." Miss Cox admits she had a lot of fun writing her first-published story, and hopes it amused us too. Indeed, it did!

A SIMPLE INCIDENT; *or,*

Andy Blair and Willie Perkins, Private Eyes; or,

OUR FIRST CASE

by LEE SHERIDAN COX

WHEN WE GOT THIS ASSIGNMENT to write a simple incident, my problem was which one. I've had so many simple incidents in my life that it's hard to choose among them. But I've decided the most simple incident I ever even heard about was what happened two years ago when I was in the fifth grade.

We had a teacher who was always having us give speeches the way now we're always having to write something. I usually gave the most interesting speeches, which burned Ronald Pruitt up. Everybody knows who Ronald is, so I don't need to describe him, but I will say he sure is a creep. Nobody likes him but teachers.

Well, we were supposed to give this talk on what we were going to be when we grew up. I had always planned on being a baseball player like Ted Williams or a football player like Otto Graham, but when I heard that Ronald was going to talk on being a jet pilot, I realized I had to come up with a more unusual subject. About half the guys in class were planning on being athletes, even Jackie Carr who can't chin himself.

I thought around and I couldn't figure out anything to beat a jet pilot. My best friend, Willie Perkins, told everybody he was going to be a genius, but he was just kidding because he was really going to be a teacher — a coach, that is. His dad is a coach, as everybody knows.

Then that night I got it. I'd been watching "Big City Detective" on television, and I got to thinking how these private eyes have pretty interesting lives. They're always being ambushed and having knives thrown at them and getting guns stuck in their back and going around corners in foreign cars on two wheels. They get in a lot of fights and meet a lot of important people. Besides that, they do good.

So that's what I gave my speech on and it turned out the class liked it better than Ronald's. I remember it had a good ending. Ronald had been yawning and snickering all the time I talked, so I got fed up and I ended by saying, "The detective fights crime, no matter who it is. For instance, say Ronald gets murdered — and he probably will —" The teacher opened her mouth, so I said quickly, "What I mean is, no matter how worthless a person is, a detective thinks he's worth something if he's killed, and goes after the criminal. So I'm going to be a private eye, to make

the world a better place for the little guy as well as the big guy or even a creep like Ronald." The teacher started to say that's enough, but I was through anyway.

When the bell rang, Ronald said, "Dead-Eye Blair. The private dead-eye. You couldn't follow a cow's trail."

I winked at Willie Perkins and Willie said, "Write us a letter about it from Mars, why don't you?"

If Willie hadn't got interested in being a detective, too, probably the simple incident wouldn't have happened. But he said detecting was a lot better than just getting into games free, which is all that happens to a coach. And Willie talks a lot. After we had decided to study up to be detectives, he kept talking about what we were doing, and Ronald kept making wisecracks — and that's the way the trouble started.

What we were doing, first we went to the library and got a book on judo. If somebody is waiting around a corner to stick a knife in you, you got to be able to protect yourself. Willie is awful little, and at first he was discouraged and said maybe he wasn't built to be a detective, but I pointed out he was a good size to get through tight places like a transom, so he brightened up and said I could practice judo on him. I got so I could throw Willie all around the room, but then he quit cooperating because he said he thought maybe I'd broken some little bone in his back and he wanted to rest up a while.

We had to quit anyway, because we busted a few things in our living room and Mom said she was getting in the mood for a little judo herself. We knocked Dad's pipe off the table which he got pretty upset about although he has eleven. We broke an old doodad which the minute it got broke became a precious old heirloom.

My dad said this was enough of this nonsense. So we took the book on judo back and got one on the F.B.I. which told all about fingerprinting. But Mom said why were all the marks on the sink and various things in the bathroom. I explained we were studying our fingerprints. I told her you had to study them and read what the book said to recognize things about them so you'd know whose they were. She said she could recognize my fingerprints anywhere and if I didn't stop leaving them around she'd fingerprint me and Willie, too. My dad said he thought he'd said this was enough of this nonsense.

It's hard to amount to anything when you've got parents to buck all the time, but we weren't giving up. We decided to practice shadowing people. I shadowed my dad a couple of times and got pretty good moving from tree to tree. I got pretty good entering a room without anybody knowing it, too, but once before dinner when I'd sneaked into the kitchen and was keeping an eye on Mom in case she did anything suspicious, I all of a sudden wondered what we were having to eat and when I just asked, Mom dropped a bowl of batter and

practically had a nervous breakdown. She told Dad I kept creeping around. Dad said he'd about reached the end of his patience and what was my trouble, and then nobody would listen.

So Willie and I went back to the library and found this book called *Easy Experiments to Perform at Home.* Detectives usually know a lot about science, so we decided to learn a few things since my brother Pete, who was away at college, had a chemistry set just lying around being wasted.

We experimented in Willie's basement because my folks were madder at me than his were at him and would hardly let me breathe. For a while we learned a lot, but one evening after school when we were experimenting with some sulphur, Willie's mother happened to be having women drinking tea upstairs. You never heard such screeching around, though I couldn't see the smell was so bad. Willie said he even kind of liked it. But Willie's mother got nervous, and she told my mother, who acted as if I was a juvenile delinquent. My dad gave me a lambasting and said just one more thing out of me and he would *really* punish me. Willie got a walloping, too.

At this point we would probably have given up being detectives if Ronald wasn't all the time making these smart remarks. And he had told his brother Bertie about us. I don't need to describe Bertie because everybody knows who he is. But I will say, if there's a bigger creep in the world than Ronald, it's Bertie, as everybody knows. He was a sophomore in high school then and now he's a senior, but he hasn't improved any yet. He's always trying to be funny, and it's a wonder he's still alive.

"Hey, Eyes," he'd yell at Willie and me, "put the finger on anyone yet?" Dumb stuff like that.

One time downtown with a lot of people around, Willie said Bertie yelled, "Here's the great detective, Dupin Perkins. Anybody been purloined lately, Dupin?"

Willie said it was embarrassing to have something like that yelled at him so everybody could hear it. Willie got so fed up that finally one day at school, when Ronald was sneering around and asking when we thought we'd be hired for our first case, Willie said we already were working on a case. All the kids said was it really true and I couldn't let Willie down, so I said yes. So Willie said we'd be paid $3.00 when we broke the case which would be any day now. Ronald kept asking questions, but I said we couldn't give out any more information. So then Willie acted so mysterious that pretty soon all the kids, except Ronald, believed we really were on a case. After school Willie said he'd almost got to believing it himself, which ought to be good for business.

That evening I was carrying home some groceries and thinking how Willie had stuck our necks out when I saw Bertie sitting on his bike in front of Antonelli's Candy Kitchen. I almost turned and went around the block, but I didn't.

"Well, if it isn't Sherlock out on a case," he said when he saw me, "*and* Watson. Sherlock, you better get out your magnifying glass because it looks like Watson's got a clue."

I turned to see what he was looking at and there was my dog, G.C., sniffing at the sidewalk. I call him Garbage Can — G.C. for short. He's a good little dog and he was minding his own business, so I got mad. They could call me names but not Garbage Can.

"His name is G.C.," I said. "You better not call him that again."

"W'at son?" said Bertie, and the guys hanging around laughed when they caught on.

I lowered my head and ran at him and butted him good in the side. Bertie lost his balance and the handlebars hit the window and cracked it.

So Mr. Antonelli came out. Bertie tried to say it was my fault, but Mr. Antonelli said he had heard the whole thing and Bertie could pay half which would be $4.00. Mr. Antonelli said he was letting Bertie off easy. He told Bertie to pay and leave and not come back until he knew how to behave in public, which Bertie did because Mr. Antonelli can get tough, as everybody knows.

I was just standing there being scared, so Mr. Antonelli said he'd settle the rest with my dad. I asked him would he please not tell my dad and give me a chance to pay him the $4.00. Finally, he said he'd give me a week, but in a week he wanted the money, and no excuses.

I started home wishing I'd never heard about detectives. I also wished Ronald and Bertie were tied to a railroad track with the train coming. All I had, counting my allowance at the end of the week, was $1.17. I didn't know where I was going to get the other $2.83, but I had to get it, because when my dad gets to the point where he says "one more thing," he means just one more thing. My dad gets awful tough sometimes for my own good.

I was so worried that I didn't hear Tim O'Brien until he caught up with me and said he'd been yelling at me for a whole block. Everybody knows Tim, so I don't need to describe him, but I will say he's all right. He was a sophomore then and he's a senior now and the best basketball player in school, as everybody knows. The only thing wrong with him is he lets my cousin Polly order him around, which is funny since he can throw a discus 200 feet. Polly is my cousin who always has a bunch of boys hanging around her house, as everybody knows. People may not know my uncle uses such language about them that my aunt has to shush him.

But this time two years ago Tim said, "I just heard from Mr. Antonelli you got a bill to pay. I got an idea. You want a job?"

"What kind of job?" I said.

"You want to be a detective, don't you?" he said.

"You think you're funny," I told him and started home with my groceries.

He kept telling me he was on the level, but I wouldn't pay any attention until he said, "Andy, I'll tell you what the job is. Polly has a letter of mine. You get it and I'll pay you whatever your charge on a case is."

This didn't sound like kidding, so I said, "Whose letter is it?"

"It's mine. I wrote it to her."

"Then it's hers, isn't it?" I said.

"Well, technically," Tim said.

"I'm not stealing for nobody," I said. "It isn't ethical."

"But your cousin Polly is blackmailing me with that letter," he said. "Now what does a detective do when he's hired by someone who is being blackmailed? He gets the damaging evidence back, doesn't he? That's not stealing. What's your fee?"

"Three dollars," I said. "But I don't want the job. It sounds funny."

"Trust me," Tim said very earnest. "What Polly is doing is against the law, but naturally I can't go to the police. That's where you come in. Polly waved the letter across the study hall at me today, but she must take it home because I already looked in her locker. Since it's your own relatives' house, you can prowl around without anybody noticing. Look for a long, white, blank, unsealed envelope with a letter in it. Get it by Friday and I'll pay you three dollars."

"Why's it so valuable?" I said.

He said I didn't need to know, but I said then definitely Willie and I couldn't take the case. So he made me swear we wouldn't tell and then he told me this kind of dull story.

He said he'd always considered Polly his girl. His instinct told him she was kidding the other guys but not him, and then he'd found out you couldn't trust your instinct. In August he was at the lake with his family and he got this snooty letter from Polly saying she understood from some unknown source that he was falling for Connie Smith, whose family had the cottage next door. Tim was surprised because he never even hardly looked at Connie Smith. So he wrote Polly this letter about how bowlegged Connie was, and stuff like that, which she wasn't but just to show he couldn't even see her. He was relieved when Polly answered in a nice, friendly way.

Then one day he was sitting on Connie's porch and the mail came and Connie got a letter from Polly. So she says, "Oh, let's see what's happening at home." So Tim gets ready to listen and then Connie reads a little to herself and sort of looks embarrassed and says, "Oh, there's nothing much happening," and takes the letter into the house.

Naturally, Tim's suspicions are up, but Connie won't tell him anything because she's such a good friend of Polly's. But from little things she drops now and then, Tim realizes that if he had seen the letter he'd have known the truth about Polly. And from things Connie doesn't know she's saying, Tim gathers that the truth is Polly is insincere, especially about him. He figures out from what Connie starts to say before she catches

herself that Polly is fooling him and everybody feels sorry for him because he doesn't know it.

So Tim feels bad, but Connie is always around to cheer him up and he begins to see that — like she keeps saying — she is well named. Constance, that is. So he writes Polly that he has fallen for Connie, after all, and he knows she won't mind, but a guy has to have a girl he can trust.

"What's all this got to do with blackmail?" I said.

"That letter about Connie being bowlegged and stuff," Tim said. "I'd forgotten it. Then the day after Connie and I decided to go steady Polly called and said if I don't take her to the big fall mixer Friday night, she'll show Connie the letter. And naturally Connie thinks I'll ask her to the dance. I don't know what to do. Every time I try to appeal to Polly's better nature, she quotes from that blasted letter."

"Is this the only way she can get to the dance?" I said.

"All the guys would like to take Polly," said Tim, "but this is a bet. She doesn't really care about me. Andy, you got to try and help me."

We had reached my house. I thought about my dad if I couldn't pay Mr. Antonelli. Then I thought about that creep Ronald. I looked at Tim and he sort of reminded me of G.C. in the rain.

"We'll take the case," I said.

As I went into the house, I saw Polly, who lives next door, looking through the window at Tim. She waved to me and I felt guilty, but then I remembered she was a blackmailer.

That evening Willie and I sneaked around Polly's house and worked on our stomachs behind the shrubbery until we were by the front porch where Polly and some other girls were talking. After about fifteen minutes Willie started backing away. So I crawled after him and when we reached the backyard he got up and started scratching himself.

"I got bugs all over me," he said, "and I can't stand that dopey talk one more minute."

"We might get a clue any time," I said. "They mentioned Tim eight times already."

"And thirty-six other fellows," said Willie. "I don't think this is the way to go about it. I think we should ask to use the bathroom while she's on the front porch and then go to her room and search it."

"If they don't know you're there, you got to have a search warrant," I said.

Willie said he was just as up on the detective business as I was, and he was going to detect in his own way. We had an argument which took quite a while, and then we had a fight which didn't take long. So Willie agreed to go listen for a clue, since it was more scientific.

When we got back, three boys, including Bertie, were on the porch.

"Why do you think Tim will take you?" he was saying. "What makes you so sure?"

"I'm not sure," said Polly. "In fact, there's a reason I almost hope he won't."

"What reason?" said Bertie. "So I'll win the bet and you'll have to give me ten dances at the next three mixers?"

"Hardly, Repulsive," said Polly.

"What if you win, Polly?" somebody said.

"Bertie does my math for two months and doesn't talk to me for three weeks."

"But I can't lose," said Bertie. "This is one time when Polly won't win. Tim keeps harping on constancy and dependability are the traits to look for in a woman, and he says Connie's got them."

"Connie *is* dependable," said Polly. "You can always depend on her for a knife in the back. She wrote me last summer that Tim was giving her a big rush, which wasn't true, and then when that didn't work she —"

Right here Willie sneezed. It was sort of a yell and a sneeze mixed together and everybody jumped about eight inches. Willie ran, but before I could get away Bertie got hold of me and was dragging me up on the porch.

"Well, if it isn't Nero Wolfe," he said digging his fingers in my arm muscle.

"My goodness," said Polly, "what were you doing down there?"

"We were catching bugs," I said.

"They were eavesdropping," said Bertie. "Working on a case, Hawkshaw?" he said, shoving me around. "Broken any windows lately?"

"Andy is welcome to hunt bugs in my bushes," said Polly. "Leave him alone, you big bully."

Everybody started bawling Bertie out and saying I was just a kid. Bertie was trying to tell about Willie and me and that we were too eavesdropping, but his hold loosened so I jerked away and ran. I kicked him first.

Willie was waiting behind the house. He said he didn't intend to sneeze. He said he thought a bug got in his nose.

"It's all right," I said. "Except if Bertie gets Polly suspicious, it'll be twice as hard to find the letter."

"Well, if we don't find it," said Willie, "Tim will probably have to take Polly to the dance and Bertie will lose the bet and I don't want to help Bertie win nothing."

Personally, I agreed with Willie. But I told him it was like I said in my speech in class. Private eyes couldn't have private feelings, and besides Polly was breaking the law — and besides we'd promised Tim.

"And besides you need the three bucks," said Willie.

So we went down the alley to the next block and cut across the street and came back to the yard across from Polly's. Bertie and the rest of them were just leaving.

"Aren't you coming, Polly?" somebody said. "I thought it was your idea to go to Antonelli's."

"There's something I want to do first," said Polly. "I'll meet you there in a minute."

We sneaked across the street after

they left and looked in the living-room windows. I thought afterwards how lucky we were. First, Willie kept doing all this unnecessary talking it's a wonder somebody didn't hear us.

"This is what you call casing the joint," he said, which I already knew. "Boy, my mom would kill me," he said, which I already knew.

Then when Polly came into the room he kicked me to be sure I saw what she was carrying and caught me right behind my left knee so that I fell against the house and made a terrible racket. But we were really lucky. Polly didn't hear us even when G.C. came around and started barking and we had to hold him down and keep his mouth shut. It was close quarters between the shrubbery and the windows, and old G.C.'s tail kept slapping against the house, but I guess Polly was thinking so hard where to hide the long white envelope in her hand that she couldn't hear a thing. She stood for a while right by the window, tapping the envelope against her chin and looking around the room and thinking. Then she walked over to a table by the door, hid the envelope under some magazines on it, called to someone she would be back in an hour, and left. Up to then we were really lucky.

I was just starting to go for the envelope when Polly's mother came into the room and sat down by the table where the magazines were.

"Well, good night," said Willie. "Now what do we do?"

"This is easy," I said. "You wait. I'll go home and phone and say their dog is bothering somebody. While my aunt is explaining they don't have a dog, you hop inside and get the letter."

So I was holding my nose, waiting to talk to my aunt, when who answers the phone but my uncle. I was so surprised I said, "Uncle Fred?" and he said, "Hello, Andy?" I couldn't think what to say, so I said was he home, and he said where else would he be answering his own telephone. I said I guessed I had the wrong number.

I went back to the window and my uncle came into the room shaking out a newspaper as if he were mad at it. He'd been yelling around, Willie told me later. My uncle yells around a lot, especially about the telephone. So he sat down and began to read and now there were two people sitting by the letter, both of them as if they were settled there for the next year.

We decided the only thing we could do was go calling and look for a chance to grab that envelope. So we knocked, and I said I had come over to apologize to Uncle Fred for having the wrong number. So I apologized and my uncle snorted and rattled his newspaper and then Willie and I sat down on the couch. While my aunt kept making conversation about school, I tried to figure out how a detective would go about getting the letter. My aunt was the one to worry about because my uncle was down behind the newspaper in the sports page.

All of a sudden I got this idea and

asked if I could have a drink. My aunt usually goes with me to get one, but this time she told me to help myself, I knew where the glasses were. I got up, giving Willie a look which he misunderstood. He said he'd like to have a drink, too. My aunt told him to go along with me, but I gave him another look. So he said on second thought he didn't want one. My uncle rattled his newspaper.

When I got to the kitchen, I called to my aunt to ask her about the glasses until finally she came to get me one. I took a good while drinking and when we went back to the living room, I saw by the look on Willie's face that he had the letter. So I thanked my aunt for the water and we left.

"Good for you, Willie," I said when we got away from the house and he pulled the letter out from under his shirt. "That's what I call real detecting."

"I almost had a fit," said Willie. "I'd just got over to the magazines and was starting to slip the letter out when your uncle lowered his newspaper and looked at me. He's got an eye like a barracuda. He finally started reading again, but boy, this detective business is hard on the nerves."

We took the letter straight over to Tim's house.

At first Tim acted as if he couldn't believe it. Then he kept yelling, "It's it! Zowie!"

"How about the three dollars," I said.

"I'll get it," said Tim. "Just a minute. I want to tear this thing up."

He ran up the stairs.

"I guess our first case was a success," said Willie.

"I don't feel so good about it," I said. "On account of Bertie."

Then Tim yelled. It sounded like he had been ambushed. "Andy!" he shouted. "Willie!" He came down the steps three at a time. "You've got to put this back — quick! Before Polly misses it. Or does she know now?"

"No," I said. "But she said she'd be home in an hour about an hour ago."

"Is it the wrong letter?" said Willie.

"No," Tim said. "Yes. No. Can you get it back without Polly knowing? I'll still pay the three dollars."

I said we could try and the next minute Tim was rushing us out to his car and driving off practically before we were inside. We reached Polly's house in about three minutes. Tim went around the last corner on two wheels. It was the time I felt most like a detective.

When we got there, there was no sign of Polly. Tim shoved the envelope at me and said in a hoarse voice to hurry and if he saw Polly coming he would honk. So I stuck the letter in my pants under the belt, and Willie and I went up on the porch and knocked.

My aunt seemed surprised to see us again.

"Excuse me for bothering you," I said, "but I think I left my magazine here."

"What kind of magazine, Andy?" she said.

"It was just a sort of magazine," said Willie. "He laid it right there on the table, I think."

We went over to the table with my aunt asking a lot of questions and going through the magazines. Then the horn began to honk out in front and I discovered the letter had slipped down where I couldn't get hold of it.

"Could I have a drink?" I said.

"Good God," said my uncle.

But I got out to the kitchen and got the letter out. Then I hurried back and Willie, who is pretty fast in an emergency, handed me a couple of magazines. I put the letter between them and laid the magazines back on the table. The horn kept honking and my uncle said, "What fool is blowing that horn?"

"I believe I remember where I left that magazine," I said. "It wasn't here."

"Yessir, it's at my house, I just remembered," said Willie.

My uncle looked sort of swollen, so we said goodbye in a hurry.

When we went out on the porch, Polly was saying, "Why, Tim, is that you making all that noise?"

"My horn sticks sometimes," said Tim, "and I have to stop and fix it. While I'm here though, Polly, since I just happened to run into you like this, I wonder if you would care to go to the dance with me Friday night, and I don't mean because of the letter but because I want you to."

Willie and I went over to my house and tried to figure it out.

"I like the way it turned out," said Willie, "but how did it get that way? We're the detectives — aren't *we* supposed to know?"

I had to admit I didn't understand it either. We were still trying to figure it out on the playground before school the next morning when along came Tim waving three dollar bills over his head and calling, "Andy Blair! Willie Perkins!" He looked very cheerful. Of course, a lot of kids, including Ronald, gathered around to see what was happening.

"Here's the fee," said Tim, "for a terrific detecting job."

You could have driven a truck into Ronald's mouth.

"Just one thing," said Tim, taking us to one side. "Remember, Polly must never know what I hired you to do. So don't ever let on."

"Why not?" I said. "How're we going to build up a reputation unless people know about our cases?"

"The situation is changed," said Tim. "You can't tell it."

"But it's all over," said Willie. "Detectives always tell everything when it's all over."

"You can't," said Tim. "It would spoil everything you've done. Look, the letter about Connie was in the envelope all right, but also Polly just happened to be keeping in it an unfinished letter she'd started to write her sister. I took it out by mistake and saw what it said before I realized what it was."

"But she was blackmailing you," I said. "After all, you didn't intend to read the wrong letter and you put it right back."

"Wait," said Tim, "you don't get it. I put them *both* back. Polly told her sister she was feeling very bad since I had let Connie Smith poison my mind. She said she hated to lose my friendship because I was so much more of a gentleman than anybody else she knew. Polly said I was a person you could count on never to do anything sneaky or underhanded. So you can imagine how I felt standing there with a letter I'd stolen."

"Stolen?" I said.

"From her point of view," Tim said. "Because you can see now she wasn't really blackmailing me. She was trying to save me from that bow-legged Connie Smith, who I'd still be going steady with if I hadn't realized how she had poisoned my mind. Polly thinks I just all of a sudden realized the truth. If she knew what I'd done, she'd lose her good opinion of me. So you *can't* tell it."

We agreed and so everything ended up fine. I paid Mr. Antonelli that evening. He said I was a good boy and he wouldn't tell my dad, which he hasn't to this day. Ronald never mentioned private eye again. He didn't even talk much for a while.

But the simple incident I've been getting around to happened the next day. Willie and I were on the playground at noon and we heard somebody calling us. It was Polly. She looked very cheerful. All the kids gathered around to see what was going on, which we wondered about, too.

"How much is it you charge for a case?" Polly said.

"Three dollars," I said.

"Very reasonable," she said and handed me $3 and walked away.

All the kids were looking at the money very impressed, so Willie and I pulled ourselves together and acted nonchalant — as if getting paid for solving a detective case happened every day.

But that evening we went around to tell Polly she must have made a mistake. She just laughed. When we tried to give the money back, she got very bossy and wouldn't take it.

Willie thinks she's not all there. He says even Ronald never did anything *that* simple. I thought at first maybe she knew what we did, but then I realized that didn't make sense because then she would be mad at Tim and naturally us, too. So what was she paying us for? It's the *simplest* thing I ever heard of!

Well, that's all. Maybe I should say my brother Pete is correcting the spelling and punctuation. And you probably notice this paper is pretty long. Last time we wrote a theme Ronald turned in six pages and I turned in eight. This time he said that he was going to show me up and write twenty. So I strung this out to twenty-two. The day will never come when Ronald Pruitt can beat me at anything!

Please do not read this in class.

Where there's a will, there's a way — to murder . . .

SURVIVOR TAKES ALL

by MICHAEL GILBERT

WHEN KENNETH ALWORTHY SAID to his cousin Arthur, "I've fixed to take a little fishing holiday in early June. I'm going to a farm in Cumberland. It's got two miles of fishable water and I'm told it's as lonely as the Sahara Desert," Arthur (himself a fisherman) felt that peculiar thrill which comes when, after the casting of successive flies, each gaudy, each attractive, each subtly different, the big trout is seen to rise ponderously from the peaty recesses under the river bank and cock an eye at the lure.

Indeed, Arthur had wrought hard and long for this moment.

Almost a year ago he had mentioned Howorth's Farm to his cousin. He had done it casually — so casually that Kenneth had already forgotten who had told him about it. Twice thereafter he had mentioned it to friends who, he guessed, would pass it on to Kenneth. Then, in March, at the time when the first daffodils look out and far-sighted people plan their holidays, he had sent a copy of a Cumberland newspaper to his cousin. In it he had marked for him an account of the newly discovered rock fissure below Rawnmere, for Kenneth was an amateur of speleology.

But it was not only the marked paragraph that he had calculated on Kenneth seeing. Immediately below it was the five-line advertisement which the owner of Howorth's Farm put into the local press each spring.

After that Arthur left it alone.

If a trout will not rise there is no profit in thrashing the water.

If you had to answer the question, why was it so important to one cousin that the other cousin go of his own free will to Howorth's Farm, then you would have to cast widely for the answer.

First, in point of time, you would have to examine the will of their common grandfather, Albert Alworthy, who had made his money out of quarrying, and tied it up tightly.

His solicitor, Mr. Rumbold (the father of the present senior partner), had drawn the will, and his client's instructions had been clear. Tie it up as tight as the law allows, said the old man. To my children, and then to their children, and the survivor can have the lot. I dug it out of the earth by the sweat of my brow. Let them sweat for it.

Fifty years later Mr. Rumbold, Junior, had attempted to explain these provisions to Arthur.

"Two wars thinned you out a lot,"

he said. "Your father and your cousin Kenneth's father — that was your uncle Bob — were the only two of old Albert's children who had any children themselves. And you and your cousin are the only two grandchildren left."

"And so it goes to Kenneth and me?"

"To the survivor of Kenneth and you."

"How much? — about."

The solicitor named a sum, and Arthur Alworthy pursed his lips.

He wanted money. He wanted it badly, and he wanted it fairly quickly. Not next week, or even next month, but if he didn't get it in a year he was done for. Certain bills were maturing steadily. He might borrow to meet them, but borrowing more money in order to meet existing debts is an improvident form of economy, even for a man with expectations. And even borrowing could not keep him afloat for more than a year at the most.

Another reason for the selection of Howorth's Farm lay in a personal tragedy which had befallen Arthur some years before, when walking in the neighborhood. He had lost his dog, an attractive but inquisitive cocker spaniel, down a pot-hole in the moor. It was a deep, ugly-looking hole, partly masked by undergrowth and surrounded by a rusty unstable wire fence. Its dangers would have led to proper precautions being taken had it existed in a less lonely spot. As it was, it was fully three miles from Howorth's Farm, and the farm was five miles from the nearest village. A few of the shepherds knew of the pot-hole's existence and it was to one of them that Arthur had hurried, hoping there might be some way of saving the animal.

The shepherd had shaken his head with the quiet firmness of a man who tells an unpleasant truth.

"Nothing come alive out of that pot," he said. "Poor little beggar, but you can reckon he'll be dead by now. It's not a dry pot, you see, Mister. There's a scour of water at the bottom." Twenty years ago, continued the shepherd, a party of experts had gone down to explore. They had found a sheep, which had fallen in a month before. At least, they thought it was a sheep. The icy current and the jagged rocks had done their dissecting work very thoroughly and the evidence was by then inconclusive.

"Another month," said the shepherd, "and there wouldn't have been nothing left at all."

"They ought to put a proper fence round it," Arthur had said, angrily.

"So they ought," the shepherd had agreed, but he had said it without much conviction because, rusty and rickety as it was, the present fence was strong enough to stop a sheep, and that was all he really cared about.

The day after Kenneth packed up his fly rods and left for the north, Arthur went on a walking tour. He went a certain distance by train, and after that he used youth hostels on

some nights, and on others nothing at all, for he was an experienced camper, and could make shift for days by himself with a sleeping bag and a small primus stove. Four days later he passed the night in a tangle of thickets just above Howorth's Farm. He had walked twenty miles the day before without putting his foot on a man-made road. He had provisions for seven days with him, *War and Peace* in the three-volume edition, and a strong pair of field glasses. Luckily the weather remained fine.

On the fourth day he saw Kenneth, a walking stick in his hand instead of a fishing rod, coming up the hill by the path which ran past his encampment.

Hastily brushing himself down, he slid out of the undergrowth, and made a detour, striking the path higher up.

Thus the cousins met, face to face, on a turn in the track, out of sight of the farm.

When greetings had been exchanged, Arthur said, "I'm based on a hostel over at Langdale. I thought I'd take a walk in this direction and watch you catch some fish."

"Not today," said Kenneth. "The dry weather has sucked the life out of the stream. The old boy down at the farm swears it's going to rain tonight, and that I'll get some sport tomorrow. So today I'm giving it a rest. Have you any ideas on what it would be fun to do? I don't know the countryside myself."

Arthur pretended to consider.

"It's the best part of three miles," he said, "but let's go and look at that pot-hole I found five years ago."

His cousin was agreeable.

It took them an hour, and Kenneth's life depended solely upon whether they happened to meet anyone. A single shepherd, seeing them from a distance, would have made it necessary for Arthur to choose another time.

They met no one, and no one saw them.

Presently they were gazing down into the hole.

"You can almost hear the water running," said Arthur. "Look out, man — don't lean too far —!"

A month later Arthur sat again in the room of Mr. Rumbold, the solicitor.

"Tragic," said the lawyer. "I don't suppose we shall ever know the truth. He must have gone out for a walk and fallen down one of those holes. There are a lot of them in that district, I understand."

"Dozens," said Arthur, "and it would take a month to explore a single one of them thoroughly."

"You were on holiday, yourself, when it happened?"

"I was on a walking tour. I may have been less than forty miles of the accident when it happened," said Arthur, who never lied unnecessarily.

"A tragic coincidence," said the lawyer.

Towards the end of the interview Arthur broached what was in his mind.

"I suppose," he said, "in the circumstances — I know the formalities will take a little time — but I might be able to have a little money?"

"Well, I'm not sure," said the lawyer.

"But —" Arthur took a firm hold of himself. "You said yourself," he went on, "that it all went to the survivor."

"Can you prove that you are the survivor?"

There was a long pause.

"I suppose not. Not *prove* it. Everyone assumes — I mean, he left all his things at the farm. No one's heard a word from him since."

"The law," said Mr. Rumbold, "is very slow to assume that a man is dead. If, in all the circumstances, it appears probable that a man has died, you will, after a suitable time has elapsed, be permitted to deal with his estate —"

"A suitable time?" said Arthur hollowly.

"Seven years is the usual period."

"Seven years — but it's crazy! Mr. Rumbold, surely, in a case like this, where it's obvious that an accident —"

"*If* Kenneth is dead," said Mr. Rumbold, "and, as I say, the law will presume no such thing from his mere absence, but *if* he is dead, then I am not at all sure that it was an accident."

When Arthur had recovered his voice he said, "What do you mean?"

"I tell you this in confidence," said Mr. Rumbold, "as it was told me. But your cousin has been suffering, since the war, from a deteriorating condition of the spine. One specialist had gone so far as to say that he was unlikely to live out the year. I'm afraid he may have made his mind up, perhaps on the spur of the moment, to end himself. So you see —"

Arthur saw only too clearly.

We are deeply grateful to Mrs. Alfred G. Parke of Coldwater, Michigan, for calling to our attention Anthony Armstrong's "The Case of Mr. Pelham." Somehow we missed this story when it first appeared in "Esquire" in 1940, and that would have meant a positive loss to readers of EQMM — for the tale of Mr. Pelham and his double is one of the most fascinating we have read on the "double" theme since Roy Vickers's classic "Double Image." We are sure other readers will share our gratitude to Mrs. Parke . . . And that reminds us: Do you have a favorite story of crime, mystery, or detection that you would like to share with other devotees, enthusiasts, aficionados, and fans? A story out of your past reading — of many years ago or of recent vintage — that you would like to see reprinted in EQMM? If you have, please do not hesitate to let us know — even a postcard will put us on the 'tec trail. Tell us the author's name and the title of the story, and if you remember where you read it, the magazine or book in which you first came upon it. If the tracking down takes us on an epistolary journey round the world, we promise to do everything in our power to locate the story; and if it is only half as good as you think, we will try our best to purchase the reprint rights from the author or author's representative, and pass the story on to other readers of EQMM. Even if you do not have full data, give us what clues you can remember. We have always been convinced that stories which stick in some readers' minds are those that other readers usually enjoy. For nearly fourteen years now, we have tried to bring to you not only the very best new stories being written today — by beginners as well as "big name" writers — but also the finest tales of the past — especially the forgotten or neglected tales which do not deserve to "languish in limbo."

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THE CASE OF MR. PELHAM

by ANTHONY ARMSTRONG

THE VERY FIRST INTIMATION THAT Mr. Pelham received — the, as it were, tiny wind ripple that so lightly brushes a field of wheat but is nevertheless the unrecognized herald of a devastating storm — occurred at about 6 o'clock on Tuesday evening the 20th of May, halfway along Corn-

hill. It was outside his City office and he was just hailing a taxi to take him home to his bachelor flat in Maida Vale. An acquaintance named Camberley-Smith, passing briskly by, gave him a brief squeeze at the back of the elbow and said: "How goes it, Pelham? . . . Saw you at the Hippodrome last night, but you didn't see me. I was up in the Circle . . . Well, so long — can't stop!" A friendly pat with a folded newspaper and he was on his way, before Mr. Pelham had time to tell him he had made a mistake.

For Mr. Pelham hadn't been inside the Hippodrome for months. Last night, in fact, he had got home at 6:30, had eaten two nice cutlets served by his man, had played a little bridge with neighbors, and had gone to bed at 11.

He shrugged his shoulders, climbed into his taxi, and promptly forgot the matter. Nine days later, however, it returned to his mind.

He was lunching, rather heavily, at Simpson's with an American business man — though it was called "completing the deal" — when he saw a friend two tables away. Sociable with food and drink, he signaled the other to come over and be introduced.

They chatted a while. Then the friend said, laughing: "Thought I wasn't on speaking terms with you!"

"Why on earth not?"

"Last Monday you gave me the dirtiest cut I've ever seen. Walked right past me."

"Me?" Mr. Pelham, friendly and inoffensive by nature, was staggered; then was apologizing even before he knew the facts. "I'm extremely sorry. I suppose I can't have seen you."

"You saw me all right. Looked straight into my face. And when I said, 'Hullo, Pel,' you stared and walked on."

"It can't have been me."

The friend, who had known Mr. Pelham for twelve years, said simply and directly: "I couldn't mistake your mug anywhere, old man."

Mr. Pelham, quite worried, asked the question he should have asked before: "Where exactly was this?"

"About 1 o'clock, in Lombard Street. I guess you'd just left the office for lunch."

"Monday?" Mr. Pelham pondered a little. Then he brightened. "No, not guilty, old chap! I was down at Chislehurst all Monday seeing a client. It wasn't me you saw."

The friend started to argue, seemed to realize that it would lead nowhere and instead said banteringly: "Then you must have a double. Good God! Two Pels in one world!" He moved on, grinning.

"Say, does this sort of thing happen much in London?" asked the American, interested. Mr. Pelham was checking up the Chislehurst visit in his engagement book and did not answer.

"Do you think I'm really likely to have a double?" he said at last, quite seriously.

His guest looked at him. He saw a

small rather precise man of about 45, with neatly brushed hair, small mustache, and a round palish face. His general expression was earnest and faintly imploring, like a spaniel asking to be friends. To the American he looked exactly like dozens of other English businessmen of the more inoffensive, humdrum type.

Not caring to say so — for the other was buying the lunch — he replied with a guarded: "Maybe." Then he suddenly added, "But I doubt it," for he had just noticed that his host had eyes of slightly different colors — one bluish-brown, one hazel. "Those eyes of yours are darned unusual, you know."

"I know. Well, it's a relief." It was then he suddenly recollected the Camberley-Smith incident nine days previously. "Still, it's queer. Twice within a fortnight that's happened. Ah, well . . . What about trying some real English port? Don't get *that* over your side."

"Not so's you'd notice it," agreed the American politely.

Actually Mr. Pelham's "twice within a fortnight" turned out to be an understatement. For the very next morning he found himself puzzling over a letter. It was from a certain Tom Mason, a young stockbroker he knew, and it ran:

> Dear Pel,
>
> This is to confirm the sketchy appt. we made in the White Lion on Wednesday. I find I'm quite free to beat hell out of you at golf on Saturday. Shall I meet you at the Golf Club? Or at Baker Street Station and we'll go out together. Give us a tinkle!
>
> T. M.

Mr. Pelham left his breakfast at once and went to the phone. He returned with an extremely worried frown and poured himself a strong cup of coffee. According to Mason, they had met on Wednesday evening at the White Lion, a pub in Bishopsgate near their respective offices and occasionally visited for a short drink after the labors of the City day. A game of golf for that weekend had been suggested. Yes, it had definitely been Wednesday and they had parted at about a quarter to 7 — Mason, a little surprised at the urgency of the immaterial questions, had been certain of those points. Yet Mr. Pelham had not the slightest recollection of anything of the sort having happened. As far as he knew he hadn't been in the White Lion since the previous Monday, hadn't even seen Mason for a week. He passed his hand across his forehead, then rang for his man servant.

"A little mix-up has occurred in my engagements, Peterson," he said as casually as he could. "I — er — do you happen to remember what time I got home last Wednesday?"

Peterson reflected a moment. "At your usual time, sir, I think. A little after 6:30. Yes, I'm certain, because of chicken casserole . . ."

Mr. Pelham waved him away ir-

ritably. He found it all absolutely inexplicable, and for the next week took life rather soberly. He read up all he could about "doubles," for he was becoming convinced that somewhere in London was a man who was, as the saying went, "the very spit and image of him" — even to the different colored eyes, a fact which he had cleverly elicited from Mason during their afternoon's golf. For of course he had kept the appointment, slightly curious indeed to see whether the man who had actually made it would dare turn up.

He also realized the disturbing factor that the unknown was now evidently fully aware of the resemblance. Instead of understandably cutting Mr. Pelham's acquaintances, he was now willfully deceiving them. Or was it just a hoax, with Mason and others implicated? If it were not that, it was obvious that the unknown was becoming bolder.

How much bolder, Mr. Pelham did not wholly appreciate till the following Thursday. He had dined at his club and was just going home when the hall porter, with a pleased smile, handed him a box of cigarettes. It was a hundred box, with a dozen or so gone. They were of the brand he smoked.

"You left this in the billiard room when you were playing last night, sir. Luckily the marker remembered your ordering them."

"I? . . . Mine? . . ." Pelham stammered, and for a moment swayed and clutched at a table.

"No doubt it escaped your memory, sir," suggested the man indulgently. Privately he thought Mr. Pelham lucky to get them back, but he supposed the marker had considered it wasn't worth risking. A wrong decision, too, it seemed, for Mr. Pelham was staring at the cigarettes as if he'd never seen them before. As indeed he hadn't, for if one thing was absolutely clear in his mind, it was that he had not been in the club last night. And that meant that the unknown double was such an identical counterpart of himself in every way that he could impersonate him successfully at his own club, not just briefly, but over a considerable period of time; for any suggestion of the incident being part of a leg-pull was now practically ruled out. No one would go so far as to enlist the club servants' help in such a matter.

Mr. Pelham had recovered his spirits by next morning, and by the afternoon had begun to feel angry. This sort of thing had got to be stopped, though he had no clear idea how to set about it. He did not particularly want to call in the police; and anyway there had been no attempt so far by the Double, as he now called him, to profit from the resemblance. For he had naturally ascertained from the Club Secretary that no account had been run up in his name or checks cashed.

He pondered the matter and a few evenings later visited the club again on his way home and skilfully questioned the marker. From him he

elicited that on the night in question he had played billiards with a very good friend of his, a Major Bellamy.

Bellamy! Everyone, thought Mr. Pelham furiously, was being deceived too easily. Something had got to be done. He won the marker's confidence with a tip and then hesitatingly put it to him that he might have been impersonated.

The marker was almost affronted. "That's impossible, sir. Why, I know you as well as most members. And what about the Major? Better ask him." Mr. Pelham shrugged this aside. "Besides, sir" — the marker had searched his memory and now produced a bombshell — "you passed the funny remark to me, you remember, about that cannon of yours." Mr. Pelham had once made a spectacularly humorous cannon and it had developed into a time-honored joke between him and the marker. How could an outsider have known about that?

He went straight to the bar and had a stiff drink. He decided to stay on at the club for dinner, settle down unobtrusively in the library afterwards, and then go down to the billiard room. Maybe he could catch the double red-handed. He went to the phone to tell Peterson he wouldn't be back.

"Oh, Peterson," he said into the transmitter. "Mr. Pelham here. I shan't be . . ."

"Yes, sir. What name shall I say?"

"What d'you mean?"

"I said, what name shall I say?"

"I know you did," snapped Mr. Pelham. "I mean, what the hell did you say that *for?*"

There was a pause. Then: "Perhaps you'd better state your business." Peterson's voice was suddenly icy. Mr. Pelham restrained with difficulty an angry rebuke.

"I don't think you've quite gathered, Peterson. This is Mr. Pelham speaking."

There was again a pause. When the man spoke, his voice was puzzled, but polite once more: "I'm afraid I don't hear you very well, sir. Did you wish to speak to Mr. Pelham? If so, would you give me your name?"

"*My name is Pelham!*" He almost danced in sudden temper. Was Peterson drunk? "This is your master speaking. I rang up to tell you . . ." He stopped suddenly. An explanation of Peterson's apparent denseness had occurred to him. He put the receiver down and leaned trembling against the side of the booth.

Then he burst suddenly out and shouting "Taxi!" to the astounded hall porter, started struggling into his coat.

He was still trembling when he reached Montague Court and he could hardly fit his key into the door. "Peterson!" he called.

"Sir?" Peterson appeared. Beneath his trained exterior he looked a little surprised.

"When I . . . Did I . . ." He tried to pull himself together. "Ah, good evening. Has anyone . . . I mean, any messages for me?"

"A rather peculiar person rang up, sir. There was some confusion about the name. I was just going to consult you when he rang off."

"Just going to consult *me*?"

"Yes, sir. You were in your bedroom at the time. It was only a minute before you stepped out a short while ago."

"Stepped out? Why I . . . But you didn't *see* me go, did you?"

"No, sir. But I heard you cross the hall and then I heard the door bang."

There was a silence. Then: "Bring me some whiskey," ordered Mr. Pelham hoarsely, and went into the sitting room.

Gulping down the spirit — he felt he was drinking more than usual these days, but really this thing was getting him down — he tried to face the facts. The extraordinary telephone conversation was explained: Peterson had imagined his master was in the bedroom at the time. Later he had thought he had gone out — even while in actual fact he was only leaving the club — and after a short while again returned. In other words, the Double had now successfully impersonated him in his own home and to his own man-servant of six years' service.

He rang the bell. Perhaps Peterson hadn't actually seen the Double come in either; had, just as when he went out, only heard him, and assumed it was his master.

"You rang, sir?"

"Ah, Peterson. I'm ready for dinner. I want an early bed. Not feeling up to the mark. Don't you — that is, didn't you think I looked a bit ill this evening when I first got back?" He was quite prepared for Peterson to say he hadn't actually seen him, when he would reply, "Oh, of course not; stupid of me! I was forgetting."

"Frankly, sir, it seemed to me the moment you came in that you appeared fitter than for some time. In good spirits too, sir." A reminiscent smile touched his lips. "That little quip about what you said to the taxi-driver was most amusing, sir."

"Yes, yes, yes," muttered Mr. Pelham feverishly. There was something important he was trying to think of.

"But I must confess, sir," went on Peterson, "you don't seem quite as well now."

Muttering something about seeing a doctor tomorrow, Mr. Pelham abruptly pushed past him and went to his bedroom. He had just remembered what it was that was important. "The moment you came in," Peterson had said. The Double therefore had let himself in. He looked in the little stud box, where he kept his spare latchkey. It was there all right. But of course it could have been put back there — once the fellow had got inside. And, anyway, how had he got possession of it in the first place? He examined his dressing-table drawers. Nothing of value was gone — pearl links, a reserve five-pound note in a wallet, gold cigarette case for special occasions, all were present. *What* had he come for? Why in God's name?

His eyes fell on something on the dressing table. It was a stiff collar with a crumpled tie still held in it — obviously only recently taken off. And the tie was the sedate dark striped tie he habitually wore to the office, the tie he had put on that morning, the tie that he would probably have changed at the same time as he put on a soft collar for the evening — *had he done so*. Which he had not; for this was the first time he'd entered the room. And his reflection in the glass confirmed that he was still wearing a stiff collar and his dark striped tie. He had similar collars, of course, but not another tie anything like it . . .

Yet an exact replica lay on the table before him . . .

He tottered to the bed and sat there a long time, his head in his hands. "What *is* all this?" he murmured. "Am I going mad?"

He felt for a sudden moment deathly afraid . . .

Next day Mr. Pelham phoned his office that he was unwell and wouldn't be in that morning. Instead, at eleven o'clock he visited a Harley Street mental specialist.

The specialist was definitely puzzled. He essayed, then discounted, hallucination theories: for, if so, it was plainly Mr. Pelham's associates who were having the hallucinations. He agreed that there could be no question of a stupendous hoax. Sounding out for paranoia, he gave him openings to state that he felt this double, or imagined double, was persecuting him deliberately; but got no reaction.

"Not willfully. Only by just being there at all," complained Mr. Pelham wretchedly, seeing that the other, for all his confident, competent air was not going to be able to help him. "Besides, you used the word 'imagined.' How can anyone imagine that?" He pointed to the ties, which he had brought with him. "They are exactly the same — same maker, even the same amount of wear. Yet only *one* is mine. The other was left in my flat. By *someone*."

"Hm! Well, if you want my opinion, your mental balance is all right, and it's really a matter for the police. Impersonation, you know. The tie might be a clue to work from."

"But what's he getting *out* of it? I haven't lost a thing."

"Not yet perhaps. A clever criminal would wait for a big haul."

"I've thought of that. I — er —" he spoke a little shamefacedly — "I've even written my bank this morning and arranged to change my signature on my checks. But how can this fellow, whom I've never seen, know just what I do and wear?" He picked up the ties and looked at them.

"By watching you. And no doubt, you are a man of regular habits."

Mr. Pelham nodded. "I do run in a bit of a groove."

"Try varying your movements and your dress a bit. Unexpectedly. And I should see the police. They may

land him. I'm afraid there is frankly not much *I* can do for you."

Mr. Pelham left him, feeling like a child whose nurse has failed him at a crucial moment. He had not the slightest intention of going to the police, not after this new development. Not only did he feel they would fail him too, but they would probably laugh at him. Besides, in his inmost soul, though he would not yet admit it, he knew that there was something about the whole business which the official mentality could never appreciate, that something which last night had momentarily filled him with a Fear of a new and hitherto unexperienced kind.

After lunch he went to the office. Vaguely surprised that none of his staff asked after his indisposition, he did not appreciate the reason till his secretary brought him some papers to sign.

"The letters you dictated just before lunch, sir," she said, with lifted eyebrows, when he testily shoved them back at her, asking what the office thought it was up to. "I *was* glad you found yourself well enough to come down after all. That Manson matter needed a proper clearing up."

Mr. Pelham sat very still for a moment, trying to get a grip of himself. Miss Clement had been with him longer even than Peterson had. "Of course, of course," he managed to get out, and motioned the woman from the room.

Then he began to study the letters — and grew more bewildered than ever. For they dealt efficiently with various details of his work — in particular the Manson matter, which he'd been putting off for days. He knew he had not dictated them, yet indisputably they were his. It was not that they employed his turns of phrase — conceivably his secretary could have been responsible for that; it was that in many cases they implied knowledge of his business activities she could hardly have possessed. Knowledge, too, that could not have been gleaned from the files without many hours' research, knowledge in fact that only Mr. Pelham personally could have had at his fingertips. Moreover, they were good letters; with one exception, they took just the line he would have followed. The exception was a particularly bold decision, brilliant but a gamble. Mr. Pelham would have toyed wistfully with the idea, but in the end would probably not have acted on it, though even that was faintly possible. Otherwise, they were exactly the letters he would have written. He dropped his aching head on one hand. They *were* the letters he had written. Mechanically he began to sign them . . .

Nearing the bottom a corner of pink suddenly showed itself. A check! He pounced on it: had he caught the Double trying to . . . No, it was pinned to a retyped letter he had yet to sign, and merely paid an overdue account. But the check was already signed — and signed with Mr. Pelham's altered signature, conceived only that morning!

He sat for a long while trembling violently. What was happening? Who *was* this Double, this — his dry lips formed the words — *more*-than-double, this veritable *alter ego*, who somehow knew his inmost secrets. The uncanny sickening fear swept over him with renewed force. When that check was signed, his letter to the bank must still have been in the post. By no possible manner of means could his new signature have then been seen or known by anyone except himself.

It was at that moment that Mr. Pelham realized for the first time that everything which had happened up to that afternoon might have had *some* normal explanation, impossible though it seemed to discover it. To this last incident, however, there was no explanation, unless — unless it was one that involved something more than purely human agency.

After some long while he pulled himself together and went out. He walked a large part of the way home. Occasionally he muttered to himself. The phrase, "more than purely human agency," stuck in his mind, and once or twice he frightened passers-by with it. The fear, however, had left him by the time he got back. He sat down and for a long while tried to face the situation.

Surely there was some way to fight this Thing — this Terror — that had come upon him? Tell Peterson to refuse admittance . . . but Peterson, he knew, would think it *was* his master. Confront the Double in the club? Or in the office? But he was never there when Mr. Pelham was. He always seemed to *know*. And why not — if something more than purely human agency *were* involved? Mr. Pelham shuddered again unaccountably, and swiftly looked up, half expecting to see the Double in the room with him.

He glimpsed Camberley-Smith next day, but avoided him, as a man shuns a place of once-happy memory which time has changed to bitterness and misery. For he had recalled that brief encounter three weeks before in Cornhill — the first intimation he had had of anything wrong — though everything then had seemed so simple. Just mistaken identity, or a possible innocent double by chance somewhere in London. Now it was The Double, an overwhelming Terror lying in wait everywhere about his daily path. Growing bolder and bolder too, seeping into his life like foul wet mud sliding down a steep bank into a clear pool, till — till the pool was no longer clear, but all muddied and evil.

In the evening he had a new idea. Rather shamefacedly, he looked up the address of a man he had greatly admired, but had lost touch with — an extremely broad-minded clergyman, who had left the neighborhood a year ago for a parish somewhere in Surrey. "The Rev. K. Fleming, The Vicarage, Littleshot," he turned up, and took pen and paper. But he did not write after all; somehow he did not know what

to say, that wouldn't sound quite foolish. Anyway, the mere thought of Fleming being there, within call, had slightly restored his courage. He felt more inclined to fight back, and next morning he called in a locksmith and had the lock on his front door changed. Only one key was made and this he put on a ring with a stout chain attached to his suspenders.

Remembering the specialist's advice about varying his movements unexpectedly, he called up a friend just before he left the office and arranged to go to the six-thirty performance at a music hall instead of going home. He also phoned Peterson to leave some cold supper out for him. The two men had a drink or so afterwards and it was quite late when he returned home.

There was no supper laid. Indignant and hungry he knocked up Peterson, who had gone to bed.

Peterson, half-undressed, seemed staggered to see him, and even more taken aback when he asked about his food.

"But you — you've *had* some supper, sir."

"I've *what*?"

The man's manner changed to sudden solicitude. "Don't you remember, sir? Cold chicken, and you asked me for a half bottle of the Liebfraumilch and — you — seemed all right then, sir," he gulped tactlessly.

Mr. Pelham saw what he meant. "You think I'm drunk?"

"No, sir," lied Peterson, thinking his master must have put in some good work on the whiskey since supper. "I — I . . . well, look here, sir." He led the way to the kitchen, eagerly showed Mr. Pelham dirty plates, explaining apologetically, "As it was late, I thought for once I'd leave them till tomorrow." Showed him too the empty hock bottle, even the chicken bones in the garbage pail. "Why, I served you with the wine, sir," he went on entreatingly. "And later you went to bed. At least I thought so — or I would have stayed up myself. I didn't hear you go out again."

Mr. Pelham was quickly at the bedroom door. For a moment he faltered; then abruptly opened it.

The room was empty, the bed untouched. His pajamas lay across the coverlet.

Peterson was frankly puzzled. "Well, I could have sworn I heard the basin running. And your wardrobe shutting. And then the springs as you got into bed. And only a short while ago too, sir."

Mr. Pelham said nothing. He stood there, fingering the latchkey in his pocket. The only key, which had been on his person all day.

"All right," he got out at last. "That's all!" A little scared, the man backed out.

Mr. Pelham lay awake a long time. Fearfully, like a schoolboy starting to explore some dark, eerie cavern which he does not want to enter, but by which he is as much

fascinated as terrified, he tried to recall all he had heard or read about ghosts, about spirits who had taken human shape. It was unbelievable, impossible, but what then was it? Nothing made any sense to his tortured brain; nothing was real — except the unknown Terror steadily engulfing his life . . . Not till he had got up and written to Fleming that he wanted to meet him, that he was in great trouble and needed his help, though he could not explain in a letter, was he able to drop off into a troubled sleep with the lights still on.

He could hardly concentrate on his work the next morning and went out at 12 to get a drink. At least it was a change from his usual habits, though the specialist's advice had not proved very successful the previous night. The drink, however, and another, cheered him up and recalling the advice further, he impulsively went into a shop and bought the most distinctive tie — within the limits of a certain taste — that he could find, a tie he would never otherwise have chosen. He even achieved a certain pleasure in this — having only worn quiet colors all his life. The clerk was vaguely amused, particularly when Mr. Pelham rejected several as being likely to be duplicated. "I want something unique," he kept saying. "Not loud — but unique!" He then chose a combination of dark green and red with a small orange spot. He put it on and felt better.

Returning to the office after lunch, he was staggered to discover, that, according to Miss Clement, he had apparently come back at a quarter-past twelve and worked dynamically on all sorts of new and to him undreamed-of projects till a quarter to two. He called for the letters and papers and sat, half terrified, half fascinated, reading them as a child reads a story full of words it cannot understand.

In the middle of this his club rang up to say he'd left his bag behind when he had stayed there last night; would he be calling for it? At first he could hardly take in what was being said; then: "Keep it! Keep it!" he gasped and slammed the receiver down as if it were red hot. His bag was in his *flat* — *it must* be in his flat. . .

He sat staring into vacancy for a long time. This was too much for any man to face alone. The mud was seeping in — overwhelmingly, inexorably. He fought for breath as if suffocated. At intervals he tried to keep calm, found himself saying: "*This* is I. *This* is old Pel. *This* is Mr. Pelham of Lake, Pelham & Company, I, and I alone, live at Flat 10, Montague Court. . ." And even as he spoke, feeling for the key to the flat in his pocket, he knew that he did not live alone there, and the Terror would engulf him again.

He jumped up. He could not wait for Fleming's reply. He could not face the flat that night. He would go down at once to Littleshot and stay

there till the thing was thrashed out. Fleming would know what to do . . .

He rang his flat to tell Peterson to pack a suitcase and take it to Waterloo, and a man said "Hullo." The voice was somehow familiar, but it wasn't Peterson. For a moment he could not place it.

"Who's that?" he said.

"This is Mr. Pelham speaking. Who is it, please?"

A sudden icy sweat broke out all over him. In an instant the instrument he held was slippery with it. No wonder the voice was familiar. *It was his own!* And the sweat on him was that of cold fear; the Terror returned in overmastering waves.

"N — no," he croaked. "*This* is Mr. Pelham. I'm speaking from my office. Who are you really?"

"I've told you." The voice held just the slight superior amusement he would have experienced under similar circumstances. "I'm Mr. Pelham. There must be some mistake. Your name may be Pelham too, of course. But I'm Mr. Pelham of Lake, Pelham & Company and Montague Court."

Mr. Pelham feverishly wiped his hands and forehead, tried to think clearly.

"Well, what can I do for you?" the other was asking.

"I want to speak to Peterson," was all Mr. Pelham could say. Surely Peterson would recognize him for the real Mr. Pelham.

"My man? Are you a friend of his? I've told him he's not supposed to be rung up on my phone but if it's important . . ."

Why, thought Mr. Pelham feverishly, that's what he himself would have said — those were his instructions to Peterson. "It's not important," he got out. "It doesn't matter." How could Peterson believe a voice on the phone with his master obviously there beside him? He formed a sudden plan. "It was merely to say I'm going away for a few days," he said. "Sorry to have bothered you."

"I honestly don't know what you're talking about . . ." he heard the other begin in just his own puzzled accents, as he put the receiver down and jumped from his chair. He had said that to put the other off the scent. He was going straight to Maida Vale.

He jumped from the taxi, ran up the stairs, and let himself into his flat. He had just shut the door when Peterson appeared. The man's jaw dropped. He stared at Mr. Pelham and then at the door of the sitting-room. "I could have sworn . . ." he began, then suddenly his control snapped. "What *is* the matter with you these days, going out and coming in without my even hearing . . ." He pulled himself up. "I'm sorry, sir."

"Never mind that now," gabbled Mr. Pelham. "There's an impostor in there. It's not me at all. It's been going on for . . ." He noticed Peterson was backing away.

"It's all right. This is me. And I want to see this fellow."

The door of the sitting room opened. A man came out.

Mr. Pelham stood transfixed. The other was an exact counterpart of himself. Mustache, round palish face, differently colored eyes, even the faintly appealing expression. Yet from him as he stood there Mr. Pelham experienced a sudden wave of malignancy, of horrible power, of something that was not after all human for all its outward shape. And it carried the Terror with it in wave after wave, a veritable physical presence, battering down his resolve.

There was a silence, broken only by Peterson. "Lord Almighty!" he ejaculated.

Mr. Pelham slowly fought back the Terror. He had noticed with a sudden delight, and clung to the knowledge like a drowning man to a life belt, that the other was not wearing the new tie, but the usual dark striped one.

"Don't go, Peterson," said the stranger, as Peterson edged away. "You may have noticed I've been worried these last days. Well, this is the cause."

Would he have said that, Mr. Pelham found himself vaguely wondering. Yes, he believed, given the incredible circumstances, he would.

"You would," said the other surprisingly, though Mr. Pelham had not spoken, and went on before Peterson could grasp anything. "You've been pestering me for some time, because of your likeness to me. And honestly I'm tired of it." He turned to Peterson again. "I didn't mention it to you before, but this man actually got into the flat here once. The night I rang up from the club, you remember?"

"But that's not true." Mr. Pelham suddenly found he was almost shouting. Very unlike him to shout. He should have been quieter, more restrained — as indeed the other Mr. Pelham was now.

"You remember, Peterson, don't you?" the Double was saying calmly.

"Well, yes, sir, I do, and it struck me as strange at the time."

Mr. Pelham choked. That, "sir," to — to the wrong one! "Peterson," he said almost imploringly. "Peterson, don't you know me? You've been with me six years, don't you know me?"

"Go on," said the other in Mr. Pelhams' level tones. "Answer him, Peterson."

Peterson was almost too shattered to speak, and when he did, it was as a man, not a servant.

"Well, it's Gawd's truth I've never seen a pair so alike before in my natural. No one'd believe me if I was to tell 'em. Those eyes of the both of you. If you was to put me on me oath I couldn't swear. But I'd swear to each of you separate."

Mr. Pelham's heart sank. Till then he had thought Peterson would, must, could not help, recognizing him instantly.

"But, Peterson," he cried. "Re-

member this . . . Think of the things we've done together, before this . . .'

"Don't shout so loud," reproved the other. "No good can come of shouting." It was a stock phrase of Mr. Pelham's own, and he saw Peterson's recognition of it as he looked quickly at the speaker. "Look, here's a test. Tell Peterson what his master said to him last night when he poured the first glass of hock."

"I — I wasn't . . ." began Mr. Pelham and was silent. He couldn't say he wasn't there. "It was you who were there then," he said sullenly.

"That's the point I'm making," was the smiling retort. "Well, I said, 'It's almost a shame to drink it, there are only nine bottles left', and Peterson said — what?"

Mr. Pelham was still stunned. He felt like a rat in a trap.

"Very well then, Peterson said, 'Only eight now, sir. This one's as good as gone!' "

"That's right, sir," said Peterson, suddenly himself again, "You're Mr. Pelham, sir. But, good lord, he's like you!"

"I'm not, I'm not. He's like *me*. He's sapping my life, my existence . . ."

"Keep calm, man, or get out. One last thing, Peterson. He's made one big mistake. Did you ever see me wearing a tie like that green and red thing?"

"No, sir. Never." Peterson was emphatic. "You haven't got one, and you'd never have bought one."

"Good! Remember all this, will you, in case of further trouble. All right. That'll do."

Peterson went. And with him it seemed to Mr. Pelham that all light and life and security went from the room. He turned to the other almost imploringly and saw the face had changed for him alone.

"That's nearly the end," said the Double. "You did make a mistake about that tie, didn't you? I could have been wearing it, but I didn't because it gave me a nice chance."

"But . . . but . . ." stammered Mr. Pelham; then whimpered: "Why have you done all this to me?"

He was not answered. "At last," said the Double exultingly, "I am *here!* I have your business and what I shall make of that I alone know, as you may have noticed. I shall be free, free to do what I . . . but that won't interest you," he broke off. "You're mad, you know," he said suddenly, with an edge to his voice.

Tears were suddenly streaming down Mr. Pelham's face. "I don't believe this is real. It must be a dream. Why has this happened to me?"

"It just happened," said the other, and all the evil of the world was in his voice. Then abruptly in Mr. Pelham's own tones: "Now I'm calling Peterson again and we're going to give you in charge for impersonation."

"No, no. Let me go away." He advanced unintentionally to the other — and recoiled horribly from his presence.

"Who are you?" he cried. "Who are you?"

"Why, Mr. Pelham, of course."

It was then Mr. Pelham started screaming. . .

If you meet Mr. Pelham nowadays you find him much the same, though his business is flourishing beyond expectation and as Tom Mason, who follows and trusts his stock exchange flair, says to him when they play golf together, "Pel, you must have scooped a tidy pile by now. Heading for a millionaire, what?"

Mr. Pelham smiles his inoffensive little smile, and says: "D'you think I've changed much since I began to go ahead?"

"Not much, old boy," says Mason. "Still really the same old Pel. But you just seem suddenly to have taken hold of yourself. I believe that rather rotten experience — you remember — when that fellow, that double, who tried to impersonate you and then went off his rocker right in front of you, had something to do with it. Made you face up to things."

"Maybe," says Mr. Pelham mildly. "Maybe. Poor chap! He's been put away a long while now, hasn't he? I'm afraid he'll never be right again."

Move Over, Mr. Mulligan!

Our editorial note following Hugh A. Mulligan's *Father Was Always Right* (March 1955 issue) included the statement: "Father may always have been right; if so, little Hugh's gene of accuracy must be traced back to other hereditary sources."

Dear Reader, substantially the same comment has been made by many of you about your Editors' arithmetic.

We pointed out that McKinley's margin over Bryan in the 1896 presidential election was, not 31 electoral votes, as the tale had it, but 95 — that is, McKinley received 271 votes, Bryan 176. "So," we said, "had Father . . . delivered New York's 36 electoral votes to The Great Commoner, Bryan would . . . still have lost by 59."

Not so, say delighted subscribers from North Hollywood to Caracas, Venezuela. The 36 votes added to Bryan's 176 could only have come from McKinley's 271. The result of a New York switch would therefore have been: McKinley 235, Bryan 212. Bryan would "still have lost" by 23.

Move over, Mr. Mulligan!

— ELLERY QUEEN

A complete detective story on one page!

KILLERS THREE: (I) *The Perfect Crime*

by FREDRIC BROWN

WALTER BAXTER HAD LONG BEEN an avid reader of crime and detective stories. So when he decided to murder his uncle he knew that he must not make a single error, and that, to avoid the possibility of making an error, simplicity must be the keynote. Utter simplicity. No arranging of an alibi that might be broken; no complicated *modus operandi;* no red herrings.

Well, one small herring. A very simple one. He would have to rob his uncle's house, too, of whatever cash it contained so the murder would appear to have been incidental to a burglary. Otherwise, as his uncle's only heir, he himself would be the obvious suspect.

He took his time acquiring a small crowbar in such a manner that it could not possibly be traced to him. It would serve both as a tool and a weapon. He planned every detail carefully, and he chose the night and the hour only after the most cautious deliberation.

The crowbar opened the living-room window easily and without noise. He entered the room without the tiniest mishap. The door to the bedroom was ajar; but no sound came from it, so he decided to get the details of the burglary over with first. He knew where his uncle kept his cash, but he'd have to make it look as though a search had been made. There was enough moonlight to let him see his way; he moved silently. . . .

At home two hours later, he undressed quickly and got into bed. No chance of the police learning of the crime before tomorrow, but he was ready if they did come sooner. The money and the crowbar had been disposed of; it had hurt him to destroy several hundred dollars but it was the only safe thing to do, and it would be nothing to the forty or fifty thousand he would now inherit.

There was a knock at the door. Already? He made himself calm; he went to the door and opened it. The sheriff and a deputy pushed their way in.

"Walter Baxter? Warrant for your arrest. Dress and come with us."

"A warrant for my arrest? What *for?*"

"Burglary and grand larceny. Your uncle saw and recognized you from the bedroom doorway — stayed quiet till you left and then came down and swore out a —"

Walter Baxter's jaw dropped. He had made an error after all.

He had planned the perfect murder but, in his engrossment with the mechanics of the burglary, had completely forgotten to commit it!

Prize-winning story . . . *the newest tale of Dr. Coffee, the contemporary Dr. Thorndyke*

IF YOU WANT TO GET KILLED

by LAWRENCE G. BLOCHMAN

THINGS LOOKED VERY DIM INDEED for Ellen Dark. Circumstantial evidence and eye-witness testimony seemed to say that she had killed her husband. She denied it, of course, but her own story was so naïve that no jury in the world would believe a word of it. Max Ritter did, but he admitted to himself that her explanation was not very convincing.

Ritter, a lanky, sad-eyed, big-eared lieutenant of detectives, may have been the swarthiest and homeliest gumshoe on the Northbank police force, but he was far from the most gullible. He was not quite sure why, against all logic and plausibility, he thought Ellen Dark was telling the truth. Perhaps he was swayed by the artless honesty he thought he saw in the woman's tear-stained face; perhaps he was just a sucker for blue-eyed blondes.

Whatever it was, he wanted outside corroboration—hard facts instead of hunches; evidence that went beyond the obvious, the kind of evidence with which Dr. Daniel Webster Coffee was always delighted to confound the coroner. Dr. Coffee was an old friend of Ritter's. Pathologist at Pasteur Hospital, Dr. Coffee never missed a chance to prove the superiority of forensic medicine over the antiquated and politically conscious coroner system with which Northbank was still saddled. So, although it was nearly 2 o'clock in the morning, Ritter dialed the pathologist's number.

Dan Coffee awoke instantly, groped for the phone, and caught the instrument halfway through the first ring. He uttered several *sotto voce* grunts, then, so as not to wake his wife, started dressing in the dark. He pulled on his trousers successfully, but fumbled with his second shoe. Julia Coffee switched on the bedside light.

"Emergency, Dan?" she mumbled sleepily.

"Yes."

"Biopsy?"

"Autopsy, more probably."

Mrs. Coffee produced a series of indistinct little bird noises which terminated with, "Max Ritter?"

"Yes. Go back to sleep. I'll be home for breakfast." He kissed his wife and made a somnambulous exit.

The technical crew had just about finished dusting for prints and photographing the scene of the crime when Dr. Coffee arrived at the Riverview Apartments, still blinking the sleep out of his humorous gray eyes. The big pathologist was hatless and his

straw-colored hair stood in unruly protest against untimely combing. One point of his collar was caught beneath his hastily tied cravat. He was perspiring gently; it was a hot night.

"Hi, Doc!" The detective greeted him at the door of Apartment 4A. "Luckily you arrive before the coroner gets here to screw up the evidence."

"What's the problem, Max?" Dr. Coffee asked.

"The problem is that I got an open-and-shut case, only I don't think it is. According to the book, Mrs. Dark shot her husband. But she says she didn't, and I believe her . . . and don't smile like that, Doc. I ain't getting sentimental, even if she is a good-looking babe. Come in and view the remains."

The late Mr. Joseph Dark lay on the living-room floor, sprawled face down across an open, half-packed suitcase. Several articles of clothing not yet packed were neatly piled beside the corpse. The dead man was in his shirtsleeves and had obviously been shot in the small of the back. There was a damp red stain the size of a soup plate on the back of his white shirt. His seersucker jacket hung on the back of a chair.

Dan Coffee knelt to examine the body. The entrance wound was quite extensive; there was no exit wound visible. The man's head was twisted to one side and the pathologist studied the waxen features. The deceased was about 30; his hair was thinning a little. He had a weak, rather handsome face. Dr. Coffee thought he recognized the type: the second-string athlete; more energy than intellect. He seemed to be smiling wistfully, as though remembering small moments of collegiate triumph and regretting that the post-graduate world had not echoed the cheers of Saturday afternoon crowds.

The pathologist stood up. He looked at the open suitcase, then nodded toward the seersucker jacket. "No railway tickets in his wallet, Max?"

"No nothing," the detective said. "Land, sea, or air. Think he was killed instantly, Doc?"

"Can't say without an autopsy. Find a gun, Max?"

"Sure. Right on top of that stack of T-shirts on the floor. A German Walther. Belonged to Dark. Souvenir of the E.T.O. No prints on it, of course. Never are, on a well-oiled gun or on a corrugated surface."

"Begin at the beginning, Max."

Ritter told of getting three telephone calls in quick succession, shortly before midnight. The superintendent of the building called first. He had heard a shot and was going to investigate, but he wanted to report first. The second call was from Frank Mollison, tenant of 4B, just across the court. He, too, had heard the shot and furthermore had noted some suspicious goings-on in 4A while looking out the window. Then the super had called back to say he had entered 4A — the door was unlocked so he didn't need his passkey — and had found Mr. Dark lying dead.

"I got all the folks in the next room, Doc," the detective said. "They've already told their stories two-three times, but I want you to listen."

"I'd like to look around the apartment first," Dr. Coffee said.

He sauntered from room to room, opening closets, peering into the refrigerator and pantry shelves, pulling out drawers, and doing many things which seemed to have little connection with his profession — until he reached the bathroom. Here he spent several minutes taking mental inventory of the contents of the medicine cabinet above the washstand. Then, "Okay, Max, let's have a look at the material witnesses. Is Mrs. Dark in there?"

"And Mrs. Mollison. Plenty of glamor, Doc."

Four persons were assembled in the bedroom: Ellen Dark; Frank Mollison, the tenant of 4B; Veronica Mollison, his wife; and the superintendent of the building, an elderly man named Pete.

The Widow Dark was propped up in one of the twin beds, the picture of misery framed in a modest pink cotton kimono. She was a pretty blue-eyed blonde with a wistful, motherly smile and a willful, fatherly jaw. She answered questions in a soft, girlish voice, and blushed easily and winsomely. She fitted exactly the picture Dr. Coffee had formed of her from having looked through the apartment: a first-class housekeeper who never left a dirty dish in the sink, never exceeded her household budget, never threw anything away. Dr. Coffee had noted the neatly folded paper bags and the little coils of saved string in the kitchen drawers. Ellen Dark had obviously been crying, but there was something about her eyes which could hardly be ascribed to tears: the pupil of her right eye was slightly larger than her left.

Frank Mollison, the man from 4B, was lolling on the second twin bed, wearing bedroom slippers and a pongee dressing gown over his pajamas — only for the sake of convention, certainly, because there was a dark spot of perspiration between his shoulder blades. He smoked a pipe with placid, well-fed, well-adjusted contentment.

His wife Veronica sat at the foot of the bed, but she was not placid; she was obviously taciturn. She was a well-turned brunette with smoky green eyes and boyishly cropped hair that waved slightly. She had no makeup on except lipstick, and the flat pallor of her cheeks gave sharp emphasis to the fullness of her carmine mouth. She wore a severely tailored shantung suit and a defiant sulk.

Pete, the super, paced the floor with puzzled steps, alternately sucking on a dead cigar butt and scratching his woolly white poll.

"Folks," Max Ritter said, "this is Doc Coffee, an old friend of mine with new angles. Scientific angles. He thinks the microscope is mightier than the lie detector, and he's proved it plenty for my money. So remember

that when you tell him your stories, because he wants to hear 'em all over again. Let's start with you, Mollison. When did you hear that shot?"

"Shortly before midnight," Mollison said. "I had the television on, and I was waiting for the midnight news. I got up to open the window wider because the wind had shifted and it was getting hot in the apartment. I happened to look across the court and I saw Joe Dark standing at his own window. He was just starting to pull down his shade when I heard the shot. Joe spun around—"

"Just a minute," Ritter interrupted. "You call him Joe. You two were palsy-walsy, like that?"

"We were good friends and neighbors," Mollison said. "Veronica and I used to come over here once or twice a week to play bridge with Joe and Ellen. Or they'd come over to our place.

"Go on."

"Well, I heard the shot, and at the same time I saw Joe sort of sag a little. Then he whirled and walked back into the room. He walked to the right, out of my line of vision. That's the last I saw of him. A few seconds later a woman in a red dress came to the window. I think she had a pistol in her hand, but it all happened so quickly that I couldn't swear to that. She closed the window and pulled down the shade all the way. That's when I called police."

"Did you recognize this woman in red?" Dr. Coffee asked.

"I couldn't see her face, because Joe had already started to pull down the shade," Mollison said. "But I . . . I. . . ." He stopped, looked at Ellen Dark. He removed his pipe and moistened his lips.

"Go on," Ritter said.

"Maybe I shouldn't say this," Mollison went on, "but Ellen was wearing a red dress when I saw her earlier in the evening. Joe and Ellen came over for a drink before dinner."

Ritter tried to avoid Ellen Dark's eyes. He asked, "Were you wearing a red dress, Mrs. Dark?"

"Early this evening, yes. But not at midnight. I was in bed and asleep before 11."

Dr. Coffee looked closely at Mrs. Dark. Was it his imagination, or was it now the pupil of her left eye which was larger than the right? He asked, "Did you hear the shot, Mrs. Dark?"

"No, I didn't. I must have been sleeping very soundly. I didn't hear a thing. I didn't hear the superintendent come in, either. And it took Lieutenant Ritter several minutes to wake me up."

"Correct, Max?"

"She was dead to the world, all right," Ritter said. And he thought, *Or she's a damned good actress.*

Dr. Coffee stared straight into Ellen Dark's eyes. Now the pupils were of the same size, no doubt about it. He asked, "Did you take a sedative before retiring tonight, Mrs. Dark?"

"No, I didn't."

"I noticed that there were some sleeping pills in your medicine chest."

"Oh, those were Joe's. My husband used to take one occasionally. I never took a sleeping pill in my life."

"Let me handle this, Doc," Ritter said. "I want you to get the whole picture first. Mrs. Dark, did you have a fight with your husband earlier in the evening?"

"No." It was a flat statement of fact — no indignation, no emphasis.

"Didn't you find out that your husband was running away with another woman? Didn't you find him packing his suitcase and threaten to kill him?"

Ellen Dark shook her blonde head with what appeared to be genuine bewilderment.

"He wasn't packing a suitcase when I went to bed," she said. "He must have started after I fell asleep. But I have no idea where he was going or why."

Ritter lit a cigarette and pointed the smoking match at the superintendent of the building.

"Pete," he said, "tell me again what you heard."

"Well," said Pete, shifting his dead cigar from port to starboard, "I was in 3A fixin' a fuse — they got a air conditioner in their bedroom and it blows fuses like they was bubble gum — when I hear this Donnybrook goin' on right upstairs. I ain't no eavesdropper, but it's a hot night and the windows is open, and I can't help recognize voices. It's Mr. and Mrs. Dark, goin' at it, hot and heavy. Yellin' and shoutin'. I been super here nineteen years, Lootenant, and I'm a discreet man, but I do hear a few words now and then. I remember Mrs. Dark's voice yellin', 'All right go ahead then — if you want to get killed.' "

"How about it, Mrs. Dark?" Ritter asked.

"I have already explained that to you, Lieutenant."

"I want the Doc to hear you tell it. Did you threaten your husband? Did you say, 'Go ahead then — if you want to get killed'?"

"I guess I said something like that," replied the blue-eyed blonde ingenuously. "But it wasn't a threat."

"What was it, then?"

Ellen Dark smiled patiently. "I've always taken care of the finances in this house," she said. "Joe is — was — such an irresponsible person. Like a great big kid, really. We have joint bank accounts, but I keep the check stubs and monthly statements balanced. Well, last evening I discovered that Joe had drawn out five thousand dollars from our savings account. He lied about it at first, but he finally admitted that he had made a down payment on a private airplane — a two-seater Erie Eaglet. That started the argument Pete overheard."

"How did you know your husband was going to get killed?"

"Oh, I didn't! Well, you see. . . ." Mrs. Dark's hands made a fluttery gesture. "You see, Joe was a dreamer. He used to dream of doing things he knew he could never do. He was an accountant, you know, an auditor. He hated the boredom of it, the rou-

tine. He always said he wanted to be a pearl trader or a secret agent or an aviator. In the last war he enlisted in the air force, but he never got his wings. He cracked up a few times and they grounded him. They said he had no feel for flying. So naturally I got panicky when I found out he was buying his own plane. I told him he was a fool. I guess I shouted it. He shouted back that I cramped his style, that I treated him like a three-year-old, that I was destroying his freedom. That's when I said, 'Go ahead, then — if you want to get killed' — in the airplane I meant."

And that was all there was to the fight, Ellen Dark concluded. After her husband had calmed down, he admitted she was right. He said he would try to get his deposit money back in the morning. So they kissed and made up and he told her to go to bed, that it was probably just the heat. She was thirsty, so he made her a glass of lemonade and brought it to her in bed.

The gun? A war souvenir. Joe kept it in the drawer of the night table that stood between their twin beds. Yes, it was always loaded. No, he had no enemies that she knew of; it was just that he liked to imagine himself surrounded by constant danger. No, she didn't know how the gun got out of the drawer. Someone took it while she was asleep, she supposed.

"The super says your front door was unlocked when he came up," Ritter said. "Why? Don't you usually keep your door locked?"

"Yes, but when I went downstairs for the afternoon mail, I left the door on the latch. I must have forgotten about it when I came back."

Curious, Dan Coffee thought, that a simple straightforward answer should immediately suggest suspicious alternatives. If Ellen Dark had denied that the door was unlocked, nobody would have wondered if she hadn't deliberately unlatched it to create the impression that her husband had been killed by someone from outside the apartment; or that she had left it open for the murderer . . .

But if Ellen Dark's features seemed the very picture of forthrightness, those of Veronica Mollison, who had been sitting silently on the other bed with her silken legs crossed, were an impassive mask. Dr. Coffee turned to her with a sudden question. "Do you own a red dress, Mrs. Mollison?"

"No. Oh, no. I look frightful in red." It was the first time the pathologist had heard Veronica's voice and he found it pleasantly exciting. It was a warm, vibrant contralto. Now that he looked at her more closely, he found that it fitted her exactly: she was a warm, vibrant person, despite her apparent stolidity which melted as soon as she opened her lips. She must be still in her twenties, Dr. Coffee judged; her husband had left forty well behind him.

"Did you hear the shot, Mrs. Mollison?" the pathologist asked.

Veronica gave him a faint, quick smile that flickered out instantly. Her green eyes, however, continued to

smile at him — knowingly, perhaps tauntingly. She said, "No, I didn't. I was in the bedroom, which is at the back of our apartment. The door was closed and the TV was on in the living room."

"You were in the bedroom . . . preparing for bed?" asked Dr. Coffee, thoughtfully studying her trim shantung suit.

"No, I'd just got home from the movies. My husband was at the fights but he got home before I did. He was already in his pajamas watching TV. I'd scarcely taken off my hat when he came into the bedroom — that's where the telephone is — to call the police. The squad cars started arriving before Frank could get dressed."

Veronica lowered her long eyelashes until Dan Coffee could see just enough of her green eyes to know that they were looking at him — and still smiling secretly. He knew suddenly that he did not like her. There was no denying that she was an extremely attractive female and that she gave off an electronic aura capable of setting up endocrine disturbances at twenty paces; but he wouldn't trust her as far as he could throw a centrifuge.

He made head signals to Max Ritter and led the way to the bathroom for a private conference.

"I think I know the answer, Max," the pathologist said, "but I can't give you a case that will stand up in court unless the coroner will let me do an autopsy. Where is Dr. Vane, by the way?"

"The coroner is attending a testimonial dinner at the Young Executives Club," the detective replied. "When I talk to him on the phone, he says he'll be right over. That's two hours ago."

"The coroner will say no autopsy is necessary because the deceased obviously came to his death by gunshot wound. But I've got to know exactly what killed the man and where the bullet finally lodged. Your whole case may hinge on it."

The pathologist opened the medicine cabinet and took down a bottle and two pill boxes. "May I put these in my pocket, Max? Legally?"

"Help yourself. Look, Doc, when the D.A. sees my report he's going to insist on an indictment for Ellen Dark. What do I do?"

"Stall, Max, until I can finish the autopsy. Besides, I want Mrs. Dark to spend the rest of the night at Pasteur Hospital. Put a guard on her, if you want, but I'd like to investigate her hippus."

"So would I, Doc." Ritter grinned. "She's sure got pretty ones."

The pathologist gave his friend a remonstrating look. "Hippus," he explained, "is a clonic spasm of the pupils. I don't know whether you noticed Mrs. Dark's eyes while we were talking to her, but the pupils changed size several times. That could be the symptom of a nervous disorder, among other things. Anyhow, I want to make some tests."

"Okay, Doc. Anything else?"

"I'll do the autopsy first thing in

the morning if you get permission. Meanwhile, find out what you can about the Mollisons."

They stepped back into the bedroom and Ritter said, "Get some clothes on, Mrs. Dark. We're going places."

"You . . . you're arresting me?"

"Not exactly," the detective said, "but you ain't sleeping here tonight."

The incredulous look of dismay in Ellen Dark's face went straight to Dan Coffee's heart. He knew precisely how Max Ritter felt about the case. He tried not to glance in Veronica Mollison's direction as he left the room, but he sensed her green eyes following him.

When Dr. Coffee returned from the autopsy room to his laboratory at nine the next morning, carrying several Mason jars and a white enameled pail, Max Ritter was awaiting for him. The detective bore some resemblance to an object fished from the river on the third day. His jowls were dark with stubble, and bags hung like orioles' nests below his melancholy eyes.

"Morning, Max," said the pathologist. "No sleep at all?"

"No, but I got news."

"Good or bad, Max?"

"Both," said Ritter. "I find Ellen's telling the truth about Dark buying a plane. That much is good. But the plane is bad because it means Ellen had one helluva motive for knocking off her lawful wedded husband. They tell me at the airport that Joe Dark learns to solo about a month ago, and since he got his ticket he's been taking a cute little tomato up for a spin now and then. Yesterday Dark gives orders to gas up his crate because he's hopping off into the wild blue yonder for a vacation. You know who the tomato is? I showed the boys at the airport a photo and —"

"I can guess," Dr. Coffee broke in. "What did you learn about the Mollisons? What does he do for a living?"

"Clips coupons," the detective said. "He's got lots of bonds stashed away. Where it came from I ain't sure, but it probably ain't legitimate. He used to live in Louisiana, so I get the New Orleans cops on the 'phone and they tell me he makes a pretty pile some years ago running guns in the Caribbean. Only he never gets caught and the statute of limitations runs out. So Mollison gets awful respectable and cautious and a tight man with a penny. He don't run guns because he likes excitement but because he likes dough. And once he gets it, he's going to be a solid citizen if it kills him."

"What about Mrs. Mollison?"

"Veronica marries Mollison two–three years ago. Before that she does a lot of things, all different. Bathing beauty. Cowgirl in a rodeo. Stunt gal in Hollywood. Knife-thrower's stooge in a carnival. WAC corporal."

"The kind of girl," mused Dr. Coffee. "who might be attracted to a gun runner and repelled by a pipe-and-slippers homebody. Where are the Mollisons now?"

"Home," Ritter said, "making depositions for a Deputy D.A. I got Brody camped on their door mat. Do you think Joe Dark was running away with Veronica Mollison?"

"Definitely."

"I was afraid of that." Ritter shook his head. "The D.A. says, and I quote, 'it must be obvious even to a cop that Ellen Dark shot her husband in a jealous rage when she found he was leaving her for another woman.' The D.A. calls me every ten minutes to ask when he can get his hands on Ellen. I tell him she's under hospital care and he can't talk to her till you give the word. Too bad. She's a nice little trick, but I guess I ought to know better than trust a demure little smile. I always was a sucker for baby-blue eyes, though. When do we toss her in the clink, Doc?"

"We don't, said Dr. Coffeee.

"You mean she's got an alibi in her hippus?"

"Chemical tests show that her hippus was caused by barbiturates," the pathologist said, "probably administered by her husband in the lemonade. He wanted her to sleep soundly while he was packing to escape from her apron strings. It's quite plausible that she should have slept through the shot and the subsequent hubbub. I'm even surprised she snapped out of it as quickly as she did."

"Then who was the lady in red?"

"There wasn't any lady in red, Max. Mollison was lying."

"Can you prove that, Doc?"

"The autopsy proves it. The bullet entered the small of Dark's back, smashed two lumbar vertebrae, followed an upward course to the left, perforated the pericardium and lodged in the heart. That means Dark could have lived a minute or so, as Mollison suggests. But it also means that the shot must have been fired from below the waist, or, as is more likely in the circumstances, by someone who found Dark bending over a suitcase — a person, let's say, who came into the room through an unlatched door, saw a Walther pistol on the floor waiting to be packed with the shirts, shorts, and handkerchiefs, and picked it up to fire into the back of the man who was going to run away with *his* wife. I assume that Mollison came home from the fights earlier than his wife expected and surprised the sultry Veronica all dressed up in her going-away clothes and packing her own suitcase. I also suspect that he locked his wife in the bedroom while he stepped over to settle accounts with his romantic neighbor. Why else would the bedroom door be closed, as Mrs. Mollison says, on a stinking hot night like last night?"

"You assume." Ritter frowned dubiously. "But maybe the jury will assume that Mollison is telling the truth: that he really does see Dark at the window when the shot is fired; that there really is a woman in red, and that she can hold the gun low and fire upward, like you say; and that Dark walks back into the room and collapses just like Mollison says."

"Impossible, Max," Dr. Coffee declared, "because the bullet that smashed the lumbar vertebrae severed the spinal cord. *Dark was paralyzed instantly from the waist down!* He couldn't possibly have walked across the room from the window to the spot where the body was found."

He beamed.

Max Ritter's sigh of relief could have inflated a small weather balloon.

"I keep forgetting my high school geometry." He chuckled. "But ain't there something about a triangle that I ought to remember in a case like this? The square on the hypotenuse . . .?"

"The square on the hypotenuse," said Dr. Coffee. "is equal to the sum of the squares on the other two sides — except when the square is on the wrong side, Max. Or when one of the other squares owns a microscope and a few test tubes."

Lieutenant Ritter reached for the telephone, than changed his mind.

"Before I go out to pick up Mollison," he said, "don't you think we might go in and give the good word to the blue-eyed blonde?"

Another Idyll of King Arthur and of Merlin, the sorcerer-sleuth

MORTE D'ESPIER

by MAXEY BROOKE

AND NOW AT LONG LAST WAR HAD come to the realm. The court was in a turmoil. Many a knight, having waxed fat from five years of good living, found himself scarce able to don his cuirass. All night the fires of the armourer and the smith burned. All day provender was brought to the castle and packed in the battle-wains. And amidst the hustle and bustle I stood by useless. *Wouldst that my father had apprenticed me to a knight, or even to a craftsman, rather than a sorcerer*, I thought bitterly.

"Nay, my son," quoth my master Merlin whom I had not heard approach. "Your time will come. And soon."

I looked at him, taken aback. "Then you can read thoughts as 'tis rumoured."

"Nay. I had but to look at your face. 'Twas written there as in great runes."

"Oh." Sorcery always seems so simple after my master Merlin explains it. "And when will that be?"

"Alas, I cannot read the future, although there are those who are convinced I can. I can only predict how future events are influenced by the past. Ere this conflict ends, every man's special talents will be used. Come, even now your skills are needed in the Council Chamber."

The Council Chamber! 'Twould be the first time I had accompanied my master to his closetings with our King. And there was no man prouder than I in the length and breadth of England. My skills indeed! I would show my master that he did not err in having me accompany him.

We crossed the courtyard together, through the Great Hall of the Round Table and to a small chamber adjoining. Seated there was our King, his captains and chief stewards. King Arthur smiled when he saw us.

"Ah, my good Merlin and his young pupil. We were about to begin. Enter and be seated. There and there."

We bowed gravely as befits magicians, and sat as ordered — my master at our King's right hand and I behind him at a small table whereon were quills, paper, and ink — ink of my own making, from nut-galls and iron rust, though there are those who believe that I conjure it from a familiar.

'Twas then I learned I was not to be consulted on the conduct of the war but rather to keep an account

of what transpired. For the knights, great men and brawny though they were, and full courageous and skilled in all arms, could scarce tell one letter from another. Even our good King could read and write but haltingly. As my master explained to me later, a king need not be scribe or magician when he can command the skills of those who are. Thus he can keep his mind free for the duties of state — even as I handled many of the details of his sorcery so that my master could concentrate on its use.

And though my council was not required I learned much about the conduct of a war. Scarce had I realized how many details were needed.

Nor was it the last council I attended and kept records thereof. But when the army marched off and quiet once again settled on the court, no longer were the captains and stewards present — but only our King, my master, and I who listened each day to the reports from runners and thus followed the battle from afar.

Far to the north was the wall built across Britain by the Romans. Even though King Arthur's domain extended beyond the wall, few sons of the nobles of that part of the realm were sent to the Court to become Knights of the Round Table. Clannish they were, and harsher of speech and darker of skin than was becoming an Englishman. And they were banded together under the leadership of one Sir Brian, who now called himself King Brian, and were challenging the authority of King Arthur, Ruler of Britain by the Grace of God.

For some days the reports were neither good nor bad. Our army had established itself near the great wall. Sorties had been made to seek out the enemy and try his strength. But as the days passed, the reports became increasingly bad. Our sorties were ambushed. Outposts were ridden against in force. And always when our forces made contact, 'twas against superior numbers though 'twas known that they did not have as great an army as we. And at last our King could contain himself no longer. His great red beard bristled and his mighty fist crashed down on the table. He roared in a voice of thunder.

"By the Almighty! Do we have an army or a rabble! Why do they not move on that infernal Brian and crush him once and for all? Why, I ask you? Why?"

My master faced him calmly as I did try, though I confess I was quaking inside.

"They have moved time and again, Sire, but always Brian eludes them."

"That I know. But how? Is he a greater warrior than my knights? Is he a greater warrior than I?"

"Nay, Sire, nay. But long have I studied the reports and at last I think I see a pattern."

"Speak on, man. Speak!"

"No matter where we move in strength, there he is not. But where we leave a weak garrison, there he attacks. He could do that only if he knew our plans."

"Mean you there is a traitor in our midst?" The King's words were low and intense — more frightening even than his roar.

"That I doubt. Your men are trusted. But a spy . . ."

"A spy! How like that black-hearted scoundrel to use so un-British a device." His anger quieted and he toyed with his beard. "But how, Merlin? How could a spy learn our secret plans?"

"That too, I think I know. Were I but with the army I could seek him out."

"Then you shall be with the army. Come, Merlin. Come, Alaric. We ride at dawn."

And at dawn we rode. Our King, my master with full saddlebags, a dozen squires and men-at-arms. Hard we rode, and fast and long. At night I could scarce sit to eat my meal. And at last we reached the army unannounced as night was falling.

Our King strode into the great tent where the captains were assembled. He pushed up his visor and glared at them.

"What manner of knights are you? Unable to crush an army half your strength."

They leaped to their feet, looking for all the world like a group of stable-boys caught gaming at dice.

Sir Launcelot spoke: "Your Majesty, if there be fault it is ours. The men are full brave and eager. But fighting this Brian is like fighting a flea. Where you strike, there he is not."

"So," roared our King, "I must travel across half of Britain to teach you how to catch a flea."

"Nay, Sire, I did not mean . . ."

"Enough! If we cannot win by force, then we must win by sorcery. Merlin, take charge."

Dark were the flushes on the cheeks of the fighting men. For in the past most of them had matched wits with my master, and had always been the losers. But ere long their resentment died, for Merlin spoke to them softly and reasonably. And they were men of great courage who could listen to reason.

"In this tent you plan your campaigns?"

"Aye."

"And 'tis well guarded that none may eavesdrop?"

"Aye. 'Tis not well that our men know of the plans too early."

"Do these plannings last long?"

"Surely, good Merlin. One does not map out a battle in a moment."

"Then during these plannings you must need refreshment?"

"Aye. 'Tis a dry business."

"Who, then, furnishes the refreshment?"

"Why, the serving-men, of course."

"Then others *are* present while the battles are being talked of?"

The light of understanding came into their eyes. Our King spoke softly.

"The serving-men. By the Saints, 'tis one of the serving-men who betrayed us." Then in his great voice, "Ho! The guards! Fetch in the serving-men. And the chief steward!"

And in a trice they were brought. Six lads clad in leather jerkins, with the white napkin which was the symbol of their rank at their belts, and behind them a little fat man whose belly was enough to denote him chief steward.

They lined up before our King with eyes downcast. He looked at them full long.

"One of you has betrayed me. One of you has eaten my salt and betrayed me to my enemy. Speak! Which of you is the Judas?"

There was a tremor in the line, but none spoke. King Arthur turned to the chief steward.

"Bare their backs. A taste of my riding crop and we shall know the guilty one."

Merlin touched his elbow.

"Sire, under pain they will all confess. And we will be none the wiser."

"Then hang them all! We will rid this camp of vermin."

"And you will carry to your grave the killing of five innocent men."

Our King sat down heavily. He put his hand to his eyes.

"Then how? How will we know which to hang?"

"Allow me, Sire. Alaric, my saddlebags."

I brought them to him with haste. He took therefrom a jar, in the likes of which good wives store treacle. He poured from it on the ground, forming a circle about the six servingmen.

"And now, remove the torches."

When this was done, the tent became not dark as would be expected. But the circle about the serving-men glowed green, filling the tent with a fearsome light. I could see fear on the faces of all. But they could not know, as did I, that the magic circle was but foxfire mixed with honey.

My master said slowly, in deep tones, "There you stand within a circle of fire. And the spirit of fire will seek out the guilty one. . . . Hold out your right hands!"

Six trembling hands were extended. Into each Merlin dropped a white stone the size of two thumbs.

"Clasp the stone tightly. If you are innocent you have nothing to fear. But the spirit of fire will have no mercy on the guilty one. Tightly, I say, more tightly!"

For full a hundred heartbeats they stood clasping the stones. Then gre drops of sweat began to form forehead of one. He clenc as in pain. The finge slowly opened, as though will. The stone fell to the g taking the there in the palm of his ha uld make great blister, as though he he'd only holding a red-hot coal. erry was

"Bring in the torches," cri d to get master. escrip-

This was done. The lad stood t staring at his hand in disbelief. e for

"Who is this wretch?" asked our ke King of the chief steward.

"He is one Richard Dale, Your Majesty."

"And where did he come from?"

"He was assigned me by Sir Marvin."

"Then call Sir Marvin and let him explain."

"That he cannot do. Sir Marvin was killed in the first day of fighting."

"Then you know not that Sir Marvin truly assigned him?"

"He came to me saying that. I was in sore need of serving-men and took him."

"You could not know," said our King. Then wearily, "Take the lad to the hangsman."

Then for the first time the lad spoke. He squared his shoulders and looked our King full in the eyes.

"Nay, Sire. Condemn not Robert dhu Brian to so base a death."

"Robert dhu Brian? Sir Brian's nephew. Very well, then. Execute him with honor at dawn."

They took him away. Could I but been... that after his death the war was gumshoe ... over! But 'twould not be so. force, but he ... gullible. He was ne... ain's army met with de- against all logic and ..., but many weary thought Ellen D... to pass ere all his follow- truth. Perhaps ... arched out and found. artless honest... e way home, naught was the woman's ... of the events that had trans- he was jus... 'Tis not well for sorcerers to dis- blondes. ... eir art before those not versed ...agical lore. But at last we were Whatev... e in our chambers. Merlin was side corro... ning back in his great chair, staring of hun... at the ceiling. yo...

"Master, you have not taught me to control the spirit of fire."

He looked at me.

"There is no spirit of fire." He thought a moment. "No, I am wrong. There is a spirit of fire, but not a supernatural one. You know the natural spirit full well."

"I do?"

I tried to remember all he had taught me, but I remembered not that. He reached into a box beside him and tossed me a white stone.

"Hold that in your hand. Tightly."

I grasped the stone. In a moment I felt it becoming warm. Then hot. In alarm, I dropped it. My palm was already red.

"Examine it."

I picked up the stone carefully. It was now cool but my palm was still hot. 'Twas but a piece of sandstone. I smelled it and understanding came.

"Mustard," I exclaimed. "The spirit of fire is naught but the spirit of mustard which burns the skin even as fire."

"Aye. One stone was soaked in oil of mustard and I had but to drop it into the hand of the guilty one."

I smiled to myself at having been able to riddle the secret. And 'twas minutes before I realized that I had not riddled the full secret.

"The guilty one, Master? How could you tell to which serving-man to give the stone?"

Merlin smiled.

"As I gave the stones, I examined their hands. That of a serf or even a freedman is horny with toil. Only a noble could have had a hand as soft as that of Robert dhu Brian."

We purchased the reprint rights to Mary Brinker Post's "That's the Man!" because we thought it a rather unorthodox example of the type of story that usually appears in national women's magazines — the psychological study of crime and suspicion in the sophisticated, Country Club jungle of modern civilization. It wasn't until after we had scheduled the story that we learned Martha Foley had rated it one of the 28 best short stories published in American magazines during 1948, and had included it in her annual anthology with stories by Dorothy Canfield, John Hersey, Victoria Lincoln, Wallace Stegner, Eudora Welty, E. B. White, and others . . . Mrs. Post was born in Seattle, Washington, in 1906. She was 25 when her first short story was published, and since that auspicious beginning her work has appeared in "Good Housekeeping," "Cosmopolitan," "Woman's Home Companion," "Seventeen," and "Prairie Schooner." She has also done free-lance writing for several well-known radio programs and has been an assistant editor for a women's magazine. In 1948, Doubleday published her novel, ANNIE JORDAN, *which was a selection of the Dollar Book Club. "That's the Man!" is Mary Brinker Post's fourth short story to be listed in the O'Brien-Foley "Roll of Honor."*

THAT'S THE MAN!

by MARY BRINKER POST

THEY HAD STAYED LATER THAN they'd planned at the Boltons' party. Russell made one or two overtures toward leaving earlier in the evening, but Evelyn was having such a good time she only waved him away, pleading, "I haven't been to such a nice party in months. Don't be stuffy and remind me how early we have to get up tomorrow."

So he'd let her stay till she was ready to go, though he couldn't help thinking how hard it was going to be to catch the 7:55 in the morning. He toyed with the idea of taking the 8:31 instead, but that would make him late to the office, and he'd only done that once, the time Terry was sick in the night and he'd had to get the druggist out of bed for a prescription.

Russell didn't like being late for work or appointments. He didn't like anything that interfered with the carefully planned, orderly pattern of his life. It wasn't that he was stuffy, as Evelyn sometimes kidded him. It wasn't that at all. He had a sort of,

well, ideal, you might call it, of how he wanted to be.

A good, hard-working, orderly life was his goal and he thought he'd accomplished it. He paid his bills promptly, never overdrew his bank account, was in his pew every Sunday, never took more than two cocktails at parties, was a faithful husband and a kind, if firm, father. He and Evelyn belonged to two good clubs, and their circle of friends, while not wide, was select and pleasant. Their children were charming and well-brought-up. The Kents were looked up to in the community and certainly that was well worth the effort.

"It's nearly 2 o'clock, Evelyn," he said a shade reproachfully, as they drove into their driveway.

"What if it is?" sighed Evelyn happily. "I had a wonderful time, didn't you?"

"Well, yes, I did. But it's going to be tough getting up at 6:30." He put on the brake, left the motor running, reached over and opened the door for his wife. "Send Betty out right away, will you, dear?"

Betty was the fifteen-year-old sitter who lived on the next lane. Russell was always punctilious about taking the girls who stayed with the children home at night. Some of their friends let them walk up the lane alone, but Russell disapproved of that. The lane was perfectly safe, of course. In fact, the whole community was safe. There hadn't been a crime, outside of schoolboys breaking into summer houses or stealing a car occasionally, since the Kents had moved there. But still, Russell wouldn't want his daughter walking home in the dark and he didn't feel right about letting other people's daughters go home alone, either.

Betty got into the car, yawning.

"I'm sorry we kept you up so late, Betty," he said.

She giggled. "Oh, that's all right, Mr. Kent. I watched television and then I took a nap on the sofa. Last week when I stayed with the Middletons' kids I didn't get home till 3."

"I'll pay you now, Betty. Fifty cents an hour up to midnight and sixty cents for the rest of the time."

"Gee, thanks, Mr. Kent."

Russell was always very fair about paying their sitters overtime after 12. As a result of that and his care in taking them home, the Kents never had any trouble getting girls to stay with the children.

He saw Betty up to the door, waited till she was safely inside, then got into the car and started home.

It was a warm, August night and the moon was full. He drove with the window down, breathing the soft, fragrant air that smelled marvelously of meadow grass, honeysuckle, and the Sound. The sky was very light, and the moon shining through the trees cast a network of black, lacy shadows upon the lane. It reminded him of the night he proposed to Evelyn. There had been that white moon and the smell of honeysuckle and Evelyn's pretty, slender face, pale in the moonlight. Just before he came to their

road he had a glimpse of the Sound, breathless and shimmering. His heart leaped at its unearthly beauty.

Afterward he couldn't explain why to anyone else, though it may have been because he was thinking about Evelyn and the days of their courtship, or because the party had overstimulated him, or because he'd been working too hard at the office and he needed to get alone for a few minutes, but he didn't go right home. Instead of turning off onto their road, he drove straight down the lane to the beach, snapped off the engine and lights, and sat in the car, gazing at the water under the spell of the great white moon. The tide was out and the beach was pure silver. Far out, ripples caught the moonlight in a glittering net that dazzled the eyes. The night was utterly still. The softly moving water made no sound as it pushed gently at the sand.

Russell had the curious feeling that he had stumbled upon a secret and mysterious scene, a hidden life that went on when human beings were safely in their beds. There was something compelling and haunting in the moon-washed beach, the dancing ripples, the dark waiting trees along the shore. It was almost as if there were a Presence there, something powerful and unknown, that held all the earth by shimmering, silver strings.

He didn't know how long he stayed, mesmerized by the scene, but at last he turned on the ignition and swung the car back up the lane. He was conscious of a vague feeling of unrest and longing as he drove into the garage and went into the house.

Evelyn was already in bed when he came up and she lifted her head from the pillow and stared at him. "For heaven's sakes, where have you been? What took you so long? You've been gone nearly an hour."

He was still under the spell of the moonlight and he didn't answer right away. He took the change out of his pockets and laid it on the dresser, along with his watch and keys, then began slowly to undress.

"Oh, well, if you don't want to tell me," she said sulkily.

"I wasn't anywhere," he answered. "I mean — I just drove down to the beach to look at the moon on the water." He turned and smiled at her oddly. "It was a glorious sight."

She laughed. "What are you doing, going romantic in your old age? I thought you couldn't wait to get home and go to bed. Were you alone?"

He frowned. "Of course I was alone. I took Betty home and as I was about to turn off onto our lane I saw the Sound. I don't know what made me drive down to the beach. But it was a sight worth seeing."

He hadn't gone to sleep yet, he was still thinking about the moonlit beach, but he must have been in a sort of doze, because at first he didn't pay any attention to the knocking on the door. Then the knocker thudded again and the pounding began. Evelyn stirred beside him, got up on one elbow and whispered sharply, "Russell, what was that?"

"Someone seems to be knocking on the door," he replied, still not moving.

"Knocking? Goodness, they're pounding the house down. Who on earth can it be?" Her voice sounded frightened.

He threw off the covers, groped for his slippers. "I'd better go down and see."

"Be careful, Russell. Ask who it is before you open the door," she cautioned.

He switched on the hall light, pulled on his bathrobe, and went downstairs. "Who is it?" he called, his hand on the doorknob.

"The police," said a harsh voice outside. "Sorry to trouble you, Mr. Kent," apologized Sergeant Henderson, after Russell had opened the door and stood staring in amazement at the uniformed officer on the porch.

"But what is it? What do you want at this hour of the night, Henderson?" cried Russell.

"Just want to ask you a few questions. Can I come in?"

"Very well." The Sergeant stepped into the hall and Russell closed the door. He turned on the bridge lamp in the living room and the officer followed him.

"Have a chair," said Russell, and Henderson sat down on the sofa. Russell took the armchair by the lamp and not until Henderson began firing questions at him did he realize it had been a mistake to sit there with the light full on his face.

"Now, what's it all about?" he demanded, offering the policeman a cigarette. Henderson declined and Russell lit one for himself. As he glanced up over the match flame he noticed that the officer was staring at his hands. A vague disquietude began to filter slowly into his mind. "Has there been an accident or something?" he asked.

"Well, not exactly an accident," said Henderson slowly. "I'll tell you all about it after you've answered a few questions. You don't object, do you?"

"To answering your questions?" snapped Russell irritably, wondering why the fellow was being so indirect. "Certainly not, but I don't mind telling you I'm anxious to get back to bed. I have to catch an early train in the morning."

"I'll be as brief as I can." Henderson leaned forward in his chair and his eyes were fixed on Russell's face. "When did you retire tonight?"

"About half an hour ago, I should say. Though I can't see what business it is —"

"You will. Please just answer my questions, Mr. Kent. I realize what a nuisance this is and it's really only a matter of routine. But we have to check all the angles. I'm sure you have nothing to worry about," replied the officer calmly, still in an apologetic voice.

Russell stared at him and something queer and cold caught at his throat. Why should there be anything for him to worry about?

"Were you out tonight?"

Russell nodded. "My wife and I

were at a party at Vincent Bolton's. We returned home a little after 2." Instinctively a guarded note had crept into his voice.

"Did you go right home after returning from the party?"

"Certainly," retorted Russell brusquely. He was annoyed at the uneasiness he was beginning to feel.

"H'm." The officer studied his face for a moment. "Then I wonder why, if you returned from the party a little after 2, the engine of your car should still be warm at 3:30."

"My car?" Russell shot him a startled glance.

"Yes, sir. We took the liberty of examining your car before getting you up." Henderson was still regarding him with a keen, thoughtful look.

Russell felt his face flushing. A wave of indignation went over him. What right did the police think they had, going around at this hour, examining the cars of respectable taxpayers? He burst out in an offended voice, "What's the idea, going into my garage and examining my car? What were you looking for?"

"Just checking on your license and finding out whether your car had been used recently tonight," replied the officer deliberately. "You say you came right home from the party and went to bed?"

Russell flushed, stammered. "Well, I — I didn't go right to bed when I brought my wife home. As a matter of fact, I took Betty, the sitter, home after that."

"Then exactly what time would you say you put the car in the garage?"

"Around quarter to 3, I suppose."

Henderson looked worried and puzzled. "How far away does this girl, Betty, live?"

"Oh, just up the next lane."

"Then it would take you not more than five to eight minutes to take her home and return?"

Russell snubbed out his cigarette, lit another. This time his hand shook slightly, though he willed it not to. Lord, he thought, what's the matter with me? I don't know what this bird is after, but I've done nothing to be afraid of. "That's about right," he mumbled.

"Then what were you doing between a few minutes after 2 when you took Betty home and a quarter to 3 when you admit you returned to your house and put away the car?" There was a curious triumphant note in the policeman's voice and his eyes probed Russell's face.

"Well, I — I drove down to the beach to look at the moonlight on the water. It's — it's magnificent tonight." His throat was dry and constricted, and the airy gesture he tried to make to put himself at ease didn't quite come off.

"I see," said Henderson, and got up.

"Look here," cried Russell sharply, his nerves tingling. "What *is* all this? Why are you shooting these questions at me?"

"I'll tell you, Mr. Kent," said the officer in a grave voice. "A girl was raped tonight over in the Eastwood

section of town on her way home from a late party, and the man drove away in a Chrysler sedan. The girl got the license number and when we called Motor Vehicle headquarters it tallied with yours."

"Good lord!" gasped Russell, sinking back into his chair.

"You certainly don't believe that my husband had anything to do with such a horrible thing, do you?" Evelyn had come downstairs in her dressing gown and stood white-faced and blazing-eyed in the doorway.

Both men turned to look at her as she swept into the room. Russell suddenly felt warm and confident again. "It's ridiculous, of course, my dear. There must be some mistake." He turned and smiled easily at the officer. "Sergeant, you haven't answered my wife. Do you think I had anything to do with it?"

Henderson looked embarrassed. Obviously he disliked discussing such a case before a lady. He cleared his throat, said apologetically, "Of course, I don't, Mr. Kent. I'm sorry to have bothered you, but I've got a job to do. Have to check all the angles. And what else could I do when the girl was so positive about the license?"

"She was probably hysterical," said Evelyn firmly, "and got the numbers wrong. At a time like that I don't see how she could possibly remember a license as long as ours."

"It's possible," said Henderson respectfully but equally firmly. "Some people have remarkable memories for numbers."

"Well," said Russell, having got to his feet when Evelyn appeared, "I hope I've answered all your questions to your satisfaction. And now if that's all, my wife and I really would like to retire."

"I-I'm awfully sorry, sir, but there's one more thing." The officer hesitated, looked at Russell.

"Well, what is it?" The fear that had been creeping over him had vanished when Evelyn came down. Her indignation and the patronizing way she'd put Henderson in his place had restored his confidence and brought back all his irritation at the intrusion.

"The girl is outside in the police car with Burke. Would you come out and let her take a look at you?"

Evelyn drew in a sharp breath. "You mean that Mr. Kent should subject himself to an identification? This is most insulting. My husband is a respected citizen of this town. He is a family man, a taxpayer. I've never heard of anything so insolent."

Russell saw Henderson's lips tighten. His voice when he spoke was edged, no longer humble. "I'm sorry, ma'am, but the girl has been more than insulted. I wouldn't ask Mr. Kent to do this if I weren't sure he is innocent. I could simply take him down to the station and book him on suspicion."

Evelyn gasped, gave Russell a frightened look. He laughed, put his hand on her arm. "My dear, there's nothing to worry about. Of course, I'll go outside with you, Henderson, and let the poor girl take a good look."

"Thank you, sir," murmured the officer, and he and Russell went out the door.

The prowl car was in the driveway, and Russell waited on the porch while Henderson went over and spoke to the policeman in the driver's seat.

"Will you step over here, sir?" he called, and Russell walked down and stood in the driveway. The car lights went on and he blinked as the full glare was focused on him.

The car door opened and a disheveled young woman in a torn white dress got out and came toward him. His heart began to pound and he realized he was holding his breath. The palms of his hands were wet with sweat as the girl stared up into his face with wide, tear-stained eyes.

"Well?" asked Henderson quietly. "Is this the man?"

The girl hesitated, stepped closer, pushing the dark, tangled hair off her forehead with a trembling hand. "I — I —" she began. "He was about that tall and blond — sort of good-looking, like him. . . ."

"You've got to be positive, miss," cautioned Henderson patiently. "This is a serious charge to bring against a man."

"Let me — smell his hair," she whispered. "He used a funny smelling hair lotion."

Russell bent stiffly while the girl's face came close to him. Suddenly she shuddered and drew back, sobbing. "Yes!" she cried, bursting into tears. "He's the one. Oh, I'm sure he's the one."

Henderson took her back to the car and then he walked over to Russell who stood frozen to the driveway, his heart suffocating him.

"I'll have to take you with me, Kent," said the officer brusquely.

"But it's utterly ridiculous! I swear to you I never saw that girl in my life. I wasn't in Eastwood tonight. Everything I told you in the house is true," burst out Russell.

"If it weren't for the license —" began Henderson, wavering, "and the fact that your car had been out —"

"I explained all that and she's simply made a mistake about the license, got the numbers wrong," cried Russell.

"Maybe. But she's positive you're the man. Tall, blond, good-looking. And then the hair lotion. I noticed it myself. It's got a distinctive odor."

"Other men use it. It comes from the men's shop at Saks. Anybody can buy it!" He knew he was babbling, losing control. He felt trapped, hemmed-in. His eyes darted instinctively for a place to run to. Henderson's hand was on his arm.

"You'd better go inside and dress. I'll wait downstairs."

Evelyn jumped up from the sofa when they came in. Her eyes searched Russell's face in a questioning look. He couldn't meet her gaze. Suddenly he felt guilty, as if he really were the man. He started upstairs and she ran to him, grabbed his hand.

"Russell, where are you going? Why did Henderson come back in with you?" she cried.

"I have to take him to the station, Mrs. Kent. The girl has positively identified him as the man," said Henderson.

"Oh!" moaned Evelyn, and dropped Russell's hand as if it were a snake. Russell gave her a queer look and when she tried to take his hand again, he pulled it away. Now he felt completely alone. For one moment, at least, though she probably would never admit it, his wife had believed him guilty.

He went upstairs heavily, shut the door behind him, and sat down on the bed with his head in his hands, trying to think what he should do. The feeling of being trapped began to suffocate him again and he jumped up, looking wildly about the room. There must be something he could do. Some way to escape. He went to the window and saw the police car in the driveway.

I'm acting like a fool, he thought. I've got plenty of friends in this town. They won't let a thing like this happen to me. Quentin Lewis — he's the one. I'll call him. Good old Quent. I did a favor for him once — put up his name at the Beach Club. He's got influence, he's in politics or something.

Russell grabbed the telephone directory, thumbed through it feverishly. It took a long time to get the number. The phone rang and rang and at last a sleepy voice answered.

"Quent? This is Russell Kent."

The voice muttered something and Russell went on in a rush of words. "I'm in trouble, Quent. There's been a fool mistake. I'm being arrested for something I didn't do. Isn't there something you can do to help me? You've got influence around here."

"Are you drunk, Russ?" asked the voice irritably. "Because if you are, go back to bed and stop ringing up people in the middle of the night."

"I'm not drunk, Quent. You've got to listen to me. The police are downstairs and they're taking me to the station. A girl got my license number mixed with another guy's — the fellow who did it — and they're holding me. But I didn't do it, Quent. Anybody who knows me would know that."

"What're they holding you for, Russell?"

"Rape. But, good lord, Quent, you know I didn't do that."

There was a long pause and finally Russell said, "Quent? Are you still there?"

"Russ, I'm sorry as the devil, but there's not a thing I can do on a charge like that. I couldn't monkey with it. But if it's a false arrest, why don't you call a good lawyer?"

"You won't help me," said Russell bitterly.

"I don't see how I can. Awfully sorry, old man."

Russell put down the phone while Quentin Lewis was still explaining how sorry he was.

As he dressed mechanically, with stiff fingers, he could hear Evelyn downstairs, weeping and pleading. And when he came down, ready to go, she flung herself on him, sobbing.

He put her away from him gently. "Call Vincent Bolton, he'll know what to do. He's not a criminal lawyer, but he's good."

Russell spent the rest of the night in the town jail. When Henderson brought him into the station, the Chief, who belonged to the Gun Club and had often shot clay pigeons with Russell, looked at him as if he'd never seen him before. Russell had intended appealing to him on the strength of their acquaintance at the Club, but he was so stunned by the blank coldness in the Chief's eyes that he couldn't think of anything to say.

Henderson locked him into the narrow, bare cell that smelled of strong antiseptics, and left him. There was a drunk in the next cell who kept yelling obscene songs and cursing. Russell didn't try to sleep and since they'd let him keep his cigarettes, he smoked continually, pacing up and down, trying to figure out what had happened to him and why. Just before dawn it turned cold, or at least it seemed so to him. He began to shiver and his hands were like ice, so he wrapped the one thin blanket around his shoulders and sat on the edge of the cot.

He couldn't figure it out at all and the harder he tried the more confused he got. It was one of those hideous mistakes, those gross miscarriages of justice that you read about — innocent men being executed and the real criminals going scot-free. "But that it should happen to *me*," he groaned.

No one had tried harder to be a good citizen, to live respectably and decently. For years he'd been building up something that he thought impregnable and beyond reproach — a good name, a solid position in the community. Now it had all crumbled through a fluke, a bit of circumstantial evidence and the word of a hysterical girl.

If he hadn't had the impulse to go down to the beach to look at the moon, the car motor wouldn't have been still warm and Henderson would have realized that the girl had made a mistake.

What does respectability mean? he asked the narrow walls. How much good is it, if at one false accusation it can fall to pieces like a house of cards?

He got up and began to pace again, trailing the blanket after him. He stared out the barred window at the shell-pink dawn, mumbling to himself, "People are wolves, that's what they are, all ready to tear each other to pieces. How secure are we? Do we live in a jungle?" He gripped the bars until his knuckles were white, and suddenly he began to weep . . .

Vincent Bolton came to see him shortly after 7 that morning. He looked sleek, rested, well groomed. He shook Russell's hand warmly, but his pink, closely-shaven face was embarrassed and his eyes avoided Russell's.

"This is a terrible thing, Russ," he boomed. "I couldn't believe it when Evelyn called me. Sorry I didn't get down sooner, but there wasn't anything I could do till morning."

So you went back to sleep, rolled over on your fat back, while I was sweating it out here alone, thought Russell, but he only nodded.

"I'll have you out of here before noon, old man. Just give me time to raise bail."

Russell caught his eye at last, fixed him with a direct, steady gaze. "Just tell me one thing, Vincent," he said. "You don't think I did it, do you?"

The lawyer cleared his throat, ran his tongue over his moist lips. There was just a fraction of a moment before he laughed heartily and cried, "Of course not, Russ, of course not. It's definitely a case of mistaken identity. Now don't you worry about a thing. I'll get you out of this."

Russell nodded and turned toward the window. Vincent followed him and patted his shoulder.

It was afternoon when Vincent came back and took Russell home, released on bail. He got into the front seat of Bolton's car, pulling his hat down over his eyes and his coat collar up and staring straight ahead all the way.

Evelyn met them at the door and when she saw Russell she burst into tears and threw her arms around him. He patted her arm and murmured something, but he didn't return her embrace or kiss her. He went into the house, hung his hat in the closet, and went upstairs to the bathroom to brush his teeth. He'd been longing to do it all day.

When he glanced at himself in the mirror, he got a shock. He needed a shave, his face looked pale and dirty, and his hair was wildly rumpled. The eyes that looked back at him from the mirror were bloodshot, with purplish-like shadows under them, and his mouth quivered nervously. *I look like a criminal*, he thought.

Evelyn fussed over him nervously, trying to make him eat, assuring him over and over again that everything would be all right, that Vincent would get him out of it.

"For heaven's sake, Evelyn," he cried at last, "stop fussing over me. And do you have to keep laughing?"

She went white and tears came into her eyes and he stamped upstairs and went to bed. Even there she wouldn't let him alone. She came and sat on the bed, talking to him in a low, conspiratorial voice. "I phoned the office this morning, Russell. I just told them you were ill and might have to stay home for several days. Was that all right? I thought I'd better tell them something."

He grunted assent and turned toward the wall. "I want you to know, darling, that I believe in you. I never for a moment thought any differently," she said. He wanted to laugh or to slap her. What about that moment last night when you dropped my hand as if it were a toad? But he only turned his head and gave her a long look until her eyes wavered, and she got up and went out of the room. Then he pulled the sheet over his head to shut out the afternoon light and went to sleep.

He slept deeply and heavily and

what wakened him was the telephone. He waited for Evelyn to answer it and when it went on ringing, he got up and answered it himself. It was Bolton and his voice was triumphant.

"I told you I'd break this case, Russ. The girl admitted under prolonged questioning that she wasn't positive you were the right man. She even said she wasn't exactly sure she'd got the license number right. The police just picked up a fellow in a Chrysler sedan with a license the same as yours except for two numbers. He hasn't got an alibi for last night and Henderson is pretty sure he's the guy. He'd been drinking and he doesn't remember where he was or what he did last night. He admitted having stopped for a drink at the Eastwood Tavern, near where the girl said she was attacked. They're bringing the girl in to identify him now. I'll call you after she's seen him."

"Okay, Vincent," said Russell, then added wearily, "Thanks," and hung up the receiver. He sat at the telephone, staring at the wall. He supposed he should feel gratitude and relief. No doubt Vincent wondered why he hadn't said more, praised him for his good work. The fact was, he didn't feel anything at all, just a complete and desolate emptiness.

When Evelyn came back from picking up the children at school, he told her and she broke into a wild torrent of weeping. She grabbed his hand and kissed it, crying, "Oh, darling, I'm so glad, so glad. If you only knew what I've been through!"

He smiled wanly and pulled his hand away, pretending he wanted to light a cigarette. "I can imagine," he said.

The fellow the police picked up confessed after the girl had positively identified him, and Vincent wanted to sue for false arrest. But Russell just wanted to forget the whole thing.

But you can't forget a thing just because you want to. The morning paper had carried the story of his arrest on a "statutory charge," as the press so delicately puts it, and while his boss accepted his explanation, expressed sympathy for his ordeal and said forget it, Russell didn't get the promotion he'd been promised on the first of the year.

The weekend after his arrest there was a big affair at the Beach Club, dinner and dancing afterward. The Kents had already been invited to make up a party at one of the tables.

"I think we should go, dear," said Evelyn in the serious, rather gentle voice she used now. "I mean, it wouldn't look well for us to stay away because of what happened. Then people *would* have something to talk about."

He couldn't explain to her how he felt about people now — their friends, all the people they knew — the way he'd felt ever since that ghastly ride back from the jail when he'd felt everyone was staring at him.

"All right, Evelyn, if you feel we should," he said.

"Well, Jane Brody phoned today to remind us we were sitting at their

table, but I suppose it was really to find out if we were going. I had to say yes, of course."

"Okay. Since it's all settled." He didn't want to talk about it. He didn't want to think about it and sometimes for a short while he managed not to, but then something would bring it back into his mind and his palms would begin to sweat.

He dressed very carefully and deliberately the night of the party, as if by being impeccably groomed he could escape the stigma that seemed to him must surround him. For the first time in his life he wanted a drink badly. But he didn't take one at home. He felt the need to be clear-headed.

Evelyn seemed to sense the mounting tension in him, though he said nothing. "After all, dear," she whispered, as they walked into the Club, "they're our friends, you know."

He thought of how he'd asked Quentin Lewis to help him and been turned down. He thought of the embarrassed way Vincent Bolton had patted his shoulder that morning in jail. "Yes," he said, "they're our friends."

Evelyn went into the powder room to leave her wraps and put on another dab of make-up. Russell left his coat and hat in the men's room. A couple of men were there washing their hands and laughing at some joke. When they saw Russell they stopped laughing and glanced at each other. He didn't know them very well, but on other occasions they'd always spoken. He hung up his coat and hat, and went out quickly.

Evelyn hadn't appeared yet when he came out into the club lounge. He saw, out of the corner of his eye, Jane Brody glance toward him and then turn quickly and begin to talk animatedly to the woman beside her.

There were several men grouped around the fireplace and since it was a cool, foggy night, the fire felt good in the big drafty room. Russell went over toward them. He wondered if it was just his imagination, but by the time he got there, they had left their chairs and were moving into the dining room. Only Peter Knowles, a wispy little man who'd always fawned on Russell for some reason, was left sitting by himself, smoking a cigarette. Russell went up to him, carefully arranging a smile on his face. "Hello, Peter," he cried heartily, holding out his hand.

Peter looked up in surprise, not used to being sought out. "Why — uh — hullo, Russell," he said, smiling and blinking his eyes. Then, as if he'd made a social blunder, a painful blush spread over his face. "How — how are you?" He looked everywhere but at Russell and when Russell sat down in the chair beside him, he suddenly glanced at his watch, tossed his cigarette into the fire, and got up with a jerk. "Excuse me, will you, Russ? I've got to make a phone call." He had been too flustered to notice Russell's outstretched hand and, as if it were offensive, Russell instinctively put it in his pocket.

He sat alone, smoking, until Evelyn came looking for him. "Come on, dear. Everyone's going into the bar."

For a minute he didn't answer because he was thinking, I could walk out now, while they're all in the bar, and no one would notice. But then he saw how anxiously Evelyn was looking at him and he thought, No, it wouldn't be fair to embarrass Evelyn that way. So he went with her into the bar, taking her arm, not so much out of politeness as for the need to feel someone close to him.

Jane's party had taken one of the small tables and there was just room for them to squeeze in. Jane said brightly, "Hurry up, we're already one up on you," and the others smiled vaguely and went on talking to each other. Evelyn, with a woman's social aplomb, began to chat with the woman next to her, but the man beside Russell was Quentin Lewis and he only nodded to Russell and went on telling a story to the rest of the men. Russell sat sipping his cocktail and when the men laughed at Quentin's story, he laughed too, though he hadn't been listening. Since he wasn't talking much, he had several cocktails.

It was like that all through dinner, although now and then someone would say something to Russell, as if suddenly aware that he was at the party too. The food at the Club was always excellent, but he didn't know what he was eating and it was hard to get it down. When the dancing started, as soon as the tables were cleared, Steve Brody asked Evelyn to dance and Russell turned to Jane, but she was already stepping out with Quentin. The only woman left was plump little Mrs. Taylor and she carefully avoided Russell's glance.

He sat for a while, smoking and watching the dancers, but when the orchestra played the same number over again and no one came back to the table, he cleared his throat and mumbled, "Care to dance, Sally?"

For a moment he thought she wasn't going to answer, then she turned with a nervous smile and said, "Oh, no, thank you. I — I think this one's a bit too fast for me."

"The next waltz then?"

"I — I'm sorry, Russell, but I promised the next one to my husband," she answered and then got up abruptly, murmuring, "Will you excuse me, please? I think I'll go powder my nose."

Russell got to his feet when she did, but he didn't sit down again. He stood, gripping the back of his chair, fighting down an almost uncontrollable impulse to throw the chair at her, to tip over the table, to break furniture. His knuckles were white when he finally let go and slowly and carefully walked into the bar.

"Rye and soda," he said to the bartender.

"Yes, *sir*," replied the bartender cheerfully. He was a new man who hadn't been at the Club long. He didn't know the names of many of the members. With a curious feeling of relief, Russell realized that he didn't

know him. He tossed off the small glass of whiskey, held out his glass.

"Another, please. Make it a double one, this time."

"Right you are, sir." The bartender had a hearty Irish face, his voice was friendly.

The second whiskey began to creep over Russell pleasantly, warming him, relaxing his tense muscles. He ordered a third, but this one he took slowly and then he began to talk.

"I suppose you're a hard-working fellow, trying to get ahead in the world," he said to the bartender.

"Well, sir, I do my best," he grinned.

"Pay your bills. Never beat your wife. Go to church. Get to work on time. All the rest of it." Russell waved his hand.

"That's right, sir."

Russell shook his head. "Doesn't pay, Joe. Doesn't make a bit of difference. What is respectability? It's a house built on sand. It's a bubble and if you touch it, it'll go to pieces." He finished his drink slowly, then gazed sadly at the bartender. "Go ahead — work hard. Try to be decent and respectable. Make a place for yourself in the community. No good. No good at all. Want me to tell you why?"

He gave the bartender a long look. "Because society . . . society is made up of wolves, just waiting for a chance to pull you to pieces. Think you're safe? You're not, Joe. Nobody's safe. Know why? I'll tell you why. Because we live in a jungle. A damned jungle."

The bartender had a fixed smile on his face and he was looking over Russell's head. Russell turned and saw Jane Brody, Steve, and the Quentin Lewises at the door, about to come in. They looked pained and embarrassed, and Jane started to say something to her husband.

Russell laughed drunkenly. "There they are, Joe. All my friends, my dear, dear friends. That's what *you* think. Know what they are? They're wolves. Wolves!"

He picked up his empty glass and threw it with all his might against the wall, shattering it. Jane Brody screamed and he saw Evelyn running toward him, her face white. He lurched away from the bar and there were tears in his eyes. "Come on, Evelyn," he said, "let's go home."

RAFFLES AND THE DEATH DATE

by BARRY PEROWNE

A MATCH FLARED IN THE DARK CAB. The hoofs of the trotting horse sounded a rapid rhythm. Raffles held the match in cupped hands to the man sitting opposite him. The light glimmered on Henry Saulsby's young, hard, arrogant face, and glinted on his rimless eyeglass, as he dipped his cigarette to the flame.

"Thanks," he said.

Norris Peters's face, lined and clever, came into view as he took his turn at the match. Then Raffles held it for me, sitting beside him. Lastly, he lighted his own cigarette, and glanced from the window as he flicked out the spent match.

"Just passing Kensington Gardens," he said.

It was an evening in early March, cold and drizzly. The four of us sharing the cab had been at the same school in our time, a famous public school on the outskirts of London. We had run into each other this afternoon while watching the school's current team wind up its rugby season.

Saulsby, who had told us he had recently returned from three years of travelling abroad, had been at the school a bit later than Raffles and me. Peters, a successful barrister, had been there long before us. Though both were members of a Pall Mall club we belonged to, we knew neither man well. We were just sharing the cab with them, back to town.

"I'm going to the club for dinner," Peters said. "Any of you going there?"

"I am," said Saulsby.

"Raffles? Manders?" Peters asked.

"Sorry, we've an engagement," said Raffles. "In fact, we get out here."

He called to the driver, who reined in his horse with a jingle of harness. This was the first I had heard of our having an engagement, and I was surprised and none too pleased. I had had no idea, anyway, why Raffles suddenly had taken it into his head that, for the first time in the eight years since we had left the school, we should go and watch the current rugger team.

The cab drove off, leaving us standing by a rain-wet pillar-box with its royal cypher, *Victoria Regina*, in the watery gleam of a street-lamp.

Raffles took my arm. "Cheer up, Bunny," he said, "we've not far to walk. Just down the road here. There's a small matter I want to look into."

"You're the cleverest cracksman in London," I said, "but if you're planning a job, count me out. It was only last Saturday, a week ago today, that we pulled that job at

the County & Continental Bank, and we're in funds."

"Just so," he said, "and the point is relevant, as you'll see. Remember Gerry Tarran at school?"

"Chap who went into the Brigade of Guards," I said, "but piled up so many debts he had to resign his commission. I've seen him once or twice since. Gone to pieces. Drinks like a camel. Is it something to do with him, our going to that rugger match?"

"In a way," Raffles said. "Gerry called on me last week — mid-week — and wanted to borrow two hundred quid. I just didn't have it at the time, and he said he was going to try his luck with old Motley. You remember old Motley — Mr. Eustace Motley, M.A.? He still teaches Latin and Greek at the school. Gerry said he was an obvious soft touch. Gerry said he'd already written to old Motley, asking if he could consult him on a private matter, and that old Motley had replied with an invitation to come and drink a glass of wine with him at his house at 10 o'clock on Monday evening. That was last Monday."

I certainly remembered Mr. Eustace Motley. He was said to be very well connected and was known to have inherited a considerable fortune from his only sister. Owing originally to her indifferent health, he had never been resident at the school, but had lived with her in a house off the Brompton Road, in Kensington, going to and from the school daily in a hansom. After her death, he had gone on in the same way.

"A wealthy old bachelor like that," I said, "with no interest but the school, is an obvious soft touch for any of the chaps in a hole. I imagine Gerry got his two hundred easily enough?"

"I don't know," Raffles said. "You and I pulled that bank job last Saturday and found ourselves in funds again. As a gesture of thanks to Lady Luck, I thought I'd look Gerry up and, if he'd got no change out of old Motley, let him have the couple of hundred myself. So I went round to Gerry's chambers yesterday, and I learned a queer thing. He went out at 9 o'clock last Monday evening, and he hasn't been seen since."

I glanced sidelong at Raffles as we walked in the rain.

"His landlord," Raffles went on, "said Gerry's habits were always irregular, and he'd give him another day or two before notifying the police. But the thing is, Bunny, as far as I'm aware I'm the only person who knows where Gerry Tarran was going when he went out last Monday evening, and I'm curious. That's why we went to the rugger match. I wanted to see if old Motley was there, with the other masters."

"I didn't see him myself," I said.

"He wasn't there," said Raffles. "When we fell in with Norris Peters, I asked him if *he'd* seen the old man. He told me old Motley never attends Saturday games. Apparently, Peters lives quite near him, and he says the

old man drives out of London somewhere in a hansom every Saturday, carrying — of all things — a fish-basket. He's invariably away the whole day, and on his way back, according to Peters, always stops for dinner at Florian's Chophouse in Knightsbridge. So I thought you and I'd drop in at Florian's this evening."

He pushed open the door of the restaurant as he spoke. Lit by white gas-globes, it was a warm, cosy little place with panelled walls, leather-padded settles, and a pewter-laden sideboard. As we yielded up our outdoor things, I looked about for old Motley. There was no sign of him. I glanced at Raffles. His grey eyes and keen, tanned face were impassive.

We had been to Florian's in the past and, as we sat down in one of the booths, Raffles addressed the waiter by name. "Richmond, do you know a Mr. Eustace Motley?"

"Yes, sir. Schoolmaster gentleman," said the waiter. "He comes here every Saturday night. Bit late tonight." He glanced toward the door as he spoke — and then glanced again. "Here's Mr. Motley now, sir."

Countless times had I seen that tall, thin, erect figure come in at the door of the classroom. But then he had worn a gown, whereas now he was frock-coated and silk-hatted, with a long, black, woollen scarf wound round his neck. In one hand he held an umbrella and a yellow fish-basket from which protruded what looked like the handle of a gardening-trowel. With his other hand he flicked an end of his scarf back over his shoulder, then fumbled for a ribboned pince-nez. Holding the pince-nez to his eyes, he seemed to incline slightly backward as he scanned the restaurant.

I had to grin. "You can't really imagine old Motley has anything to do with Gerry Tarran's disappearance, Raffles?"

He did not answer. He rose. His hair dark and crisp, his lithe figure impeccably tweeded, a pearl in his grey cravat, Raffles approached the schoolmaster with that ease of manner I had always envied in him. I saw them shaking hands. Then he was bringing old Motley to our table. I stood up.

"And Manders, too?" said old Motley. "But how delightful!" His handshake was fussy. His close-clipped mustache, and thin hair brushed straight back from a high, shining forehead, were grey; but his face was unlined, and his smile had a maiden-aunt delicacy that was oddly at variance with the searching, almost suspicious look his pale blue eyes gave me as he said, "Indeed, yes — of course — I shall be charmed to join you both."

He sat down facing us. As he made his selections from Florian's menu, he said, "You come often to this chophouse? I should have fancied you would favour the gayer resorts of the West End."

Raffles said that we dropped in here now and then; and he went on in his easy way to speak of various

men who had been at the school in our day. He dropped Gerry Tarran's name very smoothly into the list. Too smoothly, perhaps. For old Motley did not rise to it, did not remark that he had seen Tarran only last week.

"So many boys," murmured old Motley.

"I ran into Tarran," said Raffles, jiggling the bait a little, "not long ago."

"So *very* many boys," said old Motley. "Really, one quite loses track." There could be no mistaking his evasiveness. His high forehead shone; two faint patches of colour had come into his smooth, pale cheeks. He turned with evident relief as the waiter bore a pewter tureen to the table. "Ah, Richmond, excellent fellow — the soup."

It was a slightly strained meal which followed. I knew Raffles was puzzled, as I was myself. And old Motley, beyond doubt, was wary of us both. More than once, I caught his probing, suspicious look.

"Florian," he said, when he was sipping his coffee, "does one passing well. I was really quite famished. I've been out of London all day and the weather was abominable — oh, most!" He set down his cup, seemed to brood over it, and then, in a tone strangely different from his normal faddiness of speech, said, "Perhaps it has always been known at the school how I spend my Saturdays?"

"I never remember, sir," Raffles said, "hearing anything of the kind."

"Do you not?" said old Motley. "Well, as it happens, I go out of London." He still was looking down at his cup; he seemed to be forcing himself to speak. "Whatever the weather, I spend every Saturday, all day, in the countryside near the suburb of Kew. I go there," he said, speaking as though he were short of breath, "to tend four graves."

I felt as though something cold had touched me suddenly.

"Those of my parents," said old Motley, "that of my beloved sister, and — the grave that will be my own." The spoon in his saucer tinkled as he touched it with a white, fastidious hand. There is a memorial," he said. "It bears the relevant names and dates, with only one item lacking — the date of my own death. I had fondly believed that the way in which I spend my Saturdays was known only to myself. It is somewhat suggestive that, today of all days, I should come here as usual to Florian's, and find two of my ex-pupils — where I have never encountered any before. I can't help but wonder whether their purpose here is to observe the effect upon me of their — jest?"

"Jest?" Raffles said. "I don't follow you, sir."

"Do you not?" said old Motley. "Then let me tell you that I found, today, that the date hitherto lacking from my family memorial had been — provided. It had been chiselled in by some unknown hand — the date of *next Saturday*."

He looked up at us suddenly. The

patches of colour burned hectic in his cheeks. His eyes held the blue glitter of glass. He was in a shaking rage.

"On my word, sir," Raffles said, and he sounded genuinely shocked, "I know nothing of it."

"Nor I," I said.

The old man looked searchingly from one to the other of us. Then his manner changed abruptly. He rose. He had again his fussy, slightly testy air. He gave us each his quick, finicking handshake.

"So nice to have seen you again," he said. "So charming of you to have invited me to join you. Delightful, quite delightful. Ah, there — Richmond!" He clapped his hands together sharply, raised a forefinger at the waiter. "My things."

As the door closed behind the thin, tall, upright figure in the long, black, woollen scarf and the silk hat, we slowly resumed our seats. I looked at Raffles.

"What do you make of that?" I said. "Can there be any conceivable connection between Gerry Tarran's disappearance and the chiselling of old Motley's date of 'death' on his family memorial?"

Raffles took a Sullivan thoughtfully from his cigarette-case. He shook his head. I never had seen him so serious.

When, from my small flat in Mount Street, I went round next evening to the Albany, where Raffles had his chambers, I found him in evening dress, as I was myself; we had invitations to a Sunday evening recital.

"D'you mind if we cut it, Bunny?" he said. "I'd like to look in at the club and see if we can get hold of Norris Peters again, find out something more about old Motley. As a matter of fact, I've been out to Kew today. I may tell you I found the churchyard that holds the Motley family memorial — Lucian Motley, Esquire; his wife, Beatrix; his daughter, Ursula, who died fifteen years ago; his son, Eustace Harold. That's our old Motley. And sure enough, under the word *Died* beneath his name, next Saturday's date has been freshly and inexpertly chiselled."

"Who would do a thing like that?" I said. "As a joke, it's —"

"It's no joke," said Raffles. "I stood there today, among black yews and white marble, in a driving grey rain, and I tell you, the feeling that chiselled date conveys is — malignant. Mr. Eustace Motley, M.A., has an enemy of a very ugly kind."

He put on his opera hat.

"The question is, Bunny," he said, when our hansom was jingling down to Pall Mall, "what can old Motley have done to make such an enemy as the one who chiselled that date?"

As we entered the club, the secretary saw us and came quickly across the hall. He had himself been at the school, though before our time. He drew us out of earshot of the porter, with whom we had just deposited our hats.

"Was there a Gerald Tarran at school when you fellows were there?"

the secretary asked. "We've had a Scotland Yard man here this evening, asking if Tarran was a member of this club."

"Scotland Yard?" I said, and my scalp crawled, and I looked at Raffles.

He took out his cigarette-case unhurriedly. "I remember Tarran, vaguely," he said. "Not a member here, though, is he?"

"No, and I told the Yard man so," said the secretary. "He then mentioned Tarran's school, and asked me to write out a list of any members of this club who had been there. I did so, including my own and yours, of course, and I asked him what it was all about. He told me Tarran's landlord had reported him missing, and that it had sounded a rather queer echo at the Yard."

"Echo?" said Raffles.

"He told me," said the secretary, "that among 'missing persons' reports during the past twelve years the Yard had noted half a dozen or so cases of young men, men-about-town, pretty much wasters, who'd been borrowing money right and left shortly before their disappearance. What rattled me, though, was that the Yard man said they'd all been at our place — at the school. Nice thing to hear about one's alma mater, I must say!"

"What school wouldn't find half a dozen or so addled eggs," said Raffles tolerantly, "among the thousands of sound citizens it's hatched during the past twelve years?"

"True," said the secretary, brightening somewhat. "Well, anyway, I rather think that, in view of the money straits involved, the Yard is inclined to put it all down to simple cases of 'moonlight flits'. That seems probable. By the way, don't mention the matter. We wouldn't want a thing like that about the school going all round the club here. Never hear the last of it."

He went off with a nod and a wink. Raffles lighted his cigarette meditatively, then called across to the porter to ask if Mr. Norris Peters were in the club.

"Haven't seen him, Mr. Raffles," said the porter. "Not this evening."

"Let's go up to the writing room, Bunny," Raffles said. And when he opened the door of that portentous mausoleum, with gloomy portraits of bewigged judges, robed Chancellors, and ox-faced generals in plumed helmets scowling from the walls, he nodded in satisfaction. "Not a soul in here. Good. Down you sit, Bunny. I want you to write a letter. Pen, paper — here we are. Now, then — ready? 'Dear Mr. Motley —' "

I looked up at him in stupefaction.

"Go ahead," he said. Sitting on the edge of the writing table, he blew a thoughtful smoke-ring at the crystals of the chandelier. " 'Dear Mr. Motley —' " I began to write resignedly — " 'I take the liberty of asking if I may consult you on a personal matter. Due to the presence of a third party at our chance meeting last night, I did not feel free to speak. If you could spare me ten minutes to

give me the benefit of your advice, I should be most grateful. Yours and so on, and so on? And sign it with your name, Bunny."

He took it and read it over.

"Capital," he said. "Obvious preliminary to a touch. Now, let's see." He took his thin, gold half-hunter from the pocket of his white waistcoat. "We've missed tonight's post. You ought to get a reply by Wednesday, Bunny."

He was one day out. It came on Thursday. It was in an angular handwriting, full of Greek e's and emphatic punctuation, familiar to me from the margin of many an examination paper:

> My dear Manders: I have received your note. Perhaps you would care to take a *glass of wine* with me at my *HOUSE* on *Friday* evening at TEN???? We shall be *QUITE* alone!!!! Yrs., E.H.M.

I took the letter round to Raffles, at the Albany. "Candidly," I said, "I don't altogether fancy this business. What's happened to Gerry Tarran? And just what am I to expect when I do what you want and ask old Motley for a loan?"

"That," said Raffles, "is what we wish to find out. He's wrong in one thing — the two of you won't be quite alone. There'll be an eye in attendance — masked. I shall have broken in, and shall be concealed somewhere in the house, when you ring old Motley's doorbell at ten tomorrow night."

I rang the bell, which jangled rustily in the silent depths of the old house off the Brompton Road. It was raining hard. The trees in the gardens in the center of the square dripped lugubriously. Standing in the dark, pillared porch, I could hear the rain splashing in the puddles of the railed area to my left, a melancholy sound.

Though I had small stomach for my task, I rang the bell again. Just as I began to hope that old Motley had forgotten the appointment, and was out, light appeared through the dusty fanlight over the door. I heard the rattle of bolts and chains, and there stood old Motley's thin, tall, erect figure, black-clad, in silhouette against the pallid gaslight of the hall.

"Ah, Manders!" he said, giving me his fussy, testy handshake. "Come in. The house has a neglected air, I fear. You must know that I was devoted to my sister. I pensioned off her servants, as I cannot now bear to have them under the same roof, whispering, and scampering with dustpans. A female person comes in daily to clean while I am at the school. I never see her if I can avoid it. Of course, she neglects her duties — dust everywhere, as you see. A man alone is always taken advantage of abominably."

On a fine but dusty hall table lay his fish-basket, spilling forth its trowel and handfork and some hirsute bulbs. There was also a porcelain bowl filled to overflowing with yellowed visiting-cards.

"Nowadays," he said, as he opened the door of a room to the left, "I seldom receive, neither do I go out into society at all. My contact with life is through the school. Boys, as you know, Manders, keep one spiritually young. There is always good in boys. Rich or poor, they are essentially good at heart. It's when they grow into young men, and the disciplines of boyhood are cast off, that their very eagerness for life betrays them into degenerate courses. How often, more's the pity, have I seen that happen! Port, Manders?"

"Thank you, sir."

At a glance, I knew that, wherever Raffles had concealed himself, it could not be in this room. There was no hiding place. It was a drawing-room, of a delicate if dusty elegance, lighted by frosted gas-globes. The wallpaper was white with a thin silver stripe, the Chinese carpet was of an ivory colour, the closely drawn curtains were of faded crimson velvet, the spindle-legged Regency chairs had candy-striped seats. There were several cabinets of exquisite china, and on the walls many water-colours, in delicate gilt frames, of — surprisingly — seascapes and tall ships under full sail. Above the marble mantelpiece was a portrait, in an oval frame, of a fair, frail young woman with something touchingly gallant in her expression and in the gaze of her fine blue eyes.

"My sister, Ursula," said old Motley, following my glance. "She painted with spirit — always sea subjects, as you observe. As a young girl, she made with my parents, while I was still at the University, an adventurous voyage to New Zealand. Later, poor dear, her health was not of the best, and that voyage was the happiest experience of her short life."

He was standing at a round rosewood table in the centre of the room, pouring port from a cut-glass decanter. There was no fire in the grate. He still wore his black woollen scarf. His forehead shone high and pale as, tossing an end of the scarf back over his shoulder, he held out a glass to me.

It was excellent port. We sipped it standing. I felt awkward, embarrassed, out of my element. So, I thought, must Gerry Tarran have felt on Monday of the previous week. The house was icy cold, silent and strange about me. And I felt old Motley's eyes on me with a sudden blue glitter.

"What do you want of me, Manders?"

At the sharpness of the question, I felt a warmth come to my face. I began to stammer. He cut me short.

"Is it money?" he said. "You are in straits, are you not?"

I could only nod. I had come here to play a role, but I felt as genuinely, abjectly, miserably ashamed as Gerry Tarran must have felt.

"How much?" said old Motley. "Two hundred? Three hundred? To 'tide you over'? That is the glib term, I fancy?" He took my glass, turned to the table. "You ask me for money,

Manders. You will hardly, then, boggle if in return I ask certain questions."

He turned back to me with a sharp look, handing me the glass refilled.

"Indeed," he said, "I need scarcely ask them, so self-evident are the replies. You smoke, Manders? You drink, all too frequently, to excess? You are a familiar figure on the racecourses? In the card clubs? You haunt the music-halls? You skulk at stage-doors with extravagant bouquets? You dance attendance on alluring but expensive ladies? Just so. Your expression is quite sufficient answer. And now you are surprised — and injured, no doubt — to find that these pursuits have brought you to a pecuniary impasse? Manders, I wonder at you!"

I stared at the floor. My ears burned. I gritted my teeth. I could have murdered A. J. Raffles for putting me in this position.

"At school," said old Motley, "I remember you as an amiable boy — somewhat idle, perhaps, prone to hero worship, too easily led, but *quite* without vice. Now, look at you! You had an education which many a less fortunate boy would envy, but what have you done with it? However, Manders, I shall not turn you from the door. Draw a chair to the table and write me out a list of your debts."

I had no choice but to drink up my port and obey. Since I had squared everything out of the proceeds of our recent bank coup, I had to invent some debts. This done, I started to tot up the sums I had written, but found a curious difficulty in concentrating, and was just beginning again when old Motley took my notebook from me impatiently and tore out the page.

"This will do well enough," he said. "Your tradespeople, at least, shall be reimbursed."

He handed back the notebook, and I thrust it into what I took to be my breast-pocket but which proved to be my armpit, for the book fell to the carpet. With a murmured apology I rose to retrieve it, but gave an unaccountable lurch that knocked my chair flying. Embarrassed, I stooped to pick it up, and instead fell over it.

I sat on the floor feeling most peculiar.

The gaslight shone uncannily bright. The silver-striped walls seemed to billow as though under water. I goggled up at old Motley. His thin figure looked eight feet tall and still elongating. He stood with one white hand at his shoulder, as though he had just tossed back his scarf-end; in the other hand he held his pince-nez, looking down at me through the lenses.

"A giant schoolmaster," I thought, in bleary wonder.

Then the back of my head inexplicably struck the carpet, and I knew no more until, out of a black void of unknown duration, a speck of light came swimming. As it grew

larger, I saw that it had a slight elliptical motion. I focussed on it with dazzled eyes, and the light gradually clarified itself as a twin-wick paraffin lamp suspended, swaying a little, from a teak ceiling.

I remembered old Motley and realized that my port must have been doctored, but the throbbing of my temples made thinking difficult. I tried to put a hand to my head, but found both hands immovable in the small of my back. My wrists were bound. A thrill of alarm shot through me. In the same moment I became aware of voices, deep, unhurried, quiet. They seem to come from close by, to my right. I turned my head.

Incredulously, I realized that I was lying in a bunk of a ship's cabin. Under the lamp, at a table covered with green baize, sat two men with a bottle and glasses before them. One of the men, who looked to be short but barrel-chested, with a clean-shaven, mahogany-brown face and wiry white hair, was speaking between meditative puffs at a pipe. He wore a pea-jacket without insignia.

"You ask me why I'd stop at nothing to oblige an old schoolmaster?" he said. "I'll tell ye, Captain Hurn. That old gentleman has given his life to the education of boys ye can only call fortunate — moneyed boys. Now, me — I'm Royal Navy, retired, as ye know — I've given the past twenty years to the education of boys ye can only call *un*fortunate, fatherless and penniless boys, boys of the streets. The training ship I command is privately financed, and some thirteen or fourteen years ago we came to a crisis. We were at our last gasp for money. That old schoolmaster saw our appeal for funds in the newspapers. Boys are boys to him, rich or poor. His sister had recently died, leaving him a tidy fortune. He put nearly every penny of it into our ship. He saved us. He's been our main financial sponsor ever since. He wouldn't have his name mentioned, but we renamed the ship in honour of his sister — Training Ship *Ursula*."

I lay very still. The other man refilled the glasses. He was a big, rawboned man with a square beard and a shock of iron-grey hair.

"So that's the way of it," he said. "Well, as an old friend, I'd like to help you, Commander Jackson. I've already let you talk me into bringing this lubber in the bunk there aboard my ship. But it's abduction, Commander. It's a good, plain, 'Frisco style shanghaiing, right in the Pool of London. Granted what you say, that he's up to his neck in debt and the police'll write him off as moonlight flitter, still an' all I'll have to set him ashore some day and he could go to a Consul and make enough trouble to cost me my ticket."

The Commander puffed at his pipe. "Ye sail within twelve hours," he said. "Ye're bound round the Horn for San Francisco with cargo and passengers for the Alaskan gold rush. Now, if your ship's the windjammer I take her for, and your first mate's

the bucko I take him to be, ye'll make a man of this johnnie in the bunk before ever ye raise the Golden Gate. I may tell ye he's not the first ex-pupil who's gone to this old schoolmaster for a soft touch and woke up to find himself in a windjammer's fo'c'sle outward bound for Cape Stiff."

He tamped his tobacco thoughtfully.

"I've collected 'em from the old schoolmaster's house," he said, "and I've arranged shipping 'em out for him. He's a regular old shepherd of black sheep. I shipped one out just last week, name of Tarran; he's holystoning decks somewhere off the Azores by now. 'He had a good education,' said the old man, 'and he abused it. All right, Commander, we'll give him a second chance. Take him and re-educate him. Make him or break him, and land him in San Francisco with ten dollars in his pocket, like the others, and we'll see the stuff he's made of.' "

The Commander drained his glass.

"One or two of 'em have found their way back to this country ultimately," he said, "and have gone personally to thank the old man. One or two have made good lives for themselves out there on the Pacific slope, or following the way of the sea, and they've written their gratitude to the old schoolmaster. Not a manjack of 'em has gone whining to a Consulate or a copper. No, Captain Hurn, I think I can promise ye there'll be no ultimate backwash about this johnnie in the bunk. Now, as man to man, will ye take a hand in this job of salvaging human wreckage?"

"I will!" Captain Hurn said, and he brought down his great fist with a thud on the table. "You tell the old schoolmaster from me that before a week's out this johnnie in the bunk will wish he'd never seen a soubrette or a bottle of champagne!"

"Now you're talking," said the Commander. He glanced toward the porthole above the bunk where I lay. "Daylight! I must get back to the *Ursula*." He drained his glass and, taking up his cap, rose to his feet as the Captain opened the cabin door. "Well, I'm obliged to ye, Captain."

He stopped abruptly.

"Ah, there," said Raffles.

He stood on the deck outside, against the grey, misty daylight stealing over the river. He was without hat or overcoat, his tweeds impeccable, the pearl precisely set in his cravat, his right hand in his pocket.

"It's not for a landsman to criticize the anchor watch you keep, Captain Hurn," he said, as he stepped forward into the cabin, "but, you know, I climbed aboard, from an obliging waterman's dinghy, without meeting any kind of challenge. I hope you'll forgive me for eavesdropping on your talk. I was very much impressed by what I heard. I'm entirely in sympathy with your motives. The only thing is, I must deprive you of my friend in the bunk there. I need him

for an extremely serious purpose. Free him, and we'll be getting along."

The two seamen exchanged a glance.

"It's no use looking at each other in that calculating way," Raffles said, and drew his hand from his pocket. "To save time and possible argument," he went on, taking a cigarette from his case, "I arranged with my obliging waterman to stand by to take us ashore — or, alternatively, if we shouldn't appear within a given period, to deliver a note I gave him to the Docks Police Station."

I knew when Raffles was bluffing, but the two men did not. And the Commander's teeth came together with a distinct click. "You win," he said harshly. "All right, Captain Hurn, cut the damned feller's bonds."

"Nobody wins, Commander," Raffles said. "Not yet. On the contrary, until I bring you back a substitute for my friend here, the old man you call the shepherd of black sheep is in extreme danger."

"I don't know what you're talking about," the Commander said tersely.

"I'm talking about a death date chiselled on a family memorial," Raffles said. "*Today's* date!" He lighted his cigarette. "Ready, Bunny? We've not much time."

Light was strengthening over the grey old river, and there was a crying of gulls, as the waterman's dinghy set us ashore. Raffles had a brougham waiting. I recognized the driver as a man whom we used on occasions when discretion was needed.

Above the roofs of warehouses soared the masts and yards of square-riggers. As the brougham set off, the horse's hoofs ringing sharply on the dockland cobbles, I glimpsed at her moorings an old barquentine with a black-painted hull picked out in gold leaf. From her came a twitter of bosun's pipes, Navy style, and the starling sound of many boys' voices as they woke to the rise-and-shine. I saw the graceful figurehead leaning to the tide, and I recognized in the woman of the figurehead she of the oval portrait above old Motley's mantelpiece, and an odd emotion took me by the throat. It was the Training Ship *Ursula*.

The morning swallowed it as the brougham swung briskly toward Commercial Road East.

"I fancied I might have need of the brougham," Raffles said. "So I had it waiting near old Motley's house when I broke in last night through the area window. I was concealed in the house, as I promised, before you arrived, Bunny. Commander Jackson was already there, sent for by old Motley. I heard something of their talk. I learned that, if you were there for a touch, as old Motley expected, you were to be put to sleep for a few hours. To get at the whole truth, I had to let them do it, Bunny — it couldn't harm you — and then see what followed. When you keeled over, the Commander joined old Motley in the drawing-room, and they just sat there for a couple of hours, yarning

and drinking port, till the doorbell rang again. There was a four-wheeler at the door. Obviously, it had been ordered in advance and the driver squared. They carried you out to the four-wheeler, and the Commander drove off with you. I slipped out through the area window, and followed in the brougham."

He glanced at his watch, called to the driver to hurry. I felt his anxiety. Aldgate Pump; St. Paul's; the Strand. With crowded two-horse 'buses and hurrying hansoms, London was waking to the March day. It was past eight when the long drive brought our brougham, at last, into the square off the Brompton Road. Old Motley's house was to the right of the gardens. Raffles called to the driver to go slowly down the left side.

From the window Raffles's eyes searched the wet shrubs and trees, and suddenly he touched my arm. "Just as I thought! See him, Bunny? Among the trees over there — just past that big clump of daffodils — watching old Motley's house!"

I felt a sudden hard thump in my chest as I glimpsed the motionless, unobtrusive figure of the watcher in the gardens; and lost him again as the brougham, with the horse at a walk, went on slowly.

"The Ides of March," Raffles muttered, "and there's the assassin. He won't kill here. Too public. He's watching to make sure old Motley sets out for Kew today. Then our man will go there by a roundabout way, doing the last bit on foot so that no cabman will connect him with a murder in a churchyard. You see it, Bunny? He intends to murder old Motley as he kneels with a trowel in his hand, among the yews of that lonely churchyard, planting tulips on the site of his own grave."

I swallowed. "You think old Motley will go to Kew today — in view —"

"His dignity wouldn't allow him to be frightened out of his Saturday pilgrimage," Raffles said. He added sharply, "There! You see?"

Peering over his shoulder from the brougham window, I saw, across the gardens in the pale gold morning sunshine, the door of old Motley's house open. The tall, stiffly erect figure, frock-coated and silk-hatted, emerged from the porch and walked with brisk, fussy stride toward the Brompton Road end of the square.

By now we were at the opposite end. Raffles leaned from the window, whispered some instructions to the driver. The driver clicked his tongue at his horse, and the brougham, quickening slightly, rounded the end of the gardens, turned into the side where old Motley's house stood.

Raffles and I peered obliquely ahead. I could see old Motley standing on the Brompton Road corner, far ahead. I saw him raise his umbrella, and a hansom swung into the kerb. Old Motley mounted, the hansom passed from view — and from the gardens stepped a man.

Raffles drew back sharply from the window. "Sit tight, Bunny!"

Our driver's whip cracked. The horse's hoofs broke into a trot, then pulled up, clopping, the harness jingling, and I heard the driver's voice.

"Keb, sir?"

I heard a voice say, "Yes. Chiswick Mall."

"Handy for Kew," Raffles breathed.

The door of the brougham jerked open. The fare put a foot on the step. His head and shoulders were in the brougham before he saw us, recognized us. His young, hard, arrogant face, with the rimless eyeglass glittering in his left eye, was set in a grey rigour.

"Mr. Henry Saulsby," Raffles said. "Recently returned, if I remember rightly, from three years of travelling abroad. Step in, Brutus!"

Saulsby's right hand flashed instinctively to his side pocket. Before he could draw, Raffles struck at the man's exposed jaw with a short, upward jab that thumped like a poleaxe. His strong, cracksman's hands gripped Saulsby by the lapels and heaved him in limply onto the coir mat on the floor of the brougham.

I reached over and jerked the door shut. Raffles had a hand in the man's side pocket. He sat back, flicking open a blued-steel revolver and spinning the drum so that the bullets in the chambers flashed brassily.

"Picked up on his travels, for old Motley's benefit," he said grimly. "Well, there he is, Bunny. Take a good look at him — the one voyaging black sheep who hadn't the guts, the sportsmanship, or enough sense of humour about his precious self to appreciate the old man's motives, but who nursed resentment to the point of bitter hatred, and who finally found his way back with the sole intent of murdering the good shepherd!"

I looked at the unconscious man. "What'll we do with him?"

"For old Motley's temporary safety, till we can think of something more permanent," Raffles said, "we'll turn this fellow over to Commander Jackson as a consolation prize for the loss of you. He can be shipped out again, either with Captain Hurn, or, better still — if the Commander can arrange it — aboard some whaler just setting out on a three or four year cruise in inclement climes. That's simple justice, I feel. In my view, our old mentor, Mr. Eustace Motley, M.A., is a great man —"

"A giant schoolmaster," I said.

Raffles nodded. "So what do you say, Bunny, to putting the Training Ship *Ursula*," he suggested thoughtfully, "on to a third share, anonymously contributed, of that bank swag?"

I thought of the old barquentine with the gallant figurehead breasting the tide, the starling sound of many boys' voices rising from her decks, and the cry of gulls about her lofty yards.

"Done!" I said instantly.

The driver's face appeared, upside down, at the window of the brougham. "Where now, sir?" he asked.

"London Docks," said A. J. Raffles.

Brutal Murder Black Mask *fashion* . . .

DEATH AT THE BURLESQUE

by CORNELL WOOLRICH

HE SAW VILMA FIRST. SHE WAS the dark one. Then he saw Gilda. She was the golden one. He didn't see the man at all, that first night. He didn't know any of their names. He didn't want to. He'd just gone to a show on his night off.

He had an aisle seat, alongside the runway. He'd told the ticket seller he wanted to see more than just their baby-blue eyes. The ticket seller had said, "You will." He'd been right, it turned out.

It was, of course, simply burlesque under a different name, to evade the licensing restrictions of the last few years. But at the moment Benson took his seat, there wasn't anything going on that a fourteen-year-old schoolgirl couldn't have watched with perfect propriety. A black-haired singer in a flowing, full-length dress was rendering *Mighty Lak a Rose*. And she was good, too.

But this was his night off and he felt kind of cheated. "Did I walk in on a funeral?" he asked himself. He shouldn't have asked that, maybe. The mocking little gods of circumstances were only too willing to arrange it for him.

The singer walked off, the orchestra gave out with an introductory flourish, and the proceedings snapped back into character. The curtains parted to reveal a "living statue" group — five or six nymphs enameled a chalky white, their torsos veiled by wisps of cheesecloth, presided over by a central "statue" poised on a pedestal in their midst. This was Gilda, the main attraction.

Gilda stood there, head thrown back, seemingly in the act of nibbling at a dangling cluster of grapes. Whether she was as innocent of vesture as she seemed was beside the point; her body was coated with a thick layer of scintillant golden paint which was certainly far more protective than any ordinary clothes would have been. But that didn't dampen the general enthusiasm any. It was just the principle of the thing that mattered. Good clean fun, so to speak. She got a tremendous hand without doing a thing — just for art's sake.

The curtains coyly came together again, veiling the tableau. There was a teasing pause, maintained just long enough to whet the audience's appetite for more, then they parted once more and the "statuary" had assumed a different position. Gilda was now

shading her eyes with one hand, one leg poised behind her, and staring yearningly toward the horizon — or more strictly speaking, a fire door at the side of the auditorium.

Benson caught the spirit of the thing along with everyone else and whacked his hands. The curtains met, parted once more, and again the tableau had altered. This time Gilda was up on tiptoes on her pedestal, her body arched over as though she was looking at her own reflection in a pool.

Just before the curtains obliterated her, Benson thought he saw her waver a little, as if having difficulty maintaining her balance. Or maybe it was simply faulty timing. She had prepared to change positions a little too soon, before the curtains entirely concealed her from view. That slight flaw didn't discourage the applause any. It had reached the pitch of a bombardment. The audience wasn't a critical one; it didn't care about complete muscular control as long as it got complete undress. Or the illusion of it, through gold-plating.

The pause was a little longer this time, as though there had been a slight hitch. Benson wondered where the dancing came in. They had billed her out front as "The Golden Dancer," he remembered, and he wanted his money's worth. He didn't have long to wait. The footlights along the runway, unused until now, gushed up, the curtains parted, and Gilda was down on the stage floor now, and in motion.

She was coming out on the runway to dance over their heads. For this additional intimacy, she had provided herself with a protective mantle of gauzy black — just in case some of the Commissioner's men happened to be in the audience.

She wasn't any great shakes as a dancer; nobody expected her to be, nobody cared. It was mostly a matter of waving her arms, turning this way and that, and flourishing the mantle around her, a little bit like a bullfighter does his cape. She managed, while continually promising revealing gaps in it, to keep it all around her at all times, in a sort of black haze, like smoke. It was simply the striptease in a newer variation.

But indifferent as her dancing ability was to begin with, a noticeable hesitation began to creep into its posturing after she had been on the runway a few moments. She seemed to keep forgetting what to do next.

"They hardly have time to rehearse at all," Benson thought leniently.

Her motions had slowed down like a clock that needs winding. He saw her cast a look over her shoulders at the unoccupied main stage, as if in search of help. The lesser nymphs hadn't come out with her this last time, were probably doing a quick change for the next number.

For a moment she stood there perfectly still, no longer moving a muscle. The swirling black gauze deflated about her, fell limp. Benson's grin of approval dimmed and died while he craned his neck up at her. Suddenly

she started to go off-balance, to fall.

He only had time to throw up his arms instinctively, half to ward her off, half to catch her and break her fall. Her looming body blurred the runway lights for an instant, and then she had landed across him, one foot still up there on the runway behind her. The black stuff of her mantle came down after her, like a parachute, and half-smothered him. He had to claw at it to free his head.

Those in the rows farther back, who hadn't been close enough to notice the break in her performance that had come just before the fall, started to applaud and even laugh. They seemed to think it was still part of her routine, or that she had actually missed her footing and tumbled down on him, and either way it struck them as the funniest thing they had ever seen.

Benson already knew better, by the inert way her head and shoulders lay across his knees. "Take it easy. I've got you," he whispered reassuringly, trying to hold her as she started to slide to the floor between the rows of seats.

Her eyes rolled unseeingly up at him, showing all whites, but some memory of where she was and what she had been doing still lingered in the darkness rolling over her.

"I'm so sorry. Did I hurt you, mister?" she breathed. "Guess I've spoiled the show —" It ended with a long-drawn sigh — and she was still.

The laughter and handclapping was dying down, because her head didn't bob up again at the place where she had disappeared from view, and they were catching on that something was wrong. A hairy-armed man in rolled blue shirt-sleeves popped partly out of the wings, not caring if he was seen or not, and wigwagged frantically to the band leader, then jumped back again where he'd come from. The droopy music they'd been playing for her broke off short and a rackety rumba took its place. A long line of chorus girls came spilling out on the stage, most of them out of step and desperately working to get their shoulder straps adjusted.

Benson was already struggling up the aisle with his inert golden burden. A couple of ushers came hustling down to help him, but he elbowed them aside. "You quiet the house down. I can get her back there by myself."

A man with a cigar sticking flat out of his mouth like a tusk met him at the back, threw open a door marked *Manager*. "Bring her in here to my office, until I can send for a doctor —" Before closing it after the three of them, he stopped to scan the subsiding ripples of excitement in the audience. "How they taking it? All right, keep 'em down in their seats, usher. No refunds, understand?" He closed the door and came in.

Benson had to put her in the manager's swivel chair; there wasn't even a couch or sofa in the place. Even with the shaded desk light on, the place stayed dim and shadowy. Her body gleamed weirdly in the gloom, like a shiny mermaid.

"Thanks a lot, bud," the manager said to him crisply. "You don't have to wait; the doctor'll be here in a minute —"

"The tin says stick around." Benson reburied the badge in his pocket.

The manager widened his eyes. "That's a hot one. You're probably the only headquarters man out there tonight, and she keels over into your lap."

"That's the kind of luck I always have," Benson said, bending over the girl. "I can't even see a show once a year, without my job horning in."

The manager took another squint outside the door to see how his house was getting along. "Forgotten all about it already," he reported contentedly. He turned back. "How's she coming?"

"She's dead," Benson said muffledly, from below one arm, ear to the girl's gold brassière.

The manager gave a sharp intake of breath, but his reaction was a purely professional one. "Gee, who'll I get to fill in for her on such short notice? What the hell happened to her? She was all right at the matinee!"

"What'd you expect her do do," Benson said short-temperedly, "come and inform you she was going to die in the middle of her act tonight, so you'd have time to get a substitute?" He lifted one of the golden eyelids to try for optical reflex; there wasn't any.

The hastily summoned doctor had paused outside the door, trying to take in as much of the show free as he could before he had to attend to business. He came in still looking fascinatedly behind him. "You're too late," the manager scowled. "This headquarters man says she's dead already."

Benson was on the desk phone by now with his back to the two of them. A big belly-laugh rolled in from outside before they could get the door closed, and drowned out what he was saying. He covered the mouthpiece until he could go ahead. "Forty-second Street, just off Broadway. Okay." He hung up. "The examiner's office is sending a man over. We'll hear what he says."

The doctor smiled. "Well, he can't say any more than I can. She's dead and that's that."

"He can say why," Benson countered, dipping four fingers of each hand into his coat pockets and wiggling his thumbs.

The doctor closed the door after him.

"Now he's going to stand and chisel the rest of the show free, just because he was called in," the manager predicted sourly.

"He can have my seat," Benson remarked. "I won't be using it any more tonight."

He brushed a fleck of gold paint off the front of his coat, then another off the cuff of his coat sleeve. "Let's get the arithmetic down." He took out a black notebook, poised a worn-down pencil stub over the topmost ruled line of a blank page. The pages

that had gone before — and many had gone before — were all closely scrawled over with names, addresses, and other data. Then, one by one, wavy downward lines were scored through them. That meant: case closed.

The manager opened a drawer in his desk, took out a ledger, sought a pertinent page, traced a sausage-like thumb down a list of payroll names. "Here she is. Real name, Annie Willis. 'Gilda' was just her —"

Benson jotted. "I know."

He gave the address on West 135th. "There's a phone number to go with it, too."

Benson jotted. He looked up, said, "Oh, hello, Jacobson," as the man from the examiner's office came in, went back to his note-taking again.

Outside, 300-odd people sat watching a line-up of girls dance. Inside, the business of documenting a human death went on, with low-voiced diligence.

Benson repeated: "Nearest of kin, Frank Willis, husband —"

The examining assistant groused softly to himself: "I can't get anything out of it at all, especially through all this gilt. It mighta been a heart attack; it mighta been acute indigestion. All I can give you for sure, until we get downtown, is she's dead, good and dead —"

The manager was getting peevish at this protracted invasion of his privacy. "That makes three times she's been dead, already. I'm willing to believe it, if no one else is."

Benson murmured, "This is the part I hate worst," and began to dial with his pencil stub.

An usher sidled in, asked: "What'll we do about the marquee, boss? She's still up on it, and it's gotta be changed now for tomorrow's matinee."

"Just take down the 'G' from 'Gilda', see? Then stick in an 'H' instead, make it 'Hilda.' That saves the trouble of changing the whole —"

"But who's Hilda, boss?"

"I don't know myself! If the customers don't see anyone called Hilda, that'll teach them not to believe in signs!"

Benson was saying quietly: "Is this Frank Willis? Are you the husband of Annie Willis, working at the New Rotterdam Theater? . . . All right, now take it easy. She died during the performance this evening . . . Yeah, onstage about half an hour ago . . . No, you won't find her here by the time you get down. You'll be notified when the body's released by the medical examiner's office. They want to perform an autopsy . . . Now don't get frightened, that's just a matter of form, they always do that. It just means an examination . . . You can claim her at the city morgue when they're through with her."

He hung up, murmured under his breath: "Funny how a strange word they don't understand, like 'autopsy,' always throws a scare into them when they first hear it." He eyed the manager's swivel chair. It was empty now, except for a swath of gold-paint flecks down the middle of the back, like a sunset reflection. He grimaced

discontentedly. "I shoulda stayed home tonight altogether. Then somebody else would have had to handle the blamed thing! Never saw it to fail yet. Every time I try to see a show —"

Next day at 11 a cop handed Benson a typewritten autopsy report.

Benson didn't place the name for a minute. Then: "Oh yeah, that girl in the show last night — Gilda." He glanced down at his own form with rueful recollection. "It's going to cost me two bucks to have the front of that other suit dry-cleaned. Okay, thanks. I'll take it into the lieutenant."

He scanned it cursorily himself first, before doing so. Then he stopped short, frowned, went back and read one or two of the passages more carefully.

". . . Death caused by sealing of the pores over nearly the entire body surface for a protracted period. This substance is deleterious when kept on for longer than an hour or two at the most. It is composed of infinitesimal particles of gold leaf which adhere to the pores, blocking them. This produces a form of bodily suffocation, as fatal in the end, if less immediate than stoppage of the breathing passage. The symptoms are delayed, then strike with cumulative suddenness, resulting in weakness, dizziness, collapse, and finally death. Otherwise the subject was perfectly sound organically in every way. There can be no doubt that this application of theatrical pigment and failure to remove it in time was the sole cause of mortality—"

He tapped a couple of nails on the desk undecidedly a minute or two. Finally he picked up the phone and got the manager of the New Rotterdam Theater. He hadn't come in yet, but they switched the call to his home. "This is Benson, headquarters man that was in your office last night. How long had this Gilda — Annie Willis, you know — been doing this gilt act?"

"Oh, quite some time — five or six months now."

"Then she wasn't green at it; she wasn't just breaking it in."

"No, no, she was an old hand at it."

He hung up, tapped his nails some more. "Funny she didn't know enough by this time to take it off before it had a chance to smother her," he murmured half under his breath.

The report should have gone into his lieutenant, and that should have ended it. Accidental death due to carelessness, that was all. She'd been too lazy or too rushed to remove the harmful substance between shows, and had paid the penalty.

But a good detective is five-sixths hard work and one-sixth blind, spontaneous "hunches." Benson wasn't a bad detective. And his one-sixth had come uppermost just then. He folded the examiner's report, put it in his pocket, and didn't take it into his lieutenant. He went back to the New Rotterdam Theater on 42nd Street, instead.

It was open even this early, although the stage show didn't go on

yet. A handful of sidewalk beachcombers were drifting in, to get in out of the sun. The manager had evidently thought better of his marquee shortchange of the night before. The canopy still misleadingly proclaimed "Gilda, the Golden Dancer," but below it there was now affixed a small placard, so tiny it was invisible unless you got up on a ladder to scan it: "Next Week."

The manager acted anything but glad to see him back so soon. "I knew that wasn't the end of it! With you fellows these things go on forever. Listen, she keeled over in front of everybody in the theater. People are dropping dead on the streets like that every minute of the day, here, there, everywhere. What's there to find out about? Something gave out inside. It was her time to go, and there you are."

Benson wasn't an argumentative sort of person. "Sure," he agreed unruffledly. "And now it's my time to come nosing around about it — and there *you* are. Who shared her dressing room with her — or did she have one to herself?"

The manager shrugged disdainfully. "These aren't the days when the Ziegfeld Follies played this house. She split it with Vilma Lyons — that's the show's ballad singer, you know, the only full-dressed girl in the company — and June McKee. She leads the chorus in a couple of numbers."

"Are her belongings still in it?"

"They must be. Nobody's called for them yet, as far as I know."

"Let's go back there," Benson suggested.

"Listen, the show's cooking to go on —"

"I won't get in its way," Benson assured him.

They came out of the office, went down a side aisle skirting the orchestra, with scattered spectators already lounging here and there. A seven-year-old talking picture, with Morse Code dots and dashes running up it all the time, was clouding the screen at the moment. They climbed onto the stage at the side, went in behind the screen, through the wings, and down a short, damp, feebly lighted passage, humming with feminine voices coming from behind doors that kept opening and closing as girls came in from the alley at the other end of the passage, in twos and threes.

The manager thumped one of the doors, turned the knob, and opened it with one and the same gesture — and a perfect indifference to the consequences. "Put on something, kids. There's a detective coming in."

"What's the matter, isn't he over twenty-one?" one of them jeered.

The manager stood aside to let Benson pass, then went back along the passageway toward his office with the warning: "Don't gum them up now. This show hits fast once it gets going."

There were two girls in there, working away at opposite ends of a three-paneled mirror. The middle space and chair were vacant. Benson's face appeared in all three of the mirrors at

once, as he came in and closed the door after him. One girl clutched at a wrapper, flung it around her shoulders. The other calmly went ahead applying make-up, leaving her undraped backbone exposed to view down to her waist.

"You two have been sharing the same dressing room with Annie Willis," he said. "Did she usually leave this shiny junk on between shows, or take it off each time?"

The chorus leader, the one the manager had called June McKee, answered, in high-pitched derogation at such denseness. "Whadd'ye think, she could go out and eat between shows with her face all gold like that? She woulda had a crowd following her along the street! Sure she took it off."

They looked at one another with a sudden flash of enlightened curiosity. The McKee girl, a strawberry blonde, turned around toward him. "Sa-ay, is that what killed her, that gold stuff?" she asked in a husky whisper.

Benson overrode that. "Did she take it off yesterday or did she leave it on?"

"She left it on." She turned to her bench mate, the brunette ballad singer, for corroboration. "Didn't she, Vilma? Remember?"

"Where is this gold stuff? I'd like to see it."

"It must be here with the rest of her stuff." The McKee girl reached over, pulled out the middle of the three table drawers, left it open for him to help himself. "Look in there."

It was in pulverized form, in a small jar. It had a greenish tinge to it that way. He read the label. It was put up by a reputable cosmetic manufacturing company. There were directions for application and removal, and then an explicit warning: "Do not allow to remain on any longer than necessary after each performance." She must have read that a dozen times in the course of using the stuff. She couldn't have failed to see it.

"You say she left it on yesterday. Why? Have you any idea?"

Again it was the McKee girl who answered, spading her palms at him. "Because she mislaid the cleanser, the stuff that came with it to remove it. They both come together. You can't buy one without the other. It's a special preparation that sort of curls it up and *peels* it off clean and even. Nothing else works as well or as quick. You can't use cold cream, and even alcohol isn't much good. You can scrub your head off and it just makes a mess of your skin —"

"And yesterday it disappeared?"

"Right after the finale, she started to holler: 'Who took my paint remover? Anybody seen my paint remover?' Well, between the three of us, we turned the room inside out, and no sign of it. She emptied her whole drawer out. Everything else was there but that. She even went into a couple of the other dressing rooms to find out if anybody had it in there. I told her nobody else would want it. She was the only one in the

company who used that gilt junk. It wouldn't have been any good to anyone else. It never turned up."

"Finish telling me."

"Finally Vilma and me had to go out and eat. Time was getting short. Other nights, the three of us always ate together. We told her if she found it in time to hurry up after us. We'd keep a place for her at our table. She never showed up. When we got back for the night show, sure enough, she was still in her electroplating. She told us she'd had to send Jimmy the handyman out for something and had eaten right in the dressing room."

Benson cocked his head slightly, as when one looks downward into a narrow space. "Are you sure this bottle of remover couldn't have been in the drawer and she missed seeing it?"

"That was the first place we cased. We had everything out. I remember holding it up in my hand empty and thumping the bottom of it just for luck!"

His wrist shot out of his cuff, hitched back into it again, like some sort of a hydraulic brake. "Then what's it doing in there now?" He was holding a small bottle, mate to the first, except that its contents were liquid and there was a small sponge attached to its neck.

It got quiet in the dressing room, deathly quiet. So quiet you could even hear the sound track from the screen out front.

The McKee girl's lower lip was trembling. "It was put back — *after!* Somebody *wanted* her to die like that! With us right here in the same room with her!" She took a deep breath, threw open her own drawer, and with a defiant look at Benson, as if to say, "Try and stop me," tilted a small, flat gin bottle to her mouth.

The ballet singer, Vilma Lyons, suddenly dropped her head into her folded arms on the littered dressing table and began to sob.

The stage manager bopped a fist on the door and called in: "The customers are waiting to see your operations. If that dick's still questioning you in there, tell him to put on a girdle and follow you out on the runway!"

"Yes, sir, boss, I'm Jimmy, the handyman." He put down his bucket, followed Benson out into the alley, where they wouldn't be in the way of the girls hustling in and out on quick changes. "Yes, sir, Miss Gilda sent me out last night between shows to try to get her another bottle of that there stuff, which took off the gold paint."

"Why didn't you get it?"

"I couldn't! I went to the big theatrical drugstore on Eighth where she told me. It's the only place around here where you can get it and even there they don't keep much on hand, never get much call for it. The drugstore man told me somebody else just beat me to it. He told me he just got through selling the last bottle he had in stock, before I got there."

"Keep on," Benson said curtly.

"That's about all. The drugstore

man promised to order another bottle for her right away from his company's warehouse or the wholesaler that puts it up, and see that it's in first thing in the morning. So I went back and told her. Then she sent me across the street to the cafeteria to bring her a sandwich. When I came back the second time, she was sitting there acting kind of low, holding her head. She said, 'Jimmy, I'm sorry I ordered that bite, after all. I don't feel well. I hope nothing happens to me from leaving this stuff on too long.' "

All Benson said was: "You come along and point out that druggist to me."

"Come in, Benson."

"Lieutenant, I've got a problem. I've got a report here from Jacobson that I haven't turned in to you yet. I've been keeping it until I know what to do about it."

"What's the hitch?"

"Lieutenant, is there such a thing as a *negative* murder? By that I mean, when not a finger is lifted against the victim, not a hair of her head is actually touched. But the murder is accomplished by *withholding* something, so that death is caused by an absence or lack."

The lieutenant was quick on the trigger. "Certainly! If a man locks another man up in a room, and withholds food from him until the guy has starved to death, you'd call that murder, wouldn't you? Even though the guy that caused his death never touched him with a ten-foot pole, never stepped in past the locked door at all."

Benson plucked doubtfully at the cord of skin between his throat and chin. "But what do you do when you have no proof of *intention?* I mean, when you've got evidence that the act of withholding or removal was committed, but no proof that the intention was murderous. And how you gonna get proof of intention, anyway? It's something inside the mind , isn't it?"

The lieutenant glowered, said: "What do you do? I'll tell you what you do. You bring your bird in and you keep him until you get the intention *out* of his mind and down in typewriting! That's what you do!"

The man was alone when he started down the three flights of stairs in the shoddy walk-up apartment on West 135th. He was still alone when he got down to the bottom of them. And then somehow, between the foot of the stairs and the street door, he wasn't alone any more. Benson was walking along beside him, as soundlessly as though his own shadow had crept forward and overtaken him along the poorly lit passage.

He shied sideways and came to a dead stop against the wall, the apparition was so unexpected.

Benson said quietly: "Come on, what're you stopping for? You were leaving the house, weren't you, Willis? Well, you're still leaving the house, what's the difference?"

They walked on as far as the street

entrance. Benson just kept one fingertip touching the other's elbow, in a sort of mockery of guidance. Willis said, "What am I pinched for?"

"Who said you were pinched? Do *you* know of anything you should be pinched for?"

"No, I don't."

"Then you're not pinched. Simple enough, isn't it?"

Willis didn't say another word after that. Benson only said two things more himself, one to his charge, the other to a cab driver. He remarked: "Come on, we'll ride it. I'm no piker." And when a cab had sidled up to his signal, he named a precinct police station.

They rode the whole way in stony silence, Willis staring straight ahead in morbid reverie, Benson with his eyes toward the cab window — but on the shadowy reflection of Willis's face given back by the glass, not the street outside.

They got out and Benson took him in and left him waiting in a room at the back for a few minutes, while he went off to attend to something else. This wasn't accidental; it was the psychological build-up — or rather, breakdown — preceding the grill. It had been known to work wonders.

It didn't this time. Willis didn't break. A sense of innocence can sometimes lend moral support; but so can a sense of having outwitted justice.

"The guy must be innocent," another dick remarked.

"He knows we can't get him. There's nothing more in his actions to be uncovered, don't you see? We've got everything there is to get on him, and it isn't enough. And we can't get at his intentions. They got to come out through his own mouth. All he has to do is hold out. It's easy to keep a single, simple idea like that in your mind.

"What breaks down most of them is the uncertainty of something they did wrong, something they didn't cover up right, something cropping up and tripping them — an exploded alibi, a surprise identification by a material witness. He has none of that uncertainty to buck. All he has to do is to sit tight inside his own skin."

To his lieutenant, the next day, Benson said, "I'm morally certain he killed her. What are the three things that count in every crime? Motive, opportunity, and method. He rings the bell on each count. Motive? Well, the oldest one in the world between men and women. He'd lost his head about someone else, and didn't know how else to get rid of her. She was in the way in more than just one sense. She was a deterrent, because of the other woman's sense of loyalty. It wouldn't have done any good if he walked out on her or divorced her; the other woman wouldn't have had him unless he was free, and he knew it.

"It so happens the other woman was a lifelong friend of the wife. She even lived with them, up at the 135th Street place, for a while after they were first married. Then she got out, maybe because she realized a set-up like that was only asking for trouble."

"Have you found out who this other woman is?"

"Sure. Vilma Lyons, the ballad singer in the same show with the wife. I went up to the theater yesterday afternoon. I questioned the two girls who shared Annie Willis's dressing room with her. One of them talked a blue streak. The other one didn't open her mouth; I don't recall her making a single remark during the entire interview. She was too busy *thinking back*. She knew; her intuition must have already told her who had done it. At the end, she suddenly buried her face in her arms and cried. I didn't say a word. I let her take her own time. I let her think it over. I knew she'd come to me of her own accord sooner or later. She did, after curtain time last night, down here at the station house. Weren't we going to *get* the person who had done that to her friend, she wanted to know? Wasn't he going to be punished for it? Was he going to get away with it scot-free?"

"Did she accuse him?"

"She had nothing to accuse him of. He hadn't said anything to her. He hadn't even shown her by the look on his face. And then little by little I caught on, by reading between the lines of what she said, that he'd liked her a little too well."

He shrugged. "She can't help us — she admitted it herself. Because he started giving her these long, haunting looks when he thought she wasn't noticing, and acting discontented and restless, that isn't evidence he killed his wife. But she *knows*, in her own mind, just as I *know* in mine, who hid that remover from Annie Willis, and with what object, and why. She hates him like poison now. I could read it on her face. He's taken her friend from her. They'd chummed together since they were both in pigtails, at the same orphanage."

"All right. What about Opportunity, your second factor?"

"He rings the bell there, too. And again it doesn't do us any good. Sure, he admits he was sitting out front at the matinee day before yesterday. But so was he a dozen times before. Sure, he admits he went backstage to her dressing room, after she'd gone back to it alone and while the other two were still onstage. But so had he a dozen times before. He claims it was already missing then. She told him so, and asked him to go out and get her another bottle. But who's to prove that? She's not alive, and neither of the two other girls had come off the stage yet."

"Well, what happened to the second bottle that would have saved her life?"

"He paid for it. The clerk wrapped it for him. He started out holding it in his hand. And at the drug store entrance he collided with someone coming in. It was jarred out of his hand and shattered on the floor!"

And as if he could sense what the lieutenant was going to say, he hurriedly added: "There were witnesses galore to the incident; the clerk himself, the soda jerk, the cashier. I

questioned every one of them. Not one could say for sure that it wasn't a genuine accident. Not one could swear that he'd seen Willis actually relax his hand and let it fall, or deliberately get in this other party's way."

"Then why didn't he go back and tell her? Why did he leave her there like that with this stuff killing her, so that she had to send the handyman out to see if he could get hold of any for her?"

"We can't get anything on him for that, either. He did the natural thing; he went scouting around for it in other places — the way a man would, who was ashamed to come back and tell her he'd just smashed the one bottle they had left in stock." And through thinned lips he added acidly, "Everything he did was so natural. That's why we can't get him!"

The lieutenant said, "There's an important little point in that smashed-bottle angle. Did he know it was the last bottle on hand *before* he dropped it, or did he only find out after he stepped back to the counter and tried to get another?"

Benson nodded. "I bore down heavy on that with the drug clerk. Unless Willis was deaf, dumb, and blind, he knew that that was the last bottle in the store before he started away from the counter with it. The clerk not only had a hard time finding it, but when he finally located it, he remarked, "'This is the last one we've got left.' "

"Then that accident was no accident."

"Can you *prove* it?" was all Benson said.

The lieutenant answered that by discarding it. "Go ahead," he said sourly.

"I checked with every one of the other places he told me he'd been to after leaving there, and he *had* asked for it in each one. They corroborated him. He wasn't in much danger of coming across it anywhere else and he knew it! The drug clerk had not only forewarned him that he didn't think he'd find it anywhere else, but his wife must have told him the same thing before she sent him out." And screwing his mouth up, Benson said, "But it looked good for the record, and it kept him away from the theater — while she was dying by inches from cellular asphyxiation!"

"Didn't he go back at all? Did he stay out from then on?"

"No one saw him come back, not a soul. I made sure of that before I put it up to him." Benson smiled bleakly. "I know what you're thinking, and I thought of that, too. If he didn't go back at all, then he wasn't responsible for making the remover disappear in the first place. Because it was back in the drawer before the next matinee — I found it there myself.

"Now get the point involved: He had a choice between the natural thing and the completely exonerating thing. But the exonerating thing would have meant behaving a little oddly. The natural thing for a man sent out on an errand by his wife is

to return eventually, even it it's an hour later, even if it's only to report that he was unsuccessful. The exonerating thing, in this case, was for him to stay out for good. All he had to do was claim he never went back, and he was absolutely in the clear, absolutely eliminated."

"Well?" The lieutenant could hardly wait for the answer.

"He played it straight all the way through. He admitted, of his own accord and without having been seen by anybody, that he stopped back for a minute to tell her he hadn't been able to get it, after chasing all over the Forties for the stuff. And that, of course, is when the missing bottle got back into the drawer."

The lieutenant was almost goggle-eyed. "Well I'll be —! She was still alive, the murder hadn't even been completed yet, and he was already removing the traces of it by replacing the bottle!"

"The timing of her act guaranteed that she was already as good as dead, even with the bottle back within her reach. She couldn't take the gilt off now for another three hours. Using it continuously had already lowered her resistance. That brief breathing spell she should have had between shows spelled the difference between life and death. In other words, Lieutenant, he left her alive, with fifty people around her who talked to her, rubbed shoulders with her in the wings, after he'd gone. And later she even danced onstage before a couple hundred more. *But he'd already murdered her!*"

"But you say he didn't have to admit he stopped back at the theater, and yet he did."

"Sure, but to me that doesn't prove his innocence, that only proves his guilt and infernal cleverness. By avoiding the slightest lie, the slightest deviation in his account of his actual movements, he's much safer than by grasping at a chance of automatic, complete vindication. Somebody just *might* have seen him come back; he couldn't be sure."

Benson took a deep breath. "There it all is, Lieutenant: motive, opportunity, and method. And it don't do us much good, does it? There isn't any more evidence to be had. There never will be. There's nothing more to uncover — because it all *is* uncovered already. We couldn't get him on a disorderly conduct charge on all of it put together, much less for murder. What do I do with him now?"

The lieutenant took a long time answering, as though he hated to have to. Finally he did. "We'll have to turn him loose; we can't hold him indefinitely."

"I hate to see him walk out of here free," Benson said.

"There's no use busting your brains about it. It's a freak that only happens maybe once in a thousand times — but it happened this time."

Later that same morning Benson walked out to the entrance of the precinct house with Willis, after the formalities of release had been gone through. Benson stopped short at the top of the entrance steps, marking

the end of his authority. He smiled. "Well, if we couldn't get anything out of you in there last night, I didn't expect to get anything out of you out here right now." His mouth thinned. "Here's the street. Beat it."

Willis went down the steps, walked on a short distance alone and unhindered. Then he decided to cross over to the opposite side of the street. When he had reached it, he stopped a minute and looked back.

Benson was still standing there on the police station steps, looking after him. Their stares met. Benson couldn't read his look, whether it conveyed mockery or relief or just casual indifference. But for that matter, Willis couldn't read Benson's either; whether it conveyed regret or philosophic acceptance of defeat or held a vague promise that things between them weren't over yet. And it wasn't because of the distance that separated them; it was because the thoughts of both were locked up in their minds.

There was a brittle quality of long-smoldering rancor about her, even when she first opened the door, even before she'd had time to see who was standing there. She must have just got home from the show. She still had her coat and hat on. But she was already holding a little jigger glass of colorless liquid between two of her fingers, as if trying to cauterize the inner resentment that was continually gnawing at her. Her eyes traveled over his form from head to foot and back again.

"Been letting any more killers go since I saw you last?" she said sultrily.

"You've taken that pretty much to heart, haven't you?" Benson answered levelly.

"Why wouldn't I? Her ghost powders its nose on the bench next to me twice a day! A couple performances ago I caught myself turning around and saying: 'Did you get paid this week —' before I stopped to think." She emptied the jigger. "And do you know what keeps the soreness from healing? Because the person that did it is still around, untouched, unpunished. Because he got away with it. You know who I mean or do I have to break out with a name?"

"You can't prove it, any more than we could, so why bring up a name?"

"Prove it! *Prove* it! You make me sick." She refilled the jigger. "You're the police! Why weren't you able to get him?"

"You talk like a fool," he said patiently. "You talk like we let him go purposely. D'you think I enjoyed watching him walk out scot-free under my nose? And that ain't all. I've been passed over on the promotion list, on account of it. They didn't *say* it was that; they didn't say it was anything. They didn't have to. I can figure it out for myself. It's the first blank I've drawn in six years. It's eating at my insides, too, like yours."

She relented at the sign of a bitterness that matched her own. "Misery likes company, I guess. Come on in, as long as you're here. Have a stab,"

she said grudgingly, and pushed the gin slightly toward him.

They sat in brooding silence for several minutes, two frustrated people. Finally she spoke again. "He had the nerve to put *his* flowers on her grave! Imagine, flowers from the killer to the one he killed! I found them there when I went there myself, before the matinee today, to leave some roses of my own. The caretaker told me whose they were. I tore them in a thousand pieces when he wasn't looking."

"I know," he said. "He goes up twice a week, leaves fresh flowers each time. I've been casing him night and day. The hypocritical rat! All the way through from the beginning, he's done the natural thing. He does it whether he thinks anyone's watching or not, and that's the safe way for him to do it."

He refilled his own jigger without asking permission. He laughed harshly. "But he's not pining away. I cased his flat while he was out today, and I found enough evidence to show there's some blonde been hanging around to console him. Gilt hairpins on the kitchen floor, a double set of dirty dishes — two of everything — in the sink."

She lidded her eyes, touched a hand to her own jet-black hair. "I'm not surprised," she said huskily. "That would be about his speed. Maybe you can still get something on him through her."

He shook his head. "He can go around with ten blondes if he feels like it. He's within his rights. We can't hold him just for that —"

"What's the matter with the laws these days?" she said almost savagely. "Here we are, you and I, sitting here in this room. We both know he killed Annie Willis. You're drawing pay from the police department, and he's moving around fancy-free only a couple of blocks away from us!"

He nodded as though he agreed with her. "They fail you every once in a while," he admitted gloomily, "the statutes as they are written down on the books. They slip a cog and let someone fall through —" Then he went on: "But there's an older law than the statutes we work under. I don't know if you ever heard of it or not. It's called the Mosaic Law. 'An eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth.' And when the modern set-up goes back on you, that one never does. It's short and sweet, got no amendments, dodges, or habeas corpuses to clutter it up. 'An eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth.' "

"I like the way that sounds better," she said. "But more important still, *I hear the words you're not saying.*"

He just looked at her, and she looked at him. They were like two fencers, warily circling around each other to find an opening. She got up, moved over to the window, stared grimly out toward the traffic intersection at the corner ahead. "Green light," she reported. Then she turned toward him with a bitter, puckered smile. "Green light. That means go ahead — doesn't it?"

"Green light," he murmured. "That means go ahead — if you care to. The man that throws the switch in the deathhouse at Sing Sing, what makes him a legal executioner and not a murderer? The modern statutes. The Mosaic Code can have its legal executioners, too, who are also not murderers."

She had come over close to him.

"But never," he went on, looking straight up at her, "exceed or distort its short, simple teachings. Never repay the gun with the knife, or the knife with the club. Then that's murder, no longer the Mosaic Code. In the same way, if the State executioner shot the condemned man on his way to the chair, or poisoned him in his cell, then he wouldn't be a legal executioner any more, he'd be a murderer himself." And he repeated it again for her slowly. " 'An eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth.' Annie Willis met her death by having something withheld from her that her safety depended on. No weapon was used on Annie Willis, remember."

"Yes," she said, "and I know where there's a trunk that belongs to me, down in a basement storage room, seldom entered, seldom used. One of these big theatrical trunks, roomy enough to carry around the props for a whole act. I left it behind when I moved out. I was going to send for it but —" She paused. "And if I came to you, for instance, and said: 'What's been bothering you and me has been taken care of,' how would you receive me — as a criminal under the modern law or a legal executioner under the old one?"

He looked straight up at her with piercing directness. "The modern law failed you and me, didn't it? Then how could I judge you by it?"

She murmured half audibly, as if testing him: "Then why not you? Why me?"

"The injury was done to you, not me. A friend is a personal belonging, a professional disappointment isn't. Nothing was done to me personally. Under the Mosaic Law, a frustrated job can only be repaid by another frustrated job, by making the person who injured you suffer a like disappointment in *his* work."

She laughed dangerously. "I can do better than that," she said softly.

She kept shaking her head, looking at him from time to time as if she still found the situation almost past belief. "The strangest things never get down on the record books! They wouldn't be believed if they did! Here you are, sitting in my room, a man drawing pay from the police department —" She didn't finish it.

"We haven't been talking," he said, getting up.

She held the door open for him. "No," she smiled, "we haven't been talking. You weren't here tonight, and nothing was said."

The door closed and Detective Benson went down the stairs with an impassive face.

What followed was even more incredible. Or, at least, the surround-

ings it occurred in were. A cop came in to him, at the precinct house three nights later, and said, "There's a lady out there asking for you, Benson. Won't state her business."

Benson said, "I think I know who you mean. Look, Corrigan, you know that little end room on the left, at the back of the hall? Is there anyone in there right now?"

The cop said, "Naw, there's never anyone in there."

"Take her back there, will you?"

He got there ahead of her. She stood outlined in the open doorway first, watching the cop return along the hall, before she'd come in.

He didn't pretend to be going over papers or anything like that. It was one of those blind spots that even the most bustling, overcrowded buildings occasionally have, unused, avoided the greater part of the time by the personnel. He acted slightly frightened. He kept pacing nervously back and forth, waiting for her to enter the room.

When she finally came in and closed the door after her, he said, "Couldn't you have waited until I dropped over to see you?"

"How did I know when you'd be around again? I felt like I couldn't wait another half hour to get it off my chest." There was something almost gloating in the way she looked at him. "Is it safe to talk here?"

He went over to the door, opened it, looked along the passageway outside, closed it again. "It's all right."

She said, half-mockingly, with that intimacy of one conspirator for another: "No dictaphones around?"

He was too on edge to share her bantering mood. "Don't be stupid," he snapped. "This is the last place I ever expected you to —"

She lit a cigarette, preened herself. "You think you're looking at a cheap ballad singer on a burlesque circuit, don't you?"

"What am I looking at?"

"You're looking at a legal executioner, under the Mosaic Code. I have a case of Biblical justice to report. I had a friend I valued very highly, and she was caused to die by having the skin of her body deprived of air. Now the man who did that to her is going to die sometime during the night, if he hasn't already, by having the skin of *his* body — and his lungs and his heart — deprived of air in the same way."

He lit a cigarette to match hers. His hands were so steady — too steady, rigid almost — that you could tell they weren't really. He was forcing them to be that way. His color was paler than it had been when he first came in.

"What have you got to say to that?" She clasped her own sides in a parody of macabre delight.

"I'll tell you in a minute." He went over to the door, opened it, and looked out again, as if to make sure there was no one out there to overhear. He'd dropped his cigarette on the way over to it.

She misunderstood. "Don't be so jittery —" she began scornfully.

He'd raised his voice suddenly, before she knew what to expect. It went booming down the desolate hallway. "Corrigan! C'mere a minute!" A blue-suited figure had joined him before she knew what was happening. He pointed in toward her.

"*Arrest this woman for murder!* Hold her here in this room until I get back! I'm making you personally responsible for her!"

A bleat of smothered fury ripped from her. "Why, you dirty, double-crossing — The guy ain't even dead yet —"

"I'm not arresting you for the murder of Frank Willis. I'm arresting you for the murder of his wife, Annie Willis, over a month and a half ago at the New Rotterdam Theater!"

The greater part of it came winging back from the far end of the hallway, along which he was moving fast on his way to try to save a man's life.

They came trooping down single file, fast, into the gloom. White poker chips of light glanced off the damp brick walls from their torches. The janitor was in the lead. He poked at a switch by his sense of memory alone, and a feeble parody of electricity illuminated part of the ceiling and the floor immediately under it, nothing else.

"I ain't seen him since yesterday noon," he told them in a frightened voice. "I seen him going out then. That was the last I seen of him. Here it is over here, gents. This door."

They fanned out around it in a half circle. All the separate poker chips of torchlight came to a head in one big wagon wheel. The door was fireproof; nail-studded iron, rusty but stout. But it was fastened simply by a padlock clasping two thick staples.

"I remember now, my wife said something about his asking her for the key to here, earlier in the evening while I was out," the janitor said. "So he was still all right then."

"Yes, he was still all right *then*," Benson agreed shortly. "Get that thing off. Hurry up!" A crowbar was inserted behind the padlock; two of the men started to pry. Something snapped. The unopened lock bounced up, and they swung the storage-space door out with a grating sound.

The torchbeams converged inside and lit it up. It was small and cramped, the air musty and unfit to breathe. All the discarded paraphernalia of forgotten tenants over the years choked it. Cartons, empty packing cases, a dismantled iron bed frame, even a kid's sled with one runner missing. But there was a clear space between the entrance and the one large trunk that loomed up, like a towering headstone on a tomb.

It stood there silent, inscrutable. On the floor before it lay, in eloquent meaning, a single large lump of coal brought from the outside part of the basement and discarded after it had served its purpose.

"A blow on the head with that would daze anyone long enough to —" Benson scuffed it out of the way. "Hurry up, fellows. She'd only just

left here when she looked me up. It's not a full hour yet. The seams may be warped with age, there's still a slim chance —"

They pushed the scared, white-lipped janitor out of their way. Axe blades began to slash around the rusted snaplock. "Not too deep," Benson warned. "Give it flat strokes from the side, or you're liable to cut in and — Got that pulmotor ready?"

The axes held off at his signal and he pulled the dangling lock off the splintered seams with his bare hands. They all jumped in, began pulling in opposite directions. The trunk split open vertically. A face stared sightlessly into the focused torchbeams, a contorted mask of strangulation and unconsciousness that had been pressed despairingly up against the seam as close as it could get, to drink in the last precious molecule of air.

Willis's body, looking shrunken, tumbled out into their arms. They carried him out into the more open part of the basement, one hand with mangled nails trailing inertly after him. An oxygen tank was hooked up, and a silent, grim struggle for life began in the eerie light of the shadowy basement.

Twice they wanted to quit, and Benson wouldn't let them. "If he goes, that makes a murderer out of me! And I won't be made a murderer out of! We're going to bring him back, if we stay here until tomorrow night!"

And then, in the middle of the interminable silence, a simple, quiet announcement from the man in charge of the squad: "He's back, Benson. He's going again!"

Somebody let out a long, whistling breath of relief. It was a detective who had just escaped being made into a murderer.

The lieutenant came in, holding the confession in his hands. Benson followed.

"She put away?"

"Yes, sir."

The lieutenant went ahead, reading the confession. Benson waited in silence until he'd finished. The lieutenant looked up finally. "This'll do. You got results, but I don't get it. What was this business of her coming here and confiding in you that she'd made an attempt on Willis's life tonight, and how does that tie in with the murder of Annie Willis? You hit the nail on the head, but I miss the connecting links."

Benson said, "Here was the original equation. A wife in the middle, a man and a woman on the ends. She was in the way, but of which one of them? Vilma Lyons claimed it was Willis who had a pash on her. Willis didn't claim anything; the man as a rule won't.

"I watched them to see which would approach the other. Neither one did.

"I still couldn't tell which was which — although my money was still on Willis, up to the very end.

"Here was the technique. When I saw neither of them was going to tip

a hand, I tipped it, instead. There's nothing like a shot of good, scalding jealousy in the arm for tipping the hand. I went to *both* of them alike, gave them the same build-up treatment. I was bitter and sore, because I'd muffed the job. It was a mark against me on my record, and so on. In Willis's case, because we'd already held him for it once, I had to vary it a little, make him think I'd changed my mind, now thought it was Vilma, but couldn't get her for it.

"In other words, I gave them both the same unofficial all-clear to go ahead and exact retribution personally. And I lit the same spark to both their fuses. I told Willis that Vilma had taken up with some other guy; I told her he had taken up with some other girl.

"One fuse fizzled out. The other flared and exploded. One of them didn't give a damn, because he never had. The other, having already committed murder to gain the object of her affections, saw red, would have rather seen him dead than have somebody else get him.

"You see, Lieutenant, murder always comes easier the second time than the first. Given equal provocation, whichever one of those two had committed the murder the first time wouldn't hesitate to commit it a second time. Willis had loved his wife. He smoldered with hate when I told him we had evidence Vilma had killed her, but he didn't act on the hints I gave him. It never occurred to him to.

"Only one took advantage of the leeway I seemed to be giving them, and went ahead. That one was the real murderer.

"It's true," he conceded, "that's not evidence that would have done us much good in trying to prove the other case. But what it did manage to do was make a dent in the murderer's armor. All we had to do was keep hacking away and she finally crumbled. Being caught in the act the second time weakened her self-confidence, gave us a psychological upper-hand over her. She finally came through." He indicated the confession the lieutenant held.

"Well," pondered the lieutenant, stroking his chin, "it's not a technique that I'd care to have you men make a habit of using very frequently. In fact, it's a damn dangerous one to monkey around with, but it got results this time, and that's the proof of any pudding."

EQMM's DETECTIVE DIRECTORY

edited by ROBERT P. MILLS

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FC: *Frances Crane in the Evansville Press*

SC: *Sergeant Cuff in The Saturday Review*

H-M: *Brett Halliday and Helen McCloy in the Fairfield County Fair*

Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine rounds up the judgment of reviewers across the country. The key at bottom gives sources.

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DBH: *Dorothy B. Hughes in the Albuquerque Tribune*
LGO: *Lenore Glen Offord in the San Francisco Chronicle*
DQ: *Dorothy Quick in her syndicated column*
AdV: *Avis de Voto in the Boston Globe*

WINNER OF A SECOND PRIZE

EQMM had the good fortune to publish Vinnie Williams's very first story — perhaps you will recall it: "A Matter of the Tax Payers' Money," in our issue of October 1949, nearly six years ago. Mrs. Williams's debut in print was impressive: we know that more than one major publishing house got in touch with Mrs. Williams and told her they would be seriously interested in any book she wrote. And the reason was perfectly clear: Mrs. Williams has a precious ingredient in her work — authenticity, or to use another word, truth. Her first story concerned a welfare worker investigating a crime in Florida, among the "crackers." There was an undeniable realism in her details — in the Florida scene and in the background of social service work; in the homely, grass-roots, regional-American dialogue; for Mrs. Williams has the true writer's dialogue-ear and description-eye to record what she has actually heard and seen. Being a cracker herself — intimately familiar with mustard pickles, frog gigging, and Indian Mustang Oil — and having been a welfare worker in the Florida area, she had that indispensable qualification for realistic writing — first-hand knowledge.

And now, after nearly six years, Mrs. Williams sends us another story. In the interim she has been writing and selling love stories — but "Dodie and the Boogerman" is in our field (glory be!), another tale of crime in the deep-South milieu. And although Mrs. Williams has deserted the social service theme, she now gives us something she knows even better — the story of two children in the South. We will go on record here and now that Mrs. Williams's new story is one of the most beautifully written that it has been our privilege to publish in a good many years — a story with superb descriptive detail (about "fern-frowsy oaks" and "white-exploding cotton fields" and "winds stretching their legs over the tree tops"), with wonderful "local color" and such authentic dialogue that it sparkles with the ring of truth and poetry; here, too, is the stuff of folklore and legend — with place names like Lake Now 'n Again and Diddy-Wah-Diddy (where the streets are "lined with dime stores and all the counters had signs which said: Help Yourself") and Zar ("nobody knew about Zar; it was the other side of Far") . . .

When we wrote to Mrs. Williams in 1948 that we were purchasing her first story, she replied: "I haven't been so obfuscated since I ran into that

farrow of hogs a year ago down near Sarasota." Last year, when we notified Mrs. Williams that her new story had won a Second Prize, she wrote: "There is no sensation quite like opening a rural mail box — after slogging an eighth of a mile through an Autumn rain — and finding, amid a cluster of advertisements, a letter like yours. It makes everything seem worthwhile — including the fact that our favorite woodman has gone out of business and no pine knots will be forthcoming this winter . . . You always make me feel as if I were standing in tall cotton, and it bringing $300 a bale."

Oh, can that woman write!

DODIE AND THE BOOGERMAN

by VINNIE WILLIAMS

SUMMER DUSTED THE COTTON FIELDS and curled the thin, down-reaching leaves of the pecan. The two children, crouched among the roots, examined the gun they had found.

They were part of the Georgia countryside, the girl sun-darkened to gold, the boy the shiny purple-black of pokeberries. Both wore ragged blue shorts, and the girl a torn t-shirt. Their bare feet were tucked into sandy frog-houses.

". . . skeeters like to eat me 'live, so I gits up out'n bed to shet the winder." Billy-Goat's eyes rolled liquidly in his black face. "That's when I see him, ole Boogerman, a-going thu your backyard, heading for Ginny Gall and West Hell, toting this here bundle. Reckon the gun feel out 'thout him noticing."

"Uh-huh." Dodie clutched the gun. It was a teency thing with a pearl handle, and the wonder of the way they had found it possessed her. "Billy-Goat, tell me again what he looked like — the Boogerman, I mean." And she shivered with delicious anticipation.

"White. White as grave clo's, white as cottonmouth spit."

She objected, "Pa and Uncle Buck say old Boogerman's black."

"Nuh. Boogerman be white."

The tenant shack occupied by Gam Kezzie and Billy-Goat was across the big backyard, a sun-silvered hut with a clay chimney and sagging roof gouted with flame vine. Dodie's house was in front of them, white and two-storied and surrounded by fern-frowsy oaks. The cotton fields lay to their right, and beyond them was the woods, and beyond the woods was Lake Now 'n Again.

A half hour earlier the two children

had cut across the cotton field and entered the woods. They sometimes played there, but were forbidden to go near the Lake, because Pa said the lake wasn't "natural." So they walked, repeating the chant Billy-Goat had taught her against heebies and haunts: "Bread and butter, holy water. Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John, bless the ground that I walk on."

The gun was lying in the middle of the path.

Dodie pounced on it and, gripped by she knew not what emotion — terror, excitement, elation — turned and pelted back through the white-exploding cotton field, Billy-Goat hollering after . . .

She stroked the gun. "What else you reckon he had in that bundle?"

"Guns."

Billy-Goat, she had learned in the three days since he and Gam Kezzie had come, was foolish about guns — one gun, rather — a Roy Rogers he had lost the first day he came. Though he and Dodie had looked everywhere, it could not be found. "Ole Boogerman's got my Roy Rogers gun — whole heap others too."

"What's he want your ole gun for? It won't shoot none, no more than this one." She had pulled the trigger several times, but it wouldn't work. She knew nothing of safety catches.

"Why — why, he's gonna magic 'em. He's gonna make 'em shoot real bullets, then he's gonna bust in and take over Diddy-Wah-Diddy for vacation-holiday."

Billy-Goat could not have said himself where imagination left off and belief began. White Preacher Brown, back on the Georgia sea island where he had been born, said there weren't any such places as Diddy-Wah-Diddy or Ginny Gall or West Hell or Zar. But Gam Kezzie said culled folks weren't good enough to go to white folks' heaven, nor bad enough to go to white folks' hell; instead they went to Diddy-Wah-Diddy or West Hell.

Diddy-Wah-Diddy had streets lined with dime stores and all the counters had signs which said: *Help yourself.* Roast chicken and pecan pies came along with forks stuck in their middles crying *Eat me.* Only trouble was, Diddy-Wah-Diddy was hard to get to. Road going there was so crooked, a mule could eat hay off the back of the wagon he was pulling.

West Hell was the other end of the pike. Your soul was put in a rubber coffin so it could be bounced down there and not toted. That's where the Boogerman lived when he wasn't at Zar, because he had married the Devil's youngest daughter. Winter came when the Boogerman visited the Devil and turned down the dampers.

Ginny Gall was in between. Land there was so poor, only a Negro jook would have it, and then they'd have to spread fertilizer to raise the roof. Zar — well, nobody knew about Zar; it was way the other side of Far, and folks that went there never came back.

The boy, seeking to orient himself in this strange hill country so different from the gray and celadon wash of

sea and salt marsh, had renamed everything. Ellaville, ten miles down the highway and magic with barbecue stands and movies, was Diddy-Wah-Diddy; the little woods beyond the cotton field was Ginny Gall; and Lake Now 'n Again was West Hell.

The girl blew ragged tan hair out of her eyes and said scornfully, "I don't b'lieve it. You go to West Hell."

He cackled, "Drather go to Ginny Gall, where the folks eat sowbelly or nothing 'tall!" And he kicked his black heels high in an ecstasy of mirth at his wit.

The girl ignored him. "Wait till I show Pa my gun."

"Nuh, it ain't yours. It's mine. Gimme it!"

Instead, the girl sprang to her feet and raced away, dust puffing around her feet. Fiercely the boy pursued her, but she gained her back porch and, safe, turned and stuck her tongue out at him. She knew he dared not come in her house.

The boy shouted, "You gimme that gun, or I ain't gonna play with you no more!"

She said calmly, "You got no one else," and vanished into the house.

Sadly the boy turned away. He picked up a lump of dirt and began eating it. He sure had to get that gun back someways.

The girl, in her room, scrabbled through a welter of odds and ends in her toy box and came up with a worn holster. She strapped it to her waist and practiced drawing the gun.

"Bang!" she snarled, glaring at herself in the mirror. "Bang, you're dead."

By and by she tired of this, and dropping the gun into the holster, went over to stand by her front window. She better not go out for a bit; Billy-Goat would sure enough jump on her.

She grinned, absently picking a scab on her knee. Things had sure been fun since Billy-Goat and Gam Kezzie came. Before, summer had crawled on turtle-feet. The nearest house was half a mile up the highway; her mother had died four years ago, and Pa and Uncle Buck spent all their time at the cotton gin or jooking around.

Of course when Mary and Pretty Pond lived in the tenant house, it was better. But they had gotten into their old sedan one night last week and had gone off without a word to anyone. That's when Pa had phoned the sheriff and asked if there were any Negra women in the jail house. The sheriff had sent Gam Kezzie to cook for them.

A pick-up truck turned off the highway and stopped under the oaks. Dodie shot out to meet it, screaming, "Pa, Uncle Buck, what you bring me?"

The two men, descending from the truck, pretended they didn't see her.

"You hear something, Buck?" Pa asked, looking everywhere except where she hopped before him.

"Just skeeters, Dave. Sure are loud this time of year."

They were both big men, but Pa looked like Uncle Buck's father in-

stead of his brother. He had a lantern jaw and skin stretched tight over his cheek bones and brown-gray hair dusted with lint. He was so thin that his pants hung off his hips, but he was strong. Once he had cleaned out a Black Bottom jook single-handed when a buck gave him some sass.

Uncle Buck was handsome. He had the small, blunt, black-polled head of an Angus bull, and he wore fancy clothes, cowboy shirts embroidered with flowers, and fancy tooled boots to show off his small feet. He was always laughing and cutting the fool, and girls could no more stay away from him than bees could stay away from ripe peaches.

Dodie cried now, tugging Pa's sleeve. "Aw, Pa, please —"

"Well, I'll be dogged." He looked down and acted surprised, and grinned. "How come I should bring you something?"

"It's *Saturday*." On Saturday, Pa and Uncle Buck got off work at noon and went grocery shopping and always brought her a surprise. "*Pa!*"

A few minutes later she was opening a bag of chicken-feed candy.

Pa said, "Now let's go rattle the dishes and fool the cats."

After dinner she hung around watching Pa and Uncle Buck get dressed up for town. She had begged, fruitlessly, for them to take her to the cowboy show, but Pa shook his head.

"Maybe next week. I got a heap of cotton to damp down in my throat."

Lip sticking out, Dodie took the gun from the holster and sighted toward the bathroom door. Uncle Buck, coming out, gave a jump and his brown face seemed to change color.

"Great day in the morning, Dodie —"

Pa took the gun away from her. "Where you get this, Dodie?" He frowned.

If she told him in Ginny Gall, he'd get mad. He didn't like her to go in the woods, or over toward the lake.

"On the highway, Pa. Reckon," she said, "someone th'ew it out a car."

Pa looked at Uncle Buck. "This looks kinda like the gun you won in that crap game coupla months back, Buck."

Uncle Buck shook his black head. He looked better now. "Not mine," he said carelessly.

"Well," Pa spun the cylinders, "it's empty. But best take it easy, Doodle-Bug." He tossed it back to Dodie and finished tucking in his shirt-tail.

A little later he and Uncle Buck took off for town.

Dodie hung around for a while, then caching the gun in her toy box, sauntered out into the backyard, still chewing her candy.

Billy-Goat was flying a June-bug on a piece of thread. He saw the candy and ran over.

"Gimme some, Dodie?"

Carefully she counted out three pieces.

"Chinchy," he said absently. "Chinchy, chinchy, chinchy picking. Give an egg to get a chicken." But he ate them, eyes blinking with pleasure. "Gimme some more."

"I ain't got but a little left."

He made a grab for the bag, and she jerked away, and then they were rolling and squealing and struggling in the dust, black and gold legs flashing, elbows flying.

"Quit that now, Billy-Goat!" Gam Kezzie's voice broke them apart. "You jes git up from there and git in here and he'p me. I declare, you jes like your Pa. I tole Lutie not to marry wid that buckra — he ain't nuthing but breath and britches, I tole her — but she got to do it. Now you git on in here, or I gonna lay the battling stick around your legs good!"

She turned back into the shack, a wizened old colored woman, nidding-nodding and mumbling through toothless blue gums. She was swathed in a cocoon of ragged cotton dresses worn layer on layer, and her great feet were stuck in old tennis shoes slit for bunions. Her gray hair was parted in geometric squares, each tightly wrapped in thread.

Dodie followed Billy-Goat into the shack.

It already looked different. When Mary and Pretty Pond were living here, it had been dirty and chickens had fluttered through the broken windows and Mary's perfume, as cheap and pretty and brown-bright as she was, had fought with the smell of chicory-coffee and grease. Gam Kezzie had papered the walls with clean newspapers pasted on with flour and water, and cleared out most of the dirt. She was in the process now of scouring the floor. She had a thin layer of white sand spread over it and a bucket of water ready.

"Take dis brick," she told the pout-lipped Billy-Goat, "and see kin you git that stain." She pointed to a big brown blotch in a corner. "Lawdy, dem folkses musta stuck a hog, all dat blood."

Dodie asked curiously, "How you know it's blood?"

Rheumy eyes swiveled to her. "It shined in de dark last night, dat's how I knows. Ain't nothing but blood shines in de dark."

Dodie, thinking about this, tossed a candy toward her open mouth. It missed and bounced under the sagging iron bed. She dived after it. In the fetid dusk under the bed something glittered. She picked it up and wriggled back out.

"Hey, it's Mary's beads."

Mary had been foolish-proud of it, the circle of imitation pearls and diamonds. Pretty Pond had given it to her last Christmas. Dodie still remembered him fastening it around Mary's pretty coffee-colored neck.

"Honey, you look sweeter'n two pay-days a week," Dodie had heard him say.

Mary had tilted her brown head, smiling at him slantways. "You just saying that cause it's so."

"God's truth, honey." His big hands then fastened on her shoulders, and his chocolate face had come down to hers. "I even see another man looking sideways to Sunday at you, I put him deeper'n hell than a pigeon kin fly in a month."

"Who I see out here?" she had scoffed. "Who gonna give me such pretties?" And she had stroked the necklace lovingly.

Now it hung, swaying a little, from Dodie's finger. Funny Mary hadn't taken it with her. It couldn't have been because it was under the bed; once Mary had almost taken the cabin apart looking for it, moving furniture and all. Maybe she and Pretty Pond had gone off too quick.

Dodie put it on and switched over to Billy-Goat.

"Hey, Billy-Goat, looka me. Ain't I pretty?"

He scowled up at her from his knees. "You go on off."

The afternoon bumbled along as slowly as a tumble-bug carrying a dab of mud. Shadows were purpling before Billy-Goat finished sweeping the yard with a twig broom, and was released. Then he and Dodie retreated to the pecan tree with a handful of boiled pinders, snatched when Gam Kezzie wasn't looking.

Lightning suddenly cut the sky. Dodie cracked a warm salty shell. "It's gonna rain."

"Nuh, that ain't real lightning. That's fire-balls. Ever now-then Devil and old Boogerman got to have a do-see, find out which is strongest. They th'ow hell-fire balls, try to knock Jesus out'n Heaven, but they always quit before they do."

"How come?"

"Well, if they was to knock Him out, they'd be out of wuk, huh?" He added casually, "Where at's the gun?"

"In my secret hidey-hole, that's where."

"You got no right to that gun! It's mine."

"Loosers weepers, finders keepers."

"Wait till I go to West Hell, git them other guns! I ain't gonna let you play with none!"

She gasped, a peanut halfway to her lips. "Billy-Goat, you ain't fixing to go to West Hell?"

He hadn't really thought of going, but her fright sparked him. He brushed sand from a knee-cap as small and round and black as an oak gall, and said casually, "Reckon so."

"Gam Kezzie will frail you good."

"How she going to know 'less you tell? Tattle-tale, tattle-tale," he jeered, "mouth so big, go to jail."

She retorted, incensed, "I ain't neither. When you going?"

"Oh — sometime."

She recovered her aplomb. "You're scared."

"I ain't neither —"

"You are, too. You don't dast go to the lake. You know it's haunted."

"I do too dast."

"Why don't you then? I dare you — I dee-double dare you!"

Gam Kezzie said, "What you talking 'bout dat lake?" She halted on her way to the big house and studied their averted faces suspiciously. "You stay 'way fum dat lake, heah me?"

They waited until she shuffled away, and Dodie repeated, "Dare you." And when Billy-Goat still hesitated, she taunted, "Scaredy-cat, scaredy-cat!"

He sprang up. "I ain't neither."

"Go on then."

"Not less you come." And when she hesitated, he gained confidence and taunted in turn, "You're scared. I dare you!"

"I ain't —"

Their progress across the yard and through the cotton field was jerky. Occasionally they glanced over their shoulders to see if Gam Kezzie was looking for them — and half hoping she was — and then they took it up again: "I dare you." "Nuh, I dare you."

They entered Ginny Gall and took the thin path that frayed out halfway through.

The woods were a light growth, half burned out the previous spring, the soil acrid and sandy. Above them a woodpecker hitched and rapped its way up a pine tree, and all about them was the minute dust-like activity of insects.

They paused by mutual consent and rubbed absent toes on slick, sun-warmed pine needles.

Billy-Goat said, "Which way at's the lake?"

Dodie pointed vaguely. "Over that way."

She was remembering the lake, the way she had seen it on the few times Pa had taken her there for walks. It was, maybe, an acre wide, and a sand trail ran to it from the highway. Trees grew all around it — water oak and willows and sweet gum and bay — and the water was black and still, as if it hugged a dreadful secret to itself.

Dodie was scared of it. She didn't want to go anywhere near it. She cast desperately around in her mind for something — and cried, in relief and joy, "Hey, I just remembered — Mary said there was a p'simmon tree 'round here somewheres."

Billy-Goat's eyes lit up like a fox's at pokeberry time. "Where at?"

She tried to recall. It was one night, a couple of weeks back. She had awakened from a nightmare, yelling, thinking heebies were in the house — but it was only Mary, tiptoeing in to hush her.

"Shh, sugar, g'n back to sleep now. Here, Mary gonna give you a something." And she had popped a chocolate-cherry between her lips.

"Mary," she had mumbled drowsily, "where'd you get the candy?"

There was a little stillness, and then Mary had whispered, "Nev' mind. You forgit the candy — and I tell you where there's a p'simmon tree."

"Where?"

"In the woods. I show you tomorrow."

Only she never had.

Billy-Goat said, "Sure could use a 'simmon."

Dodie pointed. "Looka them bushes. All broke down, like someone's gone along there. C'm on."

Brambles reached out for their bare legs and trees caught their hair with lean twig fingers. Then Dodie saw it. There was no mistaking the bare snaky branches, the golden twinkle.

"There it is!"

It stood on the edge of a little clear-

ing, an old tree with its black bark broken into thick squares, easy for toe and finger holds. A few minutes later the two children swayed on a branch halfway up, eating the wrinkled yellow fruit with the greediness of young 'possums.

They did not notice the sky darkening, the wind stretching its legs over the treetops. They ate and talked, the lake tacitly forgotten. Billy-Goat noticed the dusk and the chill first.

"Woo-ee! Old sky is fixing to spit. We better git."

They slid and half tumbled out of the tree, and when they reached earth, the wind took them in its teeth and shook them as a puppy shakes a rag. They held close to each other to keep on their feet.

Dodie shrieked over the wind, "Which way is it home?"

"That way."

"No, that way —"

They started in one direction. They changed to another. The woods were strange monsters that shook great black arms at them and moaned. They stopped, a-grue with wind and terror, while all about them the forest creatures crept into hollow and crevice and drew warmth about them.

Billy-Goat screamed, "We git blowed away, we stay here! I seen an old holler tree —"

They swayed and pushed through the green-blackness, while stars drowned in the slip-stream of space and the world became a hollow drum, pounded on by the fists of the wind. The v-hollow in the base of the old oak was big enough for only one child, but both of them, somehow, crammed in.

It was musty and moldy in the tree. The humus under them was like a damp felt blanket. High above them in his nest, a cat-squirrel slept with his tail curled over his nose. Above him a half dozen birds huddled under leaves, their eyes filmed, while a thin drilling rain began to fall.

"You reckon it's a hurricane?"

Dodie shook her head mutely.

After a while warmth melted their tongues. They began to talk in half whispers, speculating about being missed.

"Gam Kezzie will figure we come to the lake."

"Uh-huh, but Pa and Uncle Buck won't drive home thu all this. They'll stay in town."

By and by their talk petered out. They peered out at the darkness and storm through increasingly gummy, flickering lids. Finally they fell asleep.

They slept and woke uneasily, then slept again. When they woke, it was to a vast stillness and a dawn thin and gray. They crept out of the hollow and stood up, awed by a world of stripped branches and broken trees and luminous wetness.

"Gee," Dodie breathed, "gee — I betcha no other kids have been in the woods in a hurricane."

"Nuh — hey, looka," Billy-Goat cried, pointing toward a scrim of trees blown apart by the wind, "there's the lake!" He started toward it. "C'm on."

"No, we better get home."

"Nuh, c'm on. Let's see kin we find that bundle ole Boogerman was toting." And as she still hesitated, he added, "Ain't nothing to be scared of. Today's Sunday — Boogerman goes to Zar Sundays." He extended a crooked little finger. "Let's say rabbit."

She linked her finger with his. They chanted, "Rabbit, rabbit," touched thumbs and chanted, "Bunny, bunny.

"Now can't nothing happen. Come on."

They pushed through the cold wet-heavy bushes to the lake edge. Lake Now 'n Again was before them.

Billy-Goat whispered, "Lawd God."

The lake was gone. Only a pewter glaze of water lay over half-submerged logs and rotted roots and débris. Bream and bass flopped convulsively in puddles or lay dead half up on the gummy banks. An old car was half sunk at the farther side where the sand trail ended.

Lake Now 'n Again had disappeared.

It did so about every ten years. One day it would be there, the next it was gone just as if someone had jerked a plug in a bathtub. Pa said the bottom was limestone sponge. When it got clogged, the hole filled with water. When the débris rotted away or got brushed off by a storm, the water drained off. Later it got stopped up again and refilled.

Dodie said, "The storm done it." She was hardly able to get over the wonder.

Billy-Goat's eyes were glistening in his plum-colored face. Guns were forgotten — they were play-pretties. Hunger was now a snake-tooth reality.

"Looka them fish. Let's get some."

"We got nothing to put them in—"

"There's an old something." Billy-Goat hopped down into the mud and slogged over to a rag, wind-whipped around a drowned root. He worked it loose. "Look like a shirt."

"Why," Dodie jumped down and joined him, mud oozing between her toes, "it's Uncle Buck's new shirt." She brushed dirt from a blaze of embroidered roses. "Mary put his name on the pocket. See."

Billy-Goat lunged and grabbed a flopping bass. "Hey, hold it like a sack," and when she did so, he thrust the fish in. "Huh, it ain't gonna hold hardly nothing. Look-see kin you find something else."

Obediently she relinquished the shirt and clambered back up on the bank. She began pushing her way through the thin brush along the edge, through wind-stripped vines and the downbent withes of willows.

Suddenly she thought of something and yelled, "Billy-Goat, this ain't West Hell."

His voice came muffled. "Huh?"

"Nev' mind."

No, this wasn't West Hell. It wasn't a nat'ral place, like Pa said, but it wasn't West Hell. Boogerman brought palm fans and ice water when he visited the Devil in West Hell, but it was cold here and there was water enough to strangle a toady-frog.

Bushes reached to hold her, catching Mary's necklace in thin, pleading fingers. She disentangled it and broke through to a clearing and the sand trail. Two buzzards feeding on dead fish lumbered into the air and hovered motionless above her. Now she could see the auto wreck clearly, sunk to its hubcaps in peaty marl. Why — it wasn't no wreck at all! It was Mary and Pretty Pond's old black sedan, right to the pink bug-catcher on the nose.

Suddenly, back through the woods she heard a call. "Dodie! Do-*deee?*"

It was Pa and Uncle Buck looking for her, and she shivered. Now she'd get it good; Pa would frail the daylights out of her.

She screamed back, "Here I am, Pa — to the lake," turned to run and meet them, and paused. She might as well look at the car.

She half slid down the bank and squelched her way from the back to the front of the car. The windows were up and covered with a wash of drying mud.

Dodie rubbed a peek-hole with her fist and stared in. Looked like two big black bundles there in the back seat. She rubbed off more of the mud.

Her father and Uncle Buck had reached the scrim of trees at the other end of the lake when they heard her scream.

"Dang young'un," her father panted. "What you reckoned happened now? Way she yelled, you'd think the lake was gone again, but it ain't due to go for another four-five years — less'n the wind we had last night —" He parted the curtain of bushes, exclaimed, then took a giant step and reached out long arms to catch a stumbling, sobbing child.

"Dodie, honey — it's all right now, sugar. Your old daddy's got you —"

It came through hiccups, through racking sobs that shook the thin shoulders pressed against his thighs. "Mary — Pretty Pond —"

Her father turned hopelessly. "Buck, what in the world —?"

His brother's good looking face was sucked-out white. He raised a quivering hand. "I didn't mean to, Dave — honest to God. I had my hand on Mary's shoulders and Pretty Pond come at me — and I had this little old gun on me I was fixing to sell . . ."

"Buck, what in *hell* you talking about?"

Not Hell. Not West Hell, Dodie thought, arms tightening convulsively on her father's hips. The lake was Zar — and Mary and Pretty Pond would never come back.

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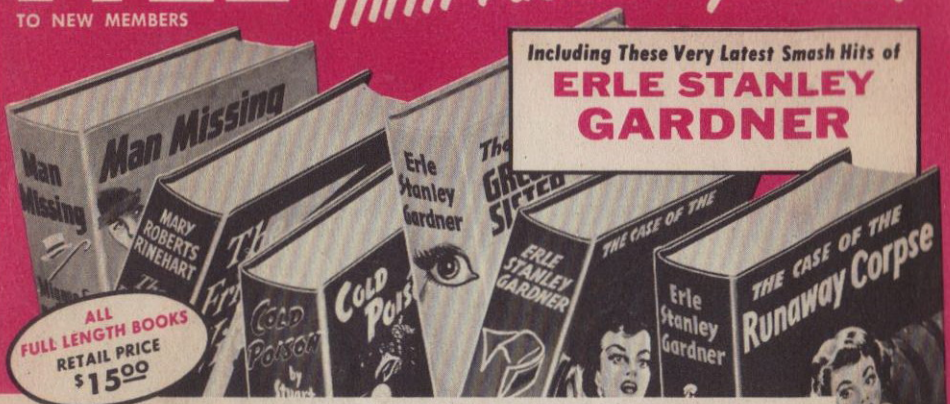

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