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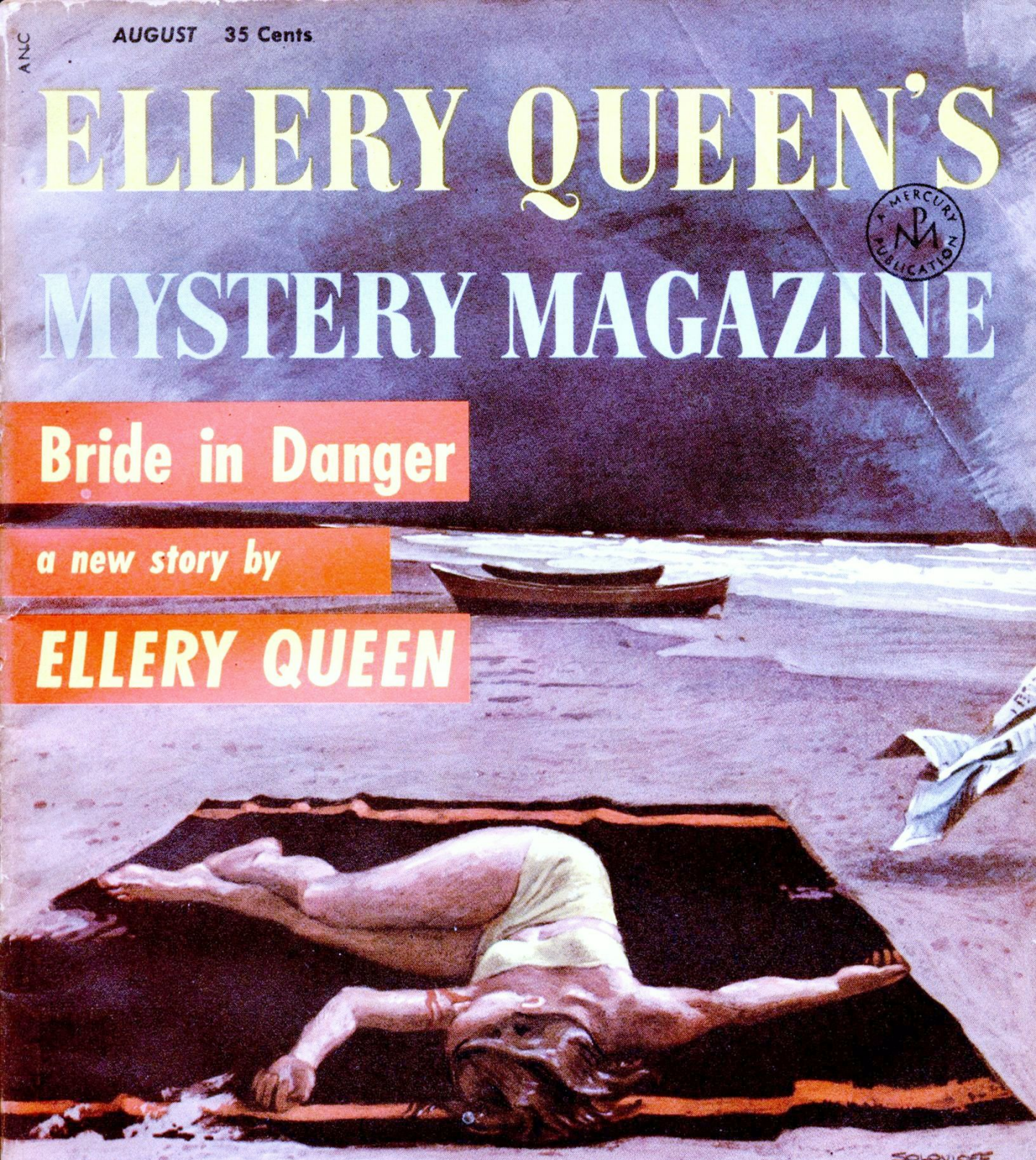

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PUBLISHER: *Joseph W. Ferman* **EDITOR:** *Ellery Queen*

Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine, Vol. 26, No. 2, Whole No. 141, AUG., 1955. Published monthly by Mercury Publications, Inc., at 35¢ a copy. Annual subscription $4.00 in U.S.A. and possessions, Canada and the Pan American Union; $5.00 in all other countries. Publication office, Concord, N. H. Editorial and General offices, 471 Park Ave., New York 22, N. Y. Entered as second class matter at the post office at Concord, N. H. under the act of March 3, 1879.

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The newest short story about the town of Wrightsville . . .

BRIDE IN DANGER

by ELLERY QUEEN

THE MACKENZIE-FARNHAM NUPtials — according to no less an authority than Violetta Billcox, Society Editor of the *Wrightsville Record* — were to be The Event of the summer social season. Molly Mackenzie was marrying Dr. Conklin Farnham, and nothing more important than that could be expected to happen for the rest of the year.

The bride-to-be was the daughter of the Donald Mackenzies (Wrightsville Personal Finance Corp., Country Club, Art Museum Committee, etc., etc.), and young Conk Farnham was *the* up-and-coming surgeon of Wrightsville — son of the celebrated New England internist, Dr. Farnham Farnham, who was President of the County Medical Association and Chairman of the Board of Wrightsville General Hospital. It was strictly a Skytop Road romance, for the Mackenzies' Virginia Colonial (built in 1948) was only two houses down the road from the Farnhams' redwood-and-glass Ranch Type Modern; their back lawns embraced behind the skimpy acre of the Hallam Lucks' intervening estate.

It was to be a June wedding, of course, with the knot tied by the Bishop himself. The noted churchman was coming up from Boston especially for the ceremony, to the secret disappointment of Rev. Ernest Highmount, who had counted on the Mackenzies' patronizing the local talent; in fact, Dr. Highmount had had Donald Mackenzie's half-promise to that effect. But Bea Mackenzie was as stubborn as the granite of the Mahoganies. Molly was her only child, and Bea had schemed and hoped for far too long to be deprived in her triumph of its full rewards. The Bishop it was going to be, with a lawn reception afterwards for one hundred and fifty-six rigidly screened guests, and catering by Del Monica's of Connhaven.

"Connhaven! But I'm in business in Wrightsville, Bea," protested Donald Mackenzie. "What's the matter with Liz Jones? Lizzie has catered every important shindig in this town for the last thirty-five years."

"Exactly," said Bea, patting her husband's paw. "How common can you get? Now you run along, Donald. All you have to do is pay the bills — I'll worry about everything else."

It was Bea who solved the social "problems." Conk was an absolute darling, but he *had* left rather a trail. There was Millie Burnett's Sandra,

for instance — a large, panting girl with the disposition and intelligence of a healthy cow. Sandra was the outdoors type, and Conk had seen a great deal of her when he was wearing turtleneck sweaters — so much so that Sandra had grown stars in her eyes and Millie had bought her an outsized hope chest. Conk swore that he had never uttered a serious word to Sandra, but to this day Millie Burnett spoke of him coldly.

There was also Flo Pettigrew, J. C.'s younger daughter, who had succeeded Sandra when Conk Farnham graduated from skiing parties on Bald Mountain to poetry sessions in the pines around Quetonokis Lake. Flo was pale and intense, wore her hair like the early pictures of Edna St. Vincent Millay, and was the *Record's* chief source of supply for love poetry; and when Conk broke their engagement she drooped like a bruised lily and wrote passionate verses to Death. Yet the Burnetts and the Pettigrews had to be invited to Molly's wedding; what was worse, Sandra and Flo were probably Molly's closest friends.

Bea solved the problem heroically: she convinced Molly that the course of wisdom was to pretend the past had never happened. Molly, who had inherited her mother's brains along with her father's good looks, had secret doubts; but she asked Sandra Burnett and Flo Pettigrew to be her bridesmaids anyway. When they accepted — Sandra with whoops and Flo very quietly — everyone but Conk Farnham was relieved.

Then Bea faced the question of what to do about Jen. Ordinarily a visiting relative from England would have given a fillip to a Wrightsville function; but Jennifer Reynolds, who was Bea's cousin and therefore her personal cross, drifted about the Mackenzie premises under such a pall of sorrow that she was bound to darken even so brilliant an occasion as Molly's wedding.

Bea gave a lot of thought to the problem of Jen. Finally she announced, "What poor Jen needs in this crisis is a *man*."

"Oh, Mother," said Molly. "I've thrown whole he-harems at her. Jen won't *encourage* an eligible male."

"Who?" sniffed her mother. "Dr. Flacker? Henry Granjon? All Walt Flacker knows about women is what he sees in the Maternity Pavilion. And Henry's idea of a nice time is an evening of Canasta with his mother." Bea's snub nose wrinkled with cleverness. "The Lord knows, with Jen's mind she won't find a challenge in any man *Wrightsville* has to offer. . . ."

"Who's the victim?" giggled Molly.

"Well," said her mother, not undefensively, "I *have* been trying to think up a formula for inviting Ellery Queen up from New York for the wedding. . . ."

The last time Ellery had seen the principals, Molly had been a shy little bud at Wrightsville High and young Conklin Farnham a dedicated medical student apparently under the

spell of one of the grimmer soap operas. Ellery found a full-grown radiant blossom and a hard-headed surgeon, and little opportunity to improve his acquaintanceship. For the Mackenzie house bustled with strange ladies with pins in their mouths, clanged with telephones and doorbells announcing the arrival of endless packages and cartons, and buzzed with mysterious conferences behind banged doors. Over all rose the conspiratorial laughter of Molly, Sandra Burnett, and Flo Pettigrew, occupied with whatever occupies the energies of a bride-to-be and her maids of honor at such epic times. Occasionally Conk Farnham flicked into the house in an aura of antiseptic, like a flung scalpel, bussed his bride in a dark corner, and flicked out again. Donald Mackenzie hardly showed his face; when he did, he was shooed off on some errand or other. As for Ellery's hostess, he met her only at mealtimes.

"We're neglecting you shamefully, Mr. Queen," Bea mourned, "but it's a comfort knowing we have Jennifer to entertain you. She's so much like you — quiet and deep and interested in the arts and things. You'll find so much in common." And off she whisked, not neglecting to shut the door on them in her departure.

Jennifer Reynolds was a slight blonde woman of thirty-four with a face whose charm looked as if it were regularly washed out in a strong bleach. It was chronically puckered, as if she were bothered by some mystery that defied solution.

There was a fragility about Mrs. Mackenzie's English cousin that made Ellery uneasy; and he was not surprised to learn that she was under the professional care of Conk Farnham's colleague, Dr. Walter Flacker, with whom young Farnham shared offices. But her fragility was more than physical. She was like a fine fabric worn to the nap and ready to fall to pieces at a touch. . . .

One afternoon when the bedlam was surpassing itself, Ellery drove Jennifer Reynolds up to the lake; and there, under the influence of the sun and the pines and the water peacefully lapping their drifting canoe, it all came out.

They were talking of Molly and Conk, and Ellery was saying what an ecstatically happy couple they seemed, and how sad it was that such bliss should be doomed to the usual corruption.

"Doomed? Corruption?" The Englishwoman looked up from her preoccupation with the ripples, startled.

"You know what I mean, Miss Reynolds. Marriages may be made in heaven, but how do they turn out?"

"Bachelor." She laughed, and lay back in the canoe. But then she sat up again, restlessly. "How wrong you are. They're very lucky, Molly and her Conklin. Do you believe in luck, Mr. Queen?"

"To a limited extent only."

"It's everything." Jennifer hugged her knees, and at the same moment a cloud slid before the sun and the air rapidly chilled. "Some of us are born

lucky, and some of us are not. What happens to us in life has nothing to do with what we are, or how we're brought up, or what we try to make of our lives."

"The whole body of modern thought disagrees with you," Ellery smiled.

"Does it?" She stared at the riffling water. "I was working at a loom by the time I was fourteen. I never had the proper things, or enough to eat, or the means to make myself attractive. I didn't grouse; I tried very hard. I educated myself under great difficulties. I suppose Beatrice has told you that I write — criticism chiefly, and chiefly in the fine arts. . . . During the war I fell in love. He was a Navy man. His ship was torpedoed in the North Sea and went down with all hands. We were to have been married on his next leave. . . . I picked up the pieces of my life and carried on. I had my work, and I had my family, a very poor family, Mr. Queen, with an ailing father and mother and a great many younger sisters and brothers . . . all of us terribly devoted to one another. And then last February my entire family was wiped out in the floods that devastated the southeast coast of England. I was the only survivor; I was in London at the time. So you see, I had bad luck even in that."

The bleached face puckered, and Ellery looked away and said, "Well!" and picked up his paddle. "Rain clouds. Let's get this relic of Hiawatha in, shall we, Miss Reynolds?"

Ellery had to admit that Jennifer Reynolds had a case.

But there was less to be said for Sandra Burnett and Flo Pettigrew. As the week jangled on, the sound of their laughter echoing Molly's took on the shrill pitch of hysteria. And on the very night of the day Miss Reynolds confided in him, Ellery found out why.

Bea and Donald Mackenzie had gone down to High Village for a session with Avdo Birobatyan at the Wrightsville Florist Shop, where a gardenia crisis had arisen. Conk and Molly had driven off somewhere to be alone, Jennifer had retired early, Essie Hunker had washed the dishes and gone to bed; and Ellery shut himself up in his room with some work he had brought up from New York.

The house was quiet at last, and he became absorbed in what he was doing. So when he heard the noise and glanced at his watch, he was surprised to find that an hour had passed.

The noise came from somewhere on the bedroom floor, and Ellery opened his door and looked up the hall. Molly's door was open and her light was on.

"Back so soon, Molly?" He paused in her doorway, smiling. She was standing in her wedding gown before the full-length mirror in her dressing room, adjusting the bridal veil. "Can't wait, I see."

And then she turned around and he saw that she wasn't Molly Mackenzie at all, but Sandra Burnett.

"I beg your pardon," said Ellery.

Sandra's cheeks were gray under her tan. "I — I just stopped by," she said. "I thought nobody was home. I mean —" And suddenly the big girl slumped down onto Molly's vanity bench and burst into tears.

"And not finding Molly here, you couldn't resist trying on her wedding dress?"

"I'm so awfully ashamed," the girl sobbed. "But I always thought Conk and I would . . . Oh, you don't understand!" The gown was too small for her, and Ellery viewed its straining seams with alarm. "I'll never marry anyone else — never, never . . ."

"Of course you will," said Ellery, "after you've found the right man, who obviously isn't Conk. And we won't say anything about this, Sandra, either of us. Now don't you think you'd better take that off — before Molly gets back?"

He heard the big girl leave ten minutes later. The Burnetts lived only a short distance away; Sandra's flat heels pounded off down the road, as if she were running.

That was the first unusual incident of the evening. The second came much later, well after midnight. Bea and Donald Mackenzie had returned from the florist's in triumph and had gone to bed. It was a warm night, and Ellery went downstairs through the dark house and the open front door to the piazza, moving quietly. He sat down in one of the basket chairs, propped his feet on the porch railing, and soaked up the coolness.

He was still sitting there when Conk Farnham's convertible swung into the driveway and pulled up near the piazza. Ellery was about to announce himself when the motor died and the lights dimmed. He heard Molly's stifled laugh and Conk's manly, "Come here, you!" and decided that the immediate silence called for self-effacement. After a long moment Molly gasped, "No, darling, that's *all* for tonight — it's *late*," and Ellery heard her jump out of the car and run up the driveway to the side door.

And the moment the side door clicked shut on Molly, before Conk could turn on his ignition, there was a rustle of foliage from the rhododendron bushes on the far side of the driveway, and a woman's voice called softly, "Conk! Wait."

The young surgeon's surprised voice said, "Yes? Who's that?"

"Me."

"Flo! What are you doing here this time of night?"

"I've got to talk to you. I've been waiting behind that bush for hours. Let me get in, Conk. Drive me somewhere."

There was a pause. Then Conk said slowly, "No, Flo, I'd rather not. I've got to get home. I'm operating at eight in the morning."

"You've been avoiding me." Flo Pettigrew's voice sounded gurgly. "You're avoiding me now —"

"We have nothing to discuss," Ellery heard Conk say. "I broke our engagement because I realized we'd made a mistake. Would you rather

I'd gone through with it, Flo, feeling the way I did? Anyway, that was kid stuff. Why revive it now? What can possibly be the point?"

"Because I still love you." Her voice was strangled.

"Flo, that's enough. This isn't fair to Molly." His voice was considerably sharper. "If you don't mind —"

"Oh, Conk, you never gave us a chance! We had so much together . . . those firefly nights at the lake, our music, the poetry. . . . Remember the Millay poem I told you was my own? 'I only know that summer sang in me. A little while, that in me sings no more.' Oh, it was prophetic! I hate you!"

"Flo, you'll wake the house. Please take your hand off my car. I've got to get some sleep."

"You fool, you fool! Do you really believe that anyone as *childish* as Molly —" The rest was smothered by the roar of the engine. The convertible backed rapidly out of the drive; in the glare of the headlights Ellery caught a glimpse of the thin pale face of Flo Pettigrew. Then the lights were gone, and Ellery clumped noisily into the house, rather hoping that the girl in the driveway could hear him.

The day before the wedding Molly had Sandra and Flo and five other girls in for brunch — "My last yak-party," Molly laughed. The yakking was vigorous — her father, home for lunch with Ellery on the side terrace, remarked that it sounded more like old man Hunker's barnyard at feeding time.

Molly insisted on dragging her friends out to the terrace to meet the author from New York, and Ellery spent a busy five minutes fending off the lion hunters and trying at the same time to read the faces of Flo Pettigrew and Sandra Burnett. But the poetess and the outdoors girl were quite unreadable. Both girls were a little pinched-looking about the mouth, that was all. If anyone was nervous, it was the bride-to-be. Molly seemed tense and distracted in her vivacity. Ellery wondered if she had overheard the painful talk in the driveway the night before. And then he recalled that Molly had been nervous all the previous afternoon, too.

"Look at the time!" Molly cried. "Girls, you'll simply have to excuse us now. We're to meet Conk at the church — Dr. Highmount's running us through the rehearsal for the Bishop. Sandra, Flo, do the honors for me, will you, dears? Then come up and talk to me while I change. — And, Daddy, don't forget, you're *not* to go back to the office, Mother said!"

Molly fled.

Sandra and Flo saw the girls to their cars while Ellery and his host finished their lunch. Essie Hunker was just serving the coffee when it happened.

Jennifer Reynolds appeared in the terrace doorway, pale as the tablecloth. "Donald, Molly's just had

hysterics upstairs. I'm ! I'm afraid she's fainted, too. You'd better come quickly."

"*Molly?*"

Molly's father ran, and Jennifer ran after him.

Ellery caught Molly's bridesmaids on the piazza, waving to the last departing car. He seized Sandra's arm. "Phone Conk Farnham — he's just up the road, isn't he? He must be home now, dressing for the rehearsal. Tell him to come right over. Something's wrong with Molly."

"Wrong!"

He caught one flash in Flo Pettigrew's eye, and then he ran back into the house and bounded upstairs. He heard Sandra excitedly jiggling the phone in the foyer as he reached Molly's bedroom.

Molly was lying in a heap on her dressing-room floor, her eyes closed, her cheeks chalky. Bea and Donald Mackenzie were on their knees trying to revive her. Bea was chafing the girl's left hand.

"Rub her other hand, Donald! Don't just squat there like a toad!"

"I can't get her fist open," groaned Molly's father. He began to massage Molly's right wrist. "Molly, baby —"

"Wake up, Molly!" Bea wailed. "Oh, dear, it's all this excitement today. I told her not to have those silly girls in —"

"Where's the doctor? Call the doctor!" Donald said.

Jennifer hurried in from the bathroom with a glass of water.

"He's already called," said Ellery cheerfully. "Here, let me get her onto the bed. You two parental idiots get out of the way. Mrs. Mackenzie, throw those windows wide open. Never mind the water, Miss Reynolds — she'd strangle. You hold her head way back while I lift. That's it."

Ellery was still working unsuccessfully over Molly when Conk Farnham rushed in, his tie hanging unmade and lather still clinging to his cheeks.

"Out," he said hoarsely. "Everybody."

"But darling, *you?*" moaned Bea. "Conk, you *mustn't* — not the day before your *wedding* —"

He shut the door in her face.

Ten minutes later, Conk came out of the room. "No, no, Bea, she's all right. She's had some sort of shock — I can't get a word out of her. What the deuce happened?"

"I don't know! Let me see my baby!" Bea said.

"Come in, but for heaven's sake don't excite her."

Molly was lying flat on her back in bed, covered to the chin and staring up at the ceiling. A little color had come into her cheeks, but her brown eyes were glassy with fear.

"Darling, what happened? What happened to my baby?"

"Nothing, Mother. Excitement, I suppose . . ."

Bea crooned over her.

"Donald," Conk said, "do you have a sedative in the house?"

"Well, there's some sleeping pills

in my medicine chest. Walt Flacker gave them to me a couple weeks ago."

"Even better. Warm a little milk and dissolve two tablets in it." Donald Mackenzie hurried out, and Conk went over to the bed and stroked Molly's bright hair. "I'm going to give you a soporific, young lady, and you're going to take it and like it."

"Oh, Conk, no," Molly whispered. "The rehearsal . . ."

"Hang the rehearsal. If you don't get some rest right now, there won't even be a wedding. Don't you want to be pronounced Mrs. Conklin Farnham tomorrow?"

"*Don't say that!*" Molly turned her face away, sobbing.

Conk looked down at her, a crease between his eyes. Then he said pleasantly, "Bea, I think the caterer's people are downstairs waiting for you — I passed them on my way up. I'll stay with my patient till Donald brings up the milk. The rest of you — d'ye mind?"

Ellery was pacing the foyer when Donald Mackenzie came heavily downstairs again, followed by Jen Reynolds.

"How is she?"

"She drank the milk . . . I don't get it." Molly's father sank into the tapestried chair beside the foyer table.

"She still hasn't given an explanation?"

"No. There's something wrong, Mr. Queen — awfully wrong. But why won't Molly tell us?"

"There's nothing wrong, Donald," said the Englishwoman nervously. "Don't say things like that."

Ellery went to the front door and looked out. Bea Mackenzie was on the lawn talking to the caterer's decorators and glancing anxiously up at Molly's windows. Flo Pettigrew and Sandra Burnett were on the piazza, twisting their hands in their laps. He came back and said, "I disagree, Miss Reynolds. I think Mr. Mackenzie is right. Something caused that shock, and it wasn't just excitement."

"But Molly's one of the lucky ones!" cried Jennifer, as if Ellery had betrayed a sacred principle of hers.

Molly's father said between his teeth, "Something happened between the time she left the girls down here and the time she got to her room. You were upstairs, Jen. Did you hear or see anything?"

"All I know about it, Donald, is that I was in my room when I heard Molly laughing and crying in a most peculiar way. I ran out and met Beatrice in the hall — she'd heard it, too. We ran in together and found Molly in her dressing room. She was having hysterics. Then her eyes rolled up and she fainted."

Donald Mackenzie looked at Ellery. "I don't like this at all," he said slowly. "Maybe I'm looking for trouble, but do you suppose, Mr. Queen, you could find out what's behind this?"

"You are sure," asked Ellery gravely, "you want me to?"

"Yes," said Molly's father; and his jaw set.

Ellery turned to Jennifer Reynolds. "There was no one else in the room when you and Mrs. Mackenzie found Molly?"

"No, Mr. Queen."

"Nothing out of place? Nothing lying on the floor?"

"I don't recall anything."

"Could she have had a phone call?"

"I heard no ring, Mr. Queen."

"I had one a few minutes ago," said Mackenzie. "But it's the only one I know of."

"Maybe a message of some kind. Did Molly get any mail this morning? A letter that perhaps she didn't open till she got upstairs?"

"Yes," said Molly's father suddenly. "When I got home for lunch I saw an envelope addressed to Molly lying in the tray here."

Ellery glanced at the salver on the foyer table. There was nothing on it. "Picked it up on her way upstairs. That may have been it, Mr. Mackenzie. Do you remember whom the letter was from?"

"I didn't look."

Mackenzie seemed puzzled.

"What's this about a letter?" Conk Farnham came down the stairs, fixing his tie.

Mackenzie told him. Conk shook his head. "I don't see how it can have been anything like that."

"How's Molly?" asked Jennifer.

"Out like a light." Conk went to the door and stared out at the two girls.

"I think," said Ellery, "we'd better look for that letter."

He found the envelope in the wastebasket in Molly's dressing room. It was lying on top of the heap, not even crumpled. And it was empty.

Ellery examined the envelope carefully, and his lean face lengthened.

"Well?" Donald Mackenzie licked his lips.

"All the earmarks of an anonymous letter, murmured Ellery. "Penciled address in block printing, dime-store envelope, and no return address. Postmarked yesterday. But where's the letter that came in it?"

Mackenzie watched dumbly as Ellery dumped out the contents of Molly's wastebasket and set to work. Halfway through, Ellery suddenly rose. "I just remembered. When we found Molly, one of her hands was so tightly closed you couldn't open it. I wonder if . . ."

"I'll bet that's it!"

Mackenzie opened Molly's bedroom door softly. Conk had drawn the shades. They tiptoed over to the bed and peered down at the sleeping girl. Her right hand was still a fist.

"We mustn't wake her up," Mackenzie whispered.

Ellery stooped over Molly, his ear to her chest. He felt her forehead, touched her eyelids. Then he ran to the door of the dressing room. "Conk!" he yelled. "Conk, come back — quick!"

"But what's the matter now?" faltered Mackenzie.

Ellery brushed by him, returning swiftly to the girl's bedside. Footsteps rattled in the hall, then Conk Farn-

ham burst in, followed by the girls and Bea.

"What is it?" Conk asked wildly.

"There's something wrong with her breathing . . ." Ellery said.

After a frantic examination Conk glared at his prospective father-in-law. "What the devil did you put in that milk?"

"Only — only two of the sleeping pills," stammered Molly's father.

"*She's had a heavy overdose of the drug!* Bea, Jen — I'll need both of you for a while. The rest of you get out!"

"But I only did what you told me," Donald Mackenzie moaned.

Ellery had to remove him forcibly.

"Listen to me, Mr. Mackenzie!" In the hall Ellery backed the bewildered man against the wall. "You're in for a shock — the same shock that made Molly faint." He produced a small wrinkled sheet of cheap white paper. "I took this out of Molly's fist."

The Wrightsville businessman stared at the writing on the paper. Nine words, in the same penciled block printing of the envelope:

"*You ignored my warning, so you will die today.*"

If not for Jen, as Bea said afterward, they would all have gone to pieces right there and then. Jen was a tower of strength, managing to be everywhere at once — soothing Bea, assisting Conk, slapping Sandra when the big girl seemed on the verge of hysteria, getting Flo's ill-timed storm of tears under control, and coming down hard on Essie Hunker, who sat in the kitchen with her apron over her head shrieking like a banshee.

"I was born to trouble," said Jen with a sort of pride; and she carried on.

Ellery asked questions and prowled. It was he who brought down word from Conk that Molly was conscious and out of danger; she was sick and still dazed, but she would be all right. Conk forbade anyone to come upstairs until he called.

They sat huddled in the living room, and from the lawns came the cheery sounds of the caterer's people stringing Japanese lanterns, sparkly mobiles, and ropes of evergreens.

"As long as we have to wait," remarked Ellery, "we may as well employ the time gainfully. Let's see if we have the facts straight. . . . When Conk told you to prepare the sleeping draught, Mr. Mackenzie, you took the bottle of pills down to the kitchen and set some milk to heat on the range. You opened the bottle and were about to take two tablets out when Essie called you to the phone. The minister was asking about the rehearsal. You took the call in your library, leaving everything in the kitchen as it was. Essie, who was cleaning up the dining room and terrace, was out of the kitchen all the time you were telling Dr. Highmount about Molly's fainting spell. Then you came back, turned off the range, dropped two tablets into the milk, dissolved them, poured the contents

into a glass, and took the glass upstairs. You stood there while Conk put the glass to Molly's lips and she drank the milk. And within a short time, Molly was drugged.

"It's obvious, then," said Ellery in the silence, "that someone who had planned it perhaps a different way saw a better opportunity when you left the kitchen to answer the phone, and took advantage of your absence to slip into the kitchen and dose the milk heavily from the bottle on the table. When you returned, you merely added two more pills."

"My fault," said Molly's father dully. "I didn't notice that the bottle, which had been almost full, was half empty when I got back. I was so upset about Molly —"

Bea pressed her husband's hand. But her eyes remained on Sandra Burnett and Flo Pettigrew, and there was a lethal glitter in them.

"The point is," said Ellery, "someone here tried to murder Molly, and it could have been anyone in the house."

There was another silence.

"Are you looking at me?" screamed Flo Pettigrew. "Do you think I'd do a thing like that?"

"Yes," said Bea Mackenzie.

"Beatrice," said Jennifer gently.

Flo sank back, trembling. And Sandra Burnett sat there with a witless look on her face, as if she could not understand any of this.

"I still can't believe it," muttered Mackenzie. "That one of Molly's girl friends. . . ."

"Murder is always hard to believe, Mr. Mackenzie."

"The police — the wedding . . . It's all spoiled now."

"Not necessarily. There's no reason to call Chief Dakin yet. By the way, I've made another discovery, Mr. Mackenzie."

"What now?" It brought all their heads up.

"The letter indicated a *previous* warning. People embarking on a spree of crime usually establish a pattern of behavior. So I looked for another anonymous note, and I found it in one of Molly's coats — the coat she was wearing the day before yesterday."

"Give — me — that!" grated Donald Mackenzie.

The sheet of paper was identical with the one they had found in Molly's hand. There was no envelope. The message was block printed, in pencil. Mackenzie read it aloud slowly.

"*Call off your wedding to your fine Mr. Farnham, or you'll be very sorry. Remember Browning's Laboratory.*"

"That's why she was nervous yesterday," exclaimed Jen. "The poor, poor dear."

"Browning's Laboratory!" Molly's father looked up at Ellery, frowning. "What does that mean?"

"I don't know. I was hoping you could tell me."

"Browning's Laboratory . . ." He turned to his wife. "Do we know anybody named Browning?"

"No, Donald." Bea was scarcely

listening; her eyes were still on Molly's bridesmaids, and they still glittered.

"How about Molly?" asked Ellery. "Perhaps a high school teacher — chemistry lab, that sort of thing. Do you girls know?" he said suddenly, turning to Sandra and Flo.

They shrank. "No," said Sandra. "No!"

Flo Pettigrew shook her head violently. She was very pale.

"I don't think there's a single family in Wrightsville by that name," rasped Mackenzie. "There's a Brownell Dental Laboratory in Limpscot, but that can't . . ."

"All right now!" Conk Farnham's voice from upstairs rang through the house like a jubilee gong.

The rush left Ellery alone in the living room. He sank into a chair, staring at the note. He sat there for a long time. Then he got up and went into the Mackenzies' library.

"Well, we're *not* going to call off our wedding," Conk Farnham was announcing when Ellery walked into Molly's bedroom. "Are we, honey?"

Molly smiled faintly up at him. "Not a chance." Her voice was low but clear. "I'm not scared any more."

"We'll be married tomorrow on schedule, and no murder attempts are going to stop us." Conk glared at the two girls cowering near the windows.

"May I — may we go home now?" Flo sounded far away.

"P-please . . ." blubbered Sandra.

"No!" roared Conk. "Because now we've — Oh, Ellery. What do you make of this 'Browning's Laboratory' business? Seems to me there's an important clue there."

"Definitely," smiled Ellery. "Well, well, Molly. You look human again."

"Thanks, Mr. Queen," whispered Molly, "for catching me in time . . ."

"Rescuing brides is my specialty. Oh, by the way." Ellery held up a fat green book he was carrying. "Here's the answer to that cryptic reference."

Bea Mackenzie stared. "That's my volume of Robert Browning's poetry — why, all of us got copies when we joined the Robert Browning Society. Did it mean *my* Browning?"

"Your Browning," nodded Ellery. "*The Laboratory* is the title of one of Browning's poems. Since the writer of the note wanted Molly to 'remember' this particular poem, let me tell you what it's about." He looked around evenly. "It's about a woman who, discovering that the man she loves is in love with another woman, procures some poison with which to kill her successful rival. That's the plot line . . . those notes were a warning, all right — a warning from a woman who thinks she's in love with Conk, Molly, and who's tried to kill you to prevent your marrying him. Sheer envy, grown to homicidal proportions. Shall I tell you," said Ellery, "which woman it was?"

"Wait!" Molly bounced upright. "Wait, Mr. Queen, please! Were you — were you going to give me a wedding present?"

Ellery laughed and took Molly's cold little hand in both of his. "I admit some such thought had entered my mind. Why, Molly?"

"Because there's only one present you can give me," cried Molly. "*Don't tell who it was.* Please?"

Ellery looked down at her for a long time. Then he squeezed her hand.

"You're the doctor's wife," he said.

It was very late. The moon had set, and the lawns were black behind the night breeze. There were no lights in the Mackenzie windows; everyone was asleep, exhausted by the events of the day. Up the road the Farnham house was dark, too.

"I think you know what I have to say," Ellery was murmuring to the silent figure in the other lawn chair, "but I'm going to say it anyway. You won't get another opportunity to harm Molly — I'll see to that. And since Molly wants this kept quiet, I suggest you'd better find an excuse for leaving Wrightsville immediately after the wedding tomorrow. In fact, we can arrange to go together. How would you like that?"

There was no sound from the other chair.

"People who do what you did are ill. Suppose I send you to someone in New York who's very good at straightening out sick minds. You'll have your chance, and I strongly advise you to take it."

The figure rustled, and a wraith of a voice drifted over through the darkness. "How did you know?" it said.

"Well, it goes back quite a way," said Ellery. "To the Middle Ages. Even earlier, in fact, to the Fifth Century A.D. and the barbers of Rome."

"Barbers?" said the voice, bewildered.

"Yes. Because barbers were the only people until relatively recent times who practised surgery. It wasn't till shortly before the American Revolution that the barbers and surgeons of London, for instance, were split into two separate groups, and in France, Germany, and other European countries the practise of surgery by barbers wasn't forbidden by law until much later.

"So to be a surgeon, you see, was for centuries considered a lowly pursuit. So lowly, in fact, that surgeons weren't dignified by titles. And the prejudice has carried over into modern times in some countries. To this day the most eminent surgeons of the finest British hospitals are not addressed as 'Doctor,' like other medical practitioners, but as 'Mister.'

"And so," said Ellery, "when I thought over the note that referred to Dr. Conklin Farnham, a surgeon, as '*your fine* Mr. *Farnham*,' I realized that only one person in the house — in all of Wrightsville, for that matter — could have written it, and that was the visiting gentlewoman from England. You, Miss Reynolds."

Thomas Flanagan's versatility and virtuosity grow with the years. Remember his very first story, "The Fine Italian Hand"? — it won a Special Award as the best "first story" in EQMM's Fourth Annual Contest. That was an historical detective story, complete with "locked room" and a startling denouement. Then Mr. Flanagan wrote three tales about Major Tennente — modern, realistic, gripping detective stories including "The Cold Winds of Adesta," which won First Prize in EQMM's Seventh Annual Contest. Now Mr. Flanagan gives us an entirely different caldron of crime — a sly and satirical story, almost puckish in its manner, impudent, quietly shocking, and (if you can imagine such a paradoxical blend) a tale of sophistication and naïveté. It also offers one of the most remarkable post-mortem conversations ever committed to print.

THIS WILL DO NICELY

by THOMAS FLANAGAN

IMMEDIATELY AFTER SHE KILLED her husband, Helen Grendel phoned their lawyer, Timothy Chancel. He was their closest and in her opinion their dullest friend. It was after midnight and the call came to him directly rather than through the switchboard. A half-hour later he was dressed and walking briskly up the ten deserted blocks of Riverside Drive which separated their apartments. When he stepped out of the self-service elevator and rang the bell, Helen opened the door at once and led him to the bedroom, where Alec Grendel lay dead and fully-clothed beside the bed.

"I suppose he really *is* dead?" Chancel asked. "Shouldn't you get in touch with Henderson?" Henderson was another of her husband's preternaturally dull friends, a physician.

"Of course he's dead," Helen said. "I shot him twice in the heart."

And Chancel, kneeling down, saw that this was so, or approximately so. "Still," he said, "Taylor's *Medical Jurisprudence* has several references to people who survived precisely such wounds."

"Well, Alec didn't," she said. "You can make up your mind to that." She was leaning against the doorjamb, wearing a fussy pale-blue dressing gown. Chancel, who had never seen her dressed so informally, kept his eyes averted.

At last he got up and carefully brushed his trousers. "This is extraordinary," he said.

"I don't see why you should say

that. I thought you were quite used to this sort of thing."

"Oh, theoretically, perhaps."

"For that matter," she said, "all that either of you knew was theoretical. That is one of the reasons why I shot him."

"The gun is Alec's, I imagine?" he asked, prodding it with a small glossy black shoe.

"From the war. The first war." She made it sound equidistant in time with the first crusade, for the disparity in their ages, Alec's and hers, had contributed to her dissatisfactions.

"For a man so interested in crime, it was, of course, quite an appropriate death. Did he know it was happening?"

"He did have time to say something. I can't remember just what, but I don't think he was pleased."

"He loved to plan things and anticipate, and this must have been on the spur of the moment?"

"So far as he was concerned. I had been thinking about it for quite some time."

"Well," he said again. "This is extraordinary."

Helen Grendel moved away from the doorjamb. "Come into the living room to talk," she said. "He makes me nervous."

When they were seated, some distance apart, on the long, faded sofa, Chancel said, "It was very thoughtful of you to get in touch with me, Helen." He had sunk his tiny matchstick body into the cushions and were it not for the shiny black buttons of eyes which moved restlessly in his parchment face he would have looked as dead as Alec. "You can't have any idea how embarrassing it has been to know so much about crime in the abstract and so little in the flesh."

"I hadn't thought of it that way at all, Timothy." She took a cigarette from the box on the table and leaned forward to accept Chancel's light. "I knew you were the one person I could count on for help."

"Help, Helen? Of what sort?"

"Help with Alec, of course. I want you to tell me what to do."

"You seem to have done a good deal without my help," he said, snuggling more comfortably among the cushions.

"Yes," she said, "but I think I've gone as far as I can alone."

"I can tell you your next step quite easily. We must get in touch with a first-rate trial lawyer and then we must phone the police. I imagine that temporary insanity is the proper and sensible thing to plead." He paused, and then said with some regret, "It should be a quiet trial."

"Now, Timothy. I have no intention of pleading temporary insanity. It is a revolting phrase. I have never liked the unbalanced. And after the acquittal they would make me spend God knows how long in an institution, just out of spite."

"Considering the circumstances, my dear, your choice of plea is limited.

It is a narrow field at best . . . Let me think a bit."

While he was thinking, Helen Grendel reached over to a side-table, poured a stiff dose of brandy into a tumbler, and handed it to him.

"There is the unwritten law," he said. "But I don't suppose Alec —" Helen Grendel laughed mirthlessly. "No, I suppose not. Not even one of his graduate students? I remember him speaking warmly of the work a Miss Maddox, I believe, was doing on the Finnesburgh fragment."

But he dwindled off with Helen's cold eyes upon him. He sipped the brandy and then set it down.

"There is self-defense, but it does not seem convincing in this case."

"For all you know," she said, "it might have been an accident."

"It might indeed, if we assume as likely the possibility that you were sitting up at midnight in a silk whatever-it-is and cleaning a heavy revolver which hadn't been fired since the first World War."

"Well," she said vindictively, "it wasn't an accident. I had my reasons."

"It might be better if I didn't know them."

"You wouldn't understand them. You're too much like Alec."

"May I suggest that reasons which your lawyer cannot understand are not likely to sit well with a jury?"

"That's just it, Timothy. I'm terribly anxious not to stand trial."

"Of course you are. But they will insist upon it."

"Well, I won't, you can be sure. Do you suppose I didn't hear Alec and you talking year after year about the women they *didn't* hang? Madeleine Smith and Mrs. Maybank? A fine life they had!"

"Maybrick. But the cases are not parallel."

"That is of no interest to me at the moment."

"There is little I can tell you, Helen." He put his hand to the small blue bow tie that hung like a dead butterfly on his stiff collar. "Alec, after all, is dead. He has been killed. It's all very well to talk."

"Timothy," she said and leaned forward to put out her cigarette. He drew even farther back into the cushions, frightened by her proximity and by the strangeness of her scent. "You were Alec's closest friend, and if you thought anything of him at all, you will try to help his widow."

"It's true that I was very fond of Alec," he said, and sighed. "Oh, whom will I talk with now? You can't imagine how I looked forward to those evenings in the study with a good fire going and the brandy circulating and the two of us gossiping about some old crime while you sat there knitting, on the footstool. Do you remember?"

"Very, very well," she said with a certain grimness. "But we must think about the present." She handed Chancel the tumbler again and said, "Drink this down, Timothy. Bottoms up."

She was an attractive woman in her early forties, some twenty years

younger than her husband and his best friend, but they often seemed to her like children, and never more so than now. When he had emptied the glass, she poured him another and sat by, watchful and impersonal as a hospital nurse, until he had finished it. With Alec, this had always been a successful emergency remedy to bring him to what she called "grips with reality."

But he said, "I'm afraid I don't understand, Helen. Just what is it you want of me?"

She drew in her breath, and held it while her small clenched fist beat the cushion between them. "I want you to get me out of everything connected with this unpleasantness about Alec. I want you to think of something and then *do* it!" In her excitement, the collar of her négligée had become dangerously disarranged and Chancel kept his eyes fixed straight ahead while he rubbed his fingers across his forehead.

"You and Alec knew all about crime," she said. "Much more than some blustering, red-faced criminal lawyer."

"A hobby," he said. "A passionate avocation, if you like, but nothing more." His forehead, he found, was slightly damp. He wondered if he should tell her about her gown, but the only phrase he could think of was "adjust your garment," which sounded unreal.

"We could go into the study," she said. "Alec always thought better in there."

"That might be better," he said. And rising with the words, he helped her to her feet.

"Bring your bottle," she said. She really did not seem to know that it was not the brandy alone which was bringing Chancel to grips with reality.

One side of the library contained Alec's professional library, and the other, flanking the fireplace, the library of his passionate avocation. "Matchless," Chancel said, hurrying to it. "I have always suspected that when it is catalogued we will see that it far surpasses Edmund Pearson's." He began pulling down volumes at random. Helen led him by the arm to one of the two wing chairs by the fireplace, and herself took the second, which had been Alec's. It did not seem strange to her, for she had often sat there during the day, while Alec was at the university.

Chancel, a fragile figure against the chair's great expanse of leather, pressed the tips of his fingers together. He decided that he did feel more himself in here.

"I am not as ingenuous as you imagine, Helen," he said. "When you say that you want my help, it is clear that you do not want it for any proper or even licit purpose. You want me to shield you from the consequences of a highly improper action."

She nodded, smiling encouragingly.

"To become, in fine, an accessory after the fact. Isn't that stretching the obligations of friendship?" He

peered at her. "Have you given any thought to this yourself?"

"Well," she said, and hesitated, drawing a forefinger along the arm of her chair. "He might have killed himself."

"Unfortunately, my dear, you were too thorough. Suicide might account very tidily for one bullet in the heart, but not for two."

"I wanted to make sure," she murmured contritely.

"And so you did. And now you find yourself in over your head. Is that it?"

She bobbed her head again.

"Broadly speaking," he said, "there are only two courses open to you if you are serious about wanting to avoid trial, and I will accommodate you to the extent of outlining them. Either the fact of the crime is concealed, or the police are induced to believe that you were not responsible for it."

"Are they equally difficult?"

"Each is attended by an infinity of nerve-wracking difficulties. Suppose we consider the first possibility. We would have to conceal the body, first of all, and then we would have to account for Alec's continuing absence from his usual round of activities."

"That is the usual way, isn't it?" she asked, drawing on her memory of the long evenings she had endured.

"It is the customary method of the *un*successful," he corrected her with the exaggerated precision which she had found so painful in both men and which she suspected them of basing on the manner of English judges of assize. "The methods of the successful we will never know, *ex hypothesi*." He brought his hands a few inches apart and then arched them together. "So far as concealing the body is concerned, it might be possible to get it into the elevator and downstairs unobserved, but since neither of us has a car, I doubt if that would advance us."

"I wish you wouldn't say 'the body.' It *is* Alec, after all."

"That might be argued," he said. "But no matter. I was going to say that one alternative would be to remove Alec sectionally."

"Timothy!" she said, shocked.

"I have some slight knowledge of the subject," he said.

"I don't think I would like to hear about it."

"Nor I," he said with a shudder. "It makes me quite queasy. It is a pity that New York apartments don't have — in the usual sense of the word — cellars. They have a poor reputation which I'm sure they don't deserve. Mostly, I suppose, because of Crippen."

"We have a sort of meshed-in compartment down in the cellar, one for each tenant. But you have to get the key from the superintendent."

"I'm afraid that wouldn't do," he said, and the arch which his fingers formed collapsed with a flutter.

"Let's leave that bit for a moment," Helen said.

"Then we would have to invent some reasonable explanation for a respectable and happily married man vanishing."

"Do we *have* to?"

"Someone will ask you both to dinner."

"We never went out to dinner."

"Then something else will bring it up. Be practical, Helen. He had a job, you know. The lapse of time before a professor of Anglo-Saxon is actually missed by his colleagues may be considerable but it is not endless." He passed a hand over his brow. "You have always been the least bit harum-scarum. I'm sure if you had thought out these things you would never have shot Alec."

"Oh, yes I would. Nothing could have stopped me."

Retreating before such fierceness, Chancel pressed his sharp bones against his chair.

"You have always been a good wife, Helen. At least, as far as I could judge. Many young women would not have put up with two old codgers forever puttering about this musty old study, as I'm sure you must have thought it."

She sat forward so that her eyes, ordinarily a wide, soft brown, drilled into him. "Do you know," she asked, "that this is the only room in the house with a view of the river? And that for fifteen years he has kept it hidden with *those?*" Her long, thin hand, glinting with crimson, pointed to the windows, which were swathed in a heavy and, he had always felt, pleasantly dull drape. "The only room. Do you know what I can see out of my window? Mrs. Baskin, the woman who corrects speech defects."

"Books fade," he said apologetically.

"Women fade," she said. "Look at me," she enjoined him, dramatically and unnecessarily, running her hands down the smooth, plump lines of her hips, and then, more like the woman whom Chancel had always known, regaining possession and dropping both hands in embarrassed modesty to her lap.

He poured a drink to avoid looking at her, alarmed at the nature of his thoughts, which he knew he could not conceal from those passionate new eyes.

He said, "If only you'd got in touch with me before and not after —" Then, realizing the implications of this, he pressed his lips together.

"No, Timothy. I don't believe in taking one's problems to an outsider until it's absolutely necessary."

"Helen," he said reproachfully, "you mustn't think of me as an outsider. Especially now that you have no one."

"That's true," she said, resting her hand for a moment on his knee and then withdrawing it.

"Now if Alec had been a diabetic," he said, recklessly concluding the thought which he had cut short, "there is a way which he and I used to think of as foolproof."

"Timothy," she said with a half-

smile, "you're such a perfectionist. We'll just have to make the best of a bad job."

Her dressing gown, he noticed when he put down his glass, had once again disarranged itself, as though it were a barometer of her emotions.

"You can see, can't you?" she asked, with, in the context, startling ambiguity. "I don't want to spend the next year or so in an institution and then the rest of my life having people point me out in restaurants."

"We must look into this," he said, shielding his eyes with his hand.

Helen, leaning over the mirror-topped coffee table, began to arrange her hair. She had undone it for the night, shortly before shooting Alec, and it had fallen over her shoulders in dark waves. Now she tugged at it, this way and that, wondering how she would wear it in her new life.

At last he raised his head. "I wonder," he said, "if Alec could have been killed by an intruder."

Helen stopped thinking about her hair at once. Chancel, like her husband, approached reality tangentially, and with a certain skittishness.

"Where is your fire escape?" he asked.

"It's in here," she said. "In this building, all the windows which front the Drive have balconies, and the fire escapes lead down from them. Let me show you," she said, beginning to rise. "It's a good wide balcony."

He closed his eyes and presently his small left shoe began to tap the carpet. He opened them when he heard a rustling, and he saw that she had her hand on the drawstring of the drapes.

"Don't do that," he said sharply. "Not for a few minutes." He shut his eyes again and continued to tap his foot. Helen stood watching him, her fists resting on her hips.

"If the blinds were drawn," he said, "the room would look dark to anyone outside. Even someone on the balcony. Let us say, for a moment, that an intruder was trying those balcony windows in which he saw no light and that this was the first window he found unlocked."

"But it always was locked," she said.

He opened his eyes then, and shook his head slightly. It was not her depths which he found unfathomable, but her shallows. "Let us go to the bedroom," he said.

In the bedroom, Helen's attention was diverted by a long mirror mounted on the closet door. She stood before it, swaying from side to side, and holding her hair in one hand.

Chancel said, "If the intruder had drawn back the drapes to find the room empty, even though lighted, he would have slipped away. But instead, he was confronted by Alec, and he shot him in panic. Let us, for the moment, assume that."

She reached over to her dressing table and picked up a dark amber hairpin. "Why, of course he did. You know, Timothy, this intruder is becoming a real personality to me.

Wretched brute to kill our Alec that way!"

"You were asleep," he said. "You heard the shots and rushed into the study."

"I see, " she said, holding the hairpin between her teeth.

"You understand that I am arranging this in such a way as would give you the fewest questions to answer. You heard the shots, you ran into the study. You would be able to remember that, wouldn't you?"

She made a face at herself in the mirror and threw down the hairpin. "Whatever you say, Timothy. I just can't concentrate."

He knelt beside Alec and with great difficulty lifted his shoulders. "This is most fortunate," he said. "The bullets are lodged in his chest and there is very little blood."

"It is less gruesome, certainly," she said.

"It is fortunate," he said drily, "because there is nothing to show that he was killed in this room."

"Of course," she said, and swung away from the mirror. "You must think me completely frivolous."

"Let us say," he said, lowering Alec back to the floor, "that you could exhibit a livelier apprehension of consequences without seeming to court hysteria."

"Don't you worry for a moment, Timothy. We will do splendidly."

"My dear girl," he said, rising. "You cannot have failed to notice that I have been careful to couch my remarks in the subjunctive."

"I am afraid," she said with the faintest of smiles, "that I did fail to."

"I have put to you certain speculations," he said. "I have in no wise engaged to abet a capital offense."

"Now you're not going to start being a lawyer all over again, are you, Timothy?" she asked with some irritation. "You know you're not. You know you're going to help me, and I don't mind at all if it makes you feel better to do it in the subjunctive."

"I was merely demonstrating the cautiousness of language which would seem incumbent on us both," he replied in a voice which had somehow lost all of its acerbity.

"For Heaven's sake!" she cried, and walked away from the mirror, kicking out at the hem of her robe, which swirled about her ankles in a way which bewitched Chancel.

He sighed and said, "We will move Alec now."

Alec was heavier than either of them, and each had to take a leg in order to drag him.

It was some time before Chancel had arranged Alec in the way which seemed to him most sensible. He walked to the curtains, pointed an imaginary gun at Alec, then walked across the room and made a slight readjustment of a leg and an arm. He would have been at it forever had Helen not forced him to let well enough alone.

She said, "And you thought of all this while I was making such a mess of my hair!"

"It required little thought, I assure you. But with luck it may possess the only essential virtue: it cannot be disproved." He didn't see how she could possibly forget the simple story with which he had provided her, or how she could contradict herself. Assuming, of course, that she really had listened to him.

"You see," she said, "that is why you were absolutely necessary."

"Look behind you at the rug," he said in reply.

And with a tiny cry she turned around, but then said, puzzled, "I don't see anything."

"Can't you see the nap? It's brushed the wrong way where we dragged Alec across it."

"Well, that isn't such a tragedy," she said. "I'll get the vacuum cleaner."

"You'll do nothing of the sort. It would leave a bright patch that any fool could see."

"Honestly, Timothy," she said. "You're worse than Alec." But she bent down and began smoothing out the nap by hand, working backwards toward the bedroom.

Chancel went back ahead of her and picked up the revolver. He broke it open gingerly and peered owlishly at the two empty chambers, then put the cylinder back into place. Then he unbuttoned his coat long enough to slip the revolver into his waistband. Although it was quite concealed, it was also quite uncomfortable, with the butt pressing against his lower ribs and the muzzle thrusting itself into his abdomen.

By this time, Helen, still on her hands and knees, had reached the bedroom.

"He never had a license for it," she said helpfully.

"Since the revolver isn't going to be found, that hardly matters."

"Well, I thought you should know."

"In that case, you might tell me where the ammunition is."

When she had told him, he took the box from the bureau drawer, and stuffed it into his coat pocket.

"Do you know what I think?" she asked as she finished her task. "I think we should say that Alec was in bed and we heard a noise and he got up and went out to investigate. It would make his death seem more heroic." She stood up and adjusted her gown. "Now what is it?" she asked, for he was staring at her, aghast.

"I was thinking that the police, who, after all, didn't know Alec as well as we did, might not believe that before he went to investigate he got fully dressed, down to a necktie, a collarpin, and garters."

"Oh, dear," she said, after a moment's thought; but she said it to the empty air, for he had gone into the study for a drink.

When she joined him, he was sitting in the wing chair, with the fingers of his free hand drumming the arm of the chair and his black avian eyes darting about the room.

She sat down on the footstool beside him and said, in a quick monotone, "The shots awakened me and I ran into the study." She added a triumphant, "There!"

"There," he repeated, hollowly.

"Well," she said, a trifle sulkily, "you can't expect women to be good at this sort of thing."

"I wish you would give all your energies to the task," he said, and then finished his drink.

"Yes, Timothy," she said. She rested her chin in her hands. "Timothy, do you think I've changed much?" She stared at him. "Do I look the same?"

"My dear, dear girl," he said, startled out of his apprehensions. He reached out and tentatively patted her head. "People don't look different after committing — after something like this. That is merely a convention used by novelists to dramatize the ravages of conscience, which in your case seem not to have had time to set in."

"I'm glad he wasn't a religious man," she said. "I can't stand funerals. We'll have one of his colleagues in the Friends of Caedmon say a few words at the Ethical Culture place."

"Considered purely as a murder, it will be awfully disappointing to those of us who knew him at The Poison and Clue Club. Ironically, the last talk he gave there was called, somewhat ponderously, 'The Unknown Intruder as Spoilsport: With Special Reference to the Elwell Case.' "

They fell silent then, each calling to mind a particular image of Alec. Chancel was thinking, also, that he had discovered in himself a capacity for practical action which Alec had undoubtedly lacked, but which blended quite well with those qualities he admired in Helen. But he distrusted the brandy he had drunk, the excitements of an evening so different from his routine, the proximity of dark, unbound hair and a gown which had a habit of falling away from Helen Grendel's round white bosom.

"You know," she said, "Alec left you his library."

"I know."

"You could sell it. It's quite valuable, he used to say."

"Sell it? Good God, Helen, it's almost the finest collection of its kind in the country. Do you know that he has every broadside relating to the execution of Eugene Aram?"

"Every single one," she said, as though feeling the full force of it for the first time. "But where could you keep it?"

"I shall turn my sitting room into a second study."

"Like this?" she asked, raising her head and moving her eyes from shelf to shelf until they met the ceiling.

"In a general way. I'm old-fashioned enough, though, to prefer glassed-in shelves."

"Glassed-in," she repeated.

"And black oak. It should make an admirable study; quite cozy."

He paused, afraid that the brandy might lure him on to dangerous and rash commitments. "I am not too rigid in my ways to embrace change, when it promises an enrichment of experience."

"I can see that," she said. She was still staring at him, chin on hands, elbows resting on her knees. Finally she said, "What is there left to do?"

"We must draw back the drapes and unlock the windows," he said. "Then, as soon as I have left, you may phone the police."

"You won't stay?" she asked, sitting up straight and opening her eyes wide. "Why won't you stay?"

"Why, consider the circumstances, Helen. You have just found your husband shot. You would phone a doctor, or the police. Surely you wouldn't want a lawyer."

"Not even a very old friend?"

"No," he said firmly. "That is why it is so essential that you remember everything I told you."

"Policemen used to frighten Alec. It isn't because they frighten you, is it, Timothy?"

"Of course not. I would much prefer to answer their questions, you may be sure of that."

"I had planned to sit on the sofa, weeping quietly."

"You may still do so. The police would not wish to check the expression of natural grief."

"And I was going to bite my lip whenever you mentioned his name."

"Some equally affecting gesture will occur to you. If you keep the facts we have agreed upon firmly in mind, you may count on your great natural buoyancy to carry you through."

"Well," she said, "what is to be must be."

"I fear so," he said. He cleared his throat and then said, "There is one more thing to do before we draw back the blinds. It is a matter of some small delicacy." He paused and tried out several phrases in his mind. "You were asleep, you know, when you heard the shots, but the bed is still — unslept in."

"Ah," she said, "and you want me to muss it up?"

She stood up then and bending down took his small, bony head between her hands. Chancel had rarely been so startled. She was somewhat larger than he, and now she stood with her long legs spread apart and her immense eyes close to his. Then she kissed him briskly but thoroughly on the mouth. He gasped slightly and rose unsteadily to his feet, but she was already walking away from him, and while he was wiping off the lipstick he heard the door of the bedroom close behind her.

In the bedroom, obedient to his instructions, she kicked off her mules, and, lying down, began to toss about. But soon she began to feel pleased with herself and she stretched out in a manner which she had learned from photographs of actresses on zebra skins. Alec had always been afraid that she would slip a disc. What Timothy Chancel would think made

her giggle. She tried to imitate his tone of voice and found herself giggling so uncontrollably that she had to stuff a handkerchief in her mouth. Then she stretched out her hand lazily and began pawing among the things on her night-stand.

Chancel, while he waited for her return, walked up and down picking up and replacing objects at random, as though on an Easter-egg hunt. Then he wandered over to the tall cases of books which were now, save for the forms of the law, his own. He frowned at the items which were duplicated in his own collection — the Notable British Trials, the Pearsons. But he ran his hand lovingly over the early and out-of-print Rougheads and his head nearly swam when he contemplated the shelves of bound pamphlets. Familiar as he was with Alec's collection, he knew that his happy voyage of rediscovery would take many months, and only the knowledge that Alec could not share this with him dimmed his pleasure. The musty antique scent of the books tugged mightily at his new allegiance to whatever it was that Helen Grendel dabbed behind her ear and let float to him through dark strands of hair.

At last, however, he pulled himself away from the bookcases and resumed his patrol of the room. He re-examined the rug and made some final adjustments in Alec's position. Then, reluctantly, he went to the door and put his hand on the light switch. He moved his quick black eyes once more over the room and then snapped out the light.

In the sudden darkness, the brandy which he had been drinking so prodigally asserted itself unexpectedly, replacing his exhilaration and sense of heightened clarity with a disagreeable lightness of head and uncertainty of foot. After he had launched himself upon the navigation of the room, he began to wish that he had waited for Helen to return. He had a sharp mental image of the position of Alec's body, but the brandy seemed intent upon keeping this information from his legs. And when he reached the window he discovered that his hands had a tendency to wander aimlessly through the baffling folds of drapery.

Eventually, after much groping he found the tasseled cord, but when he had pulled back the drapes he had to raise the shades which Alec kept drawn behind them and then the Venetian blinds which Alec always kept lowered. Then he had to struggle with the stiff lock of the window. As he worked, he peopled the drive and the park beyond it with policemen, young lovers, footpads, and insomniacs, all staring upward, stopwatch in hand. By the time he had the window open — though actually it had taken but a few minutes — his forehead was beaded with sweat and his black coat was disheveled. He paused to resettle Alec's revolver before he looked out.

Directly below, a street lamp illuminated an empty sidewalk, a wide street, and a small section of the park.

Beyond its circle of light was darkness, and beyond the darkness, the river, lighted and stained by enormous advertisements for shortening and salted peanuts. The signs seemed as far away from him as the edge of a desert sunset, and, an instant later, so close that they topped off the Palisades like candied citron and maraschino. This random and wanton reproportioning of the universe was thoroughly novel to Chancel, and he rubbed his knuckles against his eyes as though focusing field glasses.

When Helen Grendel suddenly spoke to him from the doorway he was startled. "Is it too dark to see?" she asked.

"It is very still," he said. "There is no one about." He imagined that she was afraid to cross the dark room. "I can see the river."

"Ah," she said, "but what can't you see?"

What *can't* I see, he asked himself. "There is no traffic," he said.

"Closer than that," she said, and giggled, just as, though he hadn't heard her, she had giggled in the bedroom.

"There is no one walking by," he said. "The streets are empty."

He waited, while foreboding, unsuspected, brushed by him in the silence.

"Closer than that," she said. "Much closer than that."

And then, at her prompting, he discovered the omission which he had not been able to find in the study, for all his fussing. It wasn't in the study at all. It was outside the heavy drapes, the drawn blinds, the locked window. But, as she had said, it was very, very close.

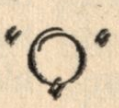
"There is no balcony," he said.

For there wasn't, nor any kind of ledge, and there was no fire escape.

"Then there is nothing more to do," Helen said. Her tone was matter-of-fact, but it came to Chancel like a chill wind from the river. "This will do nicely."

And so it did. For at that moment, the police, whom she had summoned on the bedroom phone, pulled up to the curb in a green-and-white patrol car. As Chancel watched, there jumped from the car, two astonishingly tiny black figures, and ran into the building.

He was still standing by the window when they seized him, and after he had been disarmed, he said, for the third time that night, "This is extraordinary."



THE LITTLE "GRAY CELLS" OF HERCULE POIROT

SHADOW IN THE NIGHT

by AGATHA CHRISTIE

A NOTE HAD BEEN BROUGHT BY SPECIAL messenger. Poirot read it, and a gleam of excitement and interest came into his eyes as he did so. He dismissed the man with a few curt words and then turned to me.

"Pack a bag with all haste, my friend. We're going down to Sharples."

I started at the mention of the famous country place of Lord Alloway. Head of the newly formed Ministry of Defense, Lord Alloway was a prominent member of the Cabinet. As Sir Ralph Curtis, head of a great engineering firm, he had made his mark in the House of Commons, and he was now freely spoken of as *the* coming man, and the one most likely to be asked to form a ministry should the rumors as to Mr. David MacAdam's health prove well founded.

A big Rolls-Royce car was waiting for us below, and as we glided off into the darkness, I plied Poirot with questions.

"What on earth can they want us for at this time of night?" I demanded. It was past 11.

Poirot shook his head. "Something of the most urgent, without doubt."

"I remember," I said, "that some years ago there was a rather ugly scandal about Ralph Curtis, as he then was — some jugglery with shares, I believe. In the end, he was completely exonerated; but perhaps something of the kind has arisen again?"

"It would hardly be necessary for him to send for me in the middle of the night, my friend."

I was forced to agree, and the remainder of the journey was passed in silence. Once out of London, the powerful car forged rapidly ahead, and we arrived at Sharples in a little under the hour.

A pontifical butler conducted us at once to a small study where Lord Alloway was awaiting us. He sprang up to greet us — a tall, spare man who seemed actually to radiate power.

"M. Poirot, I am delighted to see you. It is the second time the Government has had need of your services. I remember only too well what you did for us during the war, when the Prime Minister was kidnaped in that astounding fashion. Your masterly deductions — and may I add, your discretion? — saved the situation."

Poirot's eyes twinkled a little.

"Do I gather then, Milor', that this is another case for — discretion?"

"Most emphatically. Sir Harry and

I — oh, let me introduce you. — Admiral Sir Harry Weardale, our First Sea Lord — M. Poirot and — let me see, Captain —"

"Hastings," I supplied.

"I've often heard of you, M. Poirot," said Sir Harry, shaking hands. "This is a most unaccountable business, and if you can solve it, we'll be extremely grateful to you."

I liked the First Sea Lord immediately, a square, bluff sailor of the good old-fashioned type.

Poirot looked inquiringly at them both, and Alloway took up the tale.

"Of course, you understand that all this is in confidence, M. Poirot. We have had a most serious loss. The plans of the new Z type of submarine have been stolen."

"When was that?"

"Tonight — less than three hours ago. You can appreciate perhaps, M. Poirot, the magnitude of the disaster. It is essential that the loss should not be made public. I will give you the facts as briefly as possible. My guests over the weekend were the Admiral, here, his wife and son, and a Mrs. Conrad, a lady well known in London society. The ladies retired to bed early — about 10 o'clock; so did Mr. Leonard Weardale. Sir Harry is down here partly for the purpose of discussing the construction of this new type of submarine with me. Accordingly, I asked Mr. Fitzroy, my secretary, to get the plans from the safe in the corner there, and to have them ready for me, as well as various other documents that bore upon the subject in hand. While he was doing this, the Admiral and I strolled up and down the terrace, smoking cigars and enjoying the warm June air. We finished our smoke and our chat, and decided to get down to business. Just as we turned at the far end of the terrace, I fancied I saw a shadow slip out of the French window here, cross the terrace, and disappear. I paid very little attention, however. I knew Fitzroy to be in this room, and it never entered my head that anything might be amiss. There, of course, I am to blame. Well, we retraced our steps along the terrace and entered this room by the French window just as Fitzroy entered it from the hall.

" 'Got everything out we are likely to need, Fitzroy?' I asked.

" 'I think so, Lord Alloway. The papers are all on your desk,' he answered. And then he wished us both good night.

" 'Just wait a minute,' I said, going to the desk. 'I may want something I haven't mentioned.'

"I looked quickly through the papers that were lying there.

" 'You've forgotten the most important of the lot, Fitzroy,' I said. 'The actual plans of the submarine!'

" 'The plans are right on top, Lord Alloway.'

" 'Oh, no, they're not,' I said, turning over the papers.

" 'But I put them there only a few minutes ago!'

" 'Well, they're not here now,' I said.

"Fitzroy advanced with a bewildered expression on his face. The thing seemed incredible. We turned over the papers on the desk; we hunted through the safe; but at last we had to make up our minds to it that the papers were gone — and gone within the short space of about three minutes while Fitzroy was absent from the room."

"Why did he leave the room?" asked Poirot.

"Just what I asked him," exclaimed Sir Harry.

"It appears," said Lord Alloway, "that just when he had finished arranging the papers on my desk, he was startled by hearing a woman scream. He dashed out into the hall. On the stairs he discovered Mrs. Conrad's French maid. The girl looked very white and upset, and declared that she had seen a ghost — a tall figure dressed all in white that moved without a sound. Fitzroy laughed at her fears and told her, in more or less polite language, not to be a fool. Then he returned to this room just as we entered from the window."

"It all seems very clear," said Poirot thoughtfully. "The only question is, was the maid an accomplice? Did she scream by arrangement with her confederate lurking outside, or was he merely waiting there in the hope of an opportunity presenting itself? It was a man, I suppose — not a woman you saw?"

"I can't tell you, M. Poirot. It was just a — shadow."

The Admiral gave such a peculiar snort that it could not fail to attract attention.

"M. Admiral has something to say, I think," said Poirot quietly. "You saw this shadow, Sir Harry?"

"No, I didn't," returned the other. "And neither did Alloway. The branch of a tree flapped, or something, and then afterward, when we discovered the theft, he leaped to the conclusion that he had seen someone pass across the terrace. His imagination played a trick on him; that's all."

"I am not usually credited with having much imagination," said Lord Alloway with a slight smile.

"Nonsense, we've all got imagination. We can all work ourselves up to believe that we've seen more than we really have. I've had a lifetime of experience at sea, and I'll back my eyes against those of any landsman. I was looking right down the terrace, and I'd have seen the same if there was anything to see."

He was quite excited over the matter. Poirot rose and stepped quickly to the window.

"You permit?" he asked. "We must settle this point if possible."

He went out upon the terrace, and we followed him. He had taken an electric torch from his pocket, and was playing the light along the edge of the grass that bordered the terrace.

"Where did he cross the terrace, Milor'?" he asked.

"About opposite the window, I should say."

Poirot continued to play the torch for some minutes longer, walking

the entire length of the terrace and back. Then he shut it off and straightened up.

"Sir Harry is right — and you are wrong, Milor', " he said quietly. "It rained heavily earlier this evening. Anyone who passed over that grass could not avoid leaving footmarks. But there are none — none at all."

His eyes went from one man's face to the other's. Lord Alloway looked bewildered and unconvinced; the Admiral expressed a noisy gratification.

"Knew I couldn't be wrong," he declared. "Trust my eyes anywhere."

He was such a picture of an honest old sea-dog that I could not help smiling.

"So that brings us to the people in the house," said Poirot smoothly. "Let us come inside again. Now, Milor', while Mr. Fitzroy was speaking to the maid on the stairs, could anyone have seized the opportunity to enter the study from the hall?"

Lord Alloway shook his head.

"Quite impossible — they would have had to pass him in order to do so."

"And Mr. Fitzroy himself — you are sure of him, eh?"

Lord Alloway flushed.

"Absolutely, M. Poirot. I will answer confidently for my secretary. It is quite impossible that he should be criminally concerned in the matter in any way."

"Everything seems to be impossible," remarked Poirot rather dryly. "Possibly the plans attached to themselves a little pair of wings, and flew away — *comme ça!*" He blew his lips out like a comical cherub.

"The whole thing is impossible," declared Lord Alloway impatiently. "But I beg, M. Poirot, that you will not dream of suspecting Fitzroy. Consider for one moment — had he wished to take the plans, what could have been easier for him than to take a tracing of them without going to the trouble of stealing them?"

"There, Milor'," said Poirot with approval, "you make a remark *bien juste* — I see that you have a mind orderly and methodical. *L'Angleterre* is happy in possessing you."

Lord Alloway looked rather embarrassed by this sudden burst of praise. Poirot returned to the matter in hand.

"The room in which you had been sitting all the evening —"

"The drawing-room? Yes?"

"That also has a French window on the terrace, since I remember your saying you went out that way. Would it not be possible for someone to come out by the drawing-room window and in by this one while Mr. Fitzroy was out of the room, and return the same way?"

"But we'd have seen them," objected the Admiral.

"Not if you had your backs turned, walking the other way."

"Fitzroy was only out of the room a few minutes, the time it would take us to walk to the end and back."

"No matter — it is a possibility — in fact, the only one as things stand."

"But there was no one in the drawing-room when we went out," said the Admiral.

"They may have come there afterward."

"You mean," said Lord Alloway slowly, "that when Fitzroy heard the maid scream and went out, someone was already concealed in the drawing-room, that they darted in and out through the French windows, and only left the drawing-room again when Fitzroy had returned to this room?"

"The methodical mind again," said Poirot, bowing.

"You express the matter perfectly."

"One of the servants, perhaps?"

"Or a guest. It was Mrs. Conrad's maid who screamed. What exactly can you tell me of Mrs. Conrad?"

Lord Alloway considered.

"I told you that she is a lady well known in society. That is true in the sense that she gives large parties, and goes everywhere. But very little is known as to where she really comes from, and what her past life has been. She is a lady who frequents diplomatic and Foreign Office circles as much as possible. The Secret Service is inclined to ask — why?"

"I see," said Poirot. "And she was asked here this weekend —"

"So that — shall we say? —we might observe her at close range."

"*Parfaitement!* It is possible that she has turned the tables on you rather neatly."

Lord Alloway looked discomforted, and Poirot continued:

"Tell me, Milor', was any reference made in her hearing to the subjects you and the Admiral were going to discuss together?"

"Yes," admitted the other. "Sir Harry said: 'And now for our submarine! To work!' or something of that sort. The others had left the room, but she had come back for a book."

"I see," said Poirot thoughtfully. "Milor', it is very late — but this is an urgent affair. I would like to question the members of this house party at once if it is possible."

"It can be managed, of course," said Lord Alloway. "The awkward thing is, we don't want to let it get about more than can be helped. Of course, Lady Juliet Weardale and young Leonard are all right — but Mrs. Conrad, if she is not guilty, is rather a different proposition. Perhaps you could just state that an important paper is missing, without specifying what it is, or going into any of the circumstances of the disappearance?"

"Exactly what I was about to propose myself," said Poirot, beaming. "In fact, in all three cases. Monsieur the Admiral will pardon me, but even the best of wives —"

"No offense," said Sir Harry. "All women talk, bless 'em! I wish Juliet would talk a little more and play bridge a little less. But women are like that nowadays, never happy unless they're dancing or gambling. I'll get Juliet and Leonard up — shall I, Alloway?"

"Thank you. I'll call the French maid. M. Poirot will want to see her, and she can rouse her mistress. I'll attend to it now. In the meantime, I'll send Fitzroy along."

Mr. Fitzroy was a pale, thin young man with pince-nez and a frigid expression. His statement was practically word for word what Lord Alloway had already told us.

"What is your own theory, Mr. Fitzroy?"

Mr. Fitzroy shrugged his shoulders.

"Undoubtedly someone who knew the hang of things was waiting his chance outside. He could see what went on through the French window, and he slipped in when I left the room. It's a pity Lord Alloway didn't give chase then and there when he saw the fellow leave."

Poirot did not undeceive him. Instead he asked:

"Do you believe the story of the French maid — that she had seen a ghost?"

"Well, hardly, M. Poirot!"

"I mean — that she really thought so?"

"Oh, as to that, I can't say. She certainly seemed rather upset. She had her hands to her head."

"Aha!" cried Poirot with the air of one who has made a discovery. "Is that so indeed — and she was without doubt a pretty girl?"

"I didn't notice particularly," said Mr. Fitzroy.

"You did not see her mistress, I suppose?"

"As a matter of fact, I did. She was in the gallery at the top of the steps and was calling her — 'Léonie!' Then she saw me — and of course retired."

"Upstairs," said Poirot, frowning.

"Of course, I realize that all this is very unpleasant for me — or rather would have been, if Lord Alloway had not chanced to see the man actually leaving. In any case, I should be glad if you would make a point of searching my room — and myself."

"You really wish that?"

"Certainly I do."

What Poirot would have replied I do not know, but at that moment Lord Alloway reappeared and informed us that the two ladies and Mr. Leonard Weardale were in the drawing-room.

The women were in becoming negligees. Mrs. Conrad was a beautiful woman of thirty-five, with golden hair and a slight tendency to *embonpoint*. Lady Juliet Weardale must have been forty, tall and dark, very thin, still beautiful, with exquisite hands and feet, and a restless, haggard manner. Her son was rather an effeminate-looking young man, as great a contrast to his bluff, hearty father as could be imagined.

Poirot gave forth the little rigmarole we had agreed upon, and then explained that he was anxious to know if anyone had heard or seen anything that night which might assist us.

Turning to Mrs. Conrad first, he asked her if she would be so kind as

to inform him exactly what her movements had been.

"Let me see . . . I went upstairs. I rang for my maid. Then, as she did not put in an appearance, I came out and called her. I could hear her talking on the stairs. After she had brushed my hair, I sent her away — she was in a very curious nervous state. I read a while and then went to bed."

"And you, Lady Juliet?"

"I went straight upstairs and to bed. I was very tired."

"What about your book, dear?" asked Mrs. Conrad with a sweet smile.

"My book?" Lady Juliet flushed.

"Yes, you know, when I sent Léonie away, you were coming up the stairs. You had been down to the drawing-room for a book, you said."

"Oh, yes, I did go down. I — I forgot."

Lady Juliet clasped her hands nervously together.

"Did you hear Mrs. Conrad's maid scream, Milady?"

"No — no, I didn't."

"How curious — because you must have been in the drawing-room at the time."

"I heard nothing," said Lady Juliet in a firmer voice.

Poirot turned to young Leonard.

"Monsieur?"

"Nothing doing. I went straight upstairs and turned in."

Poirot stroked his chin.

"Alas, I fear there is nothing to help me here. Mesdames and monsieur, I regret — I regret infinitely to have deranged you from your slumbers for so little. Accept my apologies, I pray of you."

Gesticulating and apologizing, he marshaled them out. He returned with the French maid, a pretty, impudent-looking girl. Alloway and Weardale had gone out with the ladies.

"Now, mademoiselle," said Poirot in a brisk tone, "let us have the truth. Recount to me no histories. Why did you scream on the stairs?"

"Ah, monsieur, I saw a tall figure — all in white —"

Poirot arrested her with an energetic shake of his forefinger.

"Did I not say, recount to me no histories? I will make a guess. He kissed you, did he not? M. Leonard Weardale, I mean?"

"*Eh bien, monsieur*, and after all? What is a kiss?"

"Under the circumstances, it is most natural," replied Poirot gallantly. "I myself, or Hastings here — but tell me just what occurred."

"He came up behind me, and caught me. I was startled, and I screamed. If I had known, I would not have screamed — but he came upon me like a cat. Then came *M. le secretaire*. M. Leonard flew up the stairs. And what could I say? Especially to a *jeune homme comme ça — tellement comme il faut? Ma foi*, I invent a ghost."

"And all is explained." cried Poirot genially. "You then mounted to the chamber of your mistress. Which is her room, by the way?"

"It is at the end, monsieur. That way."

"Directly over the study, then. *Bien*, mademoiselle, I will detain you no longer. And *la prochaine fois*, do not scream."

Handing her out, he came back to me with a smile.

"An interesting case, is it not, Hastings? I begin to have a few ideas. *Et vous?*"

"What was Leonard Weardale doing on the stairs? I don't like that young man, Poirot. He's a thorough young rake, I should say."

"I agree with you, *mon ami.*"

"Fitzroy seems an honest fellow."

"Lord Alloway is certainly insistent on that point."

"And yet there is something in his manner —"

"That is almost too good to be true? I felt it myself. On the other hand, our friend Mrs. Conrad is certainly not good at all."

"And her room is over the study," I said musingly, and keeping a sharp eye on Poirot.

He shook his head with a slight smile.

"No, *mon ami*, I cannot bring myself seriously to believe that that immaculate lady swarmed down the chimney, or let herself down from the balcony."

As he spoke, the door opened, and to my great surprise, Lady Juliet Weardale flitted in.

"M. Poirot," she said somewhat breathlessly, "can I speak to you alone?"

"Milady, Captain Hastings is as my other self. You can speak before him as though he were a thing of no account, not there at all. Be seated, I pray you."

She sat down, still keeping her eyes fixed on Poirot.

"What I have to say is — rather difficult. You are in charge of this case. If the — papers were to be returned, would that end the matter? I mean, could it be done without questions being asked?"

Poirot stared hard at her.

"Let me understand you, madame. They are to be placed in my hands — is that right? And I am to return them to Lord Alloway on the condition that he asks no questions as to where I got them?"

She bowed her head. "That is what I mean. But I must be sure there will be no — publicity."

"I do not think Lord Alloway is particularly anxious for publicity," said Poirot grimly.

"You accept, then?" she cried eagerly in response.

"A little moment, Milady. It depends on how soon you can place those papers in my hands."

"Almost immediately."

Poirot glanced up at the clock.

"How soon, exactly?"

"Say — ten minutes," she whispered.

"I accept, Milady."

She hurried from the room. I pursed my mouth up for a whistle.

"Can you sum up the situation for me, Hastings?"

"Bridge," I replied succinctly.

"Ah, you remember the careless words of Monsieur the Admiral! What a memory! I felicitate you, Hastings."

We said no more, for Lord Alloway came in, and looked inquiringly at Poirot.

"Have you any further ideas, M. Poirot? I am afraid the answers to your questions have been rather disappointing."

"Not at all, Milor'. They have been quite sufficiently illuminating. It will be unnecessary for me to stay here any longer, and so, with your permission, I will return at once to London."

Lord Alloway seemed dumfounded.

"But — but what have you discovered? Do you know who took the plans?"

"Yes, Milor', I do. Tell me — in the case of the papers being returned to you anonymously, you would prosecute no further inquiry?"

Lord Alloway stared at him.

"Do you mean on payment of a sum of money?"

"No, Milor', returned unconditionally."

"Of course, the recovery of the plans is the great thing," said Lord Alloway slowly. He still looked puzzled and uncomprehending.

"Then I should seriously recommend you to adopt that course. Only you, the Admiral, and your secretary know of the loss. Only they need know of the restitution. And you may count on me to support you in every way — lay the mystery on my shoulders. You asked me to restore the papers — I have done so. You know no more." He rose and held out his hand. "Milor', I am glad to have met you. I have faith in you — and your devotion to England. You will guide her destinies with a strong, sure hand."

"M. Poirot — I swear to you that I will do my best. It may be a fault, or it may be a virtue — but I believe in myself."

"So does every great man. Me, I am the same!" said Poirot grandiloquently.

The car came round to the door in a few minutes, and Lord Alloway bade us farewell on the steps with renewed cordiality.

"That is a great man, Hastings," said Poirot as we drove off. "He has brains, resource, power. He is the strong man that England needs to guide her through these difficult days."

"I'm quite ready to agree with all you say, Poirot — but what about Lady Juliet? Is she to return the papers straight to Alloway? What will she think when she finds you have gone off without a word?"

"Hastings, I will ask you a little question. Why, when she was talking with me, did she not hand me the plans then and there?"

"She hadn't got them with her."

"Perfectly. How long would it take her to fetch them from her room? Or from any hiding place in the house? You need not answer. I will

tell you. Probably about two minutes and a half! Yet she asks for ten minutes. Why? Clearly she has to obtain them from some other person, and to reason or argue with that person before they give them up. Now, what person could that be? Not Mrs. Conrad, clearly, but a member of her own family, her husband or son. Which is it likely to be? Leonard Weardale said he went straight to bed. We know that to be untrue. Supposing his mother went to his room and found it empty; supposing she came down filled with a nameless dread — he is no beauty that son of hers! She does not find him, but later she hears him deny that he ever left his room. She leaps to the conclusion that he is the thief. Hence her interview with me.

"But, *mon ami*, we know something that Lady Juliet does not. We know that her son could not have been in the study, because he was on the stairs, making love to the pretty French maid. Although she does not know it, Leonard Weardale has an alibi."

"Well, then, who did steal the papers? We seem to have eliminated everybody — Lady Juliet, her son, Mrs. Conrad, the French maid —"

"Exactly. Use your little gray cells, my friend. The solution stares you in the face."

I shook my head blankly.

"But yes! If you would only persevere! See, then, Fitzroy goes out of the study; he leaves the papers on the desk. A few minutes later Lord Alloway enters the room, goes to the desk, and the papers are gone. Only two things are possible: either Fitzroy did *not* leave the papers on the desk, but put them in his pocket — and that is not reasonable, because, as Alloway pointed out, he could have taken a tracing at his own convenience any time — or else the papers were still on the desk when Lord Alloway went to it — in which case they went into *his* pocket."

"Lord Alloway the thief," I said, dumfounded. "But why? *Why?*"

"Did you not tell me of some scandal in the past? He was exonerated, you said. But suppose, after all, it had been true? In English public life there must be no scandal. If this were raked up and proved against him now — goodbye to his political career. We will suppose that he was being blackmailed, and the price asked was the submarine plans."

"But the man's a black traitor!" I cried.

"Oh, no, he is not. He is clever and resourceful. Supposing, my friend, that he copied those plans, making — for he is a clever engineer — a slight alteration in each part which will render them quite impracticable. He hands the faked plans to the enemy's agent — Mrs. Conrad, I fancy; but in order that no suspicion of their genuineness may arise, the plans must seem to be stolen. He does his best to throw no suspicion on anyone in the house, by pretending to see a man leaving the window. But there he ran up against the obstinacy of

the Admiral. So his next anxiety is that no suspicion shall fall on Fitzroy."

"This is all guesswork on your part, Poirot," I objected.

"It is psychology, *mon ami*. A man who had handed over the real plans would not be overscrupulous as to who was likely to fall under suspicion. And why was he so anxious that no details of the robbery should be given to Mrs. Conrad? Because he had handed over the faked plans earlier in the evening, and did not want her to know that the theft could only have taken place later."

"I wonder if you are right," I said.

"Of course, I am right. I spoke to Alloway as one great man to another — and he understood perfectly. You will see."

One thing is quite certain. On the day when Lord Alloway became Prime Minister, a check and a signed photograph arrived; on the photograph were the words: *To my discreet friend, Hercule Poirot — from Alloway.*

I believe that the Z type of submarine is causing great exultation in naval circles. They say it will revolutionize modern naval warfare. I have heard that a certain foreign power essayed to construct something of the same kind, and the result was a dismal failure. But I still consider that Poirot was guessing. He will do it once too often one of these days.

DEPARTMENT OF "FIRST STORIES"

and **Black Mask** *section*

Armando Perretta's "The Man Who Got Away with Murder" is one of the thirteen "first stories" which won special awards in EQMM's Tenth Annual Contest. It is the tough, slangy tale of a bartender's "perfect crime," and a fine contrasting piece, in our Black Mask department, with Saul Levinson's "Stay on the Sidewalks, Kid." The author has an interesting occupation. His brother owns the Hearthstone Restaurant in Hartford, Conn. — "known in the trade as a 'class' restaurant" — and Armando describes himself as "host, trouble shooter, cook, meat cutter, and convivial flatterer." But Armando is determined to become, some day, a full-time writer — so much so that he wishes there were 40 hours in every day so that he could have more time for writing. As it is, he manages to write a good deal: he has finished a 140,000-word historical novel which is now making the rounds of publishers.

After reading Mr. Perretta's long, chatty letter about himself, we have the feeling that he should write stories of his youth. During his childhood and teens, Armando's father was Cappo Collectore del Gioca del Lotto — Head Collector of the Italian Lottery. Surely there is rich material in this background — human interest, comedy — and those three sure-fire elements: love, money, and crime.

THE MAN WHO GOT AWAY WITH MURDER

by ARMANDO PERRETTA

THAT'S RIGHT, FRIEND, I'M THE only guy who done murder with a hundred per cent guarantee not to get grabbed. In fact, I could be talking in my sleep with three dicks taking down my words, and when I woke up I'd still be a free man. Sure, I'm gonna tell you, and you can print every word of it in your newspaper. What's the good of doing something real smart if nobody but you knows you done it?

I know what you're thinking. You're wondering what a sixty-dollar-a-week bartender in Ruck's Bar and Grill could have done that was so smart. Just the same I outsmarted the smartest, and at their own game, too!

It was beautiful. Nothing as corny

as killing a guy and trying to make it look like he died natural. No, sir. It was murder, all right; nobody never mistook it for nothing else. But believe me, friend, they couldn't pin it on me in a million years. That's the beauty part of it.

It all started with Susie. I knew Susie a long time before her husband was killed — maybe seven, eight months. She used to come into Ruck's for a cocktail. She'd sit there most of the afternoon sipping her drink. You know how these dames with too much time on their hands act. Am I boring you? You wait.

It ain't long before Susie's pitching at me, and I'm catching — Susie's not a bad-looking head. In no time we're having dates. She don't want her husband to get wise, which is okay by me. Besides, I don't think Ruck would like the idea of me beating him to a dame right in his own joint. So it's all on the q.t.

Susie and me have us quite a ball. She's a pretty babe, and stacked, too. Besides, she picks up the tabs wherever we go, and she even gives me a little present now and then. After a while she's so gone over me I can put the bite on her for spending money when I find myself a little short, which to tell the truth is almost always. So I figure I'm better off than if I'm going with some legitimate kid that's costing me dough and breathing down my neck to marry me. I don't have no money anyway. You don't make no tips in Ruck's, and what with a scratch sheet hanging around the joint all day I naturally blow my dough on the horses. What? How can such a smart guy like me go for the horses? You don't have to be sarcastic. Playing the ponies is a disease. A guy in a joint where there's horse action can't no more help catching it than you can help catching malaria in a jungle. Brains positively got nothing to do with it.

But to get back to my story. It ain't long before Susie's telling me right out that she's madly in love with me and wishes there's some way she can be free to marry me. Although I've never fallen for this love stuff, I'm kind of wishing the same thing. Because she's hinted to me that her husband is pretty well fixed and if he ain't such a miser with his dough she'd have more money to spend on us. And then she starts to talk about Mexico, California, Argentina, Florida. She'd talk about me and her on a beach under a striped umbrella, and then having dinner on one of those big terraces with the moon shining down on us. Like in those travel ads. That's what really sold me.

All that stuff makes the business side of Ruck's bar look like a prison to me. I realize that's all it really is, a prison, and all the hours I put in there is like doing time. And pretty soon I'm thinking along with Susie how nice it would be if her husband should suddenly drop dead.

To make the glue stickier, Susie stops just hinting and comes right out and says that if her husband conks out, she's rich. That gives me a real

charge, and I begin hoping out loud he's enjoying bad health. But Susie says he's as healthy as a Derby entry. How about getting something on him and divorcing him for big alimony? I says. But Susie says he's a real stick-in-the-mud and he don't go nowhere but to his office and back home again. No, she says, to get his dough and me, too, she's got to be a widow.

Even now I have to laugh at Susie. I know she's inviting me to kill her husband. But she's got another think coming. Murder's a tough rap. Sure, I wanted the tropics and her hubby's dough, but not if I had to keep wondering when some cop is going to clamp his big paws on my shoulder. I told her in plain English that sucker play was out. We'd go along the way we was, I said, and if we got a break and something happened to her husband, okay. But no murder. That was final, I told her. And I meant it.

But even though at that time I ain't planning on committing murder, just the same I can't get the idea out of my mind. Every day it's getting tougher to stand behind Ruck's bar, and it don't make it easier when I have to serve some guy who's on his way to Florida or one of the other places that Susie and me is always dreaming about. I tell you, friend, I got so I hate Susie's husband's guts, though I never even seen the guy.

Then Big Brocco gets it. When I read about it, the first thing that strikes me between the eyes is that it happens in the street right smack under Susie's husband's office window. I read the story over and over about Big Brocco getting knocked off. You remember Joe Kosy steps out of a car and gives it to him right there on the sidewalk in broad daylight? I keep staring and staring at the print, hoping that somewhere I'll read where some innocent guy — like Susie's husband — is looking out of his window and gets sprayed with bullets. It could have happened. It wouldn't be the first time a bystander gets it. But no such luck.

The next morning's paper got a bigger headline. The cops picked up Joe Kosy for the killing. The reason they know it was Kosy is they got some guy who seen it all. He's a secret witness. They ain't giving out the guy's name because you know what happens to guys who see a gang killing. They ain't even holding him, because nobody knows who he is and they want it to stay that way. He picked Kosy's picture out of the Rogues' Gallery, and when they put him behind a screen he picked Kosy out of the line-up.

It all figures. Big Brocco's been shooting his mouth off to the D.A. about this murder combine, and Joe Kosy's their star trigger-man.

Well, I'm still reading and wishing that a certain you-know-who was sticking his neck out when the bullets were flying. But it's no use. Susie's husband is still alive and kicking, as the saying goes.

And all of a sudden the big idea hits me. What I want is money, not Susie. And now I see I don't need

Susie to get me dough. Of course the idea's in the rough stages yet, but I begin to polish it up . . . What's the matter, friend? Forget to light your cigarette? Anyway, my brain slips into high gear, and in no time I've got all the problems licked. Then I rehearse the whole thing, looking for loopholes. Finally I'm set.

I had one thing going for me. Mobsters is almost as famous as movie stars. So it wasn't no trouble getting to somebody who could do what I wanted.

Joe Kosy's got those brothers. I called one of them and told him cold that I knew the name of the secret witness who fingered his brother Joe. He says, cautious-like, what's he supposed to do about it? I says put me in touch with somebody who'd be interested. He asks my name and I laugh. He got the point and laid off. Finally, after a few suggestions knocking back and forth we agree I should call a number he gave me. Six o'clock, I'm supposed to call. He'd have somebody at the number I could talk to. He didn't tell me who, and I still don't know who it was.

The next day was going to be my day off, which was the way I planned it. I needed to be off the day after I talked to the Big Wheel, because I didn't want to limelight what I was doing by staying out of work.

That afternoon at Ruck's I lifted a drunk's social security card and some other identifications he had, and when I was through work at 5 o'clock I went to the post office and rented a box. At 6 o'clock I walked into a telephone booth in Grand Central. I called the number Joe Kosy's brother had given me, and a guy's voice answered.

I told him I was going to talk for exactly one minute at a time, with ten-minute stretches between calls, until we had finished our business. He didn't like the idea, but you never know where them guys have connections, and I wasn't taking any chances on the call being traced. After one minute I hopped to another phone. I could cover plenty of ground in the ten-minute breaks.

Now here's the beauty part of the scheme. . . . You're listening pretty close, huh? I notice you ain't even bothering to smoke no more . . . The first question I know they're going to ask me is how I know who the secret witness is, and my answer is got to be good. Sure enough this guy asks it, and I tell him I'm a dick on the homicide squad and I was in the room when this witness picks Kosy out of the art gallery. I know I'm pretty safe saying this, because if this guy'd had connections on the squad the witness would be dead already. So I tell him I'm open for business and I hang up.

I started walking as fast as my legs could go and in ten minutes I'm at another pay phone far away. I call the guy back and right off I tell him for five grand he can have the name of the witness. Without hesitating a second he says okay, but first he wants to spread me a little proposition. Why

don't I come up and see him? he says. He don't care about the five big ones, but maybe he can put me on the payroll. He says I don't have to worry about nothing because nobody'll ever know. I says time's up and scooted over to my next stop.

Remember, friend, the way I'm playing it I got nothing to lose. The worst I can draw is a big fat no and get hooked for the post-office box rental, which is peanuts. Anyway, when I get him on the phone again I have my answers ready for him. I told him I wouldn't come out in the open for no money. Not these days with all the department shakeups going on. I told him if he didn't do it my way to just forget it. He says, "Okay, okay!" quick-like. I've got him over a barrel, and we both know it. He asks me how we're going to exchange the information and the money. Easy, I says. I'll give him the name of the witness over the phone, and he can mail me the dough. While he digested that, I hung up on him and moved another ten minutes away.

The first thing I told him when I called back was that he's got to promise not to hurt the witness. I told him my job was catching killers, not getting people killed, and if I wasn't hard up for dough I'd never do nothing like this. I told him he could give the guy some money and get him out of the country or something like that. He says, "Sure, sure," very fast, and I got him hooked. I know he's lying, but it makes my story stronger, see? Then I told him I wanted the five gees in fifties and to send it to post office box number so-and-so. I told him that the one hundred bills would fit in an envelope, *and that's the way it had to go*. I figured the guy wouldn't have any trouble getting those fifties right away, because gangsters always have more cash on hand than a bank. I hung up and took another walk. I had a name all ready to give him.

Oh, sit down and relax. Here, light up that cigarette and shift into low gear, will you? You want to hear the rest of the story, or not?

Well, when I got him again I told him that if he was thinking of crossing me by not sending the money there was a few things he ought to know in advance. In the first place, I said, the witness was out of town and wouldn't be back till the next afternoon. He could check by trying to telephone him. Oh, sure, *I* knew where the sucker was, I says, but I wasn't telling. The witness wouldn't be back in town till tomorrow afternoon, I said, and if the money wasn't in the post office box tomorrow morning . . . I broke off to let him think that over.

On the next call I said I was mailing myself a letter telling me there was a "leak" on the witness, so I could have it ready tomorrow in case he double-crossed me. If the money wasn't in the box in the morning, I would show that phony letter to my superior, and if I did that we'd go to where this guy was out of town, pick him up, and put him in the real deep freeze as a material witness till trial time. And then he'd never be able to get to the guy.

And I reminded him that with a letter like that, the D.A. could ask for a fast trial and get it, because it ain't democratic to keep an honest citizen in the can no more than necessary. He was saying, "Okay, okay," irritated-like, when I hung up.

I had it figured pretty good, didn't I? Smart, huh? Of course, there's one weak spot in my play — I could have clamped the "witness" in the can after I got the money. But this Big Wheel I'm talking to, he's got to gamble that my mind ain't working that way. Hell, I could have crossed him up plenty of other ways if he's worrying along those lines. Anyway, we get it all straight on the next call and I give him the name and business address of the witness. What's the matter, you feeling sick, friend?

The next morning — remember I was off? — I shoot over to the post office. I picked a busy time. Maybe they ain't watching that box, and then again maybe they are. Chances are they ain't, because I'm supposed to be a smart dick who knows all the angles and they probably figure I got some connection in the P.O. so I can get the envelope without going directly to the box. But I got to play it careful, because if they spot me my life ain't worth the price of last week's scratch sheet. I ain't just a voice coming over a telephone wire no more. I'm out in the open now.

There was a big mob at the post office, but I was plenty jittery. I almost backed out; if not for the fact that hesitating around might spotlight me, I think I would have. But then I thought of the five gees and I gutsed myself up and moved according to plan. I didn't go to the boxes. I didn't even glance around to see if anybody is rubbernecking for a guy who looks like a dick. I was dressed like a dockworker, and if there was a guy watching he wasn't likely to pick me. I went and stood in a line at one of the windows, and I don't mind telling you, my friend, my knees were shaking.

Well, my turn comes at last and I manage to pull out the identification I'd lifted from the drunk and tell the guy at the window I misplaced the key to my box. I had the receipt for the box and said I was expecting some important mail that morning. There was quite a line in back of me that helped cover me up. The clerk took my receipt and identification and pretty soon he comes back with a big fat envelope that looks like it could contain one hundred pieces of money. I almost fainted.

The guy asked do I want to have another key made for the box and I told him yes and I was sorry to trouble him. Then I bought twenty-five three-cent stamps and stuffed the envelope in my pocket. When I got the stamps I walked away from the window counting them like I was checking to see were they all there. And I walked out of the building without looking around once. It wasn't easy, friend. Any second I expected a rod in my spine, but nothing happened except my back got all clammy.

When I got home I opened the package. I don't know yet how I held out that long. I tell you, friend, I was shaking all over.

Well, they didn't do no flimflamming. I'm looking at 100 fifty-dollar bills. I count them over and over. I kiss them like you see guys kissing a winning sweepstakes ticket. Friend, they were beautiful. And all real. And safe. They couldn't be marked, because naturally those guys ain't asking the banks to look for marked money for *them*.

I'm looking at these beautiful fifties and I know my biggest struggle is coming up. I got to put them away and forget about them for a while. It ain't gonna look good if I sprout out with dough all of a sudden.

When I go to work the following day I even put the bite on Ruck for five like I always do after my day off.

When Susie dropped in I gave her the brush. Who needed her any more? In fact, she's worse than poison to me now. She was sore, naturally, but I just go my way doing like I always done. I don't change my routine of living at all, except I'm careful plenty of people see me every minute of the day. Why? Don't rush the story, friend. Stick another cigarette in your puss and relax. You acted plenty bored when you first came in here.

Anyway, I even call up some dizzy doll I used to go with and start dating her again. Ain't a minute of the twenty-four hours in the day that I don't cover. I didn't really think I'd need it, but why take chances?

Five days after I got the money, Bancroft was mowed down as he's coming home from work. Sit down, sit down. Don't get excited. You want the rest of the story or not?

Bancroft, naturally, is Susie's husband. I couldn't give them the name of a guy that didn't exist, because they'd check and I wouldn't get the money. And if I gave them some name of a guy in town, they'd kill him right away and I'd be out the dough, too. You see, I had to give them somebody they could check but couldn't get to till after the mail delivery the next day. I knew Susie and her husband were out of town overnight visiting some of his stuffed-shirt relatives. The reason I knew is that Susie was always bored stiff with them and she'd been beefing about having to go.

Anyhow, Bancroft made a perfect pigeon. His office looked down on the murder scene, so when the mob checked they'd have to admit it could have been Bancroft who was the secret witness. As far as Susie was concerned, who wanted to marry a dame that went around wishing her husband was murdered? I figured I'd put up with her until it was safe for me to shake her.

So now, friend, you're the only one knows why and how Bancroft came to be killed. Remember how the cops were puzzled? They never did find a motive. All they knew is that it looked like a gang killing. But why should Bancroft get it? You begin to see, friend, that it was a perfect mur-

der. I got a guy knocked off, but who was going to pin it on me? Even if they suspected me, which is ridiculous, I'm covered with airtight alibis, and if they figure I hired somebody to do it they'll go nuts trying to learn where I got the money, not to mention the connections. The best part, friend, is that if they catch the guy that pulled the trigger I'm still safe, because he don't know me from a church pew. Not even little Susie could put the finger on me — she didn't know I had anything to do with it!

I can't help laughing every time I think of the mob going over the newspapers after the killing. There's no mention of Bancroft being the secret witness the D.A.'s got up his sleeve, and the cops keep holding Joe Kosy tighter than a politician hanging on to his job. As a matter of fact, you know that Kosy came to trial and the D.A. produced the real witness, a nice, healthy character named Hoskins.

But I still have to be careful. The next time Susie came in I whispered to her that she should stay away for a while. Not that anything was wrong, I said, but what with her husband being murdered and all, the cops would start asking questions. Even though we didn't kill him and we don't know why he got killed, it could look bad for us.

Well, she wasn't dumb and she did what I told her. I wasn't worried about the cops, like I told you, because even if they knew what I'd done they couldn't prove it in a million years. But I was worried about the "boys." Those guys don't have to prove nothing. They just find you and take you off the voting list. They must've been plenty sore. I could only hope they believed they got crossed by a homicide dick and would let it lay. But I didn't take no chances. I went on living the same way as before. I just made myself forget them beautiful fifties.

Susie still came in once in a while, and pretty soon she's pitching at me again. At first I duck her because, like I told you, who needs her? But I keep on thinking about those five gees I got stashed away and what I could do with them, and the more I think the smaller they get. When I didn't have nothing, five gees looked like a fortune to me. But now I got five gees, I can see that they're only five gees and sooner or later I'll be broke again. And there's Susie, a rich widow now, still looking to get her hooks in me.

So little by little I let her warm up to me again, and soon we're back having dates. But this time it's out in the open where everybody can see. It was four months since the killing and I figure it's safe. We go to nice places together. Not expensive places. Just good enough for a guy on a bartender's pay to take his girl to. I'm even smart enough to act like a sucker who just fell in love, and if any wise guy sees us he'd never guess Susie and me been cuddling for a long time.

Meantime I'm asking her about Bancroft's estate, but it seems it ain't probated yet. Then she says there's

no reason we shouldn't get married. I says better wait till the estate is probated. She says do I really love her and I says of course I do. So she asks if I'd marry her even if she was broke. Now, that's a perfectly natural question for a doll in her position, and I tell her I'd marry her anyway and that I don't want her money. To tell you the truth, I was getting kind of leery. I figured now that Susie had money she could go to one of them places she's always dreaming about and grab herself another guy. So before she can cool off, I married her.

I told her we'd go to Florida on our honeymoon, and by the time we got back the estate would be probated and we could take off again. Could she swing it till then? But Susie says she has no cash. I ask her about Bancroft's fifty thousand dollar insurance policy she used to always tell me about, but she says that Bancroft made his estate the beneficiary and that had to wait for probate, too. I checked with a broken-down lawyer who stops in for a drink now and then, and he told me it was pretty common practice. So it looked like I'd have to wait.

The only thing is, by now I'm itching to get out of town. It was early March and there'd been a blizzard. I was sick and tired of snow and slush and cold rain, and why stay around? We could wait for the estate to be settled just as well in Florida. So I confessed to Susie that I had a little money saved, not much, but enough to swing a Florida honeymoon if we were economical, and we could be back in late spring. Susie practically smothered me with kisses.

We check in at a cheap motel in Florida. I'm still not trusting Susie with the news I'm lugging five big ones around. I figure the most the tab for our honeymoon can run to is five hundred bucks or so, and can't a guy who's worked all his life have five hundred bucks legit?

We spend the mornings on the beach, as advertised, and afternoons we're naturally over to the track. Susie don't know from nothing about racing. I pick out the horses and leave her at her seat when I go to buy the tickets. I always come back with a two-dollar ticket to show her, but I make my real bets at the fifty-dollar window. It ain't long before you can find me at the hundred-dollar sellers, blowing my money like I was afraid it was going out of style. And wouldn't you know it? I go sour. I pick a winner now and then, but for the most part all I'm making out of my tickets is confetti. Well, I figure, it ain't a matter of life and death. Ain't I married to a dame that's going to be loaded?

The honeymoon lasts about two weeks, by which time I got about enough money left for train fare and maybe two weeks' living expenses. I tell Susie we can't afford to stay no longer, so we pack up and go home.

We hole up in Susie's apartment, which is pretty crummy for a guy with Bancroft's dough. I didn't expect anything better, though, because Susie'd always griped to me about

what a miser he was. In fact, it was okay by me, because it meant he'd left more dough for me to spend.

Right after we got back I did a little quiet investigating. The coast was clear, all right. The cops never could figure a motive for Bancroft's killing, and the case was as good as forgotten. Joe Kosy gets the chair when they produce the secret witness, and for all I know the mob's still trying to find out the name of the doublecrossing dick who'd flimflammed them out of their five gees. My only worry now was getting by till Susie's inheritance came through.

But it didn't. So when I finally ran out of money and the bills were making the telephone jump, I told Susie I was going to go down to her lawyer's office and build a fire under his chair so we could get some action. I told her without no more arguments I wanted her lawyer's name.

It was at breakfast I told her that. I can still remember how the egg ran out of my mouth when Susie broke down and admitted there was no estate. Her husband had owned a two-bit ticket agency that barely kept them in groceries. The little he gave her for herself she spent on me. He didn't leave her no money, there was no insurance policy. She only told me all that stuff, she sobs, because she was crazy in love with me and she was afraid I wouldn't marry her if I knew she was broke. She says if I really loved her I could get my old job back at Ruck's and we'd get along fine. At least the furniture in the apartment was hers, she says. Was that so bad?

Can you imagine that, friend? After what I'd just pulled off? After I'd spent my hard-earned five gees on her?

I blew my top. I tell you, friend, I just blew my top. I didn't know I had my fingers around her throat till she went limp and sagged to the floor. I never even realized she was screaming her doublecrossing head off until I heard the army of neighbors breaking down the door.

They had me cold. Sure, if I'd had dough I could have hired some smart lawyer to get me off on temporary insanity. But I didn't have a plugged subway token. And how could I tell them what she did that got me so mad?

The cops are still wondering why I knocked her off. Well, now they'll know. That's why I asked the warden to call your paper and tell them to send a reporter down here. I had to tell somebody this story. A guy that's sitting in the hot seat day after tomorrow, he wants the world to know they ain't executing some brainless jerk. I want to read it in black and white. I want to read how I outfoxed Joe Kosy's mob *and* the whole police department. Wasn't I smart enough to get away with murder?

EQMM's DETECTIVE DIRECTORY

edited by ROBERT P. MILLS

GUEST IN THE HOUSE *by PHILIP MACDONALD* (CRIME CLUB, $2.75)	"No mystery here . . . but . . . full value of suspense and sympathy." (LGO)	". . . a pure joy to read . . . skilled picture of life on the fringes of Hollywood . . ." (AB)
THE SILVER COBWEB *by BEN BENSON* (MILL-MORROW, $2.75)	". . . quiet competence of narration and sound character and plotting." (LGO)	". . . admirable yarn, quietly and convincingly told. Good value." (AdV)
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DEATH AND MR. POTTER *by RAE FOLEY* (DODD, MEAD, $2.75)	"Fresh characterizations, surprising plot twists and engaging writing." (AdV)	"Superbly engaging plot and characters." (DD)
DISHONOURED BONES *by JOHN TRENCH* (MACMILLAN, $2.75)	". . . distinguished by fine writing . . . interesting background . . . absorbing plot . . ." (H-M)	"Population superabundant . . . pace is fast, humor general, writing good." (SC)
THE MEN WITH THREE EYES *by LOUISA REVELL* (MACMILLAN, $2.75)	"Swell dialogue, not too feminine a treatment . . . A corker." (AdV)	"Miss Julia is a gem in mystery fiction . . ." (DD)

AB: *Anthony Boucher in the New York Times*

CC: *Curtis Casewit in the Denver Post*

SC: *Sergeant Cuff in The Saturday Review*

DD: *Drexel Drake in the Chicago Tribune*

Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine rounds up the judgment of reviewers across the country. The key at bottom gives sources.

THE NARROWING CIRCLE *by JULIAN SYMONS* (HARPER, $2.75)	". . . extremely good . . . brilliantly satirical picture of the 'new look' in publishing . . ." (H-M)	". . . graceful, witty, amusing — and harshly realistic in a deeper sense . . ." (AB)
THE DAY OF THE DEAD *by BART SPICER* (DODD, MEAD, $2.75)	". . . especially fine, not only in its story but also in its background . . ." (DBH)	". . . longer and slower than early Spicer, but not deeper . . ." (AB)
THE ESTATE OF THE BECKONING LADY *by MARGERY ALLINGHAM* (CRIME CLUB, $3.50)	". . . charm and imagination . . . plot a little too frail . . ." (H-M)	". . . full of skilled and graceful sentences which never add up to anything substantial." (AB)
PRAY FOR A BRAVE HEART *by HELEN MACINNES* (HARCOURT, BRACE, $3.75)	". . . a fine story teller . . . you will not set this story aside unfinished." (DBH)	". . . good reading . . . always displays good taste and a fine show of culture." (CC)
TWO TICKETS FOR TANGIER *by VAN WYCK MASON* (DOUBLEDAY, $3.75)	"Routine, perhaps, but expert and readable . . ." (LGO)	". . . undeniable readability . . . staginess of writing, especially dialogue." (AdV)
MURDER IN TRINIDAD *by JOHN W. VANDERCOOK* (MACMILLAN, $2.75)	". . . exotic and lovely item from the '30s . . . well worth a revisit." (LGO)	". . . rousing novel of tropic adventure . . . satisfying deductive puzzle . . ." (AB)
THE BLACK, BLACK HEARSE *by FREDERIC FREYER* (ST. MARTIN'S PRESS, $2.75)	"Pleasant travelogue . . . pace medium-good. Plus mark." (SC)	"Taut and dramatic yarn . . . Worth reading." (AdV)

H-M: *Brett Halliday and Helen McCloy in the Fairfield County Fair*
DBH: *Dorothy B. Hughes in the Albuquerque Tribune*
LGO: *Lenore Glen Offord in the San Francisco Chronicle*
FP: *Fay Profilet in the St. Louis Post-Dispatch*
AdV: *Avis de Voto in the Boston Globe*

Officer Callahan versus Kid Numbers in a tale of pride, hate, temptation, and (don't scoff!) love . . .

CALLAHAN IN BUTTONS

by THOMAS WALSH

CALLAHAN COULD SEE THAT THE new commissioner's press annoucement contained many virtues, being brief and dignified, modest and yet forceful in its prevailing tone of quiet strength and confidence. Harrison T. Finley promised no miracles, but he was keenly aware that the public wanted — and as a private citizen he had long believed that they were entitled to — a clean, efficient, and honest police department.

Callahan read the announcement with interest.

New commissioners always began by a vigorous shake-up — it was one of the unwritten laws — and of course there was the chance that the shake-up would touch him. But Callahan never considered that seriously until, three days after the announcement, the teletype order came down. Briefly, in departmental phraseology, it ticked out the statement that Callahan, Daniel John, first grade detective assigned to the undercover squad, was returned herewith to his previous command.

Callahan, Daniel John, learned of it with a graying face that pride kept stony. He had not been singled out, for the morning papers carried news of the total disruption of the undercover squad. Harrison T. Finley refused to be quoted, but it was tacitly understood that its members had not been producing. There were intimations of bribery and corruption; there was talk of an investigation later on. And the Monday following, at 7:30, in his old precinct house, Callahan reported for uniformed duty.

You could study a man like Daniel John Callahan for a long time without getting to know very much about him. In body he was six feet tall and 180 pounds heavy, with carroty hair, light, clear, rather small eyes, and a wide mouth. There was nothing moony or idealistic about him, nothing very imaginative, and the chances are you wouldn't suspect his pride; you couldn't know it was as much a part of him as his hands, set deep and hidden perhaps, but still inflexible, fierce, and burning. Pride like that is a dangerous thing to shame; in men like Callahan it has the power to warp and deform.

Callahan received his orders. And on Fletcher Avenue, from Pearl to Naples Streets, he began to pound a beat again, with his face grown leaner and a nasty glitter in his eyes. Uni-

formed now, he settled petty quarrels and chased kids from alleys and backyards. He rang the precinct house twice an hour; he arrested drunks and gave directions . . . and tried to hide the shame that was eating at his heart.

The Fourth came, hot and sun-dazzled. Salutes and blanks boomed dully all morning; strings of smaller firecrackers went off in series of snapping reports. After a while Callahan's ears grew dulled to them, so that at 1 o'clock, when the other reports came, sharper, more compact, but not particularly loud, he did not at first know them for what they were.

Coming around the corner of Stiller Street, the avenue showed dusty and crowded before him. Most of the pushcarts were still lined at the curb, but in an open space where two were missing, Callahan saw a man sprawled horribly over the curb. His arms and face were in the gutter, and across from him a large sedan was gathering speed.

Callahan was able to fire three times before the car reached the corner. Swinging there, a tommygun spat back briefly, in match flares that showed tinnily against the blazing sunlight. Callahan went backward as if propelled by a mighty, cushioned wind. He was staring at a sky in which multitudinous blue specks flared and danced fantastically; he was sitting up and there was a lot of noise, yelling voices, swift running feet. There was a girl, too, cool and tall and dressed in white, who insisted on getting in his way while he groped for his revolver.

"Lay off," Callahan tried to say. "What the hell's the matter with you?"

He wasn't sure whether it came out that way or not. When he was on his feet the sidewalk began to swirl and dip drunkenly around him, so that he would have fallen if the girl and a short, fat man hadn't somehow attached themselves to either side of him. They brought him across Fletcher Avenue and up a low stoop, into a dim, cool room that had wicker chairs all around and a table in the center piled with magazines. Then, feeling the first of a tearing agony in his chest, he fainted.

Callahan woke up in the hospital, in a small, whitewashed room that penned him for three interminable weeks. There was nothing at all to do but sleep, eat, and read the papers.

It developed that the man in the gutter had been killed very dead by a horde of bullets from the tommygun. Little Abe Mowrer, his name was, and he'd had a lot to do with rackets. The papers seemed to think that he had tried to muscle in on the policy game, and Kid Numbers had put the finger on him. Callahan read that with a good deal of vindictive interest.

In the old days of glory he had seen Kid Numbers often — not friendly meetings, but casual passings in hotel bars, a nod, a hello. A pale, skinny thug who had organized and brought under his supervision the policy game

throughout the city, the Kid was something of a genius in his line. Dapper, quiet, not at all menacing, the only extraordinary thing about him was his overwhelming dread of illness. He spent weeks in hospitals, under observation; he spent thousands on doctors — specialists, faith healers, quacks. He carried a pocket thermometer, and Callahan had seen him fingering his pulse with a white, intent face. Even in public places he took pills, and drank only milk.

Callahan knew he controlled the numbers game; the papers knew it and the department knew it. But nothing much was ever done about it. Why? Callahan would have reminded you that the racket had a weekly take of over $50,000. Nickels and dimes and occasional quarters mounted up to that amazing total. The Kid didn't clear all of it; but for what passed out of his hands the Kid, being a good businessman, received full value. Callahan grinned sourly when he read that the commissioner, by his own announcement, was out to get Kid Numbers. That was another job that looked easy, until you learned just how much protection a small slice of 50 grand could buy. Of course, Kid Numbers dropped out of circulation for a while; but Callahan would have bet you that the numbers game went on, and that the Kid, wherever he was, still held the strings.

When the hospital discharged him, he went back to the beat on Fletcher Avenue. It was the act that finally convinced him he had looked at everything cockeyed from the start. Good police work, the big shot had said — and what did he get for risking his life? The pushcarts and the kids, the clamor and the heat — that was all. Finley sat in his office, giving interviews; Charley Kirk swam and fished, at ease in the mountains, well-heeled. Callahan waded through drudgery and smells, and the soreness in his heart festered with the dreary round of days. Good police work! Callahan's lips had a faint, snarling turn that rarely left them.

During his second week back on duty he stopped in at the house on Fletcher Avenue. A neat brass strip at one side of the low stoop bore the letters, *A. F. Moore, M.D.*, and Callahan, though he had noticed that before, had never been inside until the shooting. Now a bell tinkled somewhere as he stepped into the waiting-room. After a few moments the nurse came out.

"Oh!" she said, stopping when she saw him. "The officer! How are you?"

"Fine," Callahan told her. "I wanted to thank you for giving me a hand that day. You and the doc."

She rested against the table, crisp-looking in white, tapping a sheet of paper against her gown. She was a bit taller than he liked girls to be, rather slender, with a kind of wiry, graceful slenderness.

In the doorway behind her A. F. Moore appeared, shirt-sleeved and with a smoking cigarette in the middle of his mouth. He was clean-shaven and totally bald; he had the unmis-

takable scrubbed, shining look of doctors. Sixty, Callahan took him to be — pudgy, brisk, a little vague.

"Hello," he said, blinking at Callahan. "Can't kill a cop, can you?"

Callahan grinned. "You ought to convince some guys of that. It would save them a lot of trying."

"Well," the doc said, eying him critically, "you take care of yourself." He looked at the girl, blinked at Callahan, and went back to the doorway. "I'll be in the office when you're through, Judie."

After he had gone, Judie straightened from the table. Her hair looked shiny, what he could see of it under her cap; she had a friendly snub nose and a young mouth, so that the matter-of-fact, competent air she had rather tickled Callahan.

"I hope you will be all right," she said.

"I'm all right now," said Callahan. He looked at his watch and discovered that he had ten minutes of his lunch period left. Five minutes later he had decided that she wasn't the type that would make him sick by gazing up into his eyes or having a lot of perfume on or making her fingernails look as if she had dipped them in red paint. When he asked her what she was doing Thursday night Judie looked a little astonished, and then a little amused. She said, "Nothing particular." Callahan said that was fine; he'd call for her about 8.

"Well," Judie said, "I really don't know if —"

"Half-past will do," Callahan told her. Callahan wasn't much for girls, but in some ways he was old-fashioned and there were things he took for granted without thinking about them. One was that any girl would be mighty pleased to have him take her out.

She was still looking after him as he closed the door, crisp, darkly pretty, and with the air of uncertainty still on her. Callahan wondered why.

The first Thursday night grew into a second, and expanded to Saturdays. Soon they became regular affairs, and then Callahan was changed to night duty. That left only Sundays, on which it appeared Judie was always engaged. After a week Callahan began to miss her, and to wonder about her. Then one Friday night, when Doc Moore had late office hours, Callahan discovered the secret of those Sundays.

It was revealed in the person of a tall young man with a professional black mustache, who pulled up to the office in a sedan with the green cross of a doctor fixed over its license plate. He went into the office and shortly came down the steps again, with Judie. They got into the car, seemingly in high humor, and drove away.

An hour later Callahan met Doc Moore on Fletcher Avenue coming along with the perennial cigarette in his mouth, the small black leather bag in his hand.

Callahan helloed him gloomily, glad of the chance to exchange a word.

"Hot," he said.

"Hot," the doc agreed. "Very hot, Callahan." He pushed back the panama and wiped perspiration from his face. "Bad weather for bad hearts. Old Pat Doyle is pretty low."

"On Naples Street?" Callahan said, without much interest. "I thought he'd moved — the house was condemned last week." But in his mind he was thinking of Judie and the big car, and he tried to make his question casual when he mentioned them.

"Travers, you mean," the doc said. "J. Miles Travers. He interned at the hospital where Judie was trained. They're old friends."

Callahan said, "Uh, huh," tightening his fingers on the club behind him. "I thought they were."

The doc cast his cigarette in the gutter. "Nice boy, Miles. Smart, Callahan. He's going to get along."

Something tightened insufferably across Callahan's chest. He thought savagely that she'd be smart enough to see that, and not waste any Sundays on a dumb flatfoot who wasn't getting any place in particular. Young Travers, M.D., wasn't going to be stuck on Fletcher Avenue the rest of his life. Young Travers was going places; if Judie was smart she'd go along with him.

"Well," said the doc, "I'll be getting on. I had a heavy day."

Callahan looked at him with curiosity disturbing the sullenness in his mind.

"You," he said, "must have been here a long while, Doc. I wonder sometimes how you ever stood it."

"Thirty-two years," A. F. Moore said, rubbing his chin thoughtfully with thumb and forefinger. "Thirty-two years, Callahan. That's a long while. I came because I didn't have any money to set up a better office. I meant to pull out after a year or two. Somehow I didn't. It's hard to say just why. Maybe I got used to it the way you get used to most things, Callahan." He smiled vaguely and sadly, then waved, blinked, and went off.

Callahan walked to Stiller Street, and in a dark hallway that faced an alley stopped to smoke a brooding cigarette. While he was in the middle of it a car pulled up opposite, and a slim young man got out. Recognizing him in the glare of the headlights, Callahan's eyes narrowed. The slim young man was Georgie Cane, and Georgie Cane was Kid Numbers' pay-off man.

Callahan killed his smoke and froze in the shadows. From the doorway he watched Georgie Cane switch off the car lights, leaving it in a pool of soft darkness at the mouth of the alley. Then Georgie Cane grew dim and vanished behind it, while behind him Callahan crossed the gutter on swift, cautious feet. Pushing ahead through the alley, he came to the next street and found it empty, suffocatingly still. Georgie Cane had vanished.

Callahan waited against a fence for twenty minutes. Finally Georgie Cane appeared in the street again, coming from a small red-brick building that had a dingy cigar store on the first

floor, and a single story above, used evidently as an apartment. Drawing back through a swing door in the fence until Georgie Cane had passed by and started off again in his car, Callahan returned to the street when the motor sound purred off, and from the shadow stared down thoughtfully at the red-brick building.

He did not go over and nose around. Callahan was too smart to spoil things by doing that. But if Kid Numbers was there, if the apartment above the store was the spot to which the strings played back — well, Georgie Cane would come again and make it certain. Until then Callahan could wait.

For three nights he spent hours in the alley, watching the brick building until the last light flickered out. There seemed to be nothing exceptional about it except that its few customers remained inside a long time. None of those customers was Georgie Cane, or anyone else Callahan knew; the lights went out at eleven o'clock, and the building got quiet and normal.

Callahan watched it patiently, thinking perhaps he was wasting his time but grimly positive of the one fact that if any pinch was to be made Callahan himself was going to make it. Good police work — would the big shot think bringing in Kid Numbers was that? The big shot who sat at a desk and broke better men than himself, the big shot who didn't know what it was all about, the big shot whom Callahan hated and despised in every atom of his body. How would Harrison T. Finley's face look then?

It was a thought that had a queer solace in it, during the long nights of the next week, when Callahan drew late tour, from midnight to 8 A.M. Occasionally in the morning hours he met Doc Moore. There'd be a new baby coming into life on Fletcher Avenue, or an old man going out of it in Farragut Place; and if he was going to them the fat man waved, if he was returning he stopped for a smoke and a talk.

Callahan came to look forward to meeting the doc; sitting on a stoop or on the breadbox outside the chain grocery store, they'd talk in confidential, low voices. They discussed many things, Callahan and the doc — politics and women and sport and even philosophy.

The doc had a lot of funny ideas. He was content enough, and he seemed to think that life wasn't spelled with capitals. In the main it was pretty ordinary, the doc said, and there was nothing much you could do but plug along. There were good things in it but they were rarely so brave or splendid as the poets made out; there were bad things that never were so gloomy as they looked at first. Callahan, with the youth vigorous in him, disdained that; in time he came to have a touching, protective affection for the doc. During the last long hours before dawn and returning life he reflected often on what his life must have been.

Thirty-two years! It gave Callahan a shiver to think of it. Sometimes when he was left alone he felt that the mean buildings on Fletcher Avenue towered over him, penning him in with the company of its misfits and failures, its drunkards and incompetents. In the frenzy the feeling roused, Callahan tramped the streets, Callahan swore he was going to get out, Callahan vowed that nothing was ever going to trick him again. Judie and the big shot — wasn't the same principle behind them? Get yours, get it any way, get it quick. If you didn't, nothing else helped you, nothing else mattered. You were on the bottom in the dirt; you never would get out.

Then one Saturday night the doc had a note for him from Judie. It seemed she was wondering what had happened to him, and if he wasn't busy tomorrow night she'd look for him about 7. Reading it under a street lamp, Callahan hooted out curt and derisive laughter. Swell chance, Callahan told himself — swell chance!

He never knew why he bothered to show up. In a light linen frock and a wide white hat Judie looked dark and slender, with something he hadn't remembered of quiet fragility about her. They drove out in his roadster to a little inn they had visited before, where the food was good and they could dance.

Judie was quiet — so quiet that it came to Callahan suddenly that he bored her, that she was anxious to be rid of him, and that her silence was the strained awkwardness of someone who wished to be rid of an annoying attachment, and was not quite sure of how to go about breaking it off.

Coming home they parked on a dark, quiet road. With his arms folded on the steering wheel, his chest pressed against them, Callahan asked: "How's the Sunday boy friend? How's Miles? I guess he was busy today."

Judie was quiet for a moment. "No," she said then. "I just wanted to see you, Dan. But I didn't think you knew him."

Callahan laughed shortly. "I guess you didn't," he said. Then he leaned forward, holding her chin with one hand, and kissed her. Judie didn't pull away; under his lips she remained still and impassive.

"Why did you do that, Dan?" she asked, with something in her voice that Callahan could not interpret.

"Why?" Callahan repeated savagely. His eyes were bold and dark, shining; the anger in him made him reckless and eager to hurt. "You can have a couple of guesses, sister. One is I mightn't like to be a sap for anyone. I spent a lot of money on you, a lot of time. They earned me something."

Judie said quietly, "I see."

"Do you?" Callahan said. "Then that's fine. You were playing around and that's okay with me. I guess I was, too. Now I just wanted you to get it right."

"I think I have."

"That's swell," Callahan said again. Driving back, he gloried sullenly in her silence, and when they stopped

before her door he did not cut the motor nor did he get out to help her.

Georgie Cane's picture was on the front page of the morning paper. He had been picked up the night before by the new commissioner's newly created flying squad and he was to be held for questioning on the Mowrer murder. Callahan lay in bed late and read the paper through, for that week he switched again to the four-to-midnight tour. When he reached the precinct house at half-past three things were humming.

There was a deputy chief inspector present, and two or three men from the flying squad. A rumor went around that the commissioner had something on Kid Numbers that would establish his presence on Fletcher Avenue just before the shooting.

The air of expectancy impressed itself even on Callahan, so that he became alert for his pinch. At 10:30, from his post in the alley, he saw the squat man who ran the cigar store step out and close the door behind him, though the lights were left on. While Callahan watched he walked down the street and pushed through the door of the corner saloon.

Callahan strolled down to the building and read the message penciled on the cardboard strip over the knob. *Back in five minutes*, it said. The thin smile deepened in Callahan's cheeks; he pressed down the catch and stepped into the store.

In back and to the right of the counter there was a doorway curtained by flimsy green cloth. Pushing that aside, he stepped past to a narrow hall that had stairs slanting upward at one side. Callahan kept to the outer edge of each step, to prevent a squeak, and gained the landing almost silently.

It was lighter at the top of the stairs. Three doorways, opened, boxed in the landing, and through the end of one drifted a thin streak of cigarette smoke. Callahan reached that door and stopped.

On the vague whiteness of a bed just inside the door he saw a man lying in undershirt and shorts; one hand, hanging over the edge of the mattress, held the cigarette. Callahan thought he had made no sound; but as he stopped, the head turned quickly, the lean body swung erect.

"I'd hold it," Callahan said, weighing his gun. "Take it slow, Kid."

The man on the bed was tall and narrow; in underclothes he had the build of a scrawny boy.

"Callahan," he said, in a soft, rather husky voice. "Callahan in buttons."

"In buttons," Callahan growled. "And I'm taking you in with them. Get your clothes on."

Kid Numbers sat up on the bed, and swung his legs over the edge.

"Where's Patsy?"

"Next time," Callahan told him, "pick a spotter who doesn't like beer. Patsy dropped into Smith's for a quick one."

Slowly and savagely Kid Numbers cursed the fat man.

"It'll be tough making this rap stick on me, Callahan."

Callahan nodded. "I wouldn't doubt it. Get your clothes on."

The Kid's face twisted upward, snarling earnest.

"Okay," he said. "Only listen a second, Callahan. I didn't knock off Little Abe or plug you — I got an alibi for that no one can break. I wasn't feeling good, see? I was out of the city all that week. On a farm. I got maybe ten people to prove I was there."

"Sure," Callahan answered. "Anyone as smart as you would. But there's talk going around your alibi can't stand up. The commissioner got you spotted on Fletcher Avenue just before the shooting. And you don't have to sing to me about it. It's the D. A. who gets paid for arguing that with you."

"Maybe," the Kid said. "Gimme a chance to talk, will you, Callahan?" He hammered a hand with soft impatience against one knee. "You're in a spot now where you can do yourself some good. If you pick me up it's two months before the trial comes up. They won't gimme bail. So guys like Little Abe see a chance to muscle in on the racket — they knock it to hell."

"So what?" Callahan grunted.

"Use your head. Out, I keep running my business. In the can, it scatters on me. So it's worth dough to me to keep out, Callahan. It's worth five grand."

"Five grand?" Callahan felt his teeth grit. "Why, you little —"

Choked, he made a raging step forward to knock him off the bed. Kid Numbers didn't flinch. Looking up at Callahan with the hard, black eyes, he said: "Ten grand. That's dough, Callahan. That's tops. Take it or leave it."

Callahan halted just over him, but he didn't knock him off the bed. Something stopped him — a sudden, venomous picture of Harrison T. Finley that came into his mind.

"In cash," Kid Numbers said, his bony, upturned face harsh angles, polished grayly by the misty light from the street. "Right now. Right here, Callahan."

He got up and crossed the room on his bare feet. From a bureau drawer he took rubber-banded stacks of bills and came back to the bed, switching on the small lamp at its head.

Callahan stood over him, his face shining as if it had been spread with oil, only the thought of Finley vivid in his mind, only the long-growing hate of Finley cut sharp into his inner, confused tumult. A sucker Callahan had been — the goat. Finley could break him — Finley, who wasn't a cop, who didn't know the job; Finley, who shamed good men, prating of excellent police work, honest merit. Finley the despised, the contemptible. . . .

In a fraction of time so vividly detailed that it might have been an hour, a queer, distorted thing happened to Callahan. It happened not consciously, but as if something more powerful than himself took his mind

and shaped it in flaming conviction to its own view of things. It seemed that if he took the money he was punching Harrison T. Finley in the face. It seemed as if the action would tell him that Callahan was a good cop, a better man than he, and that nothing Finley could do could change that. A queer, distorted view, surely; but hate and pride are queer, distorted growths — old affinities that can fashion a man to incalculable ends.

Callahan went alone down the steps, out through the store to the street. On the pavement he plunged doggedly ahead, fighting the tarnished fury in him, knowing vengeance in a surge of black joy. Outside the brass plate of A. F. Moore, M.D., he stopped and stared upward at the light that was still lit in the waiting-room. The light meant Judie would be there. She'd —

He went up the steps with the anger in him turned on Judie unaccountably, and so fiercely that he could feel it hammering at his temples. Callahan wanted to do many things — throw the bills in Harrison T. Finley's face, or knock him down and kick him into the gutter, or just grab him by the shoulders and shake him like a rat. Callahan was going to show him. But first he wanted to see that girl; he wanted to tell her that he had ten thousand dollars in his back pocket. What did she think of that? Callahan, the dumb flatfoot.

She was just coming out of the inner room. Her face grew stiff when she saw who it was, and he had to grip her hands to prevent her from passing him.

"Please," she said, in a frigid, stranger's voice. "I'd like to pass, Mr. Callahan."

"Would you?" Callahan said. "Would you, now?"

Somehow, after that no words came, and all he could do was glare at her. Then something broke in Judie; he saw her eyes begin to flame as she struggled in his grip.

"Are you going to let me go? Are you? This instant!"

"No," snarled Callahan. "Not yet, my girl. There's one or two things I want to tell you first. You and your Sunday boy friend. You were all fixed with him, weren't you? Old friends. Hell," Callahan said, and he laughed, "I just filled in. Maybe I wasn't supposed to have a head to think with."

Her mouth had a dangerous set to it. "Mr. Callahan," she said, "not that this concerns you at all — not that I have to explain to you — but there isn't any reason why I should account —"

Callahan shook her. Callahan yelled: "I suppose he didn't want to marry you. I suppose he —"

"He did," Judie cried. "He did. Tomorrow I'm going to tell him I will. I'm going to tell him that, Mr. Callahan."

"Sure," Callahan said, with furious laughter between his words. "Why wouldn't you? You'd never marry anyone like me. You wouldn't have a maid or a big car or trips to Europe — you wouldn't have a lot of clothes. All

you'd have would be some kids and a six-room house and a jalopy if things went right. Don't you think I knew that all along? Don't you know I had you figured from the start?"

"Marry you!" Judie said. "If you were the last man on earth — I wouldn't!"

Shaking her, Callahan roared that she would, yelling it in her ear without any idea what he was saying. And Judie began to yell back, so that their voices clashed and neither heard the other.

"I did," Callahan shouted, goaded and desperate. "I did love you — I was fool enough for that. When you didn't give a snap for me — when I was only —"

"I was the fool," Judie cried. "Does that astonish you, Mr. Callahan? I wrote to you; I even asked you last night why —"

Callahan began to lick the sudden dryness of his lips. "You didn't," he said dazedly. "You couldn't or you—"

"Oho," Judie said, her voice shaking and her eyes blazing bright, "don't fool yourself now, Mr. Callahan. It's changed. I despise you. You're unspeakable!"

"Judie," Callahan pleaded, blocking her way to the door. "Listen to me, Judie. If it was true last night it's true now. It's got to be."

"It has," Judie said, "has it? Do you think I'd ever be such a boob again? You never said you loved me or that you wanted to marry me. You'd take me out and never, never, *never* —"

"Look," Callahan said, with his two hands out before him. "I lied to you last night. I lied because I was afraid, Judie. I thought you'd laugh about it if I told you. I couldn't say it. That's the kind of a guy I am. I couldn't say I loved you. It would make me ashamed. It —"

The doc came into the room and blinked at them. He cleared his throat and said something vague about Pat Doyle on Naples Street, then went out through the front door, looking backward at them over his shoulder. Just before the door closed he winked solemnly at Callahan, moving his eyes angelically upward, then shaking his head in a disapproving fashion.

"You couldn't," Judie said. "Isn't that a pity! Do you think I'd have believed you — do you think I believe you now? A girl wants fine things — maids and cars and trips to Europe, does she? Weren't you very clever, Mr. Callahan? Didn't you know it all? If I loved a man," she demanded, stepping up to him, "do you suppose I'd care if he had a dollar or a million? Do you suppose I would, Mr. Callahan?"

The question was purely rhetorical. It seemed that she was watching his mouth and spoke as soon as it opened.

"Or do you think I'd care for a man who thought that I was that kind of girl? You're almost funny, Mr. Callahan. There are so many things you don't see. You're thick-headed and dumb, like the others. You'd have tried to bully Doctor Moore like they did."

"Others?" Callahan said. "Cops? What were they here for?"

"What were they here for?" Judie repeated, mimicking him with ferocious pleasure. "You don't even know that, Mr. Callahan. They said the gangster who shot you and killed the other man would try to pretend he'd been in the country that day. And they found out from one of his men they'd caught that the doctor saw him in a car on Fletcher Avenue a couple of minutes before the shooting. He was always coming here and imagining all kinds of things were wrong with him. The doctor knew him well."

Callahan's voice had a croak in it. "Kid Numbers — it wasn't Kid Numbers, Judie?"

"It was. They called him that." Something changed in her eyes as she looked at his mottled face. "What's the matter?"

"Pat Doyle," Callahan croaked. "Pat Doyle on Naples Street. Isn't that where he said he was going?"

"Yes. What's —"

Callahan's mouth jerked flabbily.

"He moved — he moved yesterday, Judie. The house was condemned and he had to get out. The house is empty now. If someone phoned, it wasn't Pat Doyle. He'd have given his new address. It was someone who wanted to get the doc there alone."

A terrified whiteness surged up through her cheeks. She clutched at him but Callahan tore loose. "Police," he croaked, as he opened the door. "Phone them, Judie. Tell them Naples Street."

He went down the stoop in a single flying leap. Kid Numbers was a careful man. In a house that was empty now, in a dark hall that would swallow up a pistol shot, muffle it and lose it —

Oh, Callahan knew it was Kid Numbers. Hadn't he himself told him the commissioner had a witness? Wouldn't the Kid think back to all the people he had seen that day, carefully and desperately? Wouldn't Kid Numbers say, of course — the doc! He passed the car and said hello. He —

Callahan ran, sobbing for breath. When he reached Naples Street he was staggering and only his momentum carried him on. It was a short, narrow street, with dark, three-story houses on the left that had dilapidated wooden stairs leading up to them. Pat Doyle had lived in the last one, on the top floor, and as he reached the stoop Callahan stopped. If he hollered — He yanked open the door and plunged in, and somewhere above him there was only one shot, as Callahan had known there would only be one.

Against the inner steps he stumbled and fell, and crawled clumsily up. His eyes were narrowed and glaring; above him steps passed, there was a sound of pain.

Then on the last flight there was a sudden flicker of light above him — a wavering gray pool that hugged one wall like a ball of fog. Callahan came up to it with his mouth twisted and his gun ready, with hate burning his heart. One shot!

The man was lying on the floor of the landing, and there was a match flaming low on the wooden boards. As Callahan reached the landing it died out, and thick, heavy darkness closed in from the walls, swiftly, the sound of pain coming through it. Doc, Callahan thought, with anguish — He dropped to his knees with a tortured sound in his own throat, and from his back pocket he drew his flashlight. Then he gripped the man's shoulder and drew it gently over.

The face of the squat man, Patsy, glared sullenly back at him. Callahan could only look at it. From the end of the hall someone said, "Callahan! Glory be!" and when he turned with the flashlight held high he saw the doc coming out to him.

Callahan must have asked questions, and the doc must have answered them. But he could only remember afterward the doc getting a little petulant, and saying: "Do you think I'm a fool, Callahan? Pat Doyle always had a light in the hall for me. It wasn't there this time and I remembered what you'd said about him moving. It's an old dodge, calling me up and getting me to a place like this to rob me. I've carried a gun at night for years."

The doc said he'd heard the fellow moving and he'd shot to scare him.

Then Callahan remembered.

"Look," he said. "There's someone I got to see. You'll be all right here, Doc. Judie called headquarters. They'll have some cops and an ambulance up any minute. I'll be back."

A radio car was sirening somewhere as Callahan reached the street, but he didn't wait for it. He went down Naples Street to the alley and through that to the cigar store. The front door was locked but with a lunge of his shoulders he went through that too.

Kid Numbers was sitting on a chair in the darkness, dressed, and with two suitcases at his feet. Callahan came through so fast that his gun was only half out when Callahan hit him. The crazy grin was still on Callahan's face. He kicked the gun away from Kid Numbers's hand, and then took bills from his back pocket and dropped them in a pile on the Kid's stomach.

Snarling a lot of stuff, the Kid got to his knees. He was calling Callahan a heel and a bum and a doublecrossing rat. But Callahan felt so good that nothing of it touched him. He even had a flash of thought that Harrison T. Finley might be all right. He felt that he could walk straight again, he could sleep.

He thought of Judie, too, and he knew she couldn't have changed, not overnight like that. Daniel John Callahan didn't hate anybody, not Finley, nor even Kid Numbers. He was going up again, Callahan was; he had the stuff — he was sure of it, now. A year, maybe two; but he was going up.

"One thing," he said, as the Kid got on his feet. "You'll have a swell time in the big house, Kid. They'll examine you all you want. Twice a week, maybe. If you're good they might even let you keep your thermometer. Ain't that something?"

PRIZE-WINNING STORY

and another original for our* Black Mask *department

Saul Levinson is in his early thirties. He was born in Texas, spent his childhood in Louisiana, and got his B.A. in Philosophy from the University of Oklahoma. At Oklahoma U. he took writing courses from Stanley Vestal, the Western historian, and Foster-Harris, the Western fictioneer. Then followed fifteen months in the Air Force, various jobs on the Pacific Coast, two screenplays in Hollywood, two mystery novels, a stint for "The Dallas Morning News" writing a radio-TV column, and finally — The Big Town. Mr. Levinson swore, once he came to New York, that he wouldn't live in Greenwich Village — so now he lives in the Village. And currently he is "pounding that dreaded contrivance, the typewriter, trying to make fiction appear."

Mr. Levinson's story is in the human interest tradition of Black Mask. It has both heart and hardness. The heart stems from the author's feeling for people, and the hardness stems from the kind of realism which does not depend, for its tough coloration, on obvious sensationalism. Yes, this is a Black Mask type of story, but you will find neither sex nor sadism in its depiction of a "slice of life."

STAY ON THE SIDEWALKS, KID

by SAUL LEVINSON

KRAKOW'S DAY OPENED QUICKLY, as it always did. The instant his eyes fluttered open he got up, stretched, then went in to shave. He got that over with and stroked his hand across the blue-black stubble that was left. In his younger days he worried about never being able to get a clean shave, but that had passed. Now he considered only his own pleasures, not anything he gave others.

He stood in front of his window and threw his thick arms as far from himself as he could reach. Limbered, he got into his clothes and walked outside.

The apartment he lived in hardly concerned him at all. It was this world — this outside world with people in it — that mattered to Krakow. This world where he could shove people around. He came out into it early, at 7:30, as he always did, and looked up the street. Nothing of interest showed up. Nothing ever did, but every morning he looked. And

every morning he was glad it was the same. There was never any challenge to Krakow. Things were always just about the same — his life and his job.

He walked east, toward Broadway, sniffing the summer air. He thought it might rain and speculated on that idly as he walked, but he really didn't care if it did or not. Rain couldn't make the day or break it for him.

Only one man could break the day for him. And there was no reason for Mr. Spirk to do that. Krakow always gave him a good day's work.

He walked for an hour, had breakfast in a cafeteria, then walked back down Broadway and turned in at the office. Maybe some day it would be his office, but that was a day dream he had already worn out during the walk. Now he took out a cigarette, coughed, and lit up. As soon as he had finished coughing, Spirk called out to him.

"Krakow, come in here!"

He moved to the inner office through the door that was already open. Spirk glanced up.

"All right, today's the big day," Spirk said. He held his hand over his mouth as he talked and the words came out softened and blurred.

Krakow was used to listening carefully. "Which day do you mean?" he asked.

Spirk's small frame adjusted itself in the big chair behind the desk. "Today the cops auction off the bicycles."

"Oh, today's that day, eh? It took them long enough to get to it."

"We don't care how long it took them to get to it," the little man said irritably. "The fact is that today is the day."

"Sure," Krakow said.

There was a silence between them and Krakow didn't like to step into the breach. But Spirk waited him out.

Krakow took a quick, short draw on his cigarette and blew off the ashes with the smoke he exhaled.

"You don't think they found it, eh?"

"Now, how would they find it? If you were a cop, would you find it?"

Krakow didn't answer.

Then Spirk blurted out, "That fool, getting killed!"

Krakow still didn't answer.

"It means a hundred grand, so it doesn't matter what you think. The auction's at 11. Be there and get that bike. Just bid a little more than anybody else. The whole thing'll be a snap. Understand?"

"The cops might wonder about me," Krakow said. "My record's pretty long. One of them might recognize me and wonder what I'm doing there."

Spirk's face contorted in exasperation. "You can be back here in a couple of hours with the whole thing done. I got enough worries without you. When you worry me, your value to me stops."

"All right, I'm going. I just don't like it."

Krakow moved out of the office,

down the stairs, and into the street. An uneasiness clung to his stomach. He passed a hand over the blue-black stubble on his chin. The day had been broken for him.

Walking down the subway stairs he cursed under his breath. Four months he had been sweating this out, and in that time he had almost convinced himself that the day would never come. Now it was here. Four months after Carney had got himself killed on that damned bicycle dodging a post under the Third Avenue El. For a while the whole thing had seemed so silly he could almost laugh at it.

But now, damn Carney's soul!

Now the cops had the bike in their pound and he'd have to walk in to them instead of away from them as he'd been doing all his life and bid on a two-wheeler under their very noses. Like some crummy second-hand repair man, he sputtered to himself. And take a chance of getting tagged by some badge who might want to talk to him about any of a hundred things.

As the train jostled him along he got to wondering what would happen if he got off at Pennsylvania Station, bought a ticket to some place, and just kept out of sight. But he knew he couldn't do that. Spirk was placed too well for that. You could never get away from Spirk. He'd seen it tried.

He got off on lower Broadway, had a cup of coffee, and took another walk. No solid thoughts ran through his mind — just idle dreams of how smoothly everything had been running up till the time Carney got bumped by the car and nobody had come to claim the two-wheeler.

He wished he had done it then, as long as he had to go into the cop's nest. He wished he'd gone right in, the very next day, and said he was Carney's cousin or uncle or somebody and that he wanted to claim the bike. But when he really thought about it he knew it couldn't have been done. Spirk had examined all those possibilities.

They had always sent Carney around with no identification at all, just in case he got picked up — in case he got killed, too, although they had never really thought of that. You didn't think of Carney dying: he didn't matter that much.

Krakow considered that last thought. Maybe Carney hadn't mattered much when he was alive. But dead, he mattered plenty.

Krakow sucked in a breath, coughed, and went into the warehouse.

Nobody paid attention to him. There were about two dozen men, a couple of women, one boy — and the cops. He concentrated on the men, keeping his eyes away from the cops, until he relaxed a little and felt it might go off okay. When he finally got pretty much at ease he stole a look at the group of badges and then took a fuller view. They weren't watching him.

But no matter where else he looked, he was really watching them. Until they wheeled in the bikes.

The kid said, "Boy!"

Krakow looked at him. The kid was getting a charge out of this the same way Krakow got it out of walking outside every morning. He followed the kid's stare back to the cops and he suddenly got a jolt. All those bikes. They were being brought out and stacked against each other so that he couldn't really get a good look at any of them. A thin line of sweat formed on his upper lip.

Then Krakow saw the new red grips on the handle bars and he smiled. Carney had put new grips on the week before he dodged the post and slammed into the path of the car. Krakow put a cigarette in his mouth and waited.

Carney's bike was the seventh they put up for sale.

"Here's one that's been fixed up a little," the auctioneer said. "A little twisted, but okay."

The kid said, "Fifty cents!"

Before he knew it had popped out of his mouth, Krakow said, "A dollar."

A man said, "Two dollars."

The kid said, "Two dollars and fifty cents!"

Instantly, Krakow blurted, "Three dollars," and waited for the third bidder to speak up. But the man didn't bid again.

"Three dollars and a quarter!" the boy said.

"Four dollars," Krakow called.

"Four dollars and a . . ." The boy was fumbling at some change in his hand. "And thirty-six cents!"

Before Krakow could utter a word the auctioneer said, "It's your bike, son. And keep the change for a new spotlight."

The small crowd laughed. The auctioneer said to Krakow, "You don't mind, do you, mister? We got lots of other bikes here, but only one boy."

Desperation rose in Krakow's throat. Every eye in the place was turned on him, expecting good will to come out of him, and he knew that some of those eyes were in cops' faces.

"Naw," he croaked. He tried for a grin. "It's okay."

The faces turned away from him, toward the auctioneer again. Krakow watched the boy go forward and take the bike. There was a loving look on his face as he stroked the handle bars.

And Krakow would have been just as willing. Inside the handle bars, in little metal tubes, was a hundred thousand dollars worth of uncut heroin.

Krakow eased away from the group and got to the door. He was there when the boy came by. The boy put a foot on the left pedal, swung his right leg over, and rode away slowly and wobbily. He could ride, but he wasn't very practiced. Krakow watched the journey till the boy was half a block away. Then he walked across the street and got into a cab.

As the hackie pulled down his flag, Krakow said, "I want you to follow that boy on the bike."

"Where's he going?"

"I don't know, but if you lose him

you lose this five bucks I've got."

"I'm not going to lose him, mister."

They crept after the boy, keeping a block behind him. The boy rode a long way. He crossed the Brooklyn Bridge and kept going. The hackie began to complain and Krakow raised the promised bonus to ten dollars. Still the boy wobbled along, sometimes getting better at it for a few blocks and one time almost getting hit. Finally, deep in Brooklyn, he turned onto Kings Highway and then veered off into 16th Street. Krakow told the cabbie to go one block past the boy's stopping point, wherever that was. The boy wheeled into the driveway of a two-story house. When they were abreast of it, Krakow noted the number.

He changed his mind, told the hackie to backtrack to the nearest drug store, and he got out there. He called Spirk.

"So you let a little kid from Brooklyn walk off with it," Spirk said.

"Listen, what could I do? I couldn't fight with the cops."

"You know what that kid is going to do, don't you? He's going to go over every inch of that bike. All kids do. When he finds what we want out of that bike, it's all over. A hundred grand. And also maybe the cops check up on it and find out this is the way we deliver it. And then maybe they find out who Carney's friends were and we're them."

Krakow coughed uncontrollably.

"I want you to get the stuff before I see you again. And I want to see you this afternoon."

The phone clicked in Krakow's ear. He held the receiver a moment, then slowly replaced it. Outside the booth, he realized he had made a mistake in calling Spirk. He should have given it a try first. He found the boy making practice runs up and down the concrete ribbons of his driveway. Krakow held out his arms like a traffic cop and the boy came to a halt.

"I'd like to buy that bike from you," he said.

"Nothing doing," the boy said. He studied Krakow's face. "Wasn't you the guy who was bidding on it?"

"Well, you see, a friend of mine used to own it and I'd like to get it back. I'll pay you more than you gave for it."

"Nothing doing," the boy said. "It's mine."

Krakow shrugged and grinned at him. "Sure it's yours. But I'll tell you what I'll do. I'll make you a real deal. Come on and I'll buy you a brand-new one."

For an instant the boy's face lighted up. Then it took on a sullen expression. "Nothing doing."

"But I'll buy you a new one!"

The boy shook his head. "I'd rather have this one. I've ridden this one all the way from Manhattan across the bridge."

Krakow got control of himself. "Look," he said, "this bike's pretty banged up and it needs a paint job

and the seat's crooked. How about it? What do you say to a new one?"

"No, mister. Move. I want to ride."

He wheeled the bike around Krakow and made a short run up the street. Krakow was waiting for him when he returned.

"Well, will you do just one little thing for me? Let me ride it. Just right here on this street."

The boy was now angry. "Mister, you better leave me alone. I just got it, and I'm not going to let you have it. You can't even ride it." In a final burst, "You leave me alone or I'll tell my mom."

Krakow wanted to reach out and grab the bike and run. He wanted to smack the kid and just take the bike. But too much had gone before to do that. There were witnesses besides the kid. There were all the people at the auction. And he had a police record. He'd be identified in a few hours if he did anything to get the kid's hooks into him. All he could do was go easy.

He went back to the drug store and dialed again.

He said, "It'll have to wait till tonight. I've tried and there's nothing I can do right now."

Spirk said, "What have you tried?"

Krakow told him.

"I'll be in the office until 6," Spirk said. "After that I'll be home. You call me in not too many hours and tell me you've got it."

Krakow left the drug store and walked to the corner. Looking up 16th Street, he could see the kid and four other boys standing around the bike — standing around a hundred thousand dollars. The others had bikes too, but they were all pawing the one Krakow needed. He knew Spirk was right. Maybe tomorrow, maybe next week, but sooner or later they'd be taking the bike apart with eager hands, examining it.

And finding heroin.

Krakow stood to the side of the kitchen window in the dark. The boy's mother was giving the kid a rough time.

"All the way from Manhattan," she said. "Are you crazy? I told you you couldn't have a bike even here in the neighborhood. It's dangerous. So you go all the way across the bridge and ride one home." There was a pause and Krakow visualized her looking helplessly at the boy. "I don't know what I'm going to do with you. I don't know."

"All the others have bikes," the boy said, half pleading and half stating. "They got their first bikes a long time ago."

"Well, if their mothers want to worry all day, that's their business. You can keep it if you'll promise one thing — that you'll just ride it on the sidewalk."

The kid exploded. "The sidewalk!"

"When your father gets home he can decide. Until then you're not to ride it, do you understand?"

"But Pop won't be home for two more days."

"Eat your supper," his mother said.

"So many things to worry about and you have to go to Manhattan like this. I don't know what I'm going to do with you."

Krakow moved away. This woman didn't know just how much there really was to worry about. He had to find a way of getting into the house where the kid had taken the bike. Tonight the kid would probably sit and stare at it. Maybe the kid would put it up on its stand and turn the pedals to make the back wheel race around. But tomorrow would be a different story. Tomorrow that gang of his would be ready to start fixing it up, taking it apart.

Krakow had only one choice: to get the heroin tonight.

At 9:30 the lights in the house went out. Krakow stood across the street and rubbed his hand across his stubbled chin. He could picture the boy now, having gone to bed but actually sitting on the side of the bed, looking at the two-wheeler. Reaching out to touch it to make sure he hadn't imagined the auction and the ride across the bridge. He could visualize the boy lying back and gazing at the wonderful thing.

Krakow had always wanted a bike when he was a boy, but he had never been able to get one. He coughed briskly and walked up the street to Kings Highway . . .

At 11 o'clock he stood outside the house under the boy's window. The moon was bright over his shoulder. He could see the boy lying on his side, sleeping. The bike stood close to the bed.

Krakow lifted himself easily across the window ledge and waited silently for a moment. He would have to make about three steps. He wondered if the floor creaked and what kind of sleeper the boy was.

While he pondered, the boy's mother came in. The faint moonlight showed her fresh from bed, her face that of the sleepless sleeper. Krakow stood very still. The woman moved in back of the bicycle and leaned over to pull the boy's tangled hair back from his forehead. She moved her head a little and saw the figure of Krakow.

There was a pause, then Krakow lunged for her. She got the barest scream loose before he had his hand over her mouth. By then he was doing a good job of it and she crumpled up on the floor.

The boy said, "What?"

Krakow was quiet. The boy opened his eyes wide and looked at the bike. His eyes held there for a moment, going over every inch of it, then dropped and caught sight of the woman lying on the floor. He came off the bed before he saw Krakow. Then he was a bolt of young energy dashing from the room.

Krakow started for him, but checked himself. This was okay — the boy out of the way and the mother in a faint at his feet. He reached for the handle bars, got the red finger grips off, and tugged out the little metal cylinders. As he stuffed the last

tube into his pocket, the boy ran in.

"Don't you move," the kid said.

Krakow studied him in the moonlight. The boy was more a silhouette than a full figure, but even in that form Krakow could see the gun. It was a pistol that looked too large in the boy's hand. And there was a shake to it.

"Wait a minute," Krakow said. "Now wait a minute."

"You better not move." There was something about the voice that was cops-and-robbers and something that was cowboys-and-Indians.

But the boy had ridden his first bike all the way from Manhattan, Krakow remembered, and he was tough for a boy his age.

"Kid, that thing's dangerous. If you happen to pull the trigger accidentally, you'd feel pretty bad. Put it down."

"I'm not going to put it down."

Krakow stood silently and the boy licked his lips. The boy's hand lowered a trifle from the weight of the gun, but he brought the hand back up again and kept it straight on Krakow. From the floor the woman made a noise and then scrambled quickly to her feet.

"Tommy," she said.

"I've got him, Mom," the boy said. "Don't worry. I've got him good."

"Your father's pistol!" she said.

"I know how to use it," he told her. "Say! You're the guy who wanted my bike! You're the guy from the auction!"

Krakow coughed. "I'm going out now. I don't know what you mean by an auction, but watch yourself with that gun, kid. I'm going out through the window."

"No, you're not!" said the boy.

"Tommy, let him leave. We want him to go, so don't argue."

"You go call the police, Mom. I'll hold him here."

"Tommy, don't argue!"

"For Pete's sake," the kid said as if his patience was wearing out. "Go call the police."

Krakow said, "Lady, I wouldn't do that. The minute you leave I'm going to take the gun away from that kid and he might get hurt. You better stay here."

"You're not taking this gun away from me," the boy said. He said it flatly and finally.

"Tommy," the woman said.

"No," he answered solidly.

Krakow forced a light laugh. "Looks like a stand-off, lady. I don't think the boy can hit me, but I don't want to take that chance. At the same time you better not leave the room, because if you do I'll jump him to get that gun and he might get hurt."

Neither the boy nor the mother said anything.

Krakow said, "As a matter of fact, I'm *sure* he'll get hurt."

He had a grudging admiration for the kid. He liked a guy who knew what to do and held with it. He figured somehow he was going to get out. He had the heroin. All he had to

do was get out. Then they could call all the cops they wanted. The kid would tell them Krakow was the man at the auction. But when the badges came to check on him, he'd say sure, he was the man at the auction, but he was not the man in the boy's house. In this moonlight the woman would not be able to identify him, and a kid's word was not very good with the cops. Too much imagination to most of them.

The kid said, "Mom, will you please call on the phone? Do you want me to have to shoot this guy?"

"Tommy, give me that gun," the woman said. She moved toward him.

"Don't come near," the boy said. "I'm not going to give you the gun so this crook can get away. Don't come near or it might go off and you could get hurt. I can hit him if he tries to run."

The woman stood still. It was a bad sign for Krakow because he knew the kid had gone all the way to Manhattan for the bike when his mother had forbidden him to ride one in the neighborhood. He knew the kid wasn't going to give up the gun.

"Lady," Krakow said, "I'm going out that window."

"I can hit him if he tries to run," the boy repeated. He said it definitely, as if it were a line he had relived many times from a movie.

Krakow thought suddenly of Carney and cursed. Carney had to dodge a pillar of the Third Avenue El and slammed right into the path of a car to do it. Then he thought of Spirk. Spirk would be sitting in his living room right now, wondering why he didn't hear from Krakow. He would be figuring all sorts of things that had gone wrong. He'd be wondering if Krakow suddenly got the urge they all got at times, to pocket the hundred grand and make a run for it. A hundred grand anywhere in the world was a nice stake. Wouldn't Spirk feel a little let down when Krakow finally phoned and said he had the stuff and was coming right over with it? Didn't a hooligan like Spirk secretly wish for the worst always?

And here Krakow was, facing a boy with a pistol. With a worried mother in the room. With a hundred grand worth of the stuff in his pocket. With the moonlight streaming across his back through the wide-open window.

He got ready to make his move. A couple of steps would do it. Even if the kid pulled the trigger he probably wouldn't hit him too bad. And Krakow had to get out. It would be worth the nick of a bullet to get out and get going. He wanted to be able to get up mornings and move out into the world where he could walk like a king, like a lion. There was only one man who could break his day for him, and Spirk wasn't going to live forever.

"Goodbye, kid," Krakow said, and lunged for the window. He got just to the ledge when the shot rang out. He was going to keep going and get his feet over it when all of a sudden he

couldn't do it and just crumbled up.

The thing didn't register in his mind at first and then he realized that he hadn't got out with just a nick in the arm or a pinch on the side. An image of Carney popped into his mind — Carney with no identification on him. But Krakow had identification. Krakow would lead the badges to Spirk and on up from there. He remembered what he had thought about Carney. Dead, Carney had mattered plenty. He knew that dead he would matter plenty, too.

He didn't hear anything and that struck him as odd. When he opened his eyes he saw the boy and the woman leaning over him. Their lips were moving, but he didn't hear what they were saying.

There had been something about that kid that he liked, he remembered, and he said, "Stay on the sidewalks, kid."

Then he had a mouthful of something, and Krakow coughed for the last time.

For the second story in our series of Bret Harte's tales of detection, crime, and mystery, we ask you to join an oldtime prospecting campfire — yes, sit down, cross your legs, and listen to the yarn told by an old journalist called the Doctor; join the Major and the Judge and their "pardners," and hear a genuine, old-fashioned "ghost story." It won't take much of your time, especially since this version is somewhat abridged. The period is the second half of the Nineteenth Century and the place is the old West — Calaveras County, the scene of Mark Twain's classic, "The Celebrated Frog of Calaveras County" . . .

Perhaps it seems difficult to believe now, but at one stage in their respective careers Bret Harte had a far greater literary reputation than Mark Twain; indeed, there was one spell when Mark Twain enjoyed, at best, only national renown, while Bret Harte's fame had reached international proportions. Today, of course, we have the tremendous advantage of perspective, and in that leveling process Mark Twain has emerged, by comparison, the finer artist and the truer genius.

But at the height of his literary eminence — say, in the 1870s, when the "ghost story" we now give you was first published — Bret Harte was probably the highest paid short story writer in America. In 1871, for example, it is known that Bret Harte signed a contract which paid him $10,000 for the exclusive publication of twelve "sketches" in a single year, and Harte even had the option to substitute poems for stories. That — for 1871, dear reader — was "some pumpkins"!

A GHOST OF THE SIERRAS

by BRET HARTE

IT WAS A VAST SILENCE OF PINES, redolent with balsamic breath, and muffled with the dry dust of dead bark and matted mosses. Lying on our backs, we looked upward through a hundred feet of clear, unbroken interval to the first lateral branches that formed the flat canopy above us. We were in another atmosphere, under another sky; indeed, in another world than the dazzling one we had just quitted. For some moments we lay quietly outstretched on the pine tassels where we had first thrown ourselves. Finally, a voice said:

"Ask the old Major — he knows all about it!"

The remark was merely one of the

usual conventional feelers to conversation — a kind of social preamble, quite common to our slangy camp intercourse. I was always known as the Major, perhaps for no better reason than that the speaker, an old journalist, was always called Doctor.

"About ghosts!" said the Doctor, after a pause, which nobody broke or was expected to break. "Ghosts, sir! That's what we want to know. What are we doing here in this blank old mausoleum of Calaveras County, if it isn't to find out something about 'em, eh?"

Nobody replied.

"Thar's that haunted house at Cave City. Can't be more than a mile or two away, anyhow. Used to be just off the trail."

A dead silence.

The Doctor (addressing space generally): "Yes, sir, it *was* a mighty queer story."

Still the same reposeful indifference. We all knew the Doctor's skill as a raconteur; we all knew that a story was coming, and we all knew that any interruption would be fatal. Time and time again, in our prospecting experience, had a word of polite encouragement, a rash expression of interest, even a too eager attitude of silent expectancy, brought the Doctor to a sudden change of subject. Time and time again have we seen the unwary stranger stand amazed and bewildered between our own indifference and the sudden termination of a promising anecdote, through his own unlucky interference. So we said nothing. "The Judge" — another instance of arbitrary nomenclature — pretended to sleep. Jack began to twist a *cigarrito*. Thornton bit off the ends of pine needles reflectively.

"Yes, sir," continued the Doctor, coolly resting the back of his head on the palms of his hands, "it *was* rather curious. All except the murder. *That's* what gets me, for the murder had no new points, no fancy touches, no sentiment, no mystery. Was just one of the old style, 'subhead' paragraphs. Old-fashioned miner scrubs along on hardtack and beans and saves up a little money to go home and see relations. Old-fashioned assassin sharpens up knife, old-style; loads old flintlock, brass-mounted pistol; walks in on old-fashioned miner one dark night, sends him home to his relations away back to several generations, and walks off with the swag. No mystery *there*; nothing to clear up; subsequent revelations only impertinence. Nothing for any ghost to do — any ghost who meant business.

"Well, sir, after the murder, the cabin stood for a long time deserted and tenantless. Popular opinion was against it. One day a ragged prospector, savage with hard labor and harder luck, came to the camp looking for a place to live and a chance to prospect. After the boys had taken his measure, they concluded that he'd already tackled so much in the way of difficulties that a ghost more or less wouldn't be of much account. So they sent him to the haunted cabin. He had a big yellow dog with him, about

as ugly and as savage as himself; and the boys sort o' congratulated themselves, from a practical viewpoint, that while they were giving the old ruffian a shelter they were helping in the cause of Christianity against ghosts and goblins. They had little faith in the old man, but went their whole pile on that dog. That's where they were mistaken.

"The house stood almost three hundred feet from the nearest cave, and on dark nights, being in a hollow, was as lonely as if it had been on the top of Shasta. If you ever saw the spot when there was just moon enough to bring out the little surrounding clumps of chapparal until they looked like crouching figures, and make the bits of broken quartz glisten like skulls, you'd begin to understand how big a contract that man and that yellow dog undertook.

"They went into possession that afternoon, and old Hard Times set out to cook his supper. When it was over he sat down by the embers and lit his pipe, the yellow dog lying at his feet. Suddenly 'Rap! rap!' comes from the door. 'Come in,' says the man, gruffly. 'Rap!' again. 'Come in and be damned to you,' says the man, who has no idea of getting up to open the door. But no one responded, and the next moment smash goes the only sound pane in the only window. Seeing this, old Hard Times gets up, with the devil in his eye, and a revolver in his hand, followed by the yellow dog with every tooth showing, and swings open the door. No one there!

"But as the man opened the door, that yellow dog, that had been so chipper before, suddenly begins to crouch and step backward, step by step, trembling and shivering, and at last crouches down in the chimney without even so much as looking at his master.

"The man slams the door shut again, but there comes another smash. This time it seems to come from inside the cabin, and it isn't until the man looks around and sees everything quiet that he gets up, without speaking, makes a dash for the door, and tears round outside the cabin like mad, finding nothing but silence and darkness. Then he comes back swearing and calls the dog. But that great yellow dog that the boys would have staked all their money on is crouching under the bunk, and has to be dragged out like a coon from a hollow tree and lies there, his eyes starting from their sockets; every limb and muscle quivering with fear, and his very hair drawn up in bristling ridges.

"The man calls him to the door. The yellow dog drags himself a few steps, stops, sniffs, and refuses to go farther. The man calls him again, with an oath and a threat. Then, what does that yellow dog do? He crawls edgewise towards the door, crouching himself against the bunk till he's flatter than a knife blade; then, halfway, he stops. Then that yellow dog begins to walk gingerly — lifting each foot up in the air, one after the other, still trembling in every limb. Then he stops again. Then he crouches.

Then he gives one little shuddering leap — not straight forward, but up, clearing the floor about six inches, as if —"

"Over something," interrupted the Judge hastily, lifting himself on his elbow.

The Doctor stopped instantly. "Juan," he said to one of the Mexican packers, "quit foolin' with that *riata*. You'll have that stake out and that mule loose in another minute. Come over this way!"

The Mexican turned a scared, white face to the Doctor, muttering something, and let go the deerskin hide. We all upraised our voices with one accord, the Judge most penitently and apologetically, and implored the Doctor to go on. "I'll shoot the first man who interrupts you again," added Thornton, persuasively.

But the Doctor, with his hands languidly under his head, had seemed to lose interest in the Mexican. "Well, the dog ran off to the hills, and neither the threats nor cajoleries of his master could ever make him enter the cabin again. The next day the man left the camp. What time is it? Getting on to sundown, ain't it? Keep off my leg, damn you," the Doctor said to the scared Mexican, "and stop stumbling round there! Lie down."

But we knew that the Doctor had not finished his story, and we waited patiently for the conclusion. Meanwhile the old, gray silence of the woods again asserted itself, but shadows were now beginning to gather in the heavy beams of the roof above, and the dim aisles seemed to be narrowing and closing in around us. Presently the Doctor recommenced lazily, as if no interruption had occurred.

"As I said before, I never put much faith in that story, and shouldn't have told it, but for a rather curious experience of my own. It was in the spring of '62, and I was one of a party of four, coming up from O'Neill's, where we had been snowed up. It was awful weather; the snow had changed to sleet and rain after we crossed the divide, and the water was out everywhere; every ditch was a creek, every creek a river. We had lost two horses on the North Fork, we were dead beat, off the trail, and sloshing round, with night coming on and the hail like shot in our faces.

"Things were looking bleak and scary when, riding a little ahead of the party, I saw a light twinkling in a hollow beyond. My horse was still fresh, and calling out to the boys to follow me and bear for the light. I struck out for it. In another moment I was before a little cabin that half burrowed in the black chapparal.

"I dismounted and rapped at the door. There was no response. I then tried to force the door, but it was fastened securely from within. I was all the more surprised when one of the boys, who had overtaken me, told me he had just seen through a window a man reading by the fire. Indignant at this inhospitality, we both made a resolute onset against the door, at the same time raising our angry voices to

a yell. Suddenly there was a quick response, the hurried withdrawing of a bolt, and the door opened.

"The occupant was a short, thickset man, with a pale, careworn face, whose prevailing expression was one of gentle good humor and patient suffering. When we entered, he asked us hastily why we had not sung out before.

" 'But we knocked!' I said, impatiently, 'and almost broke your door in.'

" 'That's nothing,' he said, patiently. 'I'm used to *that*.'

"I looked again at the man's patient, fateful face, and then around the cabin. In an instant the whole situation flashed before me. 'Are we near Cave City?' I asked.

" 'Yes,' he replied, 'it's just below. You must have passed it in the storm.'

" 'I see.' I again looked around the cabin. 'Isn't this what they call the haunted house?'

"He looked at me curiously. 'It is,' he said, simply.

"You can imagine my delight! Here was an opportunity to test the whole story, to work down to the bedrock, and see how it would pan out. We were too many and too well armed to fear tricks or dangers from outsiders. If — as one theory had held — the disturbance was kept up by a band of concealed marauders or road agents, whose purpose was to preserve their haunts from intrusion, we were quite able to pay them back in kind for any assault.

"I need not say that the boys were delighted with this prospect when the fact was revealed to them. The only doubtful or apathetic spirit there was our host, who quietly resumed his seat and his book, with his old expression of patient martyrdom. It would have been easy for me to have drawn him out, but I felt that I did not want to corroborate anybody else's experience; only to record my own. And I thought it better to keep the boys from any predisposing terrors.

"We ate our supper and then sat, expectant, around the fire. An hour slipped away, but no disturbance; another hour passed as monotonously. Our host read his book; only the dash of hail against the roof broke the silence. But —"

The Doctor stopped. Since the last interruption, I noticed he had changed the easy slangy style of his story to a more artistic and studied manner. He dropped now suddenly into his old colloquial speech, and quietly said: "If you don't quit stumbling over those *riatas*, Juan, I'll hobble *you*. Come over here; lie down, will you?"

We all turned fiercely on the cause of this second interruption, but a sight of the poor fellow's pale and frightened face withheld our vindictive tongues. And the Doctor, happily, of his own accord, went on:

"But I had forgotten that it was no easy matter to keep these high-spirited boys, bent on a row, in decent subjection; and after the third hour passed without a supernatural exhibition, I observed, from certain winks and whispers, that they were determined to get up ghostly indications of

their own. In a few moments violent rappings were heard from all parts of the cabin; large stones (adroitly thrown up the chimney) fell with a heavy thud on the roof. Strange groans and ominous yells seemed to come from the outside (where the interstices between the logs were wide enough). Yet, through all this uproar, our host sat still and patient, with no sign of indignation or reproach upon his good-humored but haggard features. Before long it became evident that this exhibition was exclusively for *his* benefit. Under the thin disguise of asking him to assist them in discovering the disturbers *outside* the cabin, those inside took advantage of his absence to turn the cabin topsy-turvy.

" 'You see what the spirits have done, old man,' said the leader of this mischief. 'They've upset that there flour barrel while we wasn't looking, and then kicked over the water jug and spilled all the water.'

"The patient man lifted his head and looked at the flour-strewn walls. Then he glanced down at the floor, but drew back with a slight tremor.

" 'It ain't water,' he said, quietly.

" 'What is it, then?'

" 'It's *BLOOD!* Look!'

"The nearest man gave a sudden start and sank back white as a sheet.

"For there, gentlemen, on the floor, just before the door, where the old man had seen the dog hesitate and lift his feet, there! there! — gentlemen, upon my honor — slowly widened and broadened a dark red pool of human blood! *Stop him! Quick!*"

There was a blinding flash that lit up the dark woods, and a sharp report. When we reached the Doctor's side he was holding the smoking pistol, just discharged, in one hand, while with the other he was pointing to the rapidly disappearing figure of Juan, our Mexican vaquero.

"Missed him!" said the Doctor. "But did you see his livid face as he rose up at the name of blood? Did you see his guilty conscience in his face? Eh? Why don't you speak? What are you staring at?"

"Was it the murdered man's ghost, Doctor?" we all panted in one quick breath.

"Ghost be damned! In that Mexican vaquero — that cursed Juan Ramirez — I saw and shot at his murderer!"

'Q'

Margery Sharp is the author of THE NUTMEG TREE, CLUNY BROWN, *and most recently,* THE GIPSY IN THE PARLOUR. *She is famous the world over for her "light touch," for her verbal ability to charm and entertain. But what of the woman herself? Here is a pen-portrait by Brock Pemberton who met Margery Sharp when he produced "Lady in Waiting," which was based on* THE NUTMEG TREE: *"She seemed something out of Dickens by Dali. One of the first things that struck me about Margery Sharp was her naturalness and utter lack of affectation of any kind . . . her delicious sense of humor and infectious laugh . . . her enthusiasms and lack of the sort of inhibitions you come upon in so many writers . . ."*

But no writer, however gay, however gifted with the magic of comedy, lives perpetually in sunlight. Margery Sharp has her darker moments too. In "London Night's Entertainment" she takes you to a little coffee-stall and introduces you to a clerk, a Chinese, a bricklayer, a tramp — and to a murderer . . .

LONDON NIGHT'S ENTERTAINMENT

by MARGERY SHARP

IN ALL THE LENGTH OF GOWER STREET there was nothing bright, nothing cheerful, nothing welcoming except the oblong glow of the coffee stall; and like a moth to a candle Mr. Halliday drifted half unwillingly across the road and came to rest under its sheltering canopy. It was almost 10 o'clock, he had had a good dinner, and now wanted to get home: but for all that Mr. Halliday's elbow settled snugly to the counter.

"Ham sandwich, please," said Mr. Halliday, "and a weak tea."

The man nearest him moved up to make room, pushing a cup of coffee and an open book along the faintly sticky counter. He was so tall that his head almost touched the swinging light, and this surprised Mr. Halliday, for on closer inspection he saw that the gentleman was a Chinese. "Prince or something, maybe," reflected Mr. Halliday, paying instinctive tribute to the tribal logic of his forefathers. The heavy overcoat, however, would hardly have been acceptable to a tramp; and one of the shoes, projecting into the lamplight, showed a long diagonal crack.

"One tea, one 'am," announced the stalltender, slapping them down so smartly that a wave of opaque brown liquid slopped into the saucer. He was

a thin, spry youth, probably far older than he looked, and the other customers addressed him as James.

"Sugar?" asked the Chinese gentleman; and moving courteously aside revealed not only the sugar bowl but also a sudden brightly lit view of the other three customers. One looked like a clerk, one like a prosperous bricklayer; the third was an indubitable tramp; and they appeared to be exchanging desultory remarks on the subject of murder.

"Pore old gel!" said the bricklayer.

The tramp took a scornful bite out of his saveloy.

"Pore old gel nothing!" he said, "She'd lived 'er life, 'adn't she? An' a very nice life too, with a snug little sweet shop 'n no troubles. I only 'ope there's someone 'andy to give *me* a crack on the 'ead when I'm seventy-two." He bit again and turned to his big neighbor. "Seen whether they got 'im yet, mister? I've missed me evening paper."

"I too," said the Chinese gravely, lifting his shadow from the page just long enough for courtesy. Mr. Halliday squinted forward to see the title: it was Gibbon's *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, and Mr. Halliday was impressed.

"If they haven't yet they soon will," prophesied the bricklayer. "You can't get past the police these days. Why, they're combing the neighborhood, I don't doubt, this very minute."

Mr. Halliday moved nearer. Like the tramp, he had missed his evening paper, and the morning one as well.

"Has there been a murder round here?" he asked, addressing himself, out of diffidence, to James the stallkeeper. His delicacy however proved superfluous, for all the other three pounced on his ignorance like cats on a mouse.

"Indeed, I'm afraid there has —"

"Old gel cracked over the 'ead with a blunt instrument —"

"Happened last night, they think just after midnight," added the bricklayer. "Burglar broke into a sweet shop, pinched five pound ten out of the till and a bar of chocolate. They think the old woman must have come downstairs just as he was going away. It's that shop at the corner of Drage Street."

"That's right," corroborated the stalltender gloomily. "Just along the road it was. You can see the place from here. I did think it might bring more custom, but it doesn't seem to 'ave."

"Why, what's there to look at, when all's said and done?" inquired the tramp. "No blood, 'least not outside where you can see it. Now a fire, *there's* something worth turning out for. I've gone miles to see a really good fire."

The bricklayer nodded.

"You're right there; the public likes movement. Who wants to see a policeman stuck outside a door? Tell you one man it ought to bring, though, and that's the murderer. They have a craving, I'm told, to haunt the scene o' the crime."

"In that case," observed the Chi-

nese, finally closing his Gibbon, "I suppose we must all come into the category of the suspect."

"Not me I don't," said James promptly. "Not after I spent 'arf the morning provin' me innocence to a couple of inspectors. The p'liceman found 'er just after 1, d'you see, and she'd last bin seen alive at 11; 'n all that time I was at me stall 'ere. Lucky for me the rank's so near — there's always a good few taxi drivers till midnight; 'n after that, till I cleared off at 2, there was my brother and his young lady coming 'ome from a dance. Regular party we 'ad, down at the station."

"That's what they call an alibi," explained the little clerk sapiently. "A cousin of mine once had one, in connection with a burglary at the office. I think I'll have another coffee, if you please, with a bit more milk in it."

He pushed his cup across the counter, and Mr. Halliday, watching that gentle, confiding gesture, as of a child at nursery tea, at once exonerated him from the Chinese gentleman's impeachment. It was an odd thing to have said, dashed uncomfortable in a way, with them all standing there not a stone's throw from the murder house. One thing, it let the Chinese out too . . . or did it? No ordinary murderer, to be sure, would go rousing suspicions in so wholesale a fashion, but what about an extraordinary one? Mr. Halliday glanced in some trepidation at the big, finely modeled head, the narrow eyes, the close, authoritative mouth: murderer or not, the man was extraordinary. He wore his shabby coat with such an air that one could not remember, afterwards, whether it were actually patched or not.

"I wonder," he was now saying, "how far that theory — of the murderer drawn back to the scene of his exploits — is based on actual fact, and how far on humanity's sense of the appropriate. One could imagine a professor of psychology, for example, committing murder from the highest experimental motives."

"I hope not," said the little clerk earnestly. "Oh, I do hope not. My son's going into the teaching profession next September." And the clerk took a hasty sip of coffee, peering anxiously from face to face over the rim of his cup.

"If you ask me," said James the stallholder, leaning forward between the biscuit tins, "I'd say murder's done for one of three motives and three only. Money — like the one round the corner; love — like all these crimes o' passion they 'ave in France; and 'atred. That's all."

"All!" the tramp paused, halfway to a bite. "Love an' 'ate an' money — why, there's nothing they *aren't* the only three reasons for. Why am I 'ere like this, all in rags? Love. What was the war fought for? 'Ate. An' what's wrong with the 'ole blooming world? Money." His hand completed the journey; for a while, overcome by his own wisdom, he chewed in silence.

"It's a funny thing, though," said the bricklayer, "that no one saw or

heard anything of him. The policeman found the door open at five past 1, and there'd been you here all that time, James, to say nothing of the taxi men. It's very odd indeed."

"Oh, I don't know," argued the tramp, "what's to prevent 'im leaving — an' coming, for that matter — by the other end of Drage Street, past the back of the warehouses? It's as quiet at one in the mornin'."

"*Is* it, now?" observed the stallkeeper. "That's interesting."

The tramp grinned sardonically. "Go on, Sherlock, ask me another. What was I doing last night in the region of Drage Street, eh? And the answer to that's nothing, 'cos I spent last night in a bed . . . with twenty other gentlemen in the same room."

He finished his saveloy, drained his cup; then deliberately, ostentatiously, produced in payment a crumpled ten-shilling note. The four men looked at it; and Mr. Halliday drew a little away.

"Here, where d'you get that?" asked James sharply.

"Found it, sonny. Found it just in the gutter here."

"There — there's something like a stain on it," whispered Mr. Halliday.

"Nonsense," snapped James, "she wasn't near the money. If you ask me, that's tomato soup." But still he hesitated, one hand on the cashbox; and was still so wavering when the company was impetuously augmented by the arrival of a breezy young man in a tweed jacket. Medical student, thought Mr. Halliday wisely; he had seen those jackets before, in all the streets round.

"Hello, James," said the young man cheerfully, "I owe you a bob." And he spun the coin on to the counter.

"Here, what's this for?"

"Two saveloys, two ham sandwiches. Pinched off your stall last night by me and a friend while you were absent on neglect of duty. We didn't like to leave the money in case that got pinched too."

The stallkeeper picked up a glass and rinsed it out methodically.

"Lucky for you I'm an honest man," he said, reaching for a dish-cloth. "It's some other pore bloke you bin robbing, not me. As long as this stall's open I'm in my place, which is 'ere behind the counter, and no one gets away with no saveloys without me knowing it."

"Well, you damn well weren't here last night!" retorted the young man hotly. "We were here from about half-past 12 till a quarter to one, and there wasn't a soul in sight."

An odd silence descended on the little group by the counter; and before anyone found words to break it the small clerklike fellow with the bowler had stepped forward to the edge of the light and made a sign into the darkness; after which, turning back to the coffee stall, he said quietly:

"James Parker, I charge you with the murder of Emily Tarrant, at 14 Drage Street, on the night of Wednesday, 27th September. And I caution you that anything you now say may be used in evidence."

What kind of story would you expect from a man like Oliver La Farge? — a famous anthropologist who has led ethnological and archeological expeditions in Arizona, New Mexico, Mexico, and Guatemala; a distinguished Fellow of the American Association for the Advancement of Science; a Pulitzer Prize winner whose novel, LAUGHING BOY, *revealed Mr. La Farge's "accurate observation, sensitive understanding of the complex American Indian psychology, and respect for their cultural dignity"; a contributor to EQMM whose prize-winning story in* THE QUEEN'S AWARDS: SIXTH SERIES *was about an Indian detective named Spotted Shield. Well, even your wildest guess is not likely to be right; for Mr. La Farge's "La Spécialité de M. Duclos" seems a million light years away from the author's well-known "spécialités."*

Yes, this story is "different." But it will be delicious reading for you if you have any of the following qualifications:

(*a*) *if you have even the tiniest spark of the gourmet in your soul;*
(*b*) *if you have even a smidgeon of understanding of the* haute cuisine française, *with special reference to* sauce blanche;
(*c*) *if you have ever believed that homicide can possibly be justifiable;*
(*d*) *if you have culinary views on clam chowder;*
(*e*) *if you believe in the sacredness of art — any art.*

And if the requirements above appear too rigorous, then we'll add:

(*f*) *if you relish a courtroom story involving an unusual defense.*

We are grateful to Anthony Boucher for calling this tale to our attention, and since one 'tec turn deserves another, we spread the good word by calling the story to the particular attention of Rex Stout.

LA SPÉCIALITÉ DE M. DUCLOS

by OLIVER LA FARGE

THE JURISTS OF PARIS WERE SURprised when Maître Béchamil, the famous advocate, undertook the defense of Pierre Duclos. The United States had asked for Duclos's extradition to the province of Connecticut to be tried for a homicide that he himself admitted he had committed. His

extradition seemed certain. Moreover, Duclos was an Auvergnat, and Maître Béchamil, a Norman, had often and openly expressed his dislike for the people of Auvergne. He detested their accent. He distrusted their smallness, their darkness, their ferocity. He said that they were emotional primitives in a country founded upon civilization and pure reason, more Spanish than French, more Latin than Gallic, and that they used too much garlic.

Maître Béchamil was an effective trial lawyer, a brilliant legal thinker, a gourmet, and a man of sound common sense. His taking of the case attracted attention that was further heightened when he exercised great ingenuity to have the case put over from the winter to the spring sessions. He did nothing without cause. The delay was essential, for the whole matter hung upon a proper understanding of the *haute cuisine française*. The later sessions would insure that the presiding judge would be no less a person than the president of the Société Gastronomique des Légistes, that famous organization of jurist-connoisseurs, with two other members of the society as his associates. The winter sessions, Béchamil confided to his client, would be presided over by a man who had been seen — here he lowered his voice — sprinkling vinegar upon *rognons sautés madère*. They shuddered together.

Maître Béchamil had equally good reasons for taking the case to begin with. In the privacy of the advocate's bachelor apartment Duclos had amply proven that he was a *maître chef*. Above all, his amazing variation upon ordinary *sauce blanche*, which was the very heart of the case, was one of those great innovations that enshrine an artist's name in history. The advocate saw a dramatic and striking defense with a good chance of success. He also thought he saw the means of at last winning membership in the Société Gastronomique, which was not only a constellation of gourmets but the controlling inner circle of his profession.

Duclos planned, if he was set free, to proceed immediately to Auvergne, where he would visit his relatives and marry his fiancée. With her and her dowry he would return to Paris and open a restaurant. Maître Béchamil found this plan commendable. He asked how long the master chef would stay in Auvergne. Duclos said about a month. The advocate nodded. Inwardly, he smiled. A month would do nicely, he thought.

The case was heard by the panel of three judges for which Béchamil had hoped. The courtroom was well filled, and the presence of an American attaché testified to the importance of the matter. The prosecution put its case bluntly. The evidence was inescapable. The accused had run a restaurant in Connecticut. One evening he invited a group of his patrons to a dinner. In the course of the meal, for no apparent reason, the accused stabbed one of them, a M. Hathaway,

through the heart with a carving knife. (The pronunciation of the names "Hathaway" and "Connecticut" caused the prosecutor no slight difficulty.) It was not for the present court to find the named Duclos innocent or guilty, but merely to determine, as it could not help but determine, that there existed a sufficient shadow of guilt to require him to return to the suburb or province of Connecticut, where he would receive a fair trial under American law.

When Maître Béchamil rose, the audience felt that his case was already lost. The great advocate surveyed the bench. He shook back the sleeves of his robe and adjusted his cravat. He would not, he said, deny the facts set forth by his learned colleague. His client had indeed stabbed one of his guests and patrons through the heart as he sat at the table. He would, however, show the court that this act had been honorable and completely justified. He would further show that it would be a travesty upon justice to deliver a man who was in effect a hero to the jurisdiction of a people incapable of grasping the principles involved.

"I must give you," he said, "some little idea of the populace of that province of Connecticut, adjoining the metropolis of New York. I must describe them from the point of view of a *maître de cuisine*, a gastronome, and an artist, such as my client."

He described how these people daily wolfed a hurried breakfast, sped to New York by train or automobile, and, after a day of the intensely sustained work characteristic of American energy, hastened home, to arrive exhausted, in time only to numb themselves against their fatigue with an excess of cocktails before approaching the pleasures of the table. From this point, by an interesting transition, he reached the subject of clam chowder.

Maître Béchamil described that bivalve, paler than a mussel, tougher than a scallop, less succulent than an oyster, mere leather when cooked. He described the process of the chowder from the crude salt pork smoking in the pan to the completed dish with spots of grease floating in the milk. The bench was impressed, but it was apparent that the judges were wondering what this description of monstrosities had to do with the case.

"Among these people," he went on, "there is a certain affectation of epicureanism. There is also an affectation of the *cuisine*, with a creditable desire to emulate *la cuisine française*. But the mastery of great art requires generations. Just as that great nation leads all others in questions of the machine, so has it a long way to go before its members have absorbed a true sense of gastronomy. Many among them have formed some palate — enough so that they patronized my client's little restaurant. They have not, however, learned to cook. They may produce their chowders, and they are fairly good with a simple beefsteak, but when they step beyond that point, they err.

"It is impossible to persuade them that very little of anything is enough. If one pinch of sweet basil is good, they think, then two are better. In their cooking they seek to taste not the influence of the ingredients but the ingredients themselves. One of those gentlemen concocting a dish in his kitchen and finding that the recipe calls for a teaspoonful of dry Sauternes will unhesitatingly substitute for it a tablespoon of one of their wines of California."

Maître Béchamil paused dramatically. The judges looked profoundly shocked. Everyone glanced toward the representative of the American Embassy, who was staring at his clasped hands and blushing. Nothing had yet been brought out to prevent Duclos's extradition, but the atmosphere in the court was now strongly in his favor.

"Among my client's patrons was that M. Hathaway," the advocate resumed, "a man blindly pleased with his own cookery. A man who prided himself upon his omelettes, and yet insisted publicly that olemargarine was just as good as butter." His eyes flickered toward the judge on the right, who was internationally famous for his omelettes.

"Now, Messieurs, I have set the stage. We approach the day and hour of the act, an act far more deserving of reward than of punishment. My client, ever improving his art, discovered an amazing variation upon one of the simplest of all elements of cookery — white sauce — that elevated it to a celestial plane. I shall not elaborate, as the court will have the opportunity to judge for itself the deliciousness of this compound, a product of the purest essentials of French cookery, of simplicity, perfect timing, and restraint.

"This sauce, my client realized, would become his chiefest *spécialité de la maison*. It would become famous as *sauce blanche Duclos*. It assured at last his successful return to his native land. Launched in Connecticut, then transferred to France, where it belonged, it would be a magnet to Americans, a source of dollar exchange, an aid to his country in her restoration of herself under the Marshall Plan. To introduce this sauce, he invited a select group of patrons to dinner. Among them was the individual Hathaway, included not for his personal character or for his palate but because of his wealth and position, which dictated even that he be seated upon my client's left.

"The sauce was served with the *entrée* exactly as it will shortly be served to the court. Everyone exclaimed over it. The guests toasted their host and *sauce blanche Duclos*. They asked for the recipe, but my client only smiled. They tasted, they guessed, but the new elements — the secret — were beyond them.

"Supremely happy, my client went into the kitchen to supervise the final moments of the *pièce de résistence*. This man named Hathaway, pretending good-fellowship, followed him. Before my client knew what was happening,

the man had stepped quickly to the small stove at which my client prepared his personal creations. There was the saucepan with remnants of *sauce blanche Duclos* in it, and there, on the shelf, were all the ingredients. Hathaway scanned the shelf, chuckled, and returned to the table. Shaken, but ever courtly, my client saw the main course made ready and returned to his seat.

"The individual Hathaway sat at his left. He had prepared himself for the feast in the usual manner, with an excess of cocktails. Now he leaned over and in my client's ear he said these terrible words: 'Come to dinner next Wednesday, old boy.' And then he named three names, the secret of *sauce blanche Duclos*, and again he chuckled."

Maître Béchamil was silent long enough to let the full horror of the situation sink in. "My client's years in the Resistance had taught him speed of thought and action. Instantly, as fast as ever in a crisis confronting the Gestapo, he grasped the situation. With heavy hand, this individual would prepare a travesty that from then on he would serve under the name of *sauce blanche Duclos*. Before ever the creation was launched, a counterfeit would be in circulation, its reputation would be destroyed, and not only its creator but the French Republic would have been robbed.

"What could be done? How can knowledge be removed from a mind? There was only one thing to do, and my client did it, knowing full well that thus once more he offered the sacrifice of his life if the Good God so willed. The essence of what followed you already know. He miraculously made good his escape. I shall not waste the court's time with details of his voyage to Mexico or of his embarkation from there. Suffice it that, having set foot once more upon the soil of his beloved France, this patriot openly assumed his own name, conscious of the correctness of his position, desiring only his vindication."

Maître Béchamil fell silent. The President of the Court said that it was indeed essential that the court examine this *spécialité de M. Duclos*. A table was wheeled in, bearing cooking equipment and ingredients. M. Duclos stepped forward, bowed to the court, and went to work without speaking.

While he made his preparations, the advocate explained that the *entrée* consisted simply of slices of breast of chicken, broiled, and seethed in white Burgundy. That the court might be sure what was the contribution of the sauce to the whole, a plate with slices of the meat was passed to them. The judges entertained themselves determining the wine and vintage used.

At a certain point the little chef took three phials from an envelope and emptied them into his saucepan. He then dropped the phials into the trash receptacle. The sauce was poured over the warmed meat. The combination was allowed to simmer briefly. Then it was placed on dishes

and served, with thin slices of good bread and a well-chosen Graves. As the judges tasted, it could be seen that the effect upon them was electric. It began to seem that Maître Béchamil was winning.

The judges withdrew to consider. Maître Béchamil waited calmly. He was sure he had made and sustained all his points. He was confident, too, that no member of the Société Gastronomique could permit the secret of such a sauce to be eliminated from the world. He was inwardly pleased, in addition, because he had obtained possession of the three phials as the table had been wheeled out, and already had identified the contents of one of them.

The judges returned. The President of the Court spoke well of the Marshall Plan, and with deep feeling of the liberation of France. He pointed out that these matters, however, were not on trial in his court. It was the specific act of the defendant, which must be considered in its context. There was a man's inherent right to protect his livelihood. There was the sacredness of art. There were questions of national interest. There was the matter of delivering a man for trial under circumstances such that, with all admiration for American jurisprudence, it must be assumed that true justice would not be done, because of a fundamental conflict of mores and of cultures. One must doubt that any court in a land of chowder and oleomargarine could understand the values involved.

"Finally," he said, "the theft of a recipe of this order, aggravated by the incompetence of the thief, is an especially despicable form of larceny. The killing of the thief in the very act is legally identical with, but far more noble than, the shooting of a common burglar as he enters one's window. Extradition is denied."

The courtroom cheered. The American attaché departed furtively. M. Duclos embraced Maître Béchamil. The victory was tremendous.

At 11 o'clock the following morning the advocate told his staff that he would be absent for several hours on personal business. He then repaired to his apartment, proceeding directly to the kitchen. With precise, delicate motions he laid out the publicly known ingredients of *sauce blanche Duclos*. From a locked drawer he took out the three secret elements, identified by him the night before. The crucial question now was: How much of each?

He did not expect truly to duplicate the sauce. Connoisseur that he was, he knew he was a mediocre cook. Duclos would be a month in Auvergne. Time enough to come so close to the real thing that even the fine palate of the president of the society, after the lapse of a few weeks, would believe that he had indeed duplicated *sauce blanche Duclos* simply from having tasted it once before the trial. Election to the Société Gastronomique would then be certain.

He removed his frock coat, put on a large apron, and went to work. A very little of this, he suspected, rather more of that, and of the third — barely a drop? Or was that merely his timidity? Perhaps, in his greatness, M. Duclos had dared use as much as half a teaspoonful. One must experiment, that was all. This time, one-quarter of a teaspoonful.

The result was not right. It missed being very good — probably by some indefinable yet disagreeable imbalance of the elements. Béchamil sighed and started again. As he stirred and meditated, lost to the world, he was startled into dropping the spoon with a clatter by the sound of a step behind him and a familiar Auvergnat voice saying, "Good day, Maître Béchamil."

He whirled about. Duclos, who should have been in Auvergne by now, walked toward him. He wore a black suit, a white shirt with stiff collar, and a sober tie. Maître Béchamil noticed that his shoes squeaked slightly. He laid his bowler hat on a chair, and took from under his arm a case about half a metre long, covered with purplish plush.

"I am on my way to the station," he said. "I just stopped by to show you the bargain I picked up. Look." He opened the case. In it lay a carving knife of fine steel, moderately worn and very sharp. M. Duclos placed the case on the table and took out the knife. "Believe you, Monsieur, this is almost the exact duplicate of the fine knife I sacrificed when I eliminated the individual Hathaway."

Maître Béchamil said something vague.

The little man glanced at the articles on the table. "You experiment, Monsieur l'Avocat? You encounter trouble?" The Auvergnat accent was stronger than ever. "Incompetence, I fear. No good cook would think that I ever put that" — he pointed at one ingredient — "in a sauce. I had a phial of it along as a blind. Incompetent."

He smiled. He was dark, small, ferocious, the light in his eyes was primitive, he was more Spanish than French, more Latin than Gallic. He caressed the blade of the knife with the fingers of his left hand. Softly, in that detestable accent, he quoted, " 'The killing of the thief in the very act is legally identical with, but far more noble than . . .' "

Mignon G. Eberhart is one of the best known "names" in the contemporary mystery field. She has written about 30 detective-crime novels, many of which have appeared in national women's magazines and in the movies. She is particularly famous for her courageous heroines and for such deservedly popular female sleuths as Nurse Sarah Keate and Susan Dare. Married to a civil engineer, she travels with him to places where bridges, dams, and tunnels are built, and as a result Mrs. Eberhart writes in all sorts of odd and out-of-the-way locales — in deserts and on mountains, and betweentimes on trains, ships, and airplanes.

Now, we did not mean to give the impression that all Mrs. Eberhart's detectives are feminine. Here, for example, is the first of a series in which James Wickwire, an elderly banker, puts his orderly mind to the task of solving mysteries. Yes, this is the case that launched Mr. Wickwire on his criminological career — and under interesting circumstances too: for the bachelor banker was recovering from an illness, flat on his back, when he undertook his first murder investigation. Talk about armchair detecting: that's downright comfortable compared with detecting from a bed!

NO CRY OF MURDER

by MIGNON G. EBERHART

"I SAID IT WAS MURDER." COUSIN Abby set a glass of hot milk on the bedside table. She put a capsule down beside the milk. "Here's your capsule. You can have only one, mind." She gave me what in anyone else would have been an arch twinkle from behind her gold-rimmed spectacles.

My name is James Wickwire; I am a banker, a bachelor, elderly. Except for a single servant, Wilkins, I live alone in a comfortable narrow house on Seventy-sixth Street — New York, of course. I was recovering from an illness during which Cousin Abby had bustled in to rout the trained nurses, gently bully Wilkins, and faithfully see to me.

I was in a rosy state of mind; the doctor that morning had told me that I had every chance of getting well. But there is undoubtedly something about a cry of murder which penetrates the rosiest of veils.

I cried, "Do you mean *Henry?*"

Cousin Abby was not a trained nurse but she affected their crisp white garb. Her practical knowledge of nursing had probably been inher-

ited from her father who had been the only doctor in the village where I was born, and where Cousin Abby and others of a large and sprawling family were also born. It was one of these cousins we were speaking of, Henry Wickwire; his death had taken place a few months before.

Cousin Abby's dress rustled as she came to my bedside. "Now lie down and go to sleep, there's a dear boy."

But I insisted. "You said that you thought Henry was murdered! Why?"

"It had never occurred to you?"

"Certainly not! It was suicide! He took sleeping capsules. There wasn't any question about it."

Henry Wickwire had remained in the elm-shaded village and had gathered an inordinate amount of moss in the way of bank stock and farms. I would have thought, except for the untimely death of his young wife many years ago, that on the whole he had led a contented life. I had been surprised by his suicide.

Abby said, "But I was wrong. They decided it was suicide. Now you must go to sleep."

"But you said murder. Why?"

Abby's blue eyes were thoughtful behind the glimmering spectacles. With her plump face, her look of scrubbed and cheerful efficiency, she very much resembled the stocky and good-natured little girl she had been, back in childhood days. "Well," she said slowly. "It occurred to me." She sighed. "You ought to drink your milk and go to sleep. I don't know what the doctor will say."

Doctors always liked Cousin Abby. She would turn up wherever there was sickness in our large family and somehow, like an irresistible yet a welcome force, would simply take over. I said, "Nonsense! Why did you think it was murder? Besides, who would murder him? There's only that boy — Bob. Did Henry actually adopt him?"

"Oh, yes, he adopted him. Bob inherited Henry's money. Bob said he was going to write to you. Did he?"

"No, certainly not. Why write to me? About Henry's death?"

"We're not going to talk any more tonight."

I caught a fold of her white skirt. "Sit down and tell me now. Not that I think Henry was murdered or Bob murdered him."

She hesitated. "I shouldn't. Will you go to sleep then if I do?"

"Yes," I promised.

Cousin Abby sighed again and went to sit in the armchair before the fire and took up her knitting. It struck me that it was odd she had never married. "Wasn't Henry rather sweet on you at one time?" I asked.

She chuckled. "Oh, that was long ago. But he married Leila."

"Yes. Wasn't there some tragedy about her death?"

Cousin Abby knitted on. "It was very sad. She fell downstairs."

Suddenly I remembered Leila, beautiful, slim, and delicate with a

magnolia-white skin and soft black hair and gray eyes. She had been ill; for some reason she had got out of bed and tripped at the top of the stairs and fallen. She had died without regaining consciousness. "It was tragic," I said. "Poor Henry!"

"Yes. Poor Henry! I was taking care of her. I was out of the room and she thought she heard her kitten crying. She tripped over it."

"How did you know that?"

An involved stitch required Abby's regard. "Oh, we surmised it. The kitten was in the hall downstairs. Yes, poor Henry. But a year or so later he took in this child, Bob; and finally adopted him."

"Did you tell Bob that you thought Henry was murdered?"

She nodded. "I must say he was very cross with me. That's when he said he was going to write to you."

"He didn't. Not a word. But I can't say I blame him for being a little aroused," I said. Cross didn't seem exactly the right word to apply to the feelings of a man who must have been all but accused of murder.

Abby guessed my thought. "I didn't accuse him," she said. "At least, not until I had to."

"But why —" I began again.

"Because of the capsules, of course. And then there was so much money. At least it seemed so much to me. I've never had much, you know. Even a little money seems big to me. Not that it has ever mattered. I've managed to scrape along."

I was caught by a wave of gratitude not only for myself but for many others of that sprawling array of cousins. We ought to have seen to it that Abby was rewarded more substantially than with words.

I said quickly, "It might relieve your mind a little to know that I've left something for you in my will. Enough to insure you a small but certain income."

"That's so sweet of you, Cousin James. I didn't expect it. You oughtn't to —"

"We ought to have done far more for you than that, all of us." I was roused and indignant. "Didn't old — that is, Aunt Sophie, do anything for you? You took care of her for months before she died!"

"She left me a little. She needn't have, but I was very thankful."

"And Henry? Did all his money go to that boy?"

"He left a bit for me. Of course Bob inherited the bulk of Henry's money." Her face changed. "I *wish* I hadn't thought of — what I did think of!"

It wrenched me back to murder. "Why did you think of it?"

She knitted for a moment. Then, "You remember my father?"

"How could I forget him!" He had been a character, impatient, sour, given to unorthodox methods with his patients.

"I suppose people would call him old-fashioned now. He didn't know anything about the new medicines and drugs. You ought to have seen the things I found when I cleared out

his drug supply after he died. Old-fashioned remedies. Things nobody would use now."

"What did you do with them?" I asked.

"Oh, I threw them out. Except for the poisons. The dangerous drugs, I mean. I put them down the kitchen sink. Any doctor today would laugh at some of the remedies he used, but he knew people."

Apparently Cousin Abby was stringing together related facts, much as she constructed the pink garment from a tangle of wool.

I said, "Let's stick to Henry. *Could* Bob have given him the capsules?"

She frowned. "I don't know exactly how. He came home about 11. I didn't hear him go to Henry's room."

We were alone in the house. The coal fire glowed; my third-floor bedroom seemed high above the dreary night. I ought to have felt warm and secure but I was beginning to feel a twinge of uneasiness. Murder is an ugly word. Suppose Abby was right. Suppose Bob *had* murdered his benefactor.

If the notion Abby had tossed at me had any truth in it, then somebody was going to have to do something about it and I was reluctantly aware of the fact that that somebody would have to be me. I didn't want to.

I began to feel less and less comfortable. I didn't like this talk of murder. And the house was too quiet. The snow muffled outdoor sounds and Wilkins had that night allowed himself to be gently bullied by Cousin Abby into taking a night out.

Abby was getting nowhere with her story; clearly it was my duty, unpleasant though it was, to get at any probable fact which had introduced the shocking suspicion of murder to this kindly woman's mind.

"You probably observed something that suggested murder. Perhaps it was something you don't really remember —"

"Oh, no," she said. "I know exactly what it was. I told Bob. Later on, that is."

"What was it?"

My question had been too sharp and quick. She began to gather up her knitting. "I ought never to have said a word to you. You mustn't get upset. The doctor said —"

I tried to retrieve my lost ground. "I think you've been troubling yourself about something that didn't happen. Let's get it clear. I'll take my capsule now and I'll be asleep before you've finished the story."

She hesitated. The house seemed to be extremely quiet. My reading lamp had been turned off before Abby brought my hot milk; the dim light at the bedside table made a little circle downward upon the glass of milk, which had stopped steaming, and the bright little capsule which reminded me of the beads children string together. The doctor had been firm about the capsules. "Take one," he'd said, "or even, if you have to, two. But no more."

Cousin Abby rose, rustled to the

bathroom and came back with a glass of water. She gave me the capsule, and I swallowed it. Apparently she took me at my word for after she had rinsed and replaced the glass in the adjoining bathroom she came back to the armchair and began to knit.

"You see," she said, "Henry was getting better. The doctor had said so only the day before. It didn't seem to me that he was likely to commit suicide."

The doctor had told me that, too, only that morning. However, Henry didn't have anything to live for except the memory of a beautiful and tragic bride.

I had — well, I had the bank. And my comfortable house which was beginning to feel decidedly uncomfortable. I thought, rather oddly, that there was no way to call for help — if, say, I needed it. Wilkins was not in the house to answer my bell.

But that was nonsense. First, I was not likely to need him; second, a telephone extension stood on the bedside table; and third, Abby, cheerful and ready, was there, placidly knitting.

It was a simple story and Abby told it simply.

"I'd been there for several weeks. Henry had a touchy heart, you know. But that night nothing happened. I read to him and then talked a little while I knitted. But then I made a terrible mistake. The doctor had left him a new supply of sleeping capsules — a whole box of them." She whirled the mass of pink around. "I left the box in his room. I put one capsule, which was all that he was supposed to take, on the table beside him. But I put the whole box on a table across the room with some other medicines." She sighed again. "I was alone with him all evening."

"Where was Bob?"

"He'd gone to see his girl. I had insisted on the housekeeper, Mrs. Stevens, going to the movies. She'd been so faithful you know, all the time he was ill, never leaving the house for a minute."

Like Wilkins, I thought; faithful Wilkins. It was like Abby to think of other people's comfort.

"Henry showed no sign of the terrible thing that must have been in his mind. He was quite cheerful. And then —" she whirled the knitting around again. "When we found him the next morning the capsules were gone. All of them. Only the box was there, empty."

"Where," I said, "is the box that my capsules came from?"

She gave me a cheery twinkle. "Oh, I've got that. Put safely away. Not that I think you — but since then I've made it a rule."

I groped back through words that were no longer as cozy and altogether innocuous as the pink wool in her hands. "And you think that this adopted son — Bob — returned home and gave him the capsules?"

She stared into the fire for a moment. "There wasn't anybody else,

you see," she said at last. "Bob — he's a rather difficult young man; seems to have a chip on his shoulder. I suppose he feels that his position isn't quite right; that he really ought not to have inherited so much from Henry, being only adopted. I heard Bob come into the house about 11. But that's all I heard."

"What about the housekeeper?"

"Oh, she stayed all night with her married daughter. No, there was only Bob and me in the house when it must have happened. And the next morning, when we found him, that's when Bob and I — when we had words." She started to knit rapidly. "I couldn't conceal my feelings. Not when Bob said such dreadful things to me. It *was* very wrong of me to leave the box of capsules in the room. But I had no idea!"

"And Bob, this adopted son, got all of Henry's money?"

"There were some small bequests like mine, but he got most of it."

"Did you accuse him outright?"

"Yes! I didn't realize what I was saying, of course. It just came out. I was upset when he talked to me like that."

"But how could he have induced Henry to take the capsules?"

"I don't know. Bob all but accused *me* of giving the capsules to Henry." Her spectacles blinked in my direction.

"*You?*"

"That's when I lost my temper. I told Bob that if anybody murdered Henry, he would profit by it. I said I thought it was murder and I told him why. So then he was furious and he said he was going to write to you."

"Well, he didn't," I told her again. "This is all news to me. Look here, if you have any real reason . . . Good heavens, woman, if Henry was murdered we've got to do something!"

"I'm afraid the reason I think it was murder simply wouldn't much affect a — jury, for instance," she said. "It was something my father told me."

"What was that?"

"I suppose doctors did things then that they don't do now. In these days if a doctor doesn't know what to do he can consult with another doctor. And those days, a doctor had to decide what to do immediately, himself. He had life in his hands — and death."

"Doctors still have life and death in their hands."

"Yes, but — well, in those days there wasn't any talk of mercy killing. Father did talk of it, but only to me. But he said even a suffering and incurable patient always preferred to fight it out."

"Your father seems to have been very advanced. Why did he say that?"

"Because they never took the way out that he offered them."

I sat up. "I don't understand you!"

"Well, as you know, he was unorthodox. He did what he thought best even if it shocked people. And he — when he knew that some patient was incurable he used to give him a chance to — to escape."

"What *are* you talking about?"

"He would put, say, four pills on the table, within reach of the patient. Then he'd say, 'If you have pain tonight, take one. Take two if you have to. But if you take four you'll never have any pain again!'"

I stared at her. She nodded briskly. "That's what he used to say. And then he would leave enough pills so if the patient did take four, you see, he really never would have pain again. Of course it was very wrong of father to do that. Except —"

"Wrong!" I cried. "It was criminal."

"Yes. Except," she continued, "nobody ever took four. Never!"

"But that was unethical! That was — why, no doctor would do that."

"But nobody ever took them," Cousin Abby said again mildly.

I settled back, thinking it over. And it was a rather fine commentary upon the sturdiness of the human spirit. Fight to the very end.

Cousin Abby said, "That's why I was sure Henry couldn't have killed himself. That's what I told Bob when he . . . you see, he blamed me. He said I'd left the capsules within his father's reach. And he said — he said then that I must have given him the capsules!"

I knew all but nothing of this young man, Bob, who had had means, opportunity, and motive. I said, "And was it left like that?"

"Yes. What was I to do? There was no possible proof."

"And you really think that Bob murdered him? In cold blood?"

"I can't help remembering what my father used to say. Nobody ever took the pills he'd leave for them. Nobody. But since then," she said, "I've been very careful. I never leave medicine in the same room with somebody I'm nursing. Never." She glanced at me roguishly. "The box your little capsule came from is in my room, locked away!"

"Don't worry," I said. "I'm not like your father's patients. No easy way out for me!"

"I know, Cousin James. Now then, I've talked too much. Your milk is cold. I'll heat another glassful."

She put her knitting down in the chair and went away, toward the little serving pantry she had rigged up in a closet off the hall. I heard the snap of the switch as she turned on an electric plate.

I lay there thinking of her story. Probably Henry had been the exception, who took the four capsules. It was an unnerving story, all the same.

I was thankful when I heard Abby again; she came into the room and put down a fresh, steaming glass of milk on the table. Then she went to the bathroom, came back with a towel and carefully wiped an invisible trace of milk from the outside of the glass. She was always very neat and she polished the glass until it shone.

"Now then," she gave me a merry twinkle. "Sleep well."

With that she gave the room and

me a last searching glance to be sure that all was well, said good night, and closed the door behind her. The house settled into its unusual silence.

But I couldn't get Henry out of my mind. It pleased me that, for all her unworldliness, when Abby had been attacked by the young fellow, Bob, she had rallied and had attacked him. The best defense is offense, and she had known it. But then Bob had thought better of it and had not written to me. Because he had cooled off? Or because he was guilty of murder?

After a while I reached for the hot milk. Cousin Abby, usually so orderly, had not thought to remove the first glass she had brought me; that milk now was cold; the light from the lamp caught a reflection which was marred by one of Abby's broad fingerprints. I smiled, thinking of the anxious way she had polished the fresh glass where I had seen no trace of spilled milk. I sipped the hot milk. As I did so Abby's knitting began to slide from the armchair.

It slid very slowly downward, little pink loops came off the needle. I watched them for a moment before I realized that it should be stopped; little loops sliding off the needle meant something she called dropped stitches and fretted anxiously over their recovery. I smiled to myself again, sat up, and took another sip of the hot milk. It was very soothing although it had a rather odd, bitter taste. I got my feet into slippers and went across the room to rescue the knitting.

I lifted it, taking pains not to lose more stitches. It looked like a tiny jacket; the pattern was taking shape.

Then I saw the box.

It was in the armchair. It was empty. It was a medicine box.

I read my name and the directions, one or two for sleep.

I don't know when I began to see a pattern as clearly as the pattern of the knitting. But a very different pattern.

All Abby's digressions, her woolly threads, her hints and evasions, were clear and necessary to that pattern.

She had to accomplish three things. First, she had to assure herself that no letter from Bob would turn up among my papers after my death — to turn suspicion or inquiry toward her. She had had to talk to me of Henry in order to assure herself of that, taking the risk that it would alarm me. But that was not really a risk for I was never, after that night, to be in a position to tell anybody what she had said.

Second, she had had to assure herself that I had left her some money.

And finally, she had had to arrange it so my fingerprints — only mine — would be on the second glass of milk. Obviously I would drink the hot milk, not the cold which bore quite innocently her own fingerprints, and the empty box of capsules would be found in my room the next morning.

I was back at the bed, sitting on the edge of it. What a long trail of

murder! How had Leila died? That, perhaps, was jealousy. But Aunt Sophie — however, there was no way to know anything of Aunt Sophie's death.

And Bob had decided that he must be wrong; he had never written to me.

How much of that lethal milk had I taken? And what was in it?

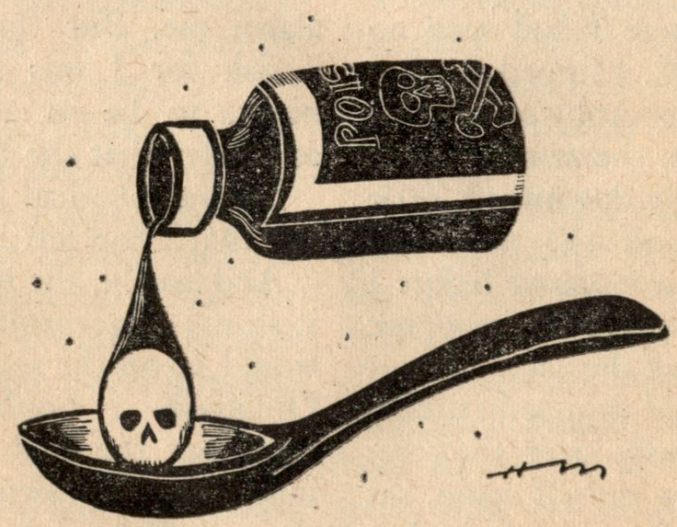
Had she really poured her father's poisons, the dangerous drugs, down the kitchen sink? Or had she, already, very neatly murdered me!

My fingers were on the telephone, fumbling for the dial. As it rang and rang at the other end something somebody — George Eliot? — had once said floated into my already drowsy mind. "— there are looks that stab and raise no cry of murder."

I was thinking of that curious, searching last look of Cousin Abby's. Her last look at me, who was about to undertake the journey she had planned, her last look around the room to be sure her deadly, simple arrangements for the journey were all in order.

I remember my doctor's voice at the other end of the telephone. I do not remember what I said.

Many hours later, when I could again speak and understand what was said to me, it was all over. Cousin Abby had not poured away quite all the poisons left in her father's dispensary.



. . . Observation and Imagination

Like so many other men who turned eventually to writing, Honoré de Balzac studied to become a lawyer, obtained his license, and spent three years in the offices of a notary and a solicitor. But when Balzac's father insisted that his son go into business for himself — that is, commit himself permanently to the legal profession — Honoré de Balzac rebelled. His father took a drastic step to enforce his wishes: he tried to starve his son into submission by making him live in a garret on a piddling allowance. But this plan boomeranged, for it was in this attic that Honoré de Balzac began to write the "works of his youth."

It is said that Honoré de Balzac wrote at least 40 books before he really got started on the work that was to emerge as his great contribution to literature, THE HUMAN COMEDY. *These early two-score volumes are not held in high esteem critically, although they were moderately successful financially. It is interesting, in passing, to note that Balzac used various pseudonyms for this youthful work; one was* [*Lord*] *R'hoone — an anagram of Honoré. But after the long apprenticeship — 40 books in less than ten years — Balzac's real literary career began, and for the next twenty-one years he wrote the incredible number of novels and short stories which were to make up* THE HUMAN COMEDY.

In full stride, Balzac's work habits were prodigious. He usually wrote from midnight until almost any hour of the following day, sometimes writing steadily for sixteen hours on end, and continuing this pace for days, and even weeks, at a stretch; and all the work was carefully, premeditatedly, built into one gigantic structure, into one cohesive and connected survey of "the human comedy." Perhaps, as some critics maintain, no single book — or for that matter, no single scene, situation, or character — can be ranked among the greatest individual efforts in literature; but surely very few novelists compare with Balzac in scope, in the vast range of his work, in the colossal spread of his purpose and plan.

When Balzac died, leaving behind more than 50 small volumes comprising THE HUMAN COMEDY, *his work was not even remotely finished. But then it never could have been completed. It has been said that "the life of Methuselah, with the powers of Shakespeare, would not suffice for that." Balzac was carried to his grave a comparatively young man, his health ruined by his gargantuan labors, and one of his pall-bearers, Victor*

Hugo, passed lasting judgment on Honoré de Balzac's place in history when he said, in his funeral discourse: Balzac's work was "observation and *imagination." The emphasis on the word "and" was the essence of Hugo's critical appraisal — indeed, it is the essence of all true criticism.*

THE MYSTERIOUS MANSION

by HONORÉ DE BALZAC

ABOUT 100 YARDS FROM VENDÔME, on the banks of the Loire, there stands an old dark-colored house, surmounted by a very high roof, and so completely isolated that there is not in the neighborhood a single evil-smelling tannery or wretched inn, such as we see in the outskirts of almost every small town. In front of the house is a small garden bordering the river, in which the boxwood borders of the paths, once neatly trimmed, now grow at their pleasure. A few willows, born in the Loire, have grown as rapidly as the hedge which encloses the garden, and half conceal the house. The plants which we call weeds adorn the slope of the bank with their luxuriant vegetation. The fruit-trees, neglected for ten years, bear no fruit; their offshoots form a dense undergrowth. The espaliers resemble hornbeam hedges. The paths, formerly gravelled, are overrun with purslane; but, to tell the truth, there are no well-marked paths. From the top of the mountain upon which hang the ruins of the old château of the Dukes of Vendôme, the only spot from which the eye can look into this enclosure, you would say to yourself that, at a period which it is difficult to determine, that little nook was the delight of some gentleman devoted to roses and tulips, to horticulture, in short, but especially fond of fine fruit. You espy an arbor, or rather the ruins of an arbor, beneath which a table still stands, not yet entirely consumed by time. At sight of that garden, which is no longer a garden, one may divine the negative delights of the peaceful life which provincials lead, as one divines the existence of a worthy tradesman by reading the epitaph on his tombstone. To round out the melancholy yet soothing thoughts which fill the mind, there is on one of the walls a sun-dial, embellished with this commonplace Christian inscription: ULTIMAM COGITA. The roof of the house is terribly dilapidated, the blinds are always drawn, the balconies are covered with swallows' nests, the doors are never opened. Tall weeds mark with green lines the cracks in the steps; the ironwork is covered with rust. Moon, sun, winter, summer, snow, have rotted the wood,

warped the boards, and corroded the paint.

The deathly silence which reigns there is disturbed only by the birds, the cats, the martens, the rats and the mice, which are at liberty to run about, to fight, and to eat one another at their will. An invisible hand has written everywhere the word MYSTERY. If, impelled by curiosity, you should go to inspect the house on the street side, you would see a high gate, arched at the top, in which the children of the neighborhood have made numberless holes. I learned later that that gate had been condemned ten years before. Through these irregular breaches you would be able to observe the perfect harmony between the garden front and the courtyard front. The same disorder reigns supreme in both. Tufts of weeds surround the pavements. Enormous cracks furrow the walls, whose blackened tops are enlaced by the countless tendrils of climbing plants. The steps are wrenched apart, the bell-rope is rotten, the gutters are broken. "What fire from heaven has passed this way? What tribunal has ordered salt to be strewn upon this dwelling? Has God been insulted here? Has France been betrayed?" Such are the questions which one asks one's self. The reptiles crawl hither and thither without answering. That empty and deserted house is an immense riddle, the solution of which is known to no one.

It was formerly a small feudal estate and bore the name of La Grande Bretèche. During my stay at Vendôme, where Desplein had left me to attend a rich patient, the aspect of that strange building became one of my keenest pleasures. Was it not more than a mere ruin? Some souvenirs of undeniable authenticity are always connected with a ruin; but that abode, still standing, although in process of gradual demolition by an avenging hand, concealed a secret, an unknown thought; at the very least, it betrayed a caprice. More than once, in the evening, I wandered in the direction of the hedge, now wild and uncared for, which surrounded that enclosure. I defied scratches, and made my way into that ownerless garden, that estate which was neither public nor private; and I remained whole hours there contemplating its disarray. Not even to learn the story which would doubtless account for that extraordinary spectacle, would I have asked a single question of any Vendômese gossip. Straying about there, I composed delightful romances, I abandoned myself to little orgies of melancholy which enchanted me.

If I had learned the cause of that perhaps most commonplace neglect, I should have lost the unspoken poesy with which I intoxicated myself. To me that spot represented the most diverse images of human life darkened by its misfortunes; now it was the air of the cloister, minus the monks; again, the perfect peace of the cemetery, minus the dead speaking their epitaphic language;

today, the house of the leper; tomorrow, that of the Fates; but it was, above all, the image of the province, with its meditation, with its hour-glass life. I have often wept there, but never laughed. More than once I have felt an involuntary terror, as I heard above my head the low rustling made by the wings of some hurrying dove. The ground is damp; you must beware of lizards, snakes, and toads, which wander about there with the fearless liberty of nature; above all, you must not fear the cold, for, after a few seconds, you feel an icy cloak resting upon your shoulders, like the hand of the Commendator on the neck of Don Juan. One evening I had shuddered there; the wind had twisted an old rusty weather-vane, whose shrieks resembled a groan uttered by the house at the moment that I was finishing a rather dismal melodrama, by which I sought to explain to myself that species of monumental grief. I returned to my inn, beset by sombre thoughts. When I had supped, my hostess entered my room with a mysterious air, and said to me:

"Here is Monsieur Regnault, monsieur."

"Who is Monsieur Regnault?"

"What! monsieur doesn't know Monsieur Regnault? That's funny!" she said, as she left the room.

Suddenly I saw a tall slender man, dressed in black, with his hat in his hand, who entered the room like a ram ready to rush at his rival, disclosing a retreating forehead, a small pointed head, and a pale face, not unlike a glass of dirty water. You would have said that he was the doorkeeper of some minister. He wore an old coat, threadbare at the seams; but he had a diamond in his shirt-frill and gold rings in his ears.

"To whom have I the honor of speaking, monsieur?" I asked him.

He took a chair, seated himself in front of my fire, placed his hat on my table, and replied, rubbing his hands:

"Ah! it's very cold! I am Monsieur Regnault, monsieur."

I bowed, saying to myself:

"*Il Bondocani!* Look for him!"

"I am the notary at Vendôme," he continued.

"I am delighted to hear it, monsieur," I exclaimed, "but I am not ready to make my will, for reasons best known to myself."

"Just a minute," he rejoined, raising his hand as if to impose silence upon me. "I beg pardon, monsieur, I beg pardon! I have heard that you go to walk sometimes in the garden of La Grande Bretèche."

"Yes, monsieur!"

"Just a minute," he said, repeating his gesture; "that practice constitutes a downright trespass. I have come, monsieur, in the name and as executor of the late Madame Countess de Merret, to beg you to discontinue your visits. Just a minute! I'm not a Turk, and I don't propose to charge you with a crime. Besides, it may well be that you are not aware of the circumstances which compel me

to allow the finest mansion in Vendôme to fall to ruin. However, monsieur, you seem to be a man of education, and you must know that the law forbids entrance upon an enclosed estate under severe penalties. A hedge is as good as a wall. But the present condition of the house may serve as an excuse for your curiosity. I would ask nothing better than to allow you to go and come as you please in that house; but, as it is my duty to carry out the will of the testatrix, I have the honor, monsieur, to request you not to go into that garden again. Even I myself, monsieur, since the opening of the will, have never set foot inside that house, which, as I have had the honor to tell you, is a part of the estate of Madame de Merret. We simply reported the number of doors and windows, in order to fix the amount of the impost which I pay annually from the fund set aside for that purpose by the late countess. Ah! her will made a great deal of talk in Vendôme, monsieur."

At that, he stopped to blow his nose, the excellent man. I respected his loquacity, understanding perfectly that the administration of Madame de Merret's property was the important event of his life — his reputation, his glory, his Restoration. I must needs bid adieu to my pleasant reveries, to my romances; so that I was not inclined to scorn the pleasure of learning the truth from an official source.

"Would it be indiscreet, monsieur," I asked him, "to ask you the reason of this extraordinary state of affairs?"

At that question an expression which betrayed all the pleasure that a man feels who is accustomed to ride a hobby passed over the notary's face. He pulled up his shirt collar with a self-satisfied air, produced his snuff-box, opened it, offered it to me, and at my refusal, took a famous pinch himself. He was happy; the man who has no hobby has no idea of the satisfaction that can be derived from life. A hobby is the precise mean between passion and monomania. At that moment I understood the witty expression of Sterne in all its extent, and I had a perfect conception of the joy with which Uncle Toby, with Trim's assistance, bestrode his battle-horse.

"Monsieur," said Monsieur Regnault, "I was chief clerk to Master Roguin of Paris. An excellent office, of which you may have heard? No? Why, it was made famous by a disastrous failure. Not having sufficient money to practise in Paris, at the price to which offices had risen in 1816, I came here and bought the office of my predecessor. I had relatives in Vendôme, among others a very rich aunt, who gave me her daughter in marraige. Monsieur," he continued after a brief pause, "three months after being licensed by the Keeper of the Seals I was sent for one evening, just as I was going to bed (I was not then married), by Madame Countess de Merret, to come to her Château de Merret.

Her maid, an excellent girl who works in this inn today, was at my door with madame countess's carriage. But, just a minute! I must tell you, monsieur, that Monsieur Count de Merret had gone to Paris to die, two months before I came here. He died miserably there, abandoning himself to excesses of all sorts. You understand? — On the day of his departure madame countess had left La Grande Bretèche and had dismantled it. Indeed, some people declare that she burned the furniture and hangings, and all chattels whatsoever now contained in the estate leased by the said — What on earth am I saying? I beg pardon, I thought I was dictating a lease. — That she burned them," he continued, "in the fields at Merret. Have you been to Merret, monsieur? No?" he said, answering his own question. "Ah! that is a lovely spot! For about three months," he continued, after a slight shake of the head, "monsieur count and madame countess led a strange life.

"They received no guests; madame lived on the ground floor, and monsieur on the first floor. When madame countess was left alone, she never appeared except at church. Later, in her own house, at her château, she refused to see the friends who came to see her. She was already much changed when she left La Grande Bretèche to go to Merret. The dear woman — I say 'dear,' because this diamond came from her; but I actually only saw her once — the excellent lady, then, was very ill; she had doubtless despaired of her health, for she died without calling a doctor; so that many of our ladies thought that she was not in full posession of her wits. My curiosity was therefore strangely aroused, monsieur, when I learned that Madame de Merret needed my services. I was not the only one who took an interest in that story. That same evening, although it was late, the whole town knew that I had gone to Merret. The maid answered rather vaguely the questions that I asked her on the road; she told me, however, that her mistress had received the sacrament from the curé of Merret during the day, and that she did not seem likely to live through the night.

"I reached the château about 11 o'clock; I mounted the main staircase. After passing through divers large rooms, high and dark, and as cold and damp as the devil, I reached the state bedchamber where the countess was. According to the reports that were current concerning that lady — I should never end, monsieur, if I should repeat all the stories that are told about her — I had thought of her as a coquette. But, if you please, I had much difficulty in finding her in the huge bed in which she lay. To be sure, to light that enormous wainscoted chamber of the old *régime*, where everything was so covered with dust that it made one sneeze simply to look at it, she had only one of those old-fashioned Argand lamps. Ah! but you have never been to Merret.

Well, monsieur, the bed is one of those beds of the olden time, with a high canopy of flowered material. A small night-table stood beside the bed, and I saw upon it a copy of the *Imitation of Jesus Christ*, which, by the by, I bought for my wife, as well as the lamp. There was also a large couch for the attendant, and two chairs. Not a spark of fire. That was all the furniture. It wouldn't have filled ten lines in an inventory.

"Oh! my dear monsieur, if you had seen, as I then saw it, that huge room hung with dark tapestry, you would have imagined yourself transported into a genuine scene from a novel. It was icy cold; and, more than that, absolutely funereal," he added, raising his arm with a theatrical gesture and pausing for a moment. "By looking hard and walking close to the bed, I succeeded in discovering Madame de Merret, thanks to the lamp, the light of which shone upon the pillow. Her face was as yellow as wax, and resembled two clasped hands. She wore a lace cap, which revealed her lovely hair, as white as snow. She was sitting up, and seemed to retain that position with much difficulty. Her great black eyes, dulled by fever no doubt, and already almost lifeless, hardly moved beneath the bones which the eyebrows cover — these," he said, pointing to the arch over his eyes. — "Her brow was moist. Her fleshless hands resembled bones covered with tightly-drawn skin; her veins and muscles could be seen perfectly. She must have been very beautiful; but at that moment I was seized with an indefinable feeling at her aspect. Never before, according to those who laid her out, had a living creature attained such thinness without dying. In short, she was horrible to look at; disease had so wasted that woman that she was nothing more than a phantom. Her pale violet lips seemed not to move when she spoke to me. Although my profession had familiarised me with such spectacles, by taking me sometimes to the pillows of dying persons to take down their last wishes, I confess that the families in tears and despair whom I had seen were as nothing beside that solitary, silent woman in that enormous château.

"I did not hear the slightest sound, I could not detect the movement which the breathing of the sick woman should have imparted to the sheets that covered her; and I stood quite still, gazing at her in a sort of stupor. It seems to me that I am there now. At last her great eyes moved, she tried to raise her right hand, which fell back upon the bed, and these words came from her mouth like a breath, for her voice had already ceased to be a voice: 'I have been awaiting you with much impatience.' — Her cheeks suddenly flushed. It was a great effort for her to speak, monsieur. — 'Madame,' I said. She motioned to me to be silent. At that moment the old nurse rose and whispered in my ear: 'Don't speak; madame countess cannot bear to hear the slightest sound, and what

you said might excite her.' — I sat down. A few moments later, Madame de Merret collected all her remaining strength, to move her right arm and thrust it, not without infinite difficulty, beneath her bolster; she paused for just a moment; then she made a last effort to withdraw her hand, and when she finally produced a sealed paper, drops of sweat fell from her brow. — 'I place my will in your hands,' she said. 'Oh, *mon Dieu!* oh!' — That was all. She grasped a crucifix that lay on her bed, hastily put it to her lips, and died. The expression of her staring eyes makes me shudder even now, when I think of it. She must have suffered terribly! There was a gleam of joy in her last glance, a sentiment which remained in her dead eyes.

"I carried the will away; and when it was opened, I found that Madame de Merret had appointed me her executor. She left all her property to the hospital at Vendôme with the exception of a few individual legacies. But these were her provisions with respect to La Grande Bretèche: She directed me to leave her house, for 50 years from the day of her death, in the same condition as at the moment that she died; forbidding any person whatsoever to enter the rooms, forbidding the slightest repairs to be made, and even setting aside a sum in order to hire keepers, if it should be found necessary, to assure the literal execution of her purpose. At the expiration of that period, if the desire of the testatrix has been carried out, the house is to belong to my heirs, for monsieur knows that notaries cannot accept legacies. If not, La Grande Bretèche is to revert to whoever is entitled to it, but with the obligation to comply with the conditions set forth in a codicil attached to the will, which is not to be opened until the expiration of the said 50 years. The will was not attacked; and so —"

At that, without finishing his sentence, the elongated notary glanced at me with a triumphant air, and I made him altogether happy by addressing a few compliments to him.

"Monsieur," I said, "you have made a profound impression upon me, so that I think I see that dying woman, paler than her sheets; her gleaming eyes terrify me; and I shall dream of her tonight. But you must have formed some conjecture concerning the provisions of that extraordinary will."

"Monsieur," he said with a comical reserve, "I never allow myself to judge the conduct of those persons who honor me by giving me a diamond."

I soon loosened the tongue of the scrupulous Vendômese notary, who communicated to me, not without long digressions, observations due to the profound politicians of both sexes whose decrees are law in Vendôme. But those observations were so contradictory and so diffuse that I almost fell asleep, despite the interest I took in that authentic narrative. The dull and monotonous tone of

the notary, who was accustomed, no doubt, to listen to himself, and to force his clients and his fellow citizens to listen to him, triumphed over my curiosity.

"Aha! many people, monsieur," he said to me on the landing, "would like to live 45 years more; but just a minute!" and with a sly expression, he placed his right forefinger on his nose, as if he would have said: "Just mark what I say." — "But to do that, to do that," he added, "a man must be less than 60."

I closed my door, having been roused from my apathy by this last shaft, which the notary considered very clever; then I seated myself in my easy-chair, placing my feet on the andirons. I was soon absorbed in an imaginary romance *à la* Radcliffe, based upon the judicial observations of Monsieur Regnault, when my door, under the skilful manipulation of a woman's hand, turned upon its hinges. My hostess appeared, a stout red-faced woman, of excellent disposition, who had missed her vocation: she was a Fleming, who should have been born in a picture by Teniers.

"Well, monsieur," she said, "no doubt Monsieur Regnault has given you his story of La Grande Bretèche?"

"Yes, Mother Lepas."

"What did he tell you?"

I repeated in a few words the chilling and gloomy story of Madame de Merret. At each sentence my hostess thrust out her neck, gazing at me with the true innkeeper's perspicacity — a sort of happy medium between the instinct of the detective, the cunning of the spy, and the craft of the trader.

"My dear Madame Lepas," I added, as I concluded, "you evidently know more, eh? If not, why should you have come up here?"

"Oh! on an honest woman's word, as true as my name's Lepas ——"

"Don't swear; your eyes are big with a secret. You knew Monsieur de Merret. What sort of a man was he?"

"Bless my soul! Monsieur de Merret was a fine man, whom you never could see the whole of, he was so long; an excellent gentleman, who came here from Picardy, and who had his brains very near his cap, as we say here. He paid cash for everything, in order not to have trouble with anybody. You see, he was lively. We women all found him very agreeable."

"Because he was lively?" I asked.

"That may be," she said. "You know, monsieur, that a man must have had something in front of him, as they say, to marry Madame de Merret, who, without saying anything against the others, was the loveliest and richest woman in the whole province. She had about 20,000 francs a year. The whole town went to her wedding. The bride was dainty and attractive, a real jewel of a woman. Ah! they made a handsome couple at that time!"

"Did they live happily together?"

"Oh, dear! oh, dear! yes and no,

so far as any one could tell; for, as you can imagine, we folks didn't live on intimate terms with them. Madame de Merret was a kind-hearted woman, very pleasant, who had to suffer sometimes perhaps from her husband's quick temper; but although he was a bit proud, we liked him. You see, it was his business to be like that; when a man is noble, you know ——"

"However, some catastrophe must have happened, to make Monsieur and Madame de Merret separate so violently?"

"I didn't say there was any catastrophe, monsieur. I don't know anything about it."

"Good! I am sure now that you know all about it."

"Well, monsieur, I will tell you all I know. When I saw Monsieur Regnault come up to your room, I had an idea that he would talk to you about Madame de Merret in connection with La Grande Bretèche. That gave me the idea of consulting with monsieur, who seems to me a man of good judgment and incapable of playing false with a poor woman like me, who never did anybody any harm, and yet who's troubled by her conscience. Up to this time I've never dared to speak out to the people of this neighborhood, for they're all sharp-tongued gossips. And then, monsieur, I've never had a guest stay in my inn so long as you have, and to whom I could tell the story of the 15,000 francs."

"My dear Madame Lepas," I said, arresting the flood of her words, "if your confidence is likely to compromise me, I wouldn't be burdened with it for a moment, for anything in the world."

"Don't be afraid," she said, interrupting me; "you shall see."

This eagerness on her part made me think that I was not the only one to whom my worthy hostess had communicated the secret of which I dreaded to be the only confidant, and I listened.

"Monsieur," she began, "when the Emperor sent Spanish or other prisoners of war here, I had to board, at the expense of the government, a young Spaniard who was sent to Vendôme on parole. In spite of the parole, he went every day to show himself to the sub-prefect. He was a Spanish grandee! Nothing less! He had a name ending in *os* and *dia*, like Bagos de Férédia. I have his name written on my register; you can read it if you wish. He was a fine young man for a Spaniard, who they say are all ugly. He was only five feet two or three inches tall, but he was well-built; he had little hands, which he took care of — oh! you should have seen; he had as many brushes for his hands as a woman has for all purposes! He had long black hair, a flashing eye, and rather a copper-colored skin, which I liked all the same. He wore such fine linen as I never saw before on any one, although I have entertained princesses, and among others General Bertrand, the Duke and Duchess d'Abrantès, Monsieur De-

cazes, and the King of Spain. He didn't eat much; but he had polite and pleasant manners, so that I couldn't be angry with him for it. Oh! I was very fond of him, although he didn't say four words a day, and it was impossible to have the slightest conversation with him; if anyone spoke to him, he wouldn't answer; it was a fad, a mania that they all have, so they tell me. He read his breviary like a priest, he went to mass and to the services regularly. Where did he sit? We noticed that later: about two steps from Madame de Merret's private chapel. As he took his seat there the first time that he came to the church, nobody imagined that there was any design in it. Besides, he never took his face off his prayer-book, the poor young man! In the evening, monsieur, he used to walk on the mountain, among the ruins of the château. That was the poor man's only amusement; he was reminded of his own country there. They say that there's nothing but mountains in Spain.

"Very soon after he came here he began to stay out late. I was anxious when he didn't come home till midnight; but we all got used to his whim; he would take the key to the door, and we wouldn't wait for him. He lived in a house that we have on Rue de Casernes. Then one of our stablemen told us that one night, when he took the horses to drink, he thought he saw the Spanish grandee swimming far out in the river, like a real fish. When he came back, I told him to be careful of the eel-grass; he seemed vexed that he had been seen in the water. At last, monsieur, one day, or rather one morning, we didn't find him in his room; he hadn't come home. By hunting carefully everywhere, I found a writing in his table drawer, where there were fifty of the Spanish gold-pieces which they call *portugaises*, and which were worth about 5,000 francs; and then there were 10,000 francs' worth of diamonds in a little sealed box. His writing said that in case he didn't return, he left us this money and his diamonds, on condition that we would found masses to thank God for his escape and his salvation. In those days I still had my man, who went out to look for him. And here's the funny part of the story: he brought back the Spaniard's clothes, which he found under a big stone in a sort of a shed by the river, on the château side, almost opposite La Grande Bretèche.

"My husband went there so early that no one saw him; he burned the clothes after reading the letter, and we declared, according to Count Férédia's wish, that he had escaped. The subprefect set all the gendarmerie on his track, but, bless my soul! they never caught him. Lepas believed that the Spaniard had drowned himself. For my part, monsieur, I don't think it; I think rather that he was mixed up in Madame de Merret's business, seeing that Rosalie told me that the crucifix that her mistress thought so much of that she had it buried with

her, was made of ebony and silver; now, in the early part of his stay here, Monsieur Férédia had one of silver and ebony, which I didn't see afterwards. Tell me now, monsieur, isn't it true that I needn't have any remorse about the Spaniard's 15,000 francs, and that they are fairly mine?"

"Certainly. But did you never try to question Rosalie?" I asked her.

"Oh! yes, indeed, monsieur. But would you believe it? That girl is like a wall. She knows something, but it's impossible to make her talk."

After conversing a moment more with me, my hostess left me beset by undefined and dismal thoughts, by a romantic sort of curiosity, a religious terror not unlike the intense emotion that seizes us when we enter a dark church at night and see a dim light in the distance under the lofty arches; a vague figure gliding along, or the rustling of a dress or a surplice; it makes us shudder. La Grande Bretèche and its tall weeds, its condemned windows, its rusty ironwork, its closed doors, its deserted rooms, suddenly appeared before me in fantastic guise. I tried to penetrate that mysterious abode, seeking there the kernel of that sombre story, of that drama which had caused the death of three persons. In my eyes Rosalie was the most interesting person in Vendôme. As I scrutinised her, I detected traces of some inmost thought, despite the robust health that shone upon her plump cheeks. There was in her some seed of remorse or of hope; her manner announced a secret, as does that of the devotee who prays with excessive fervor, or that of the infanticide, who constantly hears her child's last cry. However, her attitude was artless and natural, her stupid smile had no trace of criminality, and you would have voted her innocent simply by glancing at the large handkerchief with red and blue squares which covered her vigorous bust, confined by a gown with white and violet stripes.

"No," I thought, "I won't leave Vendôme without learning the whole story of La Grande Bretèche. To obtain my end, I will become Rosalie's friend, if it is absolutely necessary."

"Rosalie?" I said one evening.

"What is it, monsieur?"

"You are not married?"

She started slightly.

"Oh! I sha'n't lack men when I take a fancy to be unhappy!" she said with a laugh.

She speedily overcame her inward emotion; for all women, from the great lady down to the servant at an inn, have a self-possession which is peculiar to them.

"You are fresh and appetising enough not to lack suitors. But tell me, Rosalie, why did you go to work in an inn when you left Madame de Merret's? Didn't she leave you some money?"

"Oh, yes! but my place is the best in Vendôme, monsieur."

This reply was one of those which judges and lawyers call dilatory. Rosalie seemed to me to occupy in

that romantic story the position of the square in the middle of the chess-board; she was at the very centre of interest and of truth; she seemed to me to be tied up in the clew; it was no longer an ordinary case of attempting seduction; there was in that girl the last chapter of a romance; and so, from that moment, Rosalie became the object of my attentions. By dint of studying the girl, I observed in her, as in all women to whom we devote all our thoughts, a multitude of good qualities: she was neat and clean, and she was fine-looking — that goes without saying; she had also all the attractions which our desire imparts to women, in whatever station of life they may be. A fortnight after the notary's visit, I said to Rosalie one evening, or rather one morning, for it was very early:

"Tell me all that you know about Madame de Merret."

"Oh, don't ask me that, Monsieur Horace!" she replied in alarm.

Her pretty face darkened, her bright color vanished, and her eyes lost their humid, innocent light. But I insisted.

"Well," she rejoined, "as you insist upon it, I will tell you; but keep my secret."

"Of course, of course, my dear girl; I will keep all your secrets with the probity of a thief, and that is the most loyal probity that exists."

"If it's all the same to you," she said, "I prefer that it should be with your own."

Thereupon she arranged her neckerchief, and assumed the attitude of a story-teller; for there certainly is an attitude of trust and security essential to the telling of a story. The best stories are told at a certain hour, and at the table, as we all are now. No one ever told a story well while standing, or fasting. But if it were necessary to reproduce faithfully Rosalie's diffuse eloquence, a whole volume would hardly suffice. Now, as the event of which she gave me a confused account, occupied, between the loquacity of the notary and that of Madame Lepas, the exact position of the mean terms of an arithmetical proportion between the two extremes, it is only necessary for me to repeat it to you in a few words. Therefore I abridge.

The room which Madame de Merret occupied at La Grande Bretèche was on the ground floor. A small closet, about four feet deep, in the wall, served as her wardrobe. Three months before the evening, the incidents of which I am about to narrate, Madame de Merret had been so seriously indisposed that her husband left her alone in her room and slept in a room on the first floor. By one of those chances which it is impossible to foresee, he returned home, on the evening in question, two hours later than usual, from the club to which he was accustomed to go to read the newspapers and to talk politics with the people of the neighborhood. His wife supposed that he had come home, and had gone to bed and to sleep. But the invasion of France had given

rise to a lively discussion; the game of billiards had been very close, and he had lost 40 francs, an enormous sum at Vendôme, where everybody hoards money, and where manners are confined within the limits of a modesty worthy of all praise, which perhaps is the source of a true happiness of which no Parisian has a suspicion.

For some time past Monsieur de Merret had contented himself with asking Rosalie if his wife were in bed; at the girl's reply, always in the affirmative, he went immediately to his own room with the readiness born of habit and confidence. But on returning home that evening, he took it into his head to go to Madame de Merret's room, to tell her of his misadventure and perhaps also to console himself for it. During dinner he had remarked that Madame de Merret was very coquettishly dressed; he said to himself as he walked home from the club, that his wife was no longer ill, that her convalescence had improved her; but he perceived it, as husbands notice everything, a little late. Instead of calling Rosalie, who at that moment was busy in the kitchen, watching the cook and the coachman play a difficult hand of *brisque*, Monsieur de Merret went to his wife's room, lighted by his lantern, which he had placed on the top step of the stairs. His footstep, easily recognised, resounded under the arches of the corridor. At the instant that he turned the knob of his wife's door, he fancied that he heard the door of the closet that I have mentioned close; but when he entered, Madame de Merret was alone, standing in front of the hearth. The husband naïvely concluded that Rosalie was in the closet; however, a suspicion, that rang in his ears like the striking of a clock, made him distrustful; he looked at his wife and detected in her eyes something indefinable of confusion and dismay.

"You come home very late," she said.

That voice, usually so pure and so gracious, seemed to him slightly changed. He made no reply, but at that moment Rosalie entered the room. That was a thunderclap to him. He walked about the room, from one window to another, with a uniform step and with folded arms.

"Have you learned anything distressing, or are you ill?" his wife timidly asked him, while Rosalie undressed her.

He made no reply.

"You may go," said Madame de Merret to her maid; "I will put on my curl-papers myself."

She divined some catastrophe simply from the expression of her husband's face, and she preferred to be alone with him. When Rosalie was gone, or was supposed to be gone, for she stayed for some moments in the corridor, Monsieur de Merret took his stand in front of his wife, and said to her coldly:

"Madame, there is someone in your closet?"

She looked at her husband calmly, and replied simply:

"No, monsieur."

That "no" tore Monsieur de Merret's heart, for he did not believe it; and yet his wife had never seemed to him purer and more holy than she seemed at that moment. He rose to open the closet door; Madame de Merret took his hand, stopped him, looked at him with a melancholy expression, and said in a voice strangely moved:

"If you find no one, reflect that all is at an end between us!"

The indescribable dignity of his wife's attitude reawoke the gentleman's profound esteem for her, and inspired in him one of those resolutions which require only a vaster theatre in order to become immortal.

"No," he said, "I will not do it, Josephine. In either case, we should be separated forever. Listen; I know all the purity of your soul, and I know that you lead the life of a saint, and that you would not commit a mortal sin to save your life."

At these words, Madame de Merret looked at her husband with a haggard eye.

"See, here is your crucifix; swear to me before God that there is no one there, and I will believe you, I will never open that door."

Madame de Merret took the crucifix and said:

"I swear it."

"Louder," said the husband, and repeat after me: 'I swear before God that there is no one in that closet.' "

She repeated the words without confusion.

"It is well," said Monsieur de Merret coldly. After a moment's silence: "This is a very beautiful thing that I did not know you possessed," he said, as he examined the crucifix of ebony encrusted with silver and beautifully carved.

"I found it at Duvivier's; when that party of prisoners passed through Vendôme last year, he bought it of a Spanish monk."

"Ah!" said Monsieur de Merret, replacing the crucifix on the nail. And he rang. Rosalie did not keep him waiting. Monsieur de Merret walked hastily to meet her, led her into the embrasure of the window looking over the garden, and said to her in a low voice:

"I know that Gorenflot wants to marry you, that poverty alone prevents you from coming together, and that you have told him that you would not be his wife until he found some way to become a master mason. Well, go to him, and tell him to come here with his trowel and his tools. Manage so as not to wake anybody in his house but him; his fortune will exceed your desires. Above all, go out of this house without chattering —"

He frowned. Rosalie started, and he called her back.

"Here, take my pass-key," he said.

"Jean!" shouted Monsieur de Merret in the corridor, in a voice of thunder.

Jean, who was both his coachman and his confidential man, left his game of *brisque* and answered the summons.

"Go to bed, all of you," said his master, motioning to him to come near. And he added, but in an undertone: "When they are all asleep, *asleep*, do you understand, you will come down and let me know."

Monsieur de Merret, who had not lost sight of his wife while giving his orders, calmly returned to her side in front of the fire, and began to tell her about the game of billiards and the discussion at the club. When Rosalie returned she found monsieur and madame talking most amicably. The gentleman had recently had plastered all the rooms which composed his reception-apartment on the ground floor. Plaster is very scarce in Vendôme, and the cost of transportation increases the price materially; so he had purchased quite a large quantity, knowing that he would readily find customers for any that he might have left. That circumstance suggested the design which he proceeded to carry out.

"Gorenflot is here, monsieur," said Rosalie in an undertone.

"Let him come in," replied the Picard gentleman aloud.

Madame de Merret turned pale when she saw the mason.

"Gorenflot," said her husband, "go out to the carriagehouse and get some bricks, and bring in enough to wall up the door of this closet; you can use the plaster that I had left over, to plaster the wall." Then, beckoning Rosalie and the workman to him, he said in a low tone: "Look you, Gorenflot, you will sleep here tonight. But tomorrow morning you shall have a passport to go abroad, to a city which I will name to you. I will give you 6,000 francs for your journey. You will remain ten years in that city; if you are not satisfied there, you can settle in another city, provided that it is in the same country. You will go by way of Paris, where you will wait for me. There I will give you a guarantee to pay you 6,000 francs more on your return, in case you have abided by the conditions of our bargain. At that price you should be willing to keep silent concerning what you have done here tonight. As for you, Rosalie, I will give you 10,000 francs, which will be paid to you on the day of your wedding, provided that you marry Gorenflot; but, in order to be married, you will have to be silent; if not, no dower."

"Rosalie," said Madame de Merret, "come here and arrange my hair."

The husband walked tranquilly back and forth, watching the door, the mason, and his wife, but without any outward sign of injurious suspicion. Gorenflot was obliged to make a noise; Madame de Merret seized an opportunity, when the workman was dropping some bricks, and when her husband was at the other end of the room, to say to Rosalie:

"A thousand francs a year to you, my dear child, if you can tell Gorenflot to leave a crack at the bottom. — Go and help him," she said coolly, aloud.

Monsieur and Madame de Merret said not a word while Gorenflot was

walling up the door. That silence was the result of design on the husband's part, for he did not choose to allow his wife a pretext for uttering words of double meaning; and on Madame de Merret's part, it was either prudence or pride. When the wall was half built, the crafty mason seized a moment when the gentleman's back was turned, to strike his pickaxe through one of the panes of the glass door. That act gave Madame de Merret to understand that Rosalie had spoken to Gorenflot. At that moment all three saw a man's face, dark and sombre, with black hair and fiery eyes. Before her husband had turned, the poor woman had time to make a motion of her head to the stranger, to whom that signal meant: "Hope!"

At 4 o'clock, about daybreak, for it was September, the work was finished. The mason remained in the house under the eye of Jean, and Monsieur de Merret slept in his wife's chamber. In the morning, on rising, he said carelessly:

"Ah! by the way, I must go to the mayor's office for the passport."

He put his hat on his head, walked towards the door, turned back and took the crucifix. His wife fairly trembled with joy.

"He will go to Duvivier's," she thought.

As soon as the gentleman had left the room, Madame de Merret rang for Rosalie; then, in a terrible voice, she cried:

"The pickaxe; the pickaxe! and to work! I saw how Gorenflot understood last night; we shall have time to make a hole, and stop it up."

In a twinkling Rosalie brought her mistress a sort of small axe, and she, with an ardor which no words can describe, began to demolish the wall. She had already loosened several bricks, when, as she stepped back to deal a blow even harder than the preceding ones, she saw Monsieur de Merret behind her; she fainted.

Anticipating what was likely to happen during his absence, he had laid a trap for his wife; he had simply written to the mayor, and had sent a messenger to Duvivier. The jeweller arrived just as the disorder in the room had been repaired.

"Duvivier," asked Monsieur de Merret, "didn't you buy some crucifixes from the Spaniards who passed through here?"

"No, monsieur."

"Very well; I thank you," he said, exchanging with his wife a tigerlike glance. — "Jean," he added, turning towards his confidential valet, "you will have my meals served in Madame de Merret's room; she is ill, and I shall not leave her until she is well again."

The cruel man remained with his wife twenty days. During the first days, when there was a noise in the walled-up closet and Josephine attempted to implore him in behalf of the dying unknown, he replied, not allowing her to utter a word:

"You have sworn on the cross that there was no one there."

In the great 'tec tradition of M. P. Shiel's Prince Zaleski, Baroness Orczy's The Old Man in the Corner, and James Yaffe's Mom — another armchair solution by the scintillating Miss Phipps

THE INCONGRUOUS ACTION

by PHYLLIS BENTLEY

DETECTIVE-INSPECTOR TARRANT coughed, then wriggled uncomfortably on Miss Phipps's new divan.

"I should like your advice on a small but delicate matter which has arisen in my district," he began with a harassed air. "Delicate because of the position of the person concerned."

"I don't want to hear it," snapped the little novelist from her favorite armchair. "I have no sympathy with anything of that kind."

Tarrant stared, astonished by so much severity from one whom he had learned to regard as soft-hearted. Outwardly Miss Phipps was just the same: since the success of her novel *The Crystal Ring* (founded on one of the detective's own experiences) her dress was perhaps a little more expensive and a little less bright, but her white hair was as untidy as ever and her face as pink, and she still wore the old-fashioned pince-nez which perched so crookedly on her nose. It struck him, however, that the chain which attached these aids to vision to the button on her chest looked thicker than of yore, and the button itself had changed from black to gold. Surely success had not penetrated her ample bosom and turned her heart to stone!

Tarrant was disconcerted, and he showed it.

"That doesn't sound like you, Miss Phipps," he said reproachfully.

"Nonsense! It's profoundly like me," snapped Miss Phipps. "A belief in justice — in the equality of all citizens before the law, regardless of their social standing — is, I hope, the foundation of my character."

"But this is such a dear old chap," protested Tarrant. "To charge him with such a disagreeable offense, after a life spent in the honorable discharge of his duties —"

"Ah, now you are speaking of something entirely different," said Miss Phipps sharply. "An apparent incongruity between character and action. If it is on those grounds you wish to present the case, I am willing to hear it."

"I'll present it on any grounds you like," said Tarrant, drawing out his notebook, "provided you'll listen." He found the page he was seeking, cleared his throat, and began. "The gentleman concerned," he said, "is the Reverend Septimus Lancelot, vicar of the parish of Brittlewick.

Brittlewick is a small, old-fashioned village in the country a few miles behind Brittlesea."

"That sink of littoral iniquity," muttered Miss Phipps, who had not yet recovered her temper.

"I beg your pardon? That flourishing seaside resort," countered Tarrant stolidly. "The Reverend Septimus has been vicar of Brittlewick for fifty years. He is now eighty. Throughout those fifty years he has had the respect and esteem not only of his parishioners but of all who know him."

"Why did he bury himself in a village at the age of thirty?" caviled Miss Phipps.

"He is a classical scholar," replied Tarrant, "who has devoted all his leisure to the preparation of a new edition of Lucretius. He has always supplemented his small income, until the last few years, by coaching young men, undergraduates or about to be undergraduates. These pupils sometimes resided in the Vicarage, sometimes in the White Doe, the Brittlewick inn. The Vicar has fulfilled his parish duties faithfully, and, as I say, won the respect and love of his flock."

"Love?" snorted Miss Phipps.

"Love," persisted Tarrant. "Brittlewick loves old Mr. Lancelot. It also loved his wife, until she died nearly twenty years ago, and it feels a personal pride in the achievements of his only son."

"Who is his son?" demanded Miss Phipps.

"Don't you know Philip Lancelot?" said Tarrant, astonished. "Lancelot of the *Daily Examiner?* He's said to be the most famous foreign correspondent in Europe — and what's more, the most honest."

"Oh, that man! He's just been writing some articles praising Sir Robert Nonsych's administration of some native population or other somewhere, hasn't he," said Miss Phipps, still in a disagreeable tone.

"That's Lancelot," agreed Tarrant. "But don't you know the story of his career? How he was reported missing, believed killed, after Dunkirk, and was really taken prisoner, and escaped through Holland into unoccupied France, joined the underground, and later —"

"My dear boy, of course I know," said Miss Phipps. "Everyone knows Philip Lancelot's career."

"But you said —"

"No, it was you who said," Miss Phipps contradicted him. "Do try to tell the story more straightforwardly, my dear boy, and leave our irrelevant matter. Have Philip Lancelot's war experiences anything to do with the present trouble?"

"Yes, they may have," said Tarrant. "Because, you see, the old Lancelots went through such a terrible time of strain when Philip was missing."

"A great many people went through times of strain in the War," observed Miss Phipps in a somber voice.

"But he was missing more than three years," contended Tarrant. "It killed his mother, you know. She believed to the last that Philip was alive;

but as soon as she died the Vicar gave up hope. It's said he read the burial service for his son, and he certainly gave away all his personal possessions."

"That wasn't giving up hope, my dear boy," commented Miss Phipps gravely, leaning further back in her armchair. "That was to hide his hope from the gods, to cheat them, you know — the classical equivalent of not tempting Providence."

"I don't know about that," said Tarrant, stubbornly. "He encouraged the girl Philip had loved to marry someone else, anyway. Curiously enough, it was that Robert Nonsych you mentioned just now. Lady Tabitha married him in 1944."

"Really!" said Miss Phipps, sitting up. "Now that *is* interesting. Who was Lady Tabitha?"

"Her family," said Tarrant, "have lived at Brittle Manor for a couple of centuries. Lady Tabitha was the youngest daughter. She and young Philip Lancelot had a boy and girl affair before the War; they rode together, wrote each other notes, and so on. Then later, while Lancelot was believed to be dead, the Manor became a nursing home and Captain Nonsych was sent there. She nursed him, and after some hesitation — on Lancelot's account, I suppose — married him. He had been a pupil at old Mr. Lancelot's in pre-war days. In fact, he was there, staying at the White Doe, at the outbreak of War — so old Ames the landlord told me — and he and Philip and old Ames's son all went off together to enlist."

"And what sort of people are Sir Robert Nonsych and his wife now?" inquired Miss Phipps.

"A bit stiff, but decent," replied Tarrant.

"Philip Lancelot's politics and Sir Robert's don't agree," mused Miss Phipps, "and Sir Robert took Philip's girl. I must read those articles again."

"Are you suggesting there's some hanky-panky about them?" demanded Tarrant indignantly.

"No, I am not," replied Miss Phipps with emphasis. "Firstly because England is England, secondly because the *Examiner* is the *Examiner*, and thirdly because Philip Lancelot is Philip Lancelot. I've read his articles for years, and I believe him to be a man of the most scrupulous integrity and fearless courage, whose work has international importance on account of his fastidious regard for truth and his ability to express it forcibly."

"In that case," said Tarrant with an air of triumph, "you'll be as sorry as I am if his father has either to be certified as dotty or charged with unlawful entering of premises."

Miss Phipps looked grave. "What exactly are the circumstances?" she asked.

"During the last fortnight," said Tarrant, "old Mr. Lancelot has been caught in more than a dozen houses where he had no business to be, examining their owners' property."

"Examining their property?" queried Miss Phipps.

"Turning over their books and papers, and so on," explained Tar-

rant. "In two other cases he called at a house and asked for a member of the household, who was out at the time; when told of this, he asked if he might come in and wait. Naturally, in view of his venerable appearance and his clerical dress, this was permitted, and he was shown into a room alone. In one house he was found, a few minutes later, wandering about in the back passage; in another, he opened the door of a room where other members of the family were sitting. They were naturally astonished, and talked a good deal about the incident after he had doddered off, for they had recognized him."

Tarrant paused for a moment, then went on. "All the places he visited were in Brittlesea, and he is pretty well known there by sight. He is a striking figure, very tall and thin, with silver hair and bushy eyebrows; nowadays he stoops a good deal, and is apt to be easily confused. But he's a great favorite everywhere; he reads the lessons as if he meant them, and preaches in a very kindly, simple way. He's really good, Miss Phipps, and I can't bear to think of charging him. But there's no end of gossip going about, and last Thursday came the climax."

"Yes?" Miss Phipps prodded.

"A grocer in a smallish way, who lives above his own premises, saw Mr. Lancelot slip through the shop and go upstairs. Now as bad luck would have it, the grocer had some money up there, waiting to be taken to the bank; and it also chances that he's not a churchgoer and doesn't know Mr. Lancelot. So naturally he ran after the old man, hauled him downstairs, demanded an explanation pretty roughly, and there was a scene in the shop. Mr. Lancelot stumbled and stuttered, wouldn't give his name or explain his presence, and grew angry in a pathetic sort of way. The grocer, seeing him such a decent-looking old chap, was perplexed as to what to do, when luckily in came his son, a lad in the twenties who works in the Brittlesea Municipal Library. The moment this boy saw Mr. Lancelot, he addressed him by name. So the grocer let Mr. Lancelot go at once; indeed, he took him to the terminus of the bus for Brittlewick, and saw him safely to a seat. And then, naturally enough, he asked his son how he knew the old man, and the son replied that they had had trouble with Mr. Lancelot at the library. So then the grocer came to the police — to stop the old man from getting into any more scandal, the grocer being a great admirer of Mr. Philip Lancelot's articles. The moment the scene in the shop got to people's ears, half a dozen reports came in of similar occurrences. They're still coming in," added Tarrant gloomily, "though as far as we can judge, he's stopped his strange goings-on since last Friday."

"Before we take up the library trouble," said Miss Phipps, who was now listening with the keenest interest, "tell me this: could you discover any common factor linking the houses old Mr. Lancelot visited?"

"I could not," said Tarrant positively, "though, believe me, I tried. They are not in the same district of Brittlesea. The people concerned do not belong to the same profession, or business, or religion, or political party, or club. They haven't the same level of income — though on the whole they are not among Brittlesea's wealthier citizens."

"Do their names, arranged chronologically, fall into alphabetical order?" suggested Miss Phipps.

Tarrant frowned and consulted his notebook. "No," he said with regret.

Miss Phipps sighed. "If there is no common factor," she began.

"Then poor old Mr. Lancelot is falling into his second childhood," concluded Tarrant. "And his son should be informed."

Miss Phipps exclaimed distressfully. "Perhaps the library incident may shed some light," she said.

"The Brittlesea Municipal Library," continued Tarrant, "is a very fine institution and very well run. There is a librarian, an assistant librarian, and five in staff — three young women and two young men. The number of readers registered there per thousand of the population is a high one, and regarded with pride by the Brittlesea Town Council. The library occupies the whole of a handsome building just behind the promenade; on the ground floor are the reading rooms and children's library; on the first floor come the main lending library and staff rooms. It is the lending library with which we are concerned. At the entrance to this stands a wooden enclosure, with counters on two sides; behind these counters are the assistants on duty. They check the books and readers in and out by means of tickets, and boxes holding these tickets stand on one of the counters. Is that clear?"

"Clear, though not comprehensive," said Miss Phipps. "But is it relevant?"

"Very," said Tarrant dryly. "For the Reverend Mr. Lancelot temporarily appropriated some of those tickets during the past two weeks."

"What!" exclaimed Miss Phipps. "Now that really is interesting. How did it happen?"

"Mr. Lancelot was not a registered reader at the library," began Tarrant.

"Naturally. He's a scholar with a specialized library of his own. Go on," said Miss Phipps impatiently.

"A reader must either be a Brittlesea ratepayer or secure a ratepayer's signature as guarantor," Tarrant went on. "Mr. Lancelot was not a registered reader until a fortnight last Monday, when he suddenly walked in, the minute the doors opened in the morning, and expressed his desire to become one. He was given the necessary forms to fill in, withdrew, returned half an hour later with the Rector of Brittlesea's signature, and was formally enrolled as a reader. Directly he received his tickets he entered the library and betook himself to one of the nonfiction bays. The Librarian, who knew him, felt honored by his presence, went over to

him, showed him round, and explained everything."

"How are the books arranged?" asked Miss Phipps.

"By subject," said Tarrant. "Under the headings of Science, Fine Arts, Literature, History, and so on. They have some sort of scheme by which certain numbers indicate certain subjects."

"Forgive me for interrupting, my dear boy," said Miss Phipps in a kinder tone, "but I must tell you that I believe you are overworking. Your appetite for detail is not what it was, and your detective skill will suffer in consequence."

"Mr. Lancelot spent the whole day wandering about the library," continued Tarrant, disregarding the interruption. "He was equipped with papers and writing materials, often consulted the catalogue, and made notes. The assistants received the impression that he was consulting every book included in a list which he had brought. The following day he spent in the same way. That night, the library was locked up, as usual, at 8 o'clock, and the staff went home. The caretaker, leaving the building rather later — you can understand that it takes time to lock up the various departments — was horrified to see light streaming from a window above his head. Blaming himself for negligence, he went upstairs and found the Reverend Septimus Lancelot in the lending-library enclosure, bending over the ticket boxes. He said he had been inadvertently locked in. The caretaker didn't quite believe him, took his name, and gently but firmly showed him out. The old man hasn't been near the library since. Next morning, however, a number of the tickets were missing from their boxes. They continued to be missing for a week, while the Librarian tried to interview Mr. Lancelot and failed to catch him, wrote letters to him but received no reply. Then last Friday morning, as Dorothy Ames mounted the bus for Brittlesea, the Vicar came up and handed her an open gardening basket, and asked her to give it to the Brittlesea Librarian, with his compliments. It contained the missing tickets."

"But who," said Miss Phipps, "is Dorothy Ames?"

"She's the granddaughter of Ames the publican at the White Doe," replied Tarrant. "Rather a minx, but a clever girl. They thought she had some chance of a scholarship to London University last summer, but she just missed it; so now she works at the Brittlesea Library."

"Was she disappointed?" inquired Miss Phipps.

"I don't know, I'm sure," replied Tarrant irritably. "Mr. Lancelot was disappointed on her account, I'm told — he had coached her. Not for a fee — partly for the girl's own sake and partly for her father's; he was in the same company as Philip. But the point —"

"You know, my dear boy," interrupted Miss Phipps. "I'm very uneasy about this case; very uneasy indeed. There's a whiff about it of —"

"Kleptomania," supplied Tarrant mournfully.

"Blackmail," concluded Miss Phipps, shaking her head. "I do hope I'm not right about it, but I'm afraid I am. Mr. Lancelot and I couldn't both be wrong."

"Blackmail?" gaped Tarrant.

"My dear boy," said Miss Phipps impatiently, "don't tell me you don't see the significance of poor old Mr. Lancelot's actions. They were a little exaggerated, certainly, but purposeful; there was method in his madness."

"I haven't," stated Tarrant, "the faintest notion of Mr. Lancelot's purpose."

"No? And shall I tell you why?" said Miss Phipps sternly. "In this case you have lacked a proper penetration into character. That I could forgive, for characterization is my job, not yours; but you have also shown a want of your customary thoroughness in detail. Those library tickets: what was their use?"

Tarrant hesitated. "I'm not quite sure," he said.

"Precisely," said Miss Phipps, nodding. "Allow me, then, to inform you. Every reader in a library of the kind you describe has a ticket bearing his name and address; every book in the library has a ticket bearing its title, the author's name, and the class number. The reader enters the library, selects his book, then presents it — with his reader's ticket — to the assistant at the 'Out' counter. The assistant removes the book ticket, clips it to the reader's ticket, and retains both; the reader then leaves with his chosen book. When the reader brings the book back, at the 'In' counter, he receives his ticket again and the book receives *its* ticket again. Now do you see the picture? So long as the book is out of the library, the two tickets remain together *in* the library. They are filed by date — for example, all the tickets for books issued yesterday are kept under yesterday's date. And each day's tickets are arranged under the number which indicates the book's subject. Is that clear?"

"Clear *and* comprehensive," said Tarrant dryly. "But is it relevant?"

"Very," replied Miss Phipps. "For this reason. The row of tickets provides at any moment a register of the names and addresses of persons who have library books in their possession."

'Well?" said Tarrant irritably.

"The names and addresses of persons who have certain particular library books can thus be ascertained."

"Well?"

"The names and addresses of persons who have library books in their possession whose titles figure on Mr. Lancelot's list —"

Tarrant sat up suddenly. "That's an idea," he said.

"Mr. Lancelot was looking for a certain book," continued Miss Phipps calmly. "First he looked in the library, but he did not find it."

"So he visited all those persons who, according to the tickets, had books on his list!" cried Tarrant.

"Precisely," said Miss Phipps.

"But why didn't he simply consult the librarian and get him to do the job properly, by post?" demanded Tarrant.

"Secrecy was evidently essential," said Miss Phipps. "Besides, the poor old man didn't know which book he was looking for."

Tarrant stared.

"But clearly that is so," said Miss Phipps impatiently, "since he consulted the tickets which contained many titles. If he knew the title of the single book he sought, he would have had to visit only one house."

"But if he didn't know precisely which book he needed," complained Tarrant, almost angry with perplexity, "why did he need it?"

"He didn't."

"Miss Phipps!" cried Tarrant, purpling. "Upon my soul!"

"He needed," said Miss Phipps clearly, "something which was *in* the book — shall we say, a letter?"

"A letter?"

"Yes, my dear boy," said Miss Phipps, "a letter. Shall we say, an indiscreet letter? Shall we say, a letter left in one of those books of young Philip Lancelot's which his father gave away during the War? You said, you know, that he gave away Philip's possessions. What more natural than to give his books to the fine Brittlesea library? Yes, a letter, I think, left in one of Philip's books. Shall we say, an indiscreet letter from Lady Tabitha? Then a mere schoolgirl; today the wife of a man whose administration Philip has just been publicly praising. Shall we say, perhaps, an undated letter from Lady Tabitha? Imagine the effect on Philip's reputation, and on Lady Tabitha's, of a sudden publication, at this particular moment, of an indiscreet note from Lady Tabitha to Philip, offering to meet him, perhaps, after a dance? Yes, I judge that is the kind of document, hidden away in a book, with which the poor old Vicar is so concerned."

"But why," began Tarrant, "why anticipate blackmail?"

"Oh, they aren't anticipating it," sighed Miss Phipps. "It's already begun. Lady Tabitha has already received a blackmailing communication stating that the writer has in his possession a letter saying so-and-so, which he means to send to the newspapers unless he receives a certain sum by a certain date. Lady Tabitha in a frenzy rings up Philip, whom she hasn't seen perhaps for years, and asks him how he could have been so stupid as to keep her silly schoolgirl notes, so mad as to lose one — obviously the postmark of the blackmailer was Brittlesea. And Philip, who hasn't kept her letters at all, racks his brains, and suddenly from out of the deeps comes a vague recollection. That day when War was declared, perhaps, and the fellows from the inn burst in on him before breakfast, and he stuffed Tabby's letter into the book he'd brought down from his bedroom; and then he went off to enlist and forgot all about it. Yes, that must be it. But which book was it? Philip can't remember,

but he writes to his father at once and tells him the whole thing, and implores him to try to trace the blackmailer and regain the letter. He can't come himself because, as usual, there's an international crisis; besides, secrecy is essential. Don't you see it now?"

"It's the merest guesswork," objected Tarrant thoughtfully.

"It fits the facts," retorted Miss Phipps.

"There isn't a jot of proof," contended Tarrant. "And even if there were —"

"There is a psychological proof," urged Miss Phipps, "which also serves to identify the culprit."

"Identify the culprit?" exclaimed Tarrant incredulously. "And even if it does —"

"Yes. The culprit must have had access to Philip's books," said Miss Phipps. "He must know the Lancelot story well enough to know who wrote the note to whom; who Philip is and who Tabitha was and who she is today. The culprit also needs money. Now what person mentioned in this case fulfils all those conditions?"

"I've no idea," said Tarrant blankly. "And even if I had —"

"That's the third time you've begun an objection," remarked Miss Phipps. "Let's hear it."

"It's this," said Tarrant. "Your hypothesis only fits the facts if Mr. Lancelot was acting sensibly. Now I cannot believe that he was himself during these events; to me it seems certain that he was — well, in his dotage."

"Nonsense!" said Miss Phipps cheerfully. "There's nothing at all wrong with dear Mr. Lancelot's brain; I should say, to the contrary, it's exceptionally sound."

"You really think that," said Tarrant, with some indignation, "even though he gave those tickets to Dorothy Ames? Implicating a young girl in his misdemeanors! A parishioner! To me that is so completely unlike the normal Mr. Lancelot that I can't believe he was really himself when he did it. No," said Tarrant, shaking his head emphatically, "the old chap must have lost his reason — temporarily, at least."

"As it stood, the action was utterly incongruous," observed Miss Phipps. "I'm glad that at least you noticed that. But in reality, my dear boy, people very rarely act out of character. Action is the product of character and circumstances. When an action appears incongruous, we must look for circumstances which remove the incongruity. Let us assume, therefore, that the Vicar's action was what you would expect it to have been — delicate, generous, and kind. In what circumstances could such an action be so? Now consider the conditions which we said the culprit must fulfil. *Dorothy Ames fulfils them all!* She knows the Lancelot story — has heard it from father and grandfather and the Vicar himself. She needs money passionately, now that she missed her scholarship, to set her on her University career. She has access to all Philip's books. Remember, too, that

the Vicar has coached her; presumably, therefore, she is studying the classics, and naturally she uses the books in the Brittlesea Library. In some Latin text of Philip's, unused all these years — for Brittlesea is not, you know, a seat of classical learning — she finds the letter. Old Mr. Lancelot, having checked up all Philip's books, having visited all the borrowers and found that none of them seemed guilty — he probably tested them with some key word — then guessed the truth. He's a wise old bird, as these simple, dreamy people often are. And so he gave Dorothy the library tickets, unconcealed, so that she would realize what he has been doing, and if she is guilty, know why; without a word to mar her moral façade, he gave her a chance to undo her wrong."

"The young minx!" exclaimed Tarrant. "And I saw her at the Brittle Manor Garden Fête only yesterday, laughing and talking to Mr. Lancelot. She told me she meant to try for a scholarship again next year, and the Vicar promised to coach her."

"But that's perfectly splendid, my dear boy!" cried Miss Phipps.

"Don't you see, that fête was probably the date and place appointed for Lady Tabitha to hand over the money — put it in a hollow tree, or something childish of that kind. But instead of that, Dorothy will try again to win what she wants by honest means, and the Vicar is willing to help her. Of course she's sent the fatal letter back to Lady Tabitha, and everything in the Brittle Manor Garden, though not yet quite lovely, is certainly on the mend."

"And what do I do about the Lancelot case?" grumbled Tarrant.

"Forget it," advised Miss Phipps.

"You're always right, Miss Phipps," said Tarrant, with a grin.

WINNER OF THE SPECIAL AWARD OF MERIT

Look what can happen in a single year to a writer just beginning his career: Two years ago Joseph Whitehill submitted a story to EQMM's Ninth Annual Contest. Joseph Whitehill had never had a story published. We accepted his contest entry, "The Day of the Last Rock Fight," and just before Christmas 1953 awarded it the Special Prize of $500 as the best "first story" submitted in our Ninth Annual Contest. Mr. Whitehill's first story was published in the June 1954 issue of EQMM. Then what happened? Joseph Whitehill submitted another story, this time to our Tenth Annual Contest. And this time, just before Christmas 1954, he won another prize — the Special Award of Merit, the second highest prize in last year's contest. So, in a single year, Mr. Whitehill jumped from having his very first story bought and published to having another story win the second highest EQMM award of the year . . . We mention these facts in the hope that many of our readers have a deep desire to write as well as to read, and to encourage you in your writing ambitions. What happened to Joseph Whitehill can happen to you. EQMM's editorial door is never closed to newcomers with the will and talent to become writers. We will help, we will continue to give special prizes to new writers — and if you keep The Case of Joseph Whitehill in mind, you will realize that the sky's the limit!

Mr. Whitehill's first story, "The Day of the Last Rock Fight," was the tale of a murder that took place in a private school for boys — for, as the author himself expressed it, "misfits and boys with emotional problems." It was an unusually sensitive and perceptive story to have been written by a beginner in the art of transforming words into emotions. Mr. Whitehill's new story, "Stay Away from My Mother," is also the tale of a boy — this time, a seventeen-year-old staying with his mother in Las Vegas while she is getting a divorce — or, as David Henry Wright III himself phrased it when asked how many fathers he has had: "We're out here now dumping the third."

In a single year Mr. Whitehill has made great technical progress. He has the courage to tackle a big story — the tragedy of divorce and broken homes, and what it means to the innocent victims, the children. Mr. Whitehill again reveals his sensitivity and understanding, and especially his percep-

tion of adolescent awareness; and his style grows in texture and tenderness.

Like so many others who have broken into print for the first time in the pages of EQMM, Joseph Whitehill is going places . . . It is our sincere determination to help him and all the other alumni and alumnae of EQMM to get to those "high places."

STAY AWAY FROM MY MOTHER

by JOSEPH WHITEHILL

DAVID HENRY WRIGHT III HAD found his Goliath in the form of Demin Costos, the owner of the Desert Paradise. David, like an adolescent bee which buzzes in angry frustration about a closed blossom, had thought of little else for two weeks except his noble loathing for the Greek, while the Greek, like the flower, paid no attention.

For a full generation now, acquaintances among the young people have been struck up beside, or in, turquoise-tile swimming pools while their parents have introduced themselves in the cocktail lounges. (For every swimming pool, there is at least one cocktail lounge.) In Newport or Miami, in Tucson or La Jolla, the process is much the same. In Mankind, even the slenderest similarity of circumstance or condition serves to mortar together those who are cast together, into a chaotic human riprap. In the cocktail lounges, those enclaves air-conditioned against the summer heat, each man knows with quiet pride that he can pay his own bill and, if he so chooses in a seizure of alcoholic largess, pay everyone else's bill, too. Down at the swimming pools, the tired young who squint at each other across the glittering, aseptic water know with their empirical wisdom that they are all equally caught in the same cotton candy muff and smothering helplessly in the paradoxes of their luxurious orphanhood. In Nevada, however, the difference or distinction is that usually just one parent is there in the cocktail lounge to represent her pool-tied offspring.

The pool at the Desert Paradise, six miles south of Las Vegas, is a truly impressive affair, shaped like a macrocosmic sputum pan of the sort used in hospitals to receive tooth-paste foam or, sometimes, blood. The diving tower is a polished brass truss shouldering up against the hot blue sky and leaning forward into a wind that does not blow; and sticking out from it is a coconut-matted, hickory tongue above and below which the young people may, for a few tenths of a second, find their hasty freedom in mid-air.

From where he stood on this high

board, David Henry Wright III could see his mother — his lovely, white-skinned mother — sitting below in the sand by the pool and talking to Demin Costos, the hairy inspiration of his hate. Contrary to her habit, she had not looked up once as David had climbed the tower, nor was she now waiting to watch him dive. As he looked down at her David thought about the gainer he was going to try; then he thought about what would happen if he faltered on his takeoff and cracked the back of his skull on the end of the board, and would she be sorry *then* that she had not been watching? David amused himself with these thoughts for a moment as he walked back to the root of the board to begin his takeoff.

Besides keeping an ineffectual watch over his mother, David had for half an hour been covertly eyeing another boy of about seventeen, his own age, who sat by himself with his feet in the water. He appeared unattached, and David envied him for his apparent insouciance and self-sufficiency. At last David, smug in his lustrous rich tan and smooth hairless legs and short brown crew cut, dove in a lazy jackknife (a safe jackknife) from the high board and swam over to the other boy, who was dabbling his toes thoughtfully in the water. The sitter was pale, and he had moles on his front and back. David surfaced with a porpoise-like expiration, rolled to his back, and coasted to the wall of the pool where the other sat.

"Hi," David said.

"Hello," the other answered.

David, all with one fluid motion like a merman, levered himself from the water and sat wetly on the tile curb. "Good pool, huh?" he said between his hands as he squeegeed the water off his face.

"I've got no eyes for all that chlorine," the one with the moles said dryly.

"It isn't as bad as some I've swum in. My name's David Wright."

"I'm Gary King. Glad to know you, David." They shook hands.

David looked across the pool to see whether she had noticed him, but his mother was lost in the mists of absorption, her eyes locked on the face of the eloquent giant, Demin Costos. David closed his eyes (damn that man!) then turned to his companion. "You just get here, Gary?" Because he always had trouble with names, David said "Gary" firmly, in purposeful fashion, to stamp it in his memory.

"Just got back. We've been down at Tiajuana for the bullfights for a couple of weeks."

. . . My God! Two whole weeks of bullfights, David thought. What a crummy way to kill two weeks. . . . "Where you from, Gary?"

"New York."

"I know a lotta people in New York. I get down there a lot."

"Where you from?" Gary King asked.

"Newton, Mass. But I go to Cranford Latin Academy."

"I just got out of Hinsdale Latin myself," Gary said.

"Well, I'll be damned! Our own hotshot rivals! Shake again. I won't hold it against you."

"Thanks for that," Gary said.

"You get up to the hockey game this year?"

"Yes. Were you there?"

"Sure. I was goalie. That's where I got this." David turned his leg so the smooth brown calf showed, and on it a three-inch purple scar.

Gary's voice broke in a squeak: "Oh, so *you* were the one! Small world. I wouldn't have known you without your pads. . . . You were quite a sight out there, bleeding all over the place and swearing at the ref. My date fainted. They had to come out and mop up the ice after you got carried back into the gym."

"I was fouled, boy."

"I should say you were. Otten did it. He really got his butt nailed to a tree after we got back down to school. Did you hear about that?"

"No," David said, pleased.

"They found out he'd filed a starting notch at the front of his skate. He nearly got bounced."

"Why, that son of a beachcomber. And he was so nice after he did it, too. He talked just like a good sport." David looked over at his mother, so she could see him when he was justly angry; but she was talking intently to the big man beside her, gesturing prettily to underline her words. David thought again, as he had before, that his mother's white bathing suit was too low in front.

The boys were silent for a bit. Then Gary asked, "Who is that girl I see you around with?"

David winced inside. "That isn't any girl. That's my mother."

"Your *mother!* Saints all! She's *beautiful.*"

"Thank you." What else could a guy say?

"Ah . . . how old would she be?"

David paused, wondering whether this was any business of Gary King's. Then he said pedantically, "This year she's twice as old as I am. I'm seventeen, so that makes her thirty-four."

"Wow!"

"Wow, what?"

"Nothing," Gary said hastily, "just wow."

"They say she looks twenty-five."

"Or younger. Why, she looks like your sister." Gary paused. "Has she got lots of money?"

. . . Well, you son of a snoop, David thought. Asking a bare-faced question like that. . . . "My Dad does. My first Dad, I mean. He's got eighteen million dollars." This figure was about three times the truth, but it was effective.

David could feel the envy in Gary's voice when the other said, "No kidding!" and did not know what to do with it.

Gary asked, "How many fathers have you had?"

"We're out here now dumping the third. I only met him once, last fall. He's a real crumb." David's voice was pityingly insolent.

"*Now*, how much does she have?"

"What?"

"You know. Money. How much?"

David scowled at him. "Damn it, man! I just met you five minutes ago, remember?" David looked across the pool at his beautiful, heedless mother. He added deliberately, as though sticking pins in her waxen effigy, "Not a dime. Not a lovin' dime. This last husband of hers, this Jepson guy, thought she had money. Boy, was he ever fooled. All she's got is alimony."

"That's too bad," said Gary, clucking kindly.

"Let's get off it, okay?" David was feeling the guilt of high treachery at being party to this incursive discussion. He shifted himself over to a new hot place on the tiles to dry the back of his sleek bathing suit.

"Okay, okay. I didn't think you'd be so sensitive about it."

"Well, who wouldn't be? A guy's mother and all."

"Men are supposed to be impersonal in these matters."

"Whadda you think I am, some kind of hotshot net-worth reporter?"

"Oh, don't be silly. I'm sorry I brought the whole thing up." Gary was blinking his weak eyes at the lowering sun, holding them open as long as he could, then closing them in weepy relief.

"Okay, then," David said, somewhat mollified.

Gary scooped up a little of the water at his feet and patted it across his shoulders. "She sure doesn't look anything like *my* mother," he said fervently.

"I thought we were going to get off it," David said.

"We are off it. We are now talking about *my* mother, bless her little rich heart. . . . You know, I had a chance to go to England this summer with another guy, but I couldn't go. You want to know *why* I couldn't go? I have to stay close to Mother."

"How come?" David asked. For a moment, however, David's attention was drawn by the sight of Demin Costos hunting for something in his mother's beach bag. This, to David, was arrant trespass. What business had the Greek in his mother's personal things? At length, after a little comical confusion inside the bag when Demin put his whole head in, the big man brought out Carolyn's cigarettes in a red-leather holder, and her gold lighter, and gave them to her. . . . Well, at least they didn't hold hands during the transfer. . . .

Gary King talked on: "Why? Because Daddy says so. She spends money. Man, does she spend money! She's a real character, she is. She has to come out here every summer for her hay fever. Or anyway, that's what she and her doctor friend say. I guess she has it pretty bad, at that. She stays inside the main lodge all the time."

"I don't guess I've seen her yet." David was caught by the interesting thought of having to protect someone from spending too much money. It did not occur to him that this paralleled his self-appointment as protector of *his* mother, guarding lest she spend too much of herself.

"You haven't been in there where the slot machines are, then. She spends the whole afternoon there. I'll tell you how to find her if you should ever want to. Just go into that room where the slot machines are and look for a little old girl that looks like a red-nosed reindeer, sort of. She'll have a wet Kleenex rolled up in her left hand and a white gardener's glove on her right hand, and she'll have a whole trayful of nickels in front of her. She only plays the nickel machines because I only give her twenty bucks every noon, and that has to last all day."

"Wait a minute. What's the white glove for?" David asked.

"I was hoping you'd ask that." Gary gave a loving chuckle. "That's because she says the handle of the slot machine gives her blisters. There! That's the kind of character *my* mother is." Gary paused, smiling kindly at the thought, and went on, "Gee, she likes money. Me too, I guess. It's good that rich people have money — they sure need it bad. The funny thing is that Daddy has decided I'm the only one he'll trust Mother with, and I've been stealing him blind for years. I made better than eight hundred dollars off him last year at school by phonying up my Co-op bills for clothes I never bought."

David's laughter strangled away to nothing in his aching throat when, with ferret-bright eyes, he saw the hairy giant sitting by his mother laugh hugely at something she said.

Gary noticed his preoccupation with the tableau across the pool and said, "I see your mother and *El Griego* get along fine."

"*El Griego?* You mean the Greek? Is that what they call him?"

"Aye. That means 'The Greek' in Spanish. He's quite a man around these parts. He's been running this place ever since before we started coming here, and I think Mother is the only woman that never fell in love with him. Her hay fever, you know."

David's words rushed out. "That damn Greek. I wish he wouldn't sit so close to her." David knew as he spoke that he was forgetting his manners.

"Boy, you better not let him hear you talk like that." Gary looked at David in awe. "He's a real tough one. He even shot a man two summers ago in the Game Room. The guy said the roulette table was crooked and went after the croupier with a broken beer bottle, and *El Griego* shot him right there in front of everybody. I was in the can, so I missed it. It all came out all right, though. The guy was a Las Vegan and didn't belong in there anyway. Somebody told me Costos paid the guy's hospital bill and kept his family till he could go back to work."

"Real decent type," David said, with gall in his throat.

"Yeah," Gary said, not catching the irony. "All the help love him. They think he made the world."

"Or all the women in the world?"

"Oh, I don't know about that.

He's got a wife and a raft of kids down in La Jolla. But you know, he's the only guy I ever saw that really carries a gun all the time. But *all* the time. When I was little, he used to take it out and let me look at it. Look at the pocket of the beach jacket hanging over the back of his chair. That's it — that flat place."

"What's he scared of?"

"I dunno. They handle an awful lot of money around here. I guess he's just protecting the customers' interests. Or maybe you're right. Maybe it's husband insurance."

As if on cue Demin Costos, *El Griego*, stood up and waved to the boys, throwing them a great white grin. He stood like a cylindrical colossus in the sand, a brown giant in a white breechcloth, his enormous chest matted with black hair — hair that even wandered up to his heavy shoulders to become primordial epaulets. The only fault David could find was that the black, curly hair on Costos's head was thinning, and he acknowledged to himself that this was a petty fault indeed. David wanted badly to look away, but could not, as Demin gave his square hand to Carolyn when she started to rise from her sun-pallet. David flinched when he saw his mother, his own *mother*, take that proffered hand in both of hers and put all her weight on it in a laughing tease. Even at this distance, he could plainly see that her eyes were half closed into pleasure-slits. David's arm twitched involuntarily when Costos lifted his mother one-handed and held her dangling there a moment in clear air until she dropped her legs and stood by herself. For all the effort he had shown, *El Griego* might have been lifting her beach bag.

"That's disgusting," David said as he grinned and waved goodbye to the pair across the pool. The grin felt as if it were made of stiff, dry paint. "Just disgusting." Abruptly he slid into the water and began a lunging, shoulder-powered crawl toward the end of the pool. There he executed a quick roll-turn and came back, knowing as he swam that he looked good — like a trained swimmer. He flipped out of the water at Gary's side, and when he had cleared his eyes he looked around the pool to see whether any of the girls were watching him. None were. He said to Gary, "What you got on tonight?"

"Not a thing."

"I know a girl that's got a sloop over on Lake Mead," David said. "She's crazy for sailing."

"What's she like?"

"Sort of a pig, I guess."

Gary pursed his lips. "Is she good for anything else but sailing?"

"Not really."

"I guess I don't like sailing very much, then. I better stick around Mama. She might win something. Her horoscope says today is dandy. Well —" Gary grunted as he rose stiffly. "See you around. And look . . . it's none of my business, but if I were you I'd keep my opinions of *El Griego* to myself. What cabana you in?"

"Twenty-six. But we lock up our

jewelry at night, though." David had meant this for a joke, but he saw immediately from Gary's face that it had flown foul. Gary drew himself up as though called to attention, nodded, and walked away toward the men's dressing room. David half rose to follow and apologize, but the sight of Gary's unapproachable back made him sit down again, hating himself and his trigger tongue.

In that part of David Wright's childish cabalism which still remained in him there was the recurring alchemical formula that by exerting his will he could get up and move away from a place and leave behind whatever bad thing in himself he chose to abandon. Thus, he now rose, dried himself, and, willing it so, dropped the towel with which he had wiped off both his wetness and his shame, and sauntered away.

The fiery hot tiles of the pool boundary burned the soles of his feet, but his face was a mask of martyred blandness; by denying the importance of pain you denied the pain itself. On the long walk up to the cabana which he shared with his mother, he trod flatfooted and heavily on the hot sharp gravel, enjoying and keeping to himself the agony in his tender feet. Halfway to the cottage, he deliberately brushed his leg against the spears of a bordering yucca plant and went on without pausing to look down.

Only when he had reached the trellised door of the cabana, where the hardy ivy shaded the little porch, did he look at his stung leg, turning it from side to side the better to see the comb of red scratches and the little trickles of blood from their grosser ends. Then he knocked softly on the door in their pattering code rhythm and his mother let him in. She was in her white slip, the one with the lace around the top, and she was brushing her shining black hair with one hand while holding the door with the other. "Hi!" she said.

"Hi. What's for drinking?" In the cool dark of the rustic little living room she looked to David like an angel, like a *mestiza* angel put down from a generous heaven into this place of foot-cooling wood floors and soothing goatskin rugs.

"Tom Collinses." She handed him his and then she saw his bloody leg. "Where in the world did you get that?"

"Cactus by the path."

"Here, let me see."

He put his foot on a cowhide stool and watched the broad, strong curve of her back as she bent over to look.

"It looks worse than it is," she said, straightening. "The first-aid kit is in the cabinet in the bathroom." Then she went back into her bedroom.

Huh, he thought, left standing alone. That's all a bad wound means to you, is it? Just go and get the first-aid kit and tend to it yourself, huh? Okay, fine, I will.

She called out to him as he stood there, "Get that wet suit off, sport. You'll drip."

He went into the brown-tiled bath-

room and, after wiping off his leg with a wet cloth, shucked his skin-tight suit and dropped it behind the glass door of the shower stall. He looked with pleasure into the mirror at his white hips. His tan always showed up best immediately after coming in from the pool, while his eyes were still unaccustomed to the dark. "What's all this 'sport' business?" he asked through the open door of the bathroom. "You're getting to talk just like that Demin Costos. That's what he always calls everybody — 'sport'."

"Don't you like it? I didn't think you minded. It sounds cute."

"Cute, shmute," he muttered to himself. He wrapped a towel tightly about his waist and tucked in the corner so it stayed on. Then he took his sweating drink and carried it into his mother's bedroom.

As he lay down on her bed, Carolyn said, "Don't get blood on the spread."

"It's stopped bleeding." He lay back with his head on her pillow, sipping his drink and watching his mother make up. This was the time of day, if there was any at all, that he most looked forward to. There was a vesper air of peace about it which made his mother seem very, very close to David. Sometimes they talked of the day past and the evening to come; or they talked of nothing at all special, just for the fun of talking in their peculiar privacy.

She put the brush down, fluffed her hair behind to finish it, and began wiping on the liquid powder she wore. "Okay, sport, if you won't be a sport about 'sport,' then I'll not call you 'sport' any more — sport," she said, looking at him mischievously in the mirror.

David laughed weakly on the bed until the ice tinkled in his glass. "Wow!" he said. "I wish old Prof London could've heard you say that. He was always giving me the business in English Two about patterning my speech habits on those of my chawming mothah!"

His mother began to laugh, too. She dropped her make-up cotton and rested her wrists on the glass edge of the dressing table with her hands gracefully limp, and laughed. His mother's laugh was to David the most delightful of her ways. When she laughed at something they shared in their special privacy, she abandoned whatever else occupied her and gave herself wholely to the fun of it. David watched her shoulders shake, and he knew as he lay there grinning that there was not a more beautiful pair of shoulders in all the world.

When the laughter had passed, leaving behind it the warm, wet-eyed limpness, she took up her work again and asked David, "Was that a new boy I saw you with?"

"Yeah."

"Is he nice?"

"What a question! How do I know if he's nice?"

"It's just a simple-minded mother's question, dear. All mothers ask it."

"He seems fairly bright. He's rich."

"Umm. What's that got to do with it?"

"What?"

"You say he's bright, then right away you say he's rich. Is he bright because he's rich, or is he bright in spite of being rich? Or is he a different kind of bright because of or in spite of his being rich?" His mother poised the tiny, toothbrush-like mascara applicator and looked at David gravely.

David was surprised and uncomfortable at this quick series of questions. What had suddenly become of their togetherness? "Gosh, Carolyn, *I* don't know. The things aren't connected, I don't think. He's bright and he's rich, that's all."

"Like I am stupid and poor, maybe?"

"Aw, that's not fair. You're not stupid, and — and besides, *I've* got money. Or I will have when the trust comes around. And you'll have all of that you want."

"See? To you it's better to be rich than poor." She was silent a moment as she carefully did the outer corners of her eyes, then she said, "You've picked up something somewhere, and seriously I don't like it. I haven't said anything about it before because I thought I might be imagining it. Seems to me that some of the dirty part of the high tone of your high-toned school has wiped off on you. Too many snobby little boys always talking about money. Let me tell you this: Neither you nor your pals know the first *thing* about money."

David was aghast at this sudden attack. "Hell, all I said was — Oh, skip it."

His mother said, "You don't like Demin Costos, do you?"

"Cripe! What's *that* got to do with it?"

"I'm only asking."

David took a deep breath and set his lips. Then he said, "Did you know he's married?"

Carolyn swung around on the stool to face him. "Of course I know he's married. I also know he has four fine children, and I know their ages, and when they had chicken pox, and what they do with boxtops, and how many letters they write their Daddy every week." She was breathing heavily, and David could not keep his eyes away from the open valley between her breasts. "I also know he's Greek, and I know he's the finest man I ever met, and I know right now, right this minute, that I'm going to have dinner with him and his friends tonight. He asked me to this afternoon, and I told him I'd let him know after I talked to you about what you were going to do. I have now talked to you." She swung back to face the mirror. "You'd better be dressing, Mister. I'm almost ready, and we're due in the Lodge for cocktails."

Stunned, David rose and went to his bedroom where he began poking blindly through his drawers for underwear and a shirt. He straightened as she called in a silvery voice, a voice that said everything was all right again, "What are you wearing?"

He tried to keep his great relief out of his voice. "I dunno. What do you think?"

"You're a perfect doll in the palm beach and the navy blue shirt."

"Okay."

Demin Costos, freshly shaven and powdered, and dressed in his tuxedo, was waiting for them at the bar when David and his mother came in. "Just look at you two beautiful people!" he said warmly; and, with an arm around each, he led them to the corner booth. Across David's shoulders Demin's arm felt as though it weighed a hundred pounds; it threw his walk into an embarrassing, trammeled limp. When they reached the table, David tried to pull it out for his mother as he had seen the clever waiters do, but it stuck and nearly upset. "Here," Demin said, and he slid the table out neatly. David hesitated, hoping to get a chance to push it back in place, but Demin nodded to him with a grin, so David slid in impotent shame into the booth beside his mother.

Demin pulled a chair over and spun it around backwards with one hand and sat astride it. It creaked under his weight. Demin looked smilingly at each of them a moment, then asked, "What're you drinking? No, I remember. Tom Collins. I mixed them myself, the ones I sent down to you." He beckoned to the waiter standing by the bar. "Three Tom Collins, Ramón, with the real gin, okay? An' tell that organ player to stop going bumpa-bumpa on them foot pedals."

After the waiter left, Demin said to David and Carolyn, "That organ player, he's all right. He don't drink anything but Seven Up because of his ulcer, but he's just nuts about that bumpa-bumpa business with the foot pedals. You let him play for two hours without saying anything to him and he's got the bass turned up till it shakes the glasses on the bar. Just like an earthquake. Makes the joint feel flimsy." They laughed, then Demin launched into an animated description of the important people he and Carolyn were going to have dinner with.

David sat quietly through this, smiling and nodding when it seemed necessary, sipping his Tom Collins and tasting, not lime juice, but the peculiar brassy flavor of his hate for this man. But when *El Griego* turned his attention to David, the boy was obliged to put away his corrosive reveries and pay attention.

"I saw you swim down at the pool this afternoon," Demin said.

"Uh — it's a swell pool."

"You swim good all right, but you swim collegiate. What are you, Harvard?"

"I — I'll be a freshman next year."

"They'll like you on their team, I betya. But you waste too much fizz when you swim."

. . . What the hell do you know about swimming, Greek? . . . "How so?"

"It's in your legs. You go along like eggbeater. You know which is power stroke?"

"Well, n-not exactly."

"It's the stroke your leg makes going *up*. Toward the *top* of the water.

Other one, the one going down, is just to get your leg back down to where it can make another power stroke, see?"

"I think so."

"Looka here." Demin turned his hand palm up and wiggled his index finger. It was thick and long and powerful. "There is a leg, see?" To David, it looked terrifyingly like a leg. "When the leg is straight and coming to the top it has all this push face here. Plus bottom of the foot, 'cause you are pointing toe. Okay? Now, coming down again the knee bends a little, *so!* And the ankle bends frontward — so. This makes the leg small to go through the water and not slow you up. You try this, you'll see."

"All right."

Demin put his leg-finger alongside his nose. "Hey! I gotta idea. I work all night, see. The place closes at 3, then I do books till the sun comes up, then I have a swim and go to bed. Mama, okay if sport here comes down to the pool at sunup?"

David tried to signal *no* to his mother, but she was lost in her wonder at this man Demin. David did not find her foot with his soon enough, and she nodded dreamily to Demin.

"Okay. Big deals. You be down there about a quarter to 5 and we'll make you Harvard's choice in an hour! Okay?"

"That's fine," David said, trapped.

Just then Demin looked down the lounge toward the door and said, "Uh-oh. They're here." When he reached suddenly for his pocket David, in a flash of blind panic, thought the giant was going for his gun. David shrank against his mother.

Demin gave David a quizzical look as he brought from his pocket a folded pad of money. The pad had red rubber cement along one end, and the money was put up like scratch paper. "Here." Demin tore off a twenty-dollar bill and pushed it to David. "Have a nice dinner and play the machines. Carolyn and I got to go. Company's come."

Fuzzily David said, "Thanks a lot, Mister Costos."

It was still dark outside when David was awakened from his fitful, troubled sleep by the yipping laughter of coyotes out on the desert. In his dream, the money-mad Gary King had been laughing at him.

David had gone to bed early, having eaten and gambled away the whole twenty dollars Demin had given him. After the money was gone, he realized he should not have taken it at all, for he smothered now in the ultimate ignominy of having drunk at his enemy's table.

David looked at his watch in the shaft of cold light from the three-quarter moon in the black sky. Four o'clock. He rolled his head from side to side on the pillow just as he used to do for solace when he was a little boy. Left right, left right, left right. Shake up the blood. *Wake up!* Oh, now why wake up this early? There is an errand to do — a chore to be

done. . . . *Oh, yes, the pool.* . . . Mother, are you home? Yes, she is home. Finally. At long last. *At 2 o'clock!* That was the time the beast brought her back. Left right, left right. Oh, the two of them in their whispers and the one light in the living room; the friendly dim light I, David, left burning so she could find her way when she came home. The whispers — then all at once no whispers at all, for instead comes the not-sound of two people holding their breaths together — then the smiling whispers again. *Kissing*, is it?

Is it?

Thus, for the past two hours David had lain writhing across the madline parting sleep from waking as the figure of the Greek, *El Griego*, trod like a giant specter through the hollow halls of his mind. Now a beast, now a sentient brain, *El Griego* slipped greasily and hairily through successive metamorphoses, laughing and grinning; easily lifting David's whitely naked mother in one fond square hand while David, his arms bound hard by manners and his feet shod with lead, had stood by watching, squirming, yet nodding to them that it was perfectly all right, go ahead — yes, perfectly all right, go ahead, go ahead.

David took a deep breath to stifle a cry he felt rising, and swung his legs to the floor. His hands trembled as he laced his shoes, for wearing shoes without socks had always frightened David. He had several times observed that the poor often did it, so now, needing in some inchoate way to submerge in the sticky strange revulsion inside him, he wore no socks.

Clad in pajamas, he stood for some minutes leaning against the jamb of his mother's door, looking in at her. In the cold loom of moonlight which came through her window from the desert outside he could just see the white glow of her bare shoulder and the black tangle of her hair against the pillow. She was quiet. A faint, mixed scent of cologne and gin hung in the still air of her room.

When David felt the tears welling in his eyes, he turned sharply and tiptoed across the dark living room. He fumbled on the coffee table until he found a cigarette and the heavy silver lighter he had given his mother. He closed his eyes tightly as he lit the cigarette so that the bright flame would not blind him. Then he silently opened the front door and went out into the clean predawn chill of the desert.

Walking down the long gravel path to the pool, David sensed the excited weakness in his legs, and his strides felt stumpy and inelastic. He wished he had worn his robe against the cold.

The water of the pool was black and still, and it was hard then to believe that people dared to swim in such peril even when the bright sun shone. From where he stood at the edge, looking down into the polished darkness, he saw floating on the surface the fading lights of the planets and the black silhouette of his head

against the near-black sky. There must be animals, he thought, that live in pools at night and hide beneath the drains by day. To the eye the surface of the water seemed glassy quiet, but at intervals David heard clearly a hushed lapping noise as a little water spilled into the overflow trough. He cautiously bent and dipped his hand into the water and drew it back in fright. It was *hot!* He retreated from the edge and stood half turned, watching rigidly as the ripples he had started spread across the water, making the planets dance.

He threw his cigarette hissing into the water, wiped his wet hand on his pajama leg, and walked, shivering and dizzy, to a hiding place in the gloom under the sunshade. He curled up on a canvas-covered chaise longue, pulled over him a quilted sun pad, and thus began his vigil.

It seemed afterward that the day had broken suddenly — he may have slept — for when he looked up, the sky was bright and the pool had turned to a friendly blue. And Demin Costos was there, standing by the pool in a white terrycloth robe.

As David watched, peeping over the back of the chaise longue, *El Griego* loosened the robe and let it slide from his wide shoulders. David's eyes opened in horrified shock to see that Demin had worn nothing under the robe. Holding the robe by the collar, the big man let it down gently to the walk. It hung taut as it went down until the pocket was on the tiles, then it was limp, and Demin dropped the rest of the robe with a little toss. *El Griego* poised naked on the edge of the kidney-shaped pool and looked about him, then he lunged into the air and fell like a tree into the water. He swam with a heavy rolling motion, stirring little froth but leaving a solid fast wake, heading down the pool away from David's end.

. . . . So — he *has* got the gun. Well, okay . . . . If the Greek had come unarmed, David had been prepared to sneak back unnoticed to the cabana and pretend later he had overslept. But now the matter was all arranged for him and for the Greek.

David came out of hiding and walked to the Greek's fallen robe and stood astride it with his hands on his hips, watching the swimmer. When Demin reached the shallow end he stood up thigh deep in the water, wiping his eyes clear; then he saw the pajama-clad boy standing at the other end. Demin waved a heavy arm and called, "Hallo! I t'ot you was still asleep!" Then he dove and swam under water toward David.

Quickly, David bent and slipped the pistol from the robe pocket and straightened up again, holding the gun behind him with both hands. Coming toward him underwater Costos looked like a bulky, lazy shark. He surfaced and rolled at mid-pool directly before David.

"Come on in and we get to work!" cried Demin Costos.

David stood still, legs astride, and

his arms behind him. His finger found the safety button at the front of the trigger guard, and he pushed it. "Damn Greek!" he said, barely audibly.

"What? I got water in my ear." Demin was treading water.

"Damn Greek!" David shouted.

"So okay. Whatsa matter?"

"Stay away from my mother!"

Demin roared with laughter. "Oh, you poor kid. Boy, don't you look funny. You look like Ozymandias. 'Look on my works, O ye mighty, and despair!' What's got into you, boy?"

"You stay away from my *mother!*" David almost screamed the word.

Demin's face darkened, and he began an easy breast stroke toward David. He talked as he swam. "It's time you grew up, boy. I like Carolyn. I like her fine and she likes me, and everything is hunkydory because I love my wife like nobody else on earth, and my little kids, too." His voice was low and even, and all trace of his Greek accent was gone. He swam closer. "Carolyn and I are friends is all . . . . And if it makes you feel any better, buddy, I was born in Chicago, not Greece."

"You *kissed* her."

"All right. And?"

"And *this!*" David brought the pistol around, where Demin could see it.

"Why, you crazy mixed-up kid!" Demin held to the edge of the pool with one hand and pointed to his robe with a long, hairy, sinewy arm. "Put that thing back in the pocket where it belongs."

The arm looked to David like a serpent. "No." He aimed the gun with both hands and, just as Demin heaved toward him, David fired. The roar of the gun slatted drily between the walls of the pool. Demin Costos disappeared in a flurry of water, and David leaned over to see whether he had hit him. When the surface of the water calmed, he could see beneath it a blossoming parachute of gray-red blood; and as David stared down, the Greek slid out from under it paddling feebly with one hand and using the other to cover the place in his side where the bubbles were escaping. He made it halfway across the pool under water before David saw the great body relax and sink and saw the silvery lungful of air roil its way to the surface.

David tossed the gun into the water and trotted away up the path to get back in bed.

8:46 A.M. The news is out. The staff of the Desert Paradise has partly recovered from its paralysis of grief and is beginning to function once more. Jesus Ramón Gonzales, the headwaiter, comes down the path to the pool; he is carrying a menu under his arm, on the back of which he himself has lettered a notice. He strings a chain across the end of the path at the pool and hangs his sign carefully in the center of the chain. The sign reads: *The Pool Will Be Not Open Today.*

9:23 A.M. Mrs. Carolyn Wright Miller Jepson and her slim, tanned son, David Henry Wright III, enter the gloomy dining room for breakfast. Someone has forgotten to turn on the lights in the wagon-wheel chandeliers which are slung from the ceiling. Mrs. Jepson speaks to the waitress: "What's the matter with everybody today? Everybody acts like they're hung over."

The waitress, Felicidad Montoya, has tears in her dark eyes, but her face is a mask. "*Perdímos el hombre mas grande del mundo.*"

"*Quién?*"

"*El Griego.*"

"No. No. No. *No.*"

10:22 A.M. In the open-air *remada* a little woman with a red nose is talking to a uniformed policeman who wears tight blue jodhpurs and shiny black puttees: "Yes, Officer, my name is Rosa King. (Sniff) This is my son, Gary. I suppose it *was* the shot I heard at 5 o'clock. (Sniff) It woke me up so I used the nebulizer and went back to sleep."

10:37 A.M. Walter Morrison, the desk clerk, answers the telephone at the switchboard and hears: "Hello, Walt? Are you there where you can see the reservation chart? Well, move out the people in Twelve. Mrs. Costos will be in by 2 o'clock with all the kids. . . . Anything new?"

10:45 A.M. In the bar, which opened early this morning, a fat woman is heard saying: "Well, my dear, did you ever hear of such a thing? Just look at that bartender. I believe he's actually *giving* those drinks to the Mexicans. They're just the help. I thought it was against the law to give Mexicans liquor. Or maybe it was Indians. Well, either way. . ."

11:02 A.M. "David, did you swim with Demin this morning?"

"No. I overslept."

"I heard you cry out in your sleep twice, but when I got in to you, you had gone back to sleep."

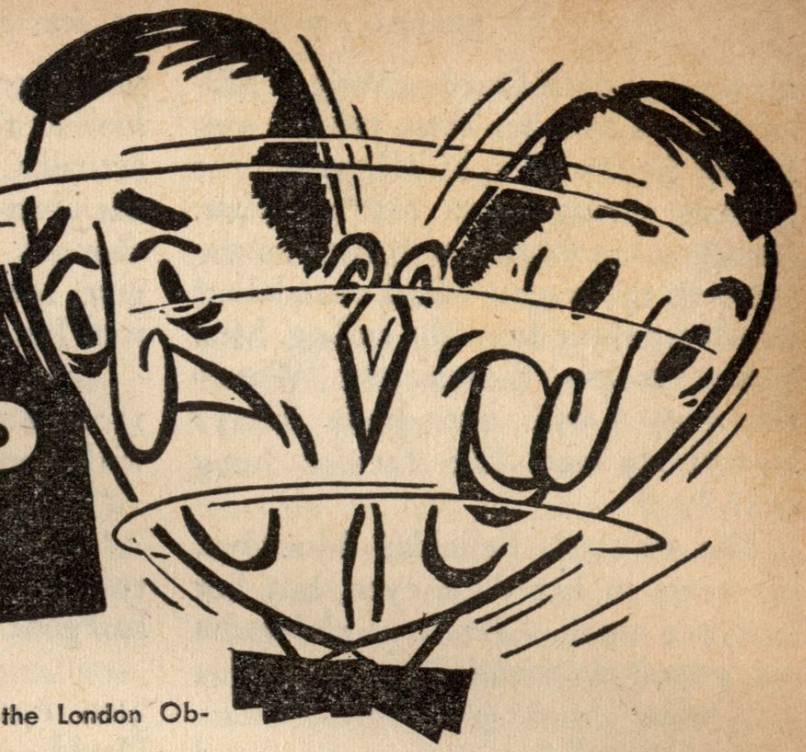
3:00 P.M. "Look at that woman, David. And look at those children, how well-behaved. Look around you, David, at how many people loved that man."

3:14 P.M. "Carolyn — Mother — can I borrow the car?"

3:56 P.M. . . . . Look how carefully I drive. I'm not like the rest of those wild kids. . . .

4:25 P.M. At the Las Vegas Municipal Police Station, Sergeant Hopewell puts his head in the door of the office of Lieutenant Cronin and says, "Hey, remember that call from the Desert Paradise this morning? From some kid named King that we thought was just nervous? Well, the joke's on us. The other kid he was talking about — the one this King said had a big red on for Costos — this kid is sitting out front now. He says he wants to talk to somebody. How about you talking to him?"

The Un-Strange Case of the TWO HEADED MAN



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