ELLERY QUEEN'S MYSTERY MAGAZINE

STEVE ALLEN

see stories pages 3 and 11

Erle Stanley Gardner

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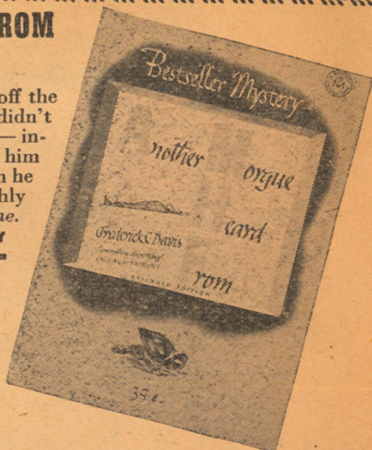

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At the very last minute, just before going to press, we changed the contents of this issue in order to include an unusual novelty — a detective story set against the background of one of television's most popular programs, The Steve Allen Show — with Steve Allen himself a character in the story!

It was a lucky hunch all along the line. O. H. Leslie conceived the idea and wrote the story. We read it and liked it. We then sent the original manuscript to Mr. Allen, for his opinion and approval, and Steve wrote that he "found the story very interesting and enjoyed it very much." Needless to say, we are deeply grateful to Steve Allen for permitting us to publish this TV-'tec scoop in EQMM.

And that isn't all by way of surprise . . . Just as soon as you have finished "Alibi on the Steve Allen Show," you will have an opportunity to read one of Steve Allen's own short stories — but more about that on page 11.

Here, then, is the first half of our double surprise . . . and happy reading!

ALIBI ON THE STEVE ALLEN SHOW

by O. H. LESLIE

THE NBC PAGE WAS SORRY. AFTER all, it wouldn't look right, would it? I mean, showing favoritism and all that — even to a lady with such a nice smile as Mrs. Edna Loomis. First come, first seated. That was the rule.

"It's the first time I've been down here," Mrs. Loomis said charmingly. "I've been watching the show on television for years. He's wonderful, isn't he? Steve Allen, I mean."

"Everybody likes Mr. Allen," the page replied, beaming.

"I thought it would be such a thrill — I mean, getting an aisle seat, and maybe being interviewed. You know, when he comes down into the audience the way he does. You see, my husband is watching tonight, and maybe my folks back in Detroit —"

"You've got a good chance," the page reassured Mrs. Loomis. "Not many people in front of you."

"I hope so," she said. Mrs. Loomis blinked at him — she was a coquettish forty — and the young man reddened and moved down the line.

When the doors opened, her de-

termined march brought her to the aisle seat she wanted. She sat down triumphantly, and watched the theatre fill up. A half dozen boy scouts, in full regalia, took the seats directly in front of her. A woman in a velvety robe that barely covered the sleek satin bathing suit she was wearing plunked behind her, giggling with expectation. Mrs. Loomis recognized a few of the show's "regulars" — the faithful visitors who made the *Tonight* program a five-night-a-week haven.

The studio clock said five minutes past eleven. Mrs. Loomis checked her own watch. George would be absorbed in the eleven o'clock news now. It was easy to picture him, slouched disgracefully into his chair, shirt-tail flopping over his creaseless trousers, sucking on the unlit dottle at the bottom of his pipe. She shuddered at the mental image, and reached up to adjust the bobbing sparrow on her hat.

The sound of applause brought her eyes to the stage. The musicians were taking their places; a good-looking man with a beard, Skitch Henderson, was tinkling *Chopsticks* on the piano, to the inexplicable amusement of the trumpet player. Mrs. Loomis laughed, too, but not at the antics on stage. She was thinking of George again — George and his nice "hot glass of milk" — George and his unlovely snores as he dozed inevitably before the Steve Allen Show faded from the screen at one o'clock. *Poor George*, she thought, almost affectionately; *I guess nobody really appreciates someone until after they're dead . . .*

A man was walking around the stage with earphones on his head, trailing a long wire behind him. He was saying things hurriedly to the cameramen, and making strange gestures towards the wings of the theater.

Then the show began.

Allen played something fast and elaborate on the keyboard in front of him. Mrs. Loomis joined in the applause that followed, but her thoughts were on the audience messages piled on the top of the piano. Would he read hers? She held her breath.

"Here's a note . . ." Allen was saying. "Frieda, Gert, and Marvin want to say hello." He looked owlishly at the audience. "Hello, Frieda, Gert, and Marvin." The audience tittered. A young female voice shrieked something from the balcony.

"Is that you, Marvin?" said Allen. He had the next note in his hand before the laughter died. "Dear Mr. Allen," he read. "The Pizza Pie Bakers of America have declared this National Pizza Pie Week, and have appointed Miss Adrienne Horst as America's first Miss Pizza." He peered into the audience. The girl in the bathing suit tittered loudly behind Mrs. Loomis. "Is Miss Horst in the audience? Ah, there you are. Are you Miss Anchovy Pizza or Miss Tomato Pizza?" The clarinet player said something to Allen, and Steve chuckled.

"Here's a note from somebody who wants to say hello to Detroit." Mrs. Loomis caught her lower lip between

her teeth. "Mrs. Edna Loomis. Sorry, Mrs. Loomis. This program won't be seen in Detroit until after twelve o'clock . . ."

The orchestra began to play, and Allen moved laughingly into a beer commercial. He sipped the brew appreciatively at the end of the message, and Mrs. Loomis shut her eyes, thinking of George. "*Your milk's in a glass in the refrigerator,*" she heard herself saying again. "*The carton was leaking, George. Your milk's in a glass . . . Don't forget your milk tonight, George.*"

Eydie Gorme was now singing a song, something slow and mournful, against a background of waterfront paraphernalia. She clutched a fishnet and wailed a melancholy blue note. A foghorn punctuated the song's conclusion, the lonely sound echoing through the darkened theater. The melody touched a trigger in Mrs. Loomis's emotions, and her eyes blurred with tears as the lights returned.

Allen was introducing someone on stage, a balding comedian who drew funny pictures that meant one thing one way, and something else another. She laughed heartily, shaking off the faint mist of tears in her eyes. She knew that George would be laughing too, in that haw-haw nasal guffaw of his, the spittle bubbling up through the bowl of his eternal pipe. *Good lord,* she thought, *how did I ever feel any tenderness toward that great, snuffling beast?*

Then it was twelve o'clock, time for a station break sandwiched between filmed commercials. George would be getting up now, with elephantine grace, and padding his way toward the kitchen. His pipe, lit or unlit, would be stuffed into his shirt pocket. (If unlit, he would forget it there, until the black ashes had smeared the shirt beyond the power of detergents. If lit, he would suddenly feel the heat, let out some censorable word, and slam the pipe on the kitchen sink, the ashes spraying over her clean porcelain.) Then he would spend a blank minute at the open refrigerator, looking for the paper milk carton. Finally he would remember about the glass, remove it, and pour the contents into a pan on the stove. He'd heat the milk, staring at it stupidly until it began to boil. Then he'd pour it back into the glass, wrap his shirt tail around it, and return to the television set.

He'd be sitting there now, Mrs. Loomis thought, ogling the bathing beauty on the stage with slack-jawed admiration.

"So you're Miss Provolone?" said Steve Allen.

The girl laughed so hard she bent at the waist. "No-o-o!" she said. "I'm Miss *Pizza!*"

"Oh, I beg your pardon." He looked at the object on her head. "What is that, a chef's cap? I've always wanted one of those things. Tell me, just what did you have to do to become Miss Pizza?" The drummer's remark was unheard, but Allen repeated. "I know, just shorten the sleeves." He laughed, and some of the

audience applauded lightly. "And is this for me?" he asked, taking the large flat box from her hand.

"That's right, Mr. Allen," she said, mechanically. "This Pizza Pie is dedicated to you by The Pizza Bakers of America, in recognition of your many kind words about Pizza Pies on the *Tonight* program —"

Allen peeked into the box, then snapped it shut in mock alarm. "There's a crazed anchovy in there," he said. "Whole thing must have gone to his head."

The audience applauded as the girl left the stage, and the musicians divided the spoils. Mrs. Loomis's hands tightened on the clasp of her purse. *He's drinking it now*, she thought; *he's sipping the milk this very minute* . . .

The studio clock said 12:15. Was Allen going to remember her note? She dug into her purse, took out a small automatic pencil, scribbled a note hastily on the inside of an empty matchbook, then caught the arm of the page who was hurrying down the aisle. It was the same young fellow she had talked to outside the studio.

"Psst!" she said. "Would you mind?" She gestured toward the stage. He looked helplessly at her, but she smiled winningly. With a shrug, the page took the message from her hand and left. She sat back in her chair, satisfied that all was going as well as she could have expected.

A few minutes later Steve Allen had Mrs. Loomis's matchbook in his hand, and was speaking into the table microphone.

"I have a note from Mrs. Loomis again. Sorry, Mrs. Loomis — almost forgot. Mrs. Loomis writes: 'Say hello to Detroit for me, and ask them how they like my crazy hat.' Where are you, Mrs. Loomis?"

She waved her arm wildly.

"We'll see you later, Mrs. Loomis. And I don't know about Detroit, but I think your hat is very sensible. And who knows better than I?" He picked up the lid of the cardboard box on his desk and slammed it over his head. He wore it that way for the next two minutes of the program.

Mrs. Loomis settled back contentedly. He'd promised to talk to her — he said he would. That meant everyone would see her, sitting innocently in the *Tonight* audience, enjoying the show, having a good time, not for a minute aware of the tragic event occurring in her home: the gasping for breath, the clutched throat, the dreadful stomach pains. Poor George! He was so fat, so flabby! Just the kind of man to suffer a sudden coronary . . .

The studio clock said 12:30. The milk would be drunk by now, the bitter flavor unnoticed after boiling. He would be wiping his mouth with the back of his hand, and sinking down into the plush of the armchair. He'd feel drowsy now, just as always. He really ought to go to bed, and he would, too, in a few minutes . . . just a few minutes more . . .

The orchestra swung into some lively chords as Allen descended into the aisle of the theater.

"Let's see now." He pushed the

microphone in front of a sleepy-eyed man. "And what's your name, sir?"

"Bob Listman," the man said.

"And you're from where, Mr. Listman?"

"Chicago. I'm a linotyper for the *Chicago Daily News* —"

"I see. And how long have you been typing linos?"

"About twenty years," Mr. Listman said proudly.

They exchanged some newspaper jokes, and Allen signaled the usher for a group of gifts for the pleased gentleman. Then Allen started walking up the aisle, disentangling the microphone cord as he went. He almost passed Mrs. Loomis by, and her pulse quickened. But he stopped at her row, and exchanged pleasantries with the boy scouts in front of her. Then he shrieked in pretended horror at the bobbing bird on her hat.

"Don't tell me!" Steve Allen said. "You're Mrs. Loomis."

"That's right," she smiled.

He stepped back dramatically.. "There it is, Detroit. Look at it carefully. Is that a crazy hat, or is that a crazy hat?" He beckoned the camera in for a close-up of the sparrow. On the stage, the drummer obliged with a suspenseful drum roll. At the cymbal clash, Allen said, "That's it, Detroit. Write your decisions about Mrs. Loomis's hat and send them to me, Steve Allen, care of NBC, enclosing one dollar for handling charges. I'll announce the decision in two weeks — unless I'm in Mexico City spending the money."

He put the microphone in front of her. "And where are you and your hat from, Mrs. Loomis?"

"Well, from Detroit originally, but we live in Brooklyn, now."

"You and the hat?"

She giggled. "No. I bought the hat in New York. I meant me and my husband."

"And where is your husband right now, Mrs. Loomis?"

"He's home. Watching the show." She waved towards the camera. "Hello, George!" she said.

"Hello, George," Steve Allen said. "Did you know your wife is out with a strange bird tonight?" He gave her the microphone again. "And what does George do when he isn't spying on you, Mrs. Loomis?"

"Well, he used to be an automobile mechanic in Detroit until he got sick. Now he's doing clerical work here in New York."

"I see." Allen looked toward the back as the usher came trotting down the aisle. "Here's our Greek bearing gifts, Mrs. Loomis. Let's see . . . here's a gift certificate from the Plastico Tile Company, and that entitles you to get plastered. No! That entitles you to do your whole kitchen up in beautiful, practical Plastico plastic tiles. And here's a copy of the *Music for Tonight* album that I'm sure you'll enjoy. And here's a nice big box of Edgewood Tobacco, containing four different tobacco cuts to suit every taste. George will really like this — there's also a handsome pipe packed inside. And because you're so

fond of crazy hats, Mrs. Loomis, here's Dr. Eliot's Five Foot Shelf of Salami. You can wear it if you want to, but I think you'll have better luck if you take it home and eat it."

The audience around her applauded as she accepted the gifts, and Allen moved up the aisle for his final interview of the night.

At one o'clock Steve Allen said farewell to the *Tonight* audience.

One faithful viewer didn't hear him.

He was George Loomis, who was dead.

Two detectives remained in the apartment after her husband's body had been removed to the ambulance downstairs. One of the detectives was youngish, with sandy hair and innocent blue eyes, and he even took off his hat while they spoke to her.

"The intern says we were much too late for oxygen, Mrs. Loomis," the older detective said sympathetically. "I'm sorry."

She sobbed dryly. "Yes. Yes, I understand."

"He's been dead over an hour, you see."

"Oh, why did I have to go out tonight?" she wailed. "Why did I have to leave him?"

"Just where *did* you go, Mrs. Loomis?"

"I — I went to the Steve Allen show. *Tonight*, they call it."

"Hey!" The younger man nudged the other. "Mrs. Loomis. Remember, Frank? The one with the nutty hat?"

Edna Loomis looked up vacantly, but her mind was racing. This was really luck!

"Yeah," said the older detective. "I thought you looked a little familiar for some reason. That's a coincidence, ain't it?"

"We saw the show up at my place," the younger man explained. "We wasn't on duty yet — you know what I mean? We were just going on duty. You know?"

"Yes, of course." She wiped her eyes and looked toward the gifts piled haphazardly on the sofa. "I never would have gone if I had known he wasn't feeling well. He didn't tell me anything, and he seemed perfectly all right when I left . . ."

"Sure, Mrs. Loomis. We understand." The police detective called Frank picked up the long salami and looked at it with interest. "These things happen when you least expect them," he said. "It's a tricky business, the heart."

The younger man sat on the sofa and lit a cigarette. "That's really something, all right," he said. "A couple of hours ago you're having a good time on a TV show, and then —" He shrugged philosophically, glancing at the cover of the record album. "He sure is a funny guy, that Steve Allen," he said.

"You can come downtown tomorrow, Mrs. Loomis," the other one said. "We'll have to make out the death certificate, and all that." He looked reflectively at the salami still in his hand, and then at the other

gifts on the sofa. "Funny thing though . . ."

"What?" said the younger man.

"I dunno. Something about these presents . . ."

Mrs. Loomis rose from her chair, wiping her eyes with a wisp of handkerchief.

"Can I — can I get you something?" she said brokenly. "Coffee or something?"

"Nothing for me, thanks," said Frank.

"Me neither."

She went into the kitchen. The milk glass, carefully washed, stood on the sink cover. She picked it up, placed it back in the cupboard, then took the pan from the stove and put it in the sink. There was a white rim around the inside of the pan. She let the hot water soak into it, then made herself a cup of instant coffee. She brought the steaming cup into the living room.

"Was there something else?" she said.

The older detective scratched his face. "Well, I dunno for sure, Mrs. Loomis. There's just one thing that keeps bothering me —"

Her throat tightened, and she choked over the sip of coffee in her mouth. "What's that?" she said.

"Well . . ." The detective looked uncertain. "It's these here gifts," he said. "This stuff you got on the Steve Allen show. You know, the salami and all that."

She stared at him. "What about them?"

"Well." He picked up the salami again and thwacked it in the palm of his hand like a billy. "I see the salami here, and the record album, and there's that gift certificate for those plastic tiles. But where's the tobacco you got? I mean, I'm sure you got some tobacco. I remember on account of I smoke a pipe myself, see, and I remember saying to Phil here —"

"Oh, that," said Mrs. Loomis, with a sigh. "I threw it away."

"What?"

She lowered her eyes into the cup. "I — threw it away. Why? What's so terrible?"

"What did you do that for, Mrs. Loomis?" the younger man asked slowly. "After all, your husband smokes a pipe, doesn't he? I mean, he's got all sorts of tobacco and stuff lying around here —"

The cup rattled violently against the saucer, and Mrs. Loomis set the coffee on the table. "I don't know. I didn't — I didn't think, I guess. George had so much tobacco already —"

"Maybe so," the older man grunted. "But it still doesn't make sense to me, Mrs. Loomis. I mean, you *knew* your husband was watching the show, didn't you? You waved to him, didn't you?"

"Yes, yes," Mrs. Loomis said impatiently.

"Well, then you know he *saw* you get that tobacco from Allen. It just doesn't seem right that you'd throw it away after that."

"What are you talking about?" Mrs. Loomis said, her voice rising. "What difference does it make?" Hysteria crept in. "He can't smoke it now, can he?"

The older detective nodded thoughtfully. "That's just what I mean. Maybe you threw the tobacco away because you *knew* he couldn't use it."

"You're crazy!" Mrs. Loomis said.

"Maybe I am," the detective answered. "Maybe I'll look like a jerk after I get 'em to perform an autopsy, Mrs. Loomis. But this is my show now, understand? If everything's okay, you don't have a thing to worry about."

They went to the door.

"You'll be hearing from us, Mrs. Loomis," the older man said.

Mrs. Loomis closed the door behind the two men, and walked into the living room. The television screen stared back at her, a blank, mysterious eye. It had all seemed so safe, so sure . . .

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MASTER OF THE QUICK QUIP

Steve Allen is a national celebrity who has become a national institution. What family in all these United States, urban or suburban, is not familiar with this particular tall man in the horn-rimmed glasses who epitomizes the charm, wit, and nonchalance of MCmanship — indeed, Steve Allen is Mr. Relaxation himself . . .

Steve Allen was born to show business — his parents were the vaudeville team of Montrose and Allen — and he has been in show business practically ever since. His career is a display of fireworks — pinwheels and skyrockets, and still flashing and zooming. He started as a radio announcer in Phoenix, Arizona; later he was a radio disc jockey in Hollywood where he quadrupled as a pianist, comedian, and master of (informal) ceremonies, in a show that was praised by such great talents of show business as Al Jolson and Groucho Marx; then he came East and soon became an outstanding television personality — remember him, not so long ago, as a regular panelist on "What's My Line?" and as a summer replacement for Arthur Godfrey's "Talent Scouts"? And for nearly two years now, Steve Allen has been the studious-looking, quiet-mannered genius of NBC's five-times-a-week network show, "Tonight," an 11:20 P.M. *to 1:00* A.M. *carnival of the unexpected and the unpredictable that has changed the sleeping times of a nation.*

And these are not all of Stephen Valentine Patrick William Allen's claims to fame . . . add star billing in Universal-International's Technicolor motion picture, "The Benny Goodman Story," with Steve playing the role of the King of Swing; add his stature as a talented composer of popular songs (some say 200, others say 2000), including such hits as "Let's Go to Church Next Sunday," "Cotton Candy," and "South Rampart Street Parade"; add his success on Coral records — like the fairy tales told in bop talk and the mood melodies of "Music for Tonight"; add his authorship of a volume of short stories, FOURTEEN FOR TONIGHT, *published last year by Henry Holt and Company of New York, and a collection of poetry to appear this year . . . and who knows what fabulous and versatile feats Steve Allen is still to perform?*

Now we give you a short story written by Mr. Ad Lib (sometimes called Mr. Midnight) himself — the quiet ball of fire voted "Young Man of the Year" in 1955 (an honor previously won by Thomas E. Dewey and the late Lou Gehrig) and, also in 1955, "Personality of the Year" (an honor

previously voted to such show-business headliners as Bob Hope and Al Jolson). You will find Steve's story offbeat but strangely appealing — the tale of a fifteen-year-old boy called Seventy who matches wits with Nick, known in the neighborhood as a "pretty sharp operator." Was Steve ever called Seventy in his own boyhood? We wonder . . .

THE SIDEWALK

by STEVE ALLEN

WHEN I CAME AROUND THE corner at Fifty-fourth Street I saw Seventy on his hands and knees. His face was screwed up in concentration and his nose was close to the sidewalk.

"Hi," I said.

"Hi," he said. "Careful. Don't walk here where it's wet."

"Why not?" I said. He dipped a small brush into a glass of soapy water and brushed vigorously at the pavement. Half of one square of concrete was brushed clean.

"I'm trying to get the sidewalk clean," he answered.

"What for?"

"Oh, it's a long story," he said, "but I gotta get it all clean. I figure this soap'll do the trick, then I can hose it down to wash the soap off."

"What's the idea?" I said.

"It's a long story."

I reached into the pocket of my jacket and took out a small, dark red rubber ball. While he brushed the sidewalk I stood there throwing the ball against the small space between two windows of the apartment house that stretched from the alley to the corner.

"Careful," Seventy said, "don't walk here where it's wet."

"Who's walking?" I said.

"I didn't say you were," Seventy said. "I just said be careful."

"All right," I said, "but what the hell's the big idea? You gonna clean up the whole city?"

"No," he said, "just this one square here."

The square of cement bounded east and west by two cracks and north and south by the curb and a sparse lawn was now almost wholly moistened, cleaned by Seventy's brush.

"Al ain't home yet," Seventy said. "Go in the alley and find a tin can or a milk bottle."

"What for?"

"If Al ain't home I can't borrow his hose, so I'll need a tin can or something for the water."

"What water?"

"Judas, you're dumb! The water to wash all the soap off, what water do you think?"

"Oh," I said, frowning. I walked

From FOURTEEN FOR TONIGHT *by Steve Allen.* © *1955 by Steve Allen; reprinted by permission of Henry Holt and Co. Inc.*

down the street a few steps and turned into the alley. Halfway down its length I found a milk bottle. When I brought it to Seventy, he walked across the grass and filled the bottle from the pipe that jutted out of the brick wall. Then he shook it to clean the inside of the bottle, emptied the water on the grass, and refilled the bottle.

"This should do it," he said, splashing the water down hard on the pavement. The fluid scooped up tiny soap bubbles and cleaned little patches where soap had dried to a powdery film. Six times he filled the milk bottle and emptied its contents on the sidewalk. At last, satisfied with its cleanliness, he sat down on the curb in his faded brown corduroys and unbuttoned his collar.

"Now what?" I said.

"Now we're all set," he said.

"All set for what?" I asked. He looked at me the way people look at a dog that just isn't learning the simplest of tricks.

"Judas, you're dumb!" he said again, "but I guess I'll have to lay it all out for you. I just cleaned me off a nice little stretch of sidewalk here."

"Thanks a lot," I said, with all the sarcasm I could muster. "I thought maybe you were playing baseball or something." This struck me as a crushingly clever retort.

"Tell you what," Seventy said. "Maybe you can help me out. You got a quarter?"

"Yeah. Why?"

"Why do you think," Seventy said. "Because I want to borrow it, that's why." I gave him the quarter and he said, "If this little deal comes off I'll give you back fifty cents for your quarter. Okay?"

"Okay," I said. "What do we do now?"

"Head for the Bluebird Diner," he said, standing up and dusting off his pants.

At the Bluebird he carefully examined the menu as I drained both glasses of water the counterman had set before us.

"What'll it be?" the counter man asked tiredly.

"The chicken à la king should do it," Seventy told him.

"You want it on the dinner?" the man said.

"No," Seventy said. "To go out. And just the chicken à la king in a carton or something. Nothing else."

The man looked at me. "You want anything?" he said.

"No," I said. "I'm with him."

Walking back to Fifty-fourth I lovingly fingered the warm paper bag and the carton inside it. I could feel the heat from the creamy chicken warming my cold fingers.

"The sidewalk should be dried off by now," Seventy said.

"I guess you're right," I said, as we rounded the corner. I could see that the film of water had disappeared and the square of pavement Seventy had so diligently cleaned gave no immediate evidence of having been so recently scoured.

"Well," he said, squinting his eyes

and pursing his lips, "I guess we're just about all set."

I started to say "For what?" but checked myself. Seventy hated to be prodded and I refused to lower myself by any further demonstrations of insatiable curiosity.

"One thing, though," he added. "We'll have to figure out some way to keep people from walking on it."

"Walking on what?" I said, without thinking, then bit my lip.

"Tell you what," he said, not pressing his advantage, "let's pull that sawhorse over here." He referred to a wooden sawhorse flanked by two oil lanterns that the city had left in the street to warn motorists of the presence of an unusually deep depression in the asphalt.

"Isn't that liable to cause trouble?" I asked.

"No," he said. "The two red lanterns will guard the bump and besides we can put the horse back later."

When we had carried the sawhorse to the curb and slanted it diagonally across the washed square of pavement, Seventy picked up the bag of chicken à la king, deftly opened the carton, and without a word splattered its contents down on the sidewalk.

"You crazy?" I asked.

"When are you gonna stop asking stupid questions?" he said. "What time is it?"

"I don't know. It was about half-past five when we left the Bluebird."

"Okay, then it's about time Nick should be gettin' home from work. Let's go down to Woodlawn 'cause I gotta get the bread before he gets off the bus."

By this time I was so angry I wouldn't have asked another question if my life depended on it. When we got to Woodlawn Avenue we went down the street to the A. & P. and bought a loaf of bread, sliced. Seventy made sure it was sliced. Without talking we hurried out of the A. & P. and walked up to Fifty-third Street.

"Let's not stand right here on the corner," Seventy said. "Let's wait down here by the shoe store, so's it'll look like we were just passing by."

I didn't say anything. We waited near the shoe store and in about five minutes the bus stopped near the corner. Seventy hurried toward it, then slowed down and sauntered past the drug store just as Nick was getting off the bus.

"Let on you don't see him," Seventy whispered. We turned the corner and walked on ahead of Nick, listening to his cleated heels clicking on the pavement behind us. Nick always wore cleats on the heels of his shiny, pointed shoes. Nick was a pretty sharp operator.

His full name was Nick Depopolous and around the neighborhood he liked to be referred to as Nick the Greek, which he was. I think he had read something in a magazine once about the well-known gambler, Nick the Greek, and had selected the man as a personal idol. Nick needn't have patterned himself after anybody. He

was tall, well-built, good-looking in a sort of George Raftish way, a natty dresser, and popular with the girls. He worked downtown as a shipping clerk, but he spent a lot of time around the Green Mill Poolroom on Fifty-fifth Street and he liked to gamble. Nick would take a bet on anything, and though he rarely wagered more than ten or fifteen dollars at a time, this made him a big gambler in the eyes of most of the kids in the neighborhood.

"Hi, Seventy." Nick had come abreast of us. Seventy's face lit up. He could not have acted more surprised if the King of England had come up behind us.

"Why, Nick," he said, "I haven't seen you in a week or so. Where've you been keeping yourself?"

"Oh, here and there," Nick said. "What's new with you guys?"

"Nothing much," I said.

We walked on for a few feet in silence, then Seventy said, "How the ponies treating you, Nick?"

"Fair enough," Nick answered. "Almost had a daily double this afternoon." Nick was only eighteen but to me he seemed a man of the world.

"This guy'll kill you," Seventy said to me. "Bets on anything. Nick, tell him about the time you bet Al Dietz he didn't know what color socks he was wearing."

"Sucker bet," Nick said modestly. "Nothing to it."

Seventy laughed in vast admiration. "Get him," he said. "Nothing to it. How about the time you bet old man Walters ten bucks his cigarette lighter wouldn't light the first time he tried it?"

"Sucker bet," Nick said, thrusting his lower lip out with slight pride.

Seventy laughed again. "I'm tellin' ya, there's nothing this guy won't bet on. Funny part of it is, he usually wins."

"No kidding?" I said.

"That's right," Seventy said as we turned the corner. "Why, I saw him one time when he bet Bob Petrolli that he could swallow a live goldfish. Did it, too. Didn't ya, Nick?"

"Yep," Nick admitted. "If the price is right, I guess a guy'll do just about anything."

"Yessirree," Seventy said. "That's the way I feel about it, too. A guy might think he couldn't eat a goldfish, but you put a sawbuck on the line and there's a lot of guys would try it. Right, Nick?"

"Right you are," Nick said. "Of course, the price has to be right."

"And the guy has to have guts, too," Seventy said.

"Oh, of course," Nick agreed. "If you ain't got guts, you got no right to make a bet in the first place."

"I got just as much guts as you have, Nick, only I don't seem to have the money to back it up," Seventy said, with sudden abandon.

A flicker of surprise at Seventy's tone crossed Nick's face. We had almost walked up to the cleaned square of pavement where the spilled chicken à la king lay splashed, and the sawhorse partially blocked the path.

"So you got guts," Nick said.

"You're darned right," Seventy said. "Eating live goldfish!" He sneered. "Why, if somebody was to make me the right kind of a bet I'd even eat *that.*" He pointed with a rigid finger at the cold, creamy mess on the sidewalk.

I was looking at Nick. When he saw what Seventy was pointing at, his face screwed up with displeasure and he turned his eyes away, stepping gingerly across the splattered area. I held my breath. Nick walked on a few feet, then halted and turned around. He looked at Seventy.

"What did you say?" he asked.

"I said that if somebody made me the right kind of a bet, I'd even eat that!" He pointed again, but Nick's eyes refused to lower. They were momentarily expressionless, then a methodical glint came into them. Nick slanted his head and regarded Seventy with a superior smile.

"You talk big," he said. "I got fifteen dollars I'll put up against your five that says you can't do no such thing. That is," he smiled with contempt, "if you can raise five bucks."

"Don't you worry about me," Seventy said.

There was a pause.

"Well, big boy," Nick said. "How about it? We got a bet or have you chickened out already?"

Seventy hesitated. I couldn't help but admire his timing.

"That's what I thought," Nick said. "You punks around here talk pretty big, but when it comes to putting up you ain't got what it takes."

"That does it," Seventy said. "You got a bet!"

"Okay," Nick said. "So I got a bet. But it don't look to me as if I'm gonna lose it."

Seventy didn't answer. Instead he opened the wax paper wrapped on the bread he was carrying and took out one slice. Tearing it in half, he solemnly got down on his knees and carefully sopped up a large gob of chicken à la king from the spotless pavement. Nick's eyes almost popped out of his head.

"Holy God!" he said.

Expressionlessly Seventy lifted the slice of bread to his mouth, bit off a large piece, and wiped more chicken à la king from the sidewalk with the rest of the slice, then put it into his mouth, closed his eyes tight as if he were suffering great pain, and wolfed the bread and chicken down.

Nick was pale now. Through tight lips he gasped, "That's enough. Cut it out!" With trembling fingers he withdrew his wallet from a back pocket, produced a ten and a five, and handed them to Seventy; then without a word he turned and hurried away, groaning slightly.

Seventy and I went back to the A. & P., got five ones for the five, and Seventy handed me one of the bills.

He came by that nickname because even though he was only fifteen he had the wisdom of an old man. I haven't seen him in years now, but I guess he's doing all right.

EDITORS' FILE CARD

AUTHOR:	**Erle Stanley Gardner**
TITLE:	***To Strike a Match***
TYPE:	War Crime Story
LOCALE:	Canton, China
TIME:	1937
COMMENTS:	*The creator of Perry Mason tells the poignant story of a little coolie woman and what she did, in the days of the "devil's eggs," at the House of the Three Candles . . .*

The Love of Loyalty Road in Canton is a wide thoroughfare cut ruthlessly through the congested district in order to modernize the city. Occasional side streets feed the traffic of automobiles and rickshas into it, but back of these streets one enters the truly congested areas, where people live like sardines in a tin.

The Street of the Wild Chicken is so wide that one may travel down it in a ricksha. But within a hundred feet of the intersection of The Street of the Wild Chicken and The Love of Loyalty Road, one comes to *Tien Mah Hong*, which, being translated, means The Alley of the Sky Horse. And in *Tien Mah Hong* there is no room for even ricksha traffic. Two pedestrians wearing wide-brimmed hats must tilt their heads as they meet, so that the brims will not scrape as the wearers pass each other shoulder to shoulder.

Houses on each side of *Tien Mah Hong*, with balconies and windows abutting directly upon The Alley of the Sky Horse, give but little opportunity for privacy. The lives of neighbors are laid bare with an intimacy of detail which would be inconceivable in a less congested community or a more occidental atmosphere. At night the peddlers of bean cakes, walking through The Sky Horse Alley, beat little drums to attract attention, and shout their wares with a cry which is like the howl of a wolf.

Leung Fah walked down The Sky Horse Alley with downcast eyes, as befitted a modest woman of the coolie class. Her face was utterly without

© 1938 by Erle Stanley Gardner; originally titled "The House of Three Candles"

expression. Not even the shrewdest student of human nature could have told from her outward appearance the thoughts which were seething within her breast.

It had been less than a month before that Leung Fah had clasped to her breast a morsel of humanity which represented all life's happiness, a warm, ragged bundle, a child without a father, a secret outlet for her mother love.

Then one night there had been a scream of sirens, a panic-stricken helterskelter rush of shouting inhabitants, and over all, the ominous, steady roar of airplane engines, a hideous undertone of sound which mounted until it became as the hum of a million metallic bees.

It is easy enough to advocate fleeing to a place of safety, but the narrow roads of Canton admit of no swift handling of crowds. And there are no places of safety. Moreover, the temperament of the Chinese makes it difficult to carry out any semblance of an air defense program. Death in one form or another is always jeering at their elbows. Why dignify one particular form of death by going to such great lengths, so far as precautions are concerned?

The devil's eggs began to fall from the sky in a screaming hail. Antiaircraft guns roared a reply. Machine guns sputtered away hysterically. Through all the turmoil the enemy flyers went calmly about their business of murder, ignoring the frenzied, nervous attempts of an unprepared city to make some semblance of defense.

With fierce mother instinct, Leung Fah had held her baby to her breast, shielding it with her frail body, as though interposing a layer of flesh and bone would be of any avail against this "civilized" warfare which rained down from the skies.

The earth had rocked with a series of detonations, and then suddenly Leung Fah had been surrounded by a terrific noise, by splintered timbers, dust and debris.

When she had wiped her eyes and looked at the little morsel of humanity in her arms, she had screamed in terrified anguish.

No one had known of Leung Fah's girl. Because she had no husband, she had kept her offspring as a secret; and because she slept in one of the poorest sections of the city, where people are as numerous and as transient as bats in a cave, she had been able to maintain her secret. Since no one had known of her child, no one had known of her loss. Night after night she had gone about her work, moving stolidly through the heat and stench of the city, her face an expressionless mask.

Sahm Seuh, the man who had only three fingers on his right hand, and whose eyes were cunning, moving as smoothly moist in their sockets as the tongue of a snake, had noticed her going about her work, and of late he had become exceedingly solicitous. She was not looking well. Was she perhaps sick? She no longer laughed,

or paused to gossip in loud tones with the slave girls in the early morning hours before daylight. Was it perhaps that the money she was making was not sufficient. . . . Sahm Seuh's oily eyes slithered expressively. Perhaps that too could be remedied.

Because she had said nothing, because she had stared at him with eyes that saw not and ears that heard not, her soul numbed by an anguish which made her as one who walks in sleep at the hour of the rat, Sahm Seuh grew bold.

Did she need money? Lots of money — gold money? Not the paper money of China, but gold which would enable her to be independent? *Aiiii-ahh.* It was simple. So simple as only the striking of a match. And Sahm Seuh flipped his wrist in a quick motion and scratched a match into flame in order to illustrate his meaning. He went away then, leaving her to think the matter over.

That night as she moved through the narrow thoroughfares of the city her mind brooded upon the words of Sahm Seuh.

Canton is a sleepless city of noise. At times, during the summer months, there comes a slight ebb of activity during the first few hours after midnight, but it is an ebb which is barely perceptible to occidental ears. In the large Chinese cities people sleep in shifts because there is not enough room to accommodate them all at one time in houses. Those who are off-shift roam the streets, and because Chinese ears are impervious to noise, just as Chinese nostrils are immune to smells, the hubbub of conversation continues unabated.

Daylight was dawning, a murky, humid dawn which brought renewed heat to a city already steeped in its own emanations — a city of silent-winged mosquitoes, oppressive and sweltering heat, unevaporated perspiration, and those odors which cling to China as an aura.

Sahm Seuh stood suddenly before her.

"That gold?" he asked. "Do you wish it?"

"I would strike a match," she said, tonelessly.

"Meet me," Sahm Seuh said, "at the house on Sky Horse Alley where three candles burn. Open the door and climb the stairs. The time is tonight at the last minute of the hour of the dog."

And so, as one in a daze, Leung Fah turned down The Sky Horse Alley and shuffled along with leaden feet, her eyes utterly without expression, set in a face of wood . . .

Night found her turning into the The Alley of the Sky Horse.

In a house on the left a girl was playing a metallic-sounding Chinese harp. Ten steps back of her a bean peddler raised his voice in a long, howling "*o-w-w-w-w e-o-o-o-o.*" Fifty feet ahead, a family sought to scatter evil spirits by flinging lightened firecrackers from the balcony.

Leung Fah plodded on, circling a bonfire where paper imitation money,

a model sedan chair, and slaves in effigy were being sent by means of fire to join the spirits of ancestors. Three candles flickered on the sidewalk in the heavy air of the hot night.

Leung Fah opened the door and climbed stairs. There was darkness ahead, only darkness. She entered a room, and sensed that others were present. She could hear their breathing, the restless motions of their bodies, the rustle of clothes, occasionally a nervous cough. The hour stuck — the passing of the hour of the dog, and the beginning of the hour of the boar.

The voice of Sahm Seuh came from the darkness. "Let everyone here close his eyes, and become blind. He who opens his eyes will be adjudged a traitor. It is given to only one man to see those who are gathered in this room. Any prying eyes will receive the kiss of a hot iron, that what they have seen may be sealed into the brain."

Leung Fah, seated on the floor, her feet doubled back under her, her eyes closed tightly, sensed that men were moving around the room, examining the faces of those who were present by the aid of a flashlight which stabbed its beam into each of the faces. And she could feel heat upon her cheeks, which made her realize that a man with a white-hot iron stood nearby, ready to plunge the iron into any eyes which might show signs of curiosity.

"She is strange to me," a voice said, a voice which spoke with the hissing sound of the *yut boen gwiee* — the ghosts of the sunrise.

"She is mine," the voice of Sahm Seuh said, and the light ceased to illuminate her closed eyelids. The hot iron passed by.

She heard a sudden scream, the sizzling of a hot iron, a yell of mortal anguish, and the sound of a body as it thudded to the floor. She did not open her eyes. Life, in China, is cheap.

At length the silent roll call had been completed. The voice of Sahm Seuh said, "Eyes may now open."

Leung Fah opened her eyes. The room was black with darkness.

"Shortly before the dawn," Sahm Seuh said, "there will be the roar of many motors in the sky. Each of you will be given a red flare and matches. To each of you will be whispered the name of the place where the red flare is to be placed. When you hear the roar of motors, you will crouch over the flare, as though kneeling on the ground in terror. When the motors reach the eastern end of the city, you will hold a match in your fingers. There will be none to watch, because people will be intent upon their own safety. When the planes are overhead, you will set fire to the red flares, and then you will run very rapidly. You will return most quickly to this place; you will receive plenty gold.

"It is, however, imperative that you come to this place quickly. The bombing will last until just before daylight. You must be here before the bombing is finished. You will receive your gold. In the confusion you will

flee to the river. A boat will be waiting. It will be necessary that you hide for some time, because an investigation will be made. There are spies who spy upon us, and one cannot explain the possession of gold. You will be hidden until there is more work."

Once more there was a period of silence, broken only by the shuffling of men and of whispered orders. Leung Fah felt a round, wooden object thrust into her hands. A moment later, a box of matches was pushed into her fingers. A man bent over her, so close that his voice breathed a thought directly into her ears, almost without the aid of sound.

"The house of the Commissioner of Public Safety," he said.

The shuffling ceased. The voice of Sahm Seuh said, "That is all. Go, and wait at the appointed places. Hurry back and there will be much gold. In order to avoid suspicion, you will leave here one at a time, at intervals of five minutes. A man at the door will control your passing. There will be no lights, no conversation."

Leung Fah stood in the darkness, packed with people whom she did not know, reeking in the stench of stale perspiration. At intervals she heard a whispered command. After each whisper the door would open and one of the persons in that narrow, crowded staircase would slip from the suffocating atmosphere into the relative coolness of the street.

At length the door was in front of her. Hands pushed against her. The door swung open and she found herself once more in The Alley of the Sky Horse, shuffling along with demure eyes downcast, and a face which was the face of a sleepwalker.

Leung Fah went only so far as the house where the sacrifices were being offered to the spirit of the departed. The ashes of the sacrificial fire were still smouldering in the narrow street, drifted about by vagrant gusts of wind. Leung Fah knew that in this house there would be mourners, that any who were of the faith and desired to join in sending thought waves to the Ancestor in the Beyond would be welcome.

She climbed the stairs, and heard chanting. Around the table were grouped seven nuns with heads as bald as a sharp razor could make them. At another table, flickering peanut-oil lamps illuminated a painting of the ancestor who had in turn joined his ancestors. The table was loaded with sacrifices. There were some twenty people in the room who intermittently joined in chanting prayers.

Leung Fah unostentatiously joined this group. Shortly thereafter she moved quietly to the stairs which gave to the roof, and within 30 minutes had worked her way back to the roof of the house of the three candles. She sought a deep shadow, merged herself within it and became motionless.

Slowly the hours of the night wore away. Leung Fah began to listen. Her ears, strained toward the East, then heard a peculiar sound. It was like

distant thunder over the mountains, a thunder which rumbles ominously.

With ominous rapidity the murmur of sound in the East grew into a roar. She could hear the screams of people in the streets below, could hear babies, aroused from their sleep as they were snatched up by frantic parents, crying fretfully.

Still Leung Fah remained motionless. The planes swept by overhead. Here and there in the city bright red flares suddenly blossomed into blood-red pools of crimson. And wherever there was a flare, an enemy plane swooped down, and a moment later a mushroom of flame rose up against the night sky, followed by a reverberating report which shook the very foundations of the city.

Leung Fah crept to the edge of the roof where she might peer over and watch The Sky Horse Alley. She saw surreptitious figures darting from shadow to shadow, slipping through the portals of the house of three candles.

At length a shadow, more bulky than the rest, the shadow of a fat man running on noiseless feet, crossed the street, and was swallowed up within the entrance of the house of three candles. The planes still roared overhead.

Leung Fah placed her box of red fire on the roof, and tore off the paper. With calm, untrembling hands, she struck a match to flame, the flame to the flare.

In the crimson pool of light which illuminated all the housetops, Leung Fah fled from one rooftop to another. And yet it seemed she had only been running a few seconds when a giant plane materialized overhead and came roaring down out of the sky. She heard the scream of a torpedo. The entire street rocked under the impact of the terrific explosion.

Leung Fah was flung to her knees. Her eardrums seemed shattered, her eyes about to burst from their sockets under the terrific rush of pressure which swept along with the blast.

Day was dawning when she recovered enough to limp down to The Sky Horse Alley. The roar of the planes was receding into the distance.

Leung Fah hobbled slowly and painfully to the place where the house of the three candles had stood. There was now a deep hole in The Sky Horse Alley, a hole surrounded by bits of wreckage and torn bodies.

A blackened torso lay almost at her feet. She examined it intently. It was all that was left of Sahm Seuh.

She turned and limped back up The Sky Horse Alley, her eyes downcast and expressionless, her face as though it had been carved of wood.

The sun rose in the East, and the inhabitants of Canton, long since accustomed to having the grim presence of death at their side, prepared to clear away the bodies and debris, resume once more their daily course of ceaseless activity.

Leung Fah lifted the bamboo yoke to her sore shoulders. *Aiiii ah-h-h* it was painful, but one must work if one would eat.

EDITORS FILE CARD

AUTHOR: **MICHAEL INNES**

TITLE: ***The Metal Ribbon***

TYPE: Detective Story

DETECTIVE: Assistant Commissioner Appleby

LOCALE: London and environs

TIME: The Present

COMMENTS: *The disappearance of Lord Cantell, one of England's top scientists, was more important to the free world than the theft of the Crown Jewels. For if the Professor cracked up and talked . . .*

ASSISTANT COMMISSIONER APPLEBY stood up as Lady Cantell entered his room. But he noticed that he had almost been so unmannerly as to sit tight. This was perhaps because of an obscure persuasion that he had suddenly been transported from New Scotland Yard to some West End theatre, and was occupying a good seat in the third row of the stalls. Lady Cantell had an air of projecting herself — firmly controlled agitation and all — over invisible footlights. This wasn't necessarily a matter for suspicion. It was just a reminder that, before she married the famous scientist, she had been an actress of some note.

But that — Appleby reflected as he placed a chair — had been quite some time ago. The lady was still extremely chic, but she was no longer instantaneously captivating. "I'm afraid the sun's in your eyes," he said. "Let me pull down that blind."

Lady Cantell inclined her head — a little wearily, as if acknowledging that a notably clear daylight was no longer among her best friends. "Thank you," she said and then added flatly, "My husband has disappeared. He hasn't been seen since Thursday."

"And you've spent nearly a week thinking about it?"

The question could hardly have taken Lady Cantell by surprise. But she contented herself with merely saying, "It has been quite difficult."

"These things sometimes are." Appleby was cautious. "But Lord Cantell's colleagues — didn't they wonder?"

"Arthur had been unwell during the previous week — nervous and strained because of overwork. There was some misunderstanding, and it was thought that he'd taken a holiday." Lady Cantell looked straight at Appleby. "I have often thought that a person like Arthur should be watched — perhaps even guarded."

Appleby smiled grimly. "It's not a thing that everybody takes to very kindly. May I have the particulars, please?"

Lord Cantell, it appeared, was of a taciturn disposition, and more than once he had gone off for a brief period with very little explanation. Lady Cantell believed — or professed to believe — that these were confidential occasions of high national importance, and that her husband had taken the shortest way to say nothing about them.

"But *entirely* without notice?" Appleby asked. "Has your husband ever gone off and left no word at all?"

"Certainly not when I have been at home. And if it had happened while I was away, I am sure that Butt would have told me. Butt is our butler. Or Mrs. Davis, the cook, would have mentioned it. Neither of them would have remained silent if Arthur had ever occasioned alarm. The younger servants would be different."

"And that is your whole household, Lady Cantell?"

"Except for our secretary, Charles Diamond."

"He helps with Lord Cantell's work?"

"Dear me, no. Arthur brings nothing of that sort home with him." Lady Cantell spoke with energy, as if she considered her husband's scientific work as some dangerous monster. And that, Appleby thought, mightn't be a bad way of conceiving it, if one was a little poetically inclined. "Mr. Diamond is simply our social secretary. He sends out invitations, and orders things, and fends people off. He has been with us for not quite a year, and is most satisfactory. He succeeded a young woman called Parsons."

"Who was *not* satisfactory?"

"Decidedly not."

Appleby didn't pursue this. A glance at *Who's Who* before his visitor was shown in had told him that the Cantells had no children. It didn't seem to be in any sense what could be called an abundant marriage. When Arthur Cantell, then a provincial professor, had found a bride in a leading West End actress it must have looked, in a sense, quite a brilliant affair. But later Cantell had gone to the top, and the stage had gradually found that the lady's services were dispensable. He had been decidedly a rocket while she might be unkindly described as a falling star. Of course their union might have been a gorgeous success, all the same. But Appleby doubted if it had turned out that way. Moreover, for a scientist, it had been a little out of the way. It seemed possi-

ble that Lord Cantell's temperament deserved investigation. "I suppose," Appleby said diplomatically, "that your husband has one of the finest minds we possess in England today."

"So they say. I wouldn't know. But I do consider that — except when he gets worried — Arthur wears very well."

She had spoken drily, but with a sort of down-to-earth loyalty which impressed Appleby. "Is he often worried?" he asked.

"Yes, I would say so. Especially these times when his problems — I mean his scientific problems — seem to cling to him. It happens most often when he ought to have taken a holiday, but hasn't."

"And apart from his work?"

"I don't worry about Arthur." Lady Cantell spoke crisply, and again with a direct glance. "He has — well, susceptibilities. But basically, I'd say, things aren't too bad." She paused. "Of course, to get what's basic in this life, you sometimes have to go pretty deep. Or that's my experience."

Appleby smiled. "Deeper than people like Miss Parsons?"

Although rather faintly, Lady Cantell smiled back. "Put it this way: that I've always treated Arthur's moods as reflecting difficulties in his work. From that point of view they've been manageable. And it seemed no different this time. Until, that is, two or three days before — before it happened. Then, suddenly, he seemed desperate."

"And it was then he vanished?"

"Yes — on Thursday morning. Farris, our chauffeur, was waiting with the car after breakfast, just as usual. And Arthur went out just as usual, too. But instead of getting into the car he simply turned aside and walked off."

"Hat and coat?"

"Yes — but nothing else."

Appleby rose. "I think, Lady Cantell, I'd better come round and make inquiries on the spot. But I've one or two things to clear up first. I shall be at your house in half an hour."

Five minutes later, on the other side of Whitehall, Appleby was shown into the presence of a tall, gray-haired man who stood by a high window thumbing a file of papers in the bleak London daylight. The tall man turned and spoke with an automatic geniality that was belied by his jaded air. "It's no good, my dear Appleby. I haven't even ten seconds for you. Not if it's the theft of the Crown Jewels."

"It's not the Crown Jewels, Minister. It's Lord Cantell."

"What's wrong with him? Got into trouble with a copper?"

"He's vanished."

"Stuff and nonsense!" The jaded man tossed a file on a table. "Eminent scientists don't vanish — or only in second-rate films."

"Cantell's vanished — nearly a week ago. And his wife only reported the story this morning."

Impatience and incredulity seemed to drain from the jaded man. "You

mean the woman's just found out?"

"No, Minister, I don't. She's simply kept quiet about it."

The Minister shrugged his shoulders. It was a gesture at once of relief and distaste. "My dear man, I know nothing about Cantell's morals, and care less."

"That's what is suggested, I agree." Appleby shook his head somberly as the Minister pushed forward a cigarette box. "The only normal explanation of the lady's keeping quiet that way is that she supposed her husband's disappearance to be more discreditable than dangerous. But there are possibilities that aren't discreditable at all. For Cantell, I suppose, *is* some rather special sort of scientist? It's what I've come to ask you about, before I take over the matter myself."

"You're supposing that Cantell carries the vital formula about town with him in his tobacco-pouch?" The Minister was again genially caustic.

"It's a picturesque way of putting it."

The jaded man paced restlessly across the room. Then he turned. "There's no doubt that Cantell's confoundedly well-informed. If something damnable happened to him, if he cracked up and went to pot and jabbered, it would be most unfortunate. No need, of course, to be melodramatic about it — I don't think we'd all suddenly go up in a nasty green vapor. But it would be most unfortunate — yes."

Appleby considered. "There would be enough in this to make quite a big drive on Cantell well worth some crook's while?"

"Lord, yes! What the spy-story people used to call the Chancelleries of Europe would pay up like a shot."

Appleby got to his feet. "Then," he said, "Cantell had better be found. Even, I suppose, if he's dead."

"Yes, even if he's dead." The Minister was unemotional. "Dining at the club tonight? I'll be glad to hear how you've got on." He pushed a button on his desk and picked up his file. "If you have, that is to say."

Lady Cantell must have brought her husband a considerable fortune from the stage, since their house was a large one in a fashionable square. Appleby's behavior on reaching it was eccentric. He dived down the area steps and didn't pull up until he arrived in a roomy kitchen. "Good morning," he said briskly.

Two men and a woman were drinking tea with an air of considerable leisure. The older man rose in an indignation that turned a little uncertain as he noticed the intruder's appearance. "And who," he asked heavily, "may you be?"

"I am Sir John Appleby, an Assistant Commissioner of Police. Mr. Butt, I think? And Mr. Farris? Just so." Appleby laid his hat and stick on the table and sat down. "Mrs. Davis, I'll be very grateful for a cup of tea." He nodded pleasantly. "And of some explanation of your conduct."

"My conduct?" Mrs. Davis, although she spoke with some dis-

pleasure, reached obediently for the teapot.

"Lord Cantell disappeared six days ago, and none of you took any steps in the matter. You could see Lady Cantell didn't know her own mind, couldn't you? She needed a lead. Think of the state Lord Cantell must have been in for days."

"That's true." Mr. Butt the butler spoke in a deep husky voice. "What they call a regular breakdown, to my mind. But I don't think we're to blame, sir — that I don't. There was what Mr. Diamond said — that his lordship had left suddenly for Washington on a top-secret matter. Of course, we talked it over between ourselves, and agreed it was said just to cover up." Butt paused uneasily. "I suppose you are what you say you are, sir?"

Farris spoke for the first time. "He's Sir John Appleby, all right. I've seen his photo. You'd better tell him."

"I'd never have expected it — not in good service." Butt shook his head mournfully. "A gentleman's own establishment is sacrosanct. There's an unwritten law. Mrs. Davis, you'll bear me out in that?"

"That I will. A gentleman respects the purity of the home."

"Yet there the young person was." Butt sighed. "An assignation. And in his lordship's own library. It was a great shock."

There was a moody silence. Appleby, sipping tea, let it mature. "You surprise me," he said presently.

"It was on Tuesday, sir — Tuesday afternoon. I was about to enter the library myself. But I paused. There was the voice, sir, of a young female. In fact, a lady."

"But there wasn't anything so very out of the way in that?"

"I knocked at the door, sir, and the voice of the young person abruptly stopped. When I entered, what was my surprise to find nobody in the room."

"Nobody?" Appleby stopped sipping.

"Only his lordship, that is to say. And there's no other way out. In fact," — and Butt paused with a marked sense of drama at the climax of his narrative — "there's nothing but a closet."

Appleby finished his tea. He somehow found it easier to swallow than the tale he had just heard. "You suggest," he said, "that Lord Cantell, realizing that he was going to be disturbed, hid his visitor in a closet."

"Yes, sir. Trembling, his lordship was. His brow was clammy."

"It must have been most distressing." Appleby looked at the butler with a certain sober doubt. "And what did you do?"

"I made up the fire and withdrew. Then I came straight downstairs and talked it over with Mrs. Davis here. It had been distressing, as you say. And it was the start of his lordship's being taken really bad. He had been upset for some time before, but after that he was a different man — really desperate."

"And that's the only odd incident you can recall lately?"

"Except the taxi." It was Farris who spoke. "On the morning of the same day, that was. His lordship himself called a taxi, quiet-like, and came back an hour later, slinking into the library with a large parcel. Nobody would have known, if it hadn't been for one of the maids poking around."

"Not his lordship's style at all." Mrs. Davis offered this.

"First a smuggled parcel and then a lady who has to be concealed in a closet." Appleby rose, shaking his head. "There's something to think about there, I agree — and I'm much obliged to you. And now I think I'll go and see this Mr. Diamond."

The Cantell's social secretary was in the library — the room, in fact, in which Butt maintained that the young lady had been thrust into hiding. Although he wasn't exactly rugged — not, Appleby told himself, a rough Diamond — he did have something more than the smooth manners and small-scale competence that one might have expected. Yet he was discernibly uneasy and puzzled. He might have been laboring under the conviction that things had not only gone wrong, but had gone wrong in quite the wrong way. His speech, however, was direct and entirely open. "I'm glad you've come, sir. This is the deuce of a fix."

"It's something that you're aware of that." And Appleby looked at the young man stonily. "Your behavior has been most irresponsible. Six days ago your employer disappeared. I believe your concern is only with his, and with his wife's, private affairs. But you must have as good a general notion as I have of his position in scientific research in this country. Something had happened that might be of the gravest importance. Instead of bringing this home to Lady Cantell, or yourself taking the responsibility of informing the authorities, you set about deceiving the household with the statement that Lord Cantell had left suddenly for Washington. Was there a word of truth in that?"

"No, there wasn't." Diamond had turned pale. "I might as well tell you the facts, I suppose. There's no point in keeping dark about something you'll learn as soon as you get in touch with Cantell's lab."

"That might be called self-evident." Appleby was unsmiling.

"Oddly enough, Lady Cantell herself doesn't know — not yet. Nothing, I mean, specific. But she'd guessed, you know, what the picture was in general terms. That's why she's kept quiet for a week, hoping for the best — hoping, you might say, for the return of the prodigal." Diamond paused, frowning. "My God," he said, "a thing like this turns even one's language dead common."

"No doubt. But it's a point, if I may say so, of minor interest. Will you get on with what you have to say?"

"It's simply that there's a girl who has also disappeared — and from Cantell's lab. A secretary who works for him — Marian something. Marian Page — that's her name. It happened on Monday. That was three days before Cantell vanished in his turn. Or rather the lab got a telephone message on Monday, saying that this girl Page was ill. I believe there ought to be some sort of doctor's certificate within a week, but I should think they're only beginning to make inquiries about her now. The reason why I have this information is very simple. I don't know the girl, and I don't think I've ever set eyes on her. But as she works for Cantell there, I've spoken to her on the telephone from time to time. I tried to get her on Thursday afternoon, as soon as I heard about the queer way Cantell had walked out of this house. They said she'd been away sick since the previous Monday. They also said Cantell himself wasn't about. And at that I rang off and did a little thinking."

"Did you, indeed? Well, it's what I'm now doing myself." And Appleby gave the young man a long, straight look. "Suppose these two absences, or disappearances, actually are connected. Suppose, to put it bluntly, that Lord Cantell and this Miss Page had gone off together in the reckless pursuit of an intrigue. Do you consider you had the faintest right to treat it as a purely private matter — to be kept quiet in the interest of avoiding scandal and so forth?"

"I'd a strong suspicion that Cantell had involved himself in similar indiscretions before — and without the slightest repercussions on his work, or his loyalty, or anything like that."

"Very well, Mr. Diamond. Now take the mere supposition itself — the supposition that Cantell's disappearance and this girl's absence from work *are* related. Isn't that rather taking things for granted?"

"There's this reason why it isn't: Cantell's relationship with the girl wasn't a straightforward professional one. For instance, he has her photograph in this room — there, on the mantelpiece."

The room was entirely lined with books, but over the fireplace there was a large mirror. Against this half a dozen unframed photographs were perched. Appleby walked over to them. "This middle one?" he asked, and in the mirror saw Diamond nod his head.

Appleby picked up the photograph, looked at it for a moment, then turned and walked back with it to the middle of the room. He placed it on a table. "A good-looking girl," he said impassively, and suddenly added, "Where's the closet?"

"The closet?" For a moment Diamond was bewildered. Then he walked to a section of the bookshelves and gave a tug. "I suppose you mean this. It's one of those concealed affairs behind dummy books. Doesn't spoil the symmetry of the room. But I can't think —"

"Never mind." Appleby stepped

inside the small square space and spent a couple of minutes making a careful inspection. "Miss Page," he asked when he emerged, "never came to this library and worked here? This room has a lot of office equipment — filing cabinets, tape recorder, those desk telephones, that typewriter. Yet you say Cantell never did any of his real work here?"

"Never." Diamond had looked startled. "And if the girl ever turned up here, it was without my knowing it."

"And you say you never set eyes on her?"

"Never."

"Then how do you know that this is her photograph?"

Diamond laughed a shade contemptuously. "I know because she's written on the back of it."

Appleby turned the photograph over. Penciled in a neat script were the words: *To Lord Cantell from Marian P.* Appleby looked at the inscription thoughtfully. "Well," he said, "it's perfectly innocent."

Diamond laughed again, this time more easily. "It's certainly discreet. But, even so, it's a bit out of the way. Secretaries don't commonly give a photograph of themselves to the boss."

"Does Lady Cantell know Miss Page, would you say?"

"I haven't the slightest reason to suppose so. Incidentally, she makes a point of never coming in here — which may explain Cantell's leaving the girl's photograph here."

"Then it won't perhaps be tactful to give Lady Cantell a receipt for it." Appleby picked up the photograph of Marian Page. "But you can be a witness that I'm making off with it. And now I must make inquiries elsewhere."

Diamond seemed surprised that their interview was suddenly over. "Well," he said — and his voice was ever so slightly jaunty — "I hope you've learned something here for a start."

"As a matter of fact, I have. Quite a lot. Good morning."

Late that evening, as the two men dined together, the Minister listened moodily to Appleby's account of his investigations during the day. "And the girl — this Marian Page?" he asked.

"She has certainly disappeared. The lab got a telephone message on Monday, saying that she was unwell and would not be coming in for a few days. And her landlady got a similar message that afternoon, saying that Miss Page had heard that her mother was dangerously ill, and had gone at once to join her in the country. I've checked that the message was false. Miss Page's mother is quite well."

"People seem to have been a bit casual about the girl. Do you think it sounds like her running away with Cantell? I don't."

Appleby shook his head. "I don't believe it for a moment. And I don't believe that he hid her, or any girl, in the secret closet. It's not the way

that a man like Cantell makes an ass of himself. And what is suggested to me by the manner in which he left his house is something quite different."

"Different?" The Minister waited for a moment. And when Appleby said nothing he added, "But there was that photograph."

"There was indeed. It told me quite a lot. For one thing, I recognized it. I'd seen the girl — and with Cantell."

"Good lord!"

"It was about a month ago. I didn't recognize Cantell at the time, but I've checked up on my memory since. It was in a rather smart restaurant to which I'd taken my wife. Cantell was having dinner with the girl."

"I see. And what was she like?"

Appleby drained his tankard. "She was all right."

"You mean —?"

"It was a clear case, on its own high level, of the boss having become infatuated with a girl about the place. She was handling it as well as she could. I expect she liked her job rather more than she liked him. A capable, decent girl of strong character, I'd say."

The Minister considered. "That would explain the photograph, and its decidedly temperate inscription."

"Ah, the inscription. That introduces something else. In fact, the villain."

"The villian, my dear Appleby?"

"Just that. In tragic life, God wot, no villain need be. But this isn't tragic life, Minister — or if it is, it's criminal investigation as well. That photograph, you know, was leaning against a mirror. When I took it up, I saw the reflection of the back. At that time *it was blank!* But Diamond realized he had made a slip in claiming to be able to identify it, so when I was examining the closet, he supplied that neat penciled script himself."

"Well, well!" The Minister had to make some effort to take this in his stride. "Would you say, then, that there is some intrigue between Diamond and the girl?"

Appleby shook his head impatiently. "No. Consider the sequence of events. Cantell, who is impressionable in ways that his wife has learned to discount, starts this middle-aged man's passion for Miss Page. He turns worried and nervous — which is a normal reaction to such a situation. On Monday Miss Page vanishes, to the accompaniment of those bogus telephone messages. On Tuesday morning Cantell goes out and makes a mysterious purchase. That afternoon there is the even more mysterious incident in the library, reported by Butt. Cantell's worry then turns to desperation, and on Thursday he also disappears. And you remember *how* he disappeared?"

The Minister nodded. "He walks out of his house, straight past his own waiting car and chauffeur."

"Precisely. It's not how a man in Cantell's position goes off for a lark — or even upon some serious resolution to make a complete break with his whole past life. It bears quite

another character — and one, I suppose, that is sufficiently obvious."

"Nervous breakdown?"

"Just that. Or what they call, technically, hysterical fugue. Complete loss of memory, then disappearance into the blue."

The Minister considered for a moment. "When a chap goes right round the bend that way, isn't he pretty quickly picked up?"

"Not always. Sometimes he behaves with a sort of unconscious cunning that defeats even an active hunt for days or weeks. Thanks to Lady Cantell's delay — and the obscure and sinister rôle of Diamond — there's been no hunt for Cantell until today."

"Oughtn't this Diamond fellow be locked up — or at least be made to give some account of himself?" The Minister had a recurrence of his mildly sardonic manner. "It's generally regarded as the right line with villains."

Appleby shook his head. "If I'm right in the way I see this case," he said gravely, "then the last thing we want to do is to alarm Charles Diamond."

The next morning every newspaper carried the story of Lord Cantell's disappearance. He was described as having been missing for several days. Scotland Yard believed that he was suffering from loss of memory. Importance was attached to reports that a man answering to his description had been seen in Cambridge, behaving in a dazed manner that had attracted attention. Lord Cantell was a Cambridge graduate, and it was thought that he might have returned to familiar ground. The police were conducting an intensive search both in the city and the surrounding countryside.

It was in tones of considerable impatience that the Minister spoke to Appleby on the telephone shortly after breakfast. For one thing, there had been some delay in getting through to the Assistant Commissioner.

"Look here, Appleby, did the news have to break like that? And how did the papers get on to it?"

"I put it out myself. You don't disapprove?" Over the wire, Appleby's voice sounded flat and tired.

"My dear fellow, you're a pretty sound judge. And it's good that we've got that line on Cambridge. But need *that* have gone out? There may be less virtuously disposed people than ourselves after him, remember."

"There certainly may. But I don't think there's any extra danger in what we've done." Appleby's voice paused. "I think, Minister, you'd better come round and see me."

"I come round and see *you?*" The Minister was startled. "At New Scotland Yard?"

"No, no. I'm in Cantell's library. They got you through to me here. I think you'll be — well, interested."

"I'll take your word for that. Give me ten minutes." And the Minister slapped down the receiver.

There were two uniformed inspectors in the book-lined room. The Minister gave them a nod and then turned at once to Appleby. "Well, here I am. What about that fellow Diamond? I'm still uneasy at his being loose. Where is he?"

"Not in this house — where I think he's ceased taking his duties very seriously. I rather hope that he's in Cambridge by this time."

The Minister stared. "You mean that report is all rot?"

"Certainly. No more than an attempt at a little diversionary action. We still haven't a notion about Cantell's whereabouts. All we've got is his overcoat."

"And how on earth —"

"On Thursday evening he dined by himself in the same restaurant in which my wife and I saw him entertaining Miss Page. The head waiter thought he looked queer. And when he left he forgot his coat. And in the pocket there was *that.*" Appleby picked up from a table beside him a small cigar box. "Inside which there was *this.*" He opened the box. It contained a broad, flat spool of metal ribbon. "The sequence is clear. Cantell received this by post on Tuesday morning. He didn't, here at home, have the machine to play it back on —"

"You mean it's for one of those tape-recorder affairs?"

"Of course it is, Minister. So Cantell went out, then and there, and bought one. It was, in fact, the large parcel he was seen bringing into this room. It's standing behind you."

The Minister swung round. "And the fellow you were telling me about, who sounds as if he was out of Happy Families —"

"Mr. Butt the butler? Precisely. What he heard through the door was not the voice of an actual woman, but the voice of a woman recorded on this." Appleby tapped the cigar box once more and then handed it to one of his colleagues. "I think, Minister, you'll find what it has to say rather striking."

There was silence for a few moments while the inspector manipulated the machine. Then a girl's voice — low, clear, slightly tremulous but desperately controlled — filled the room. The Minister was the only one present who was hearing it for the first time. Yet within seconds all four men were equally tense and rigid. Two or three times the voice broke off and then began again. Eventually it stopped for good.

"So that's it." The Minister had produced a handkerchief and had unobtrusively dabbed at his forehead. "Well, no wonder that butler found his employer discomposed. Here was this girl for whom he had an infatuation — kidnaped — and forced, God knows how, to make this appeal for help. I suppose this damned ribbon arrived along with a letter saying just what information Cantell must give away if she was to be released. It's as diabolical as anything I've ever heard. And you've no notion where she is?"

"Play it again." Appleby spoke grimly to the inspector. "And just short of two minutes listen particularly hard."

They listened. "Sounds like musical notes — like somebody tuning a fiddle," one of the inspectors suggested. "And there's something else — clack, clack — maybe it's a bass fiddle." They listened even more intently. "There it is again — clack, clack, clack — like strings plucked, quite softly, in rapid succession."

"More probably it's a technical fault in the machine." The second inspector spoke for the first time. "There are the musical notes again — curious, they are. Now the deeper tone — just one, a sort of irregular clack — and another. Yes, I think it must be in the machine itself — something out of whack."

Appleby was gazing somberly out of the window. But now he swung around quickly. "Play it again," he repeated.

Once more they listened with complete concentration.

"Find an atlas," Appleby said, "and one of you take that telephone and call up the Southern Electricity Board."

Nearly an hour later, as the police car slowed to turn off A40, the Minister broke a long silence. "Cantell's a bit older than I thought. He was just tipped into the first World war."

Appleby nodded. "I know. I looked him up. A very modest martial career. Signals." Appleby took his pipe from his mouth and stared at it, frowning. "We're going to find that girl — if we have any luck. But it occurs to me we may find Cantell too."

"I'll be much obliged to you if we do." Unconvincingly, the Minister had returned to his old jocular form. "What sort of place are we going to?"

"Mott? Formless sort of neighborhood, I gather. A good many large villas scattered all round a golf course. But the house we're interested in is older — early Seventeenth Century, and quite a show place at one time. Taken over by a local authority some years ago and used as offices. Now it's in the hands of a rather vaguely described private business firm. I hope we'll make their acquaintance. But first we should try the hotel. Golfers' place too."

"You think we may find Cantell in the bar, quietly polishing a niblick?"

Appleby was unperturbed by this sarcasm. "I think it's just possible we may hear of him."

And Appleby was right.

For the hotel manager recognized a photograph of Cantell immediately. "He arrived some days ago," he said. "Odd fellow. Absent-minded. Hasn't even signed our register yet. Irregular that, I'm afraid. Arrived without any baggage, but seemed to pick things up later. Plenty of money."

"Golfer?" Appleby asked.

"Not remotely interested, I'd say. And that's another odd thing. We hardly get anybody here but golfers. It seems to puzzle the chap himself.

too. I've sometimes thought he simply roams about wondering why on earth he came here."

"I see." Appleby's voice betrayed no trace of excitement. "He'll be in to lunch?"

"Sure to be. Or wait — no. Possibly not. He's gone off with some friends — the first people he's spoken to since he came. There was a chap in last night, who seemed to be looking at him rather curiously. And I saw the same fellow go up and speak to him this morning, just beyond the clubhouse. Then three or four other men appeared — rather suddenly, I thought. Golfers, I suppose. They surrounded our queer fish of a guest, and all went off together."

"Did they? Then I think you can certainly count him out for lunch." Appleby turned to the Minister. "I don't think now that our friend Diamond paid much attention to the little fuse about Cambridge. Not after his pals' interesting find here last night."

The Minister nodded. "Well," he said, "we're finding something too. But do you really think they could just walk off with Cantell in broad daylight?"

"Yes. In his confused state they could probably get away with it. Come along. I rather feel we haven't much time."

They drove for only ten minutes, and then the car came to a halt. Appleby jumped out. "A convenient hill," he said, and handed a pair of binoculars to the Minister. "There's Mott Manor, straight below us. Admirable Jacobean scrollwork. Attracts lovers of architecture from all over. As a matter of fact, you can see quite a number of them arriving now."

The Minister focused the glasses, and gave an exclamation. "You mean in that motor coach moving up the drive?"

"Yes. The South London Architectural and Archeological Society out on a jaunt. They rang up our interesting friends down there, I understand, and asked if they might just stroll round the place and admire the façade."

"Well, I'm damned!"

"I hope it's others, Minister, who are that. Look, they're getting out." Appleby chuckled. "An entirely male society, you notice. Elderly looking, some of them. And even infirm. But, if they straightened up, I think most of them would be about six feet. Spreading out now, you notice. The fellows wandering round to the back are no doubt attracted by the original Elizabethan stables. . . . Ah!"

A shrill whistle had sounded down below.

And then through every available door and window the members of the South London Architectural and Archeological Society were pouring into Mott Manor.

"Chancy," Appleby said. "But if those two were to be got out alive, it needed a dodge like that." . . .

That evening the Minister — he was quite a junior Minister after all — took Appleby to dine with someone important.

"And the noble and learned professor," the important person asked solicitously, "he'll be all right?"

Appleby nodded. "Yes, sir. It's thought that, when Lord Cantell realizes the girl has come to no harm through his folly, his condition will clear up and he'll be able to return to his lab."

"In the future he'd better stick to it. *Ne sutor ultra crepidam.* That's Latin for 'Back-room boys should stay put'."

"So it is, sir."

"Charles Diamond?"

"He was the brains of the whole affair. But it was his last ambitious essay in crime. He had gone down early that morning, and was in Mott Manor when we raided it. He tried to escape from an upper window, and broke his neck."

"Excellent. And now would you mind, Sir John, telling our young friend here" — the important person glanced at the Minister who passed a nervous hand over his smoothly brushed gray hair — "just how you did it? Was it with mirrors?"

"Only in the initial phase, sir. A mirror entered into that. But the later stage was acoustic, not visual. And the acoustics were divided into two parts. Remember the sounds we heard in the tape recording that seemed to be musical notes? Well, they reminded me of something: when one turns on a fluorescent light — as distinct from an ordinary electric light — there is often an accompaniment of faint musical notes. The microphone the girl was being forced to talk into happened to pick up just that — the series of soft musical clicks."

"So you knew that much about the place where they were holding her — that they used fluorescent lights. But how did that really help?"

"It wouldn't have, but Miss Page is a resourceful girl. She added a second acoustical clue. Remember the deeper tones we also heard in the tape recording — the ones that sounded like clacks rather than clicks? Well, they had given the girl a hand microphone, and she managed, as she held it, to tap on it with her fingernail. The taps came through as intermittent clacks that we almost took for flaws in the recording machine. They too made a sequence, entirely apart from the fainter musical clicks of the fluorescent lights going on. First, two clacks — then three — then one — then one again. Simple enough — the girl knew Morse code. Two dashes, three dashes, one, then another single one — spells Mott. It was the chance of getting the clue through that made Miss Page submit to what was demanded of her."

"She'd better have a medal — and be found an unmarried and eligible employer. Are you married, Sir John?"

"Yes, sir."

"A pity. So all you had to do —"

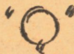
"Was to find where, in or near Mott, there was fluorescent lighting in operation. Apart from the hotel and the clubhouse, Mott Manor was the only place. It had been put in when the house was converted into offices."

There was a short silence.

"And Cantell?" the important person asked.

"There, of course, is the point of interest in the affair. That Morse message had got through to him too. He'd been in Signals in the first war, you remember. But it got through, so to speak, only to his unconscious mind. When he cracked up and lost his memory — as he very soon did — he nevertheless obeyed the signal he'd received, and went straight off to Mott. But he had no notion why. He hardly could have, since he had no notion who he was, either. When he was spotted by Diamond's men last night, they decided that their best course was to collar him too. I don't know that it was very sensible. But his disappearance had made hay of their original plan — kidnaping Miss Page — and I'd say they were rather floundering."

The important person nodded. "You didn't find it catching, Sir John." He paused, having plainly found the phrase upon which the episode should close. "If our young friend will cease detaining the decanter, you and I might venture on a second glass of port."



NEXT MONTH . . .

The newest story by a famous British novelist —

PHYLLIS BENTLEY'S *A Telegram for Miss Phipps*

EDITORS' FILE CARD

AUTHOR: **JEROME BARRY**

TITLE: ***Ice Storm***

TYPE: Detective Story

DETECTIVE: Sheila Pennell, secretary-librarian

COMMENTS: *"Pure detection" in the classical tradition: a house isolated by storm; three strangers from different parts of the world — an authority on Shakespeare, a musicologist, and a museum curator; an impostor and murderer; danger, menace, suspense; and that elusive, esoteric clue . . .*

SHEILA PENNELL LOOKED OUT OF the library window and watched the freezing rain turning the bare, spreading branches of the huge willow trees into crystal chandeliers. The telephone wire had become a glass rope. Mead, Simeon Barrington's aging butler, who was bundled in a dark overcoat and hat and a red plaid muffler, was scattering ashes with little futile gestures on the steep, curving drive.

Sheila was glad that she had been able to get back to the house before this ice storm had set in. After lunch, in response to a telephone call, Mr. Barrington had had her take him to the railroad station to catch a local train into the city. Bill Gurney, who would ordinarily have driven him, had gone to town that morning with the station wagon, to pick up some new slip covers for one of the guest rooms, and then, later in the afternoon, to call for the three men who were coming to dinner that evening. During the last month the three had written at different times, each asking to see part of the celebrated Barrington collection of prints and manuscripts. Each had a specialty and each was interested in only a portion of the collection. They were strangers — from different parts of the world — and Mr. Barrington had decided to lump their visits into one, ask a few other guests, and have a small dinner party.

At the shrill insistence of the bell Sheila picked up the telephone on the library table. Probably another guest,

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she thought, calling to say he wouldn't be able to come because of the storm, perhaps one of the three from the city. Those who lived nearby had already made their excuses.

It was Simeon Barrington himself. "Sheila, pay close attention," he said.

She noted a strange urgency in his usually unruffled voice. Listening to the precise enunciation, she seemed to see the lean, calm New England features beneath the neatly parted silver hair. Mr. Barrington's life, like his person, was as orderly and well planned as the collection that Sheila, as his secretary-librarian, had the task of cataloguing.

"I'm listening carefully," she said.

The unusual inflection in his voice was unmistakable now. "I've had an unpleasant shock, Sheila. I've learned something that leads me to believe that one of the men I've asked to dinner may be an impostor."

"But why should anyone —?"

"Sometimes psychopaths get a twisted pleasure out of impersonating some distinguished person. Or there may be a more serious reason."

Sheila said, a little breathlessly, "The collection, of course. Which one is the impostor, Mr. Barrington?"

"My information isn't complete yet. However, I'm following it up. I called to alert you. I'll be moving about unpredictably for the next hour or two. I shall call from time to time to see if there are any messages. If you receive any peculiar communications, you'll know now what they're about."

Sheila frowned with misgiving. "The weather has gone bad up here. Everything is icing over. The Newcomes and Mrs. Dell have called to say they're not coming. Wouldn't it be wise to tell your three guests from down there in the city that the dinner is off? That would avoid all danger."

"That's just what I shall do, Sheila — as soon as I have evidence to turn the fraud over to the police. That may be any minute now. Then I shall make my excuses to the other two, meet Bill at the University Club, where he was to pick them up, and drive back with him in the station wagon. Please tell Mead and the cook about the change in plans."

Sheila carried out his instructions and then busied herself in the library, sitting at the heavy fumed-oak table before the window. Behind her, solid tiers of bookshelves rose to the beamed ceiling. Lost in the task of bringing the catalogue up to date, she forgot the passage of time until the daylight waned and she put her hand out to the switch of the gooseneck lamp.

It did not light. The storm had apparently cut off the power. She glanced out at the blue-gray glitter of the landscape.

The station wagon, chains churning, was slithering slowly up the drive. Before it reached the spot where Mead had strewn the ashes, it faltered and skidded sidewise. Then a big branch from a willow tree broke off with a loud report and crashed down across the hood of the car.

Sheila ran into the hall, snatched a

coat from the closet, and hurried down the driveway. Needles of sleet stung her face. Bill, darling, she thought, are you hurt?

To her intense relief she saw the doors of the car open and Bill Gurney ease himself from the driver's seat, hobbling, as a man emerged from the other side. Mr. Barrington had come too, apparently, as he said he would.

But in a moment she realized that the man was someone she had never seen before. Another stranger emerged, and then a third, to stand by the station wagon and hold on to it for support against the slippery footing. Drawing nearer, she could see that there was no one else in the car.

A shiver ran along her skin, colder than the sleet. These were the three guests who should not have come; one especially should not — the pretender, the cheat.

Or perhaps — she reassured herself with the thought — it was possible that Mr. Barrington had discovered his suspicions had been groundless. Perhaps he would arrive later on the train, quietly amused at the whole incident.

The tallest of the three hooked an arm under Bill's and helped him along the icy slope. "Crocked up your leg, cobber?" he asked, and by the idiom Sheila ticked him off mentally as an Australian.

Bill grimaced with pain. "Forgot about my bad ankle. When the tree fell on us, I automatically tramped hard on the brake and twisted —" He ended in a grunt of anguish.

The big man helped Bill into the house, where Sheila made him comfortable in an easy chair in the living room, with his injured foot resting on an ottoman.

"Where's Mr. Barrington, Sheila?" Bill asked.

"He took a train into town after lunch. He'll be back in time for dinner." She wanted to tell him of her employer's curious telephone call, but the big Australian stood near them, listening.

"How's he going to get up from the station?" Bill asked. "We barely made it ourselves. Another half hour and there won't be a thing stirring on the roads."

"I'm sure he'll call and tell us what to do." Sheila turned then to the Australian. With a hand on his arm she urged him toward the great entry hall, hoping to get rid of him and have a word with Bill, but as she turned him over to Mead and started back, a slight man with gray-blond hair tagged along with her.

"American ways puzzle me," he said. "You won't mind if I ask a question or two, will you? The chauffeur chap — he doesn't wear a uniform, and you've installed him in the best part of the house. I say, is he a servant or a friend of the family? He *told* us he was the chauffeur. Was he having a bit of fun with us? Of course, you Americans do these things differently."

"He's Lieutenant William Gurney," Sheila said. "He was badly hurt by anti-aircraft while he was piloting

a Sabre jet over the Korean mountains, and he's back in civilian life now, getting over it. In February he is starting as an instructor in a city high school. He's as poor as a churchmouse, and I'm going to marry him. Mr. Barrington invited him to stay with us until his job begins. He eats with us and helps out with this and that, and I'm sure I don't know whether you'd call him an underpaid servant or an honored guest. We're proud to have him here. Does that cover the high spots of your inquiry?"

As they reached Bill's side, the man smiled down at him. "I say, Gurney, your fiancée's a remarkably interesting young woman."

Bill's frank face twisted into a rueful smile. He moved his leg and winced. "I don't know why a smart girl like Sheila ever got engaged to a dumb lug like me. Knocking myself out —"

"The name should tell you, old boy. Sheila's Irish for Cecilia, and that's the feminine of Cecil, from the Latin, meaning 'dim-sighted.' Quite pat, I mean to say." The man chuckled.

"Nothing dim-sighted about Sheila, Professor Beecham — except what she sees in me. She was an honor student in college. If Mr. Barrington can't get here, he might give her permission when he calls to show the collection. By now she knows it as well as he does."

Sheila thought of the vault where the most precious of the Barrington items were stored, protected by a heavy steel door and a lock to which only she and her employer knew the combination. I'm sure that everything is all right, she thought, but I do wish Bill hadn't said that.

"Could he give permission at zis time?" The third man — dark, spectacled, and round-bodied — spoke with a faint accent. "Are the wires not down?" He gestured toward the butler, who was setting lighted candles about the room.

"The telephone was still working when I last tried it," Sheila said. "Mead, may we have cocktails now?" She knew that the butler had prepared Martinis earlier in the day and left them in the refrigerator to blend and chill. "Now that we've caught our breath, shall we introduce ourselves?"

"I told you I was dumb!" Bill exclaimed. "Gentlemen, this is Miss Pennell, Mr. Barrington's secretary-librarian. Sheila, may I present Professor Percy Beecham, who is an eminent authority on the Shakespearean drama?"

"I've been looking forward to seeing the folio of King John, Miss Pennell. There are a few points —"

"I read ze reviews of your book about zat play," the stout man said to Beecham. "Zey were complimentary — on ze whole. You are supposed to have done a definitive study." He grunted. "Definitive studies have a habit of being upset before ze ink is dry."

Beecham's blue eyes crinkled at the corners. "I take it that you've read the reviews but not my book."

The stout man shrugged. "A musi-

cologist is too busy wiss his own field to do more zan skim about in ozzers."

"This is Dr. Hans Ten Hagen of Amsterdam, Sheila," Tom explained. "Historian of music and a composer in his own right."

"Very little composition," Ten Hagen said. He seemed the testy sort of man who likes to contradict others about small details. "I am more interested in examining ze manuscripts of Jan van Ockeghem's canons zat Mr. Barrington has in his collection."

"It's a pity," the tall, sandy-haired Australian said, in a deep bass, "that a chap can't get a bit of recognition before he's centuries dead like Ockeghem. I'm Arthur Trench, Miss Pennell — curator of prints at the Melbourne museum. I was thinking particularly of Hugh Ramsay. He was one of our few great Australian artists. Mr. Barrington has found some engravings that he thinks may have been done by Ramsay, I understand. If they were, this is a happy pilgrimage for me."

"Ah! Engravings?" The Dutchman's round face, behind his thick horn spectacles, promptly puckered in a frown of challenge. "I have only read of his paintings. But zen I am not an ausority on art."

"Ramsay managed to get to Paris in the 'nineties. I understand these mezzotints turned up in an old shop there."

"They're signed 'H.R.,'" Sheila said.

"If it can be established that they're by Ramsay," Trench told her, "we'd very much like to acquire some for the museum."

The telephone bell shrilled. "I'll take it in the library, Mead." Sheila felt suddenly completely at ease. Mr. Barrington was calling, of course. He would clear up the situation. She turned back for a moment. "If you'd like to freshen up before dinner," she said, "Mead will show you the way."

As Sheila picked up the telephone, she half-turned her back to the door to the hallway. Ten Hagen and Beecham, cocktail glasses in hand, had wandered out of the living room and stood chatting not twenty feet away.

"Who's this speaking?" a harsh male voice said.

"Mr. Barrington's secretary."

"This is Police Chief John Wentworth, Miss Pennell. We've received word from the city that they found Mr. Barrington's body this afternoon. He'd been shot. Have you any idea who might have killed him?"

The flame of the candle on the table wavered and danced before her eyes. She thought wildly: The murderer is here now — and he must not know that I know. Perhaps he is one of those two, looking at me. He killed Mr. Barrington to escape discovery, and he is here now because he didn't expect the body to be found so soon.

She forced her lips into a polite smile. "You can't come tonight? I'm so very sorry." Covering the mouthpiece with her hand, she made a little face toward the men at the door, whispering loudly, "The last of our guests, washing out on us."

The chief went on: "No, Miss Pennell, we can't get over there tonight. We'd like to start investigating right away, but both our squad cars are stranded on the icy hills, and I don't think we could get out to your place on foot. I'll see you tomorrow."

The dial tone indicated that he had hung up.

"Thank you for calling," she said graciously to the dead telephone. "I do hope you can come another time."

She walked back through the hall. Her heart was pounding. The men turned away and started up the stairs. She must give them a few minutes to get out of hearing; then she would call the police chief back.

She made her way at an even pace to Bill's chair. She dropped to her knees beside him and put her lips close to the side of his head. He started to slip an arm around her shoulders. That solid, reassuring pressure brought a wonderful relief. Once Bill knew, they could plan together. She whispered, "Bill, one of these —"

Someone was coming across the hall. Sheila rose slowly, avoiding a hasty motion that would indicate alarm. She said casually, "If your ankle swells any more, we'll put cold applications on it at intervals."

Trench, the Australian, came in, followed by Mead, who beckoned to her. She went out into the hall with him.

"The cook is quite out of hand, miss," he said. "She says first a dinner, and then no guests, and now —"

Sheila's heart slowed its pounding. "I can't talk to her, Mead. Surely she can prepare something quickly. Canned soup. Fried chicken."

"She's gone temperamental, Miss Pennell."

"Handle it as well as you can, Mead. We won't be critical under the circumstances. Anything will do."

"Not for her, miss," Mead said. "Her pride in her work —"

"I haven't time to discuss it, Mead."

"Thank you." The butler retreated, shaking his head.

She must telephone now, before the others came downstairs. She would have to tell Bill the next chance she had. She went into the library and picked up the instrument, keeping her eyes on the door and her ears alert.

There was no dial tone. She jiggled the bar impatiently, but there was only dead silence. Sleet ticked against the window. Through the glass she heard the deadened sound of a falling tree, or a giant ice-sheeted branch.

Replacing the telephone, she went to the front door, opened it softly, and stepped out onto the porch. The telephone line, which had hung like a glass rope among the candelabras of the trees, was down. On the ground, plain in the ghostly gray light, lay the shattered crystals of its icy coating. Her eyes went to the bathroom window; near it, the line had entered the house. There was no tag end of wire hanging down. The break had taken place close to the window.

Stepping indoors she found herself

shivering, as if the freezing rain that pelted down were peppering her naked skin. She was certain that the wire had been cut. It would have taken the killer only a few moments to raise the bathroom window and hack through the line — the last line of communication with the outside world. He would know that the ice would be blamed.

She must tell Bill at once. Even though he was lamed, he was a man. He had seen violence and killing. He would know what to do.

She crossed the hall as the visitors came downstairs, arguing. "How can you say zat?" Ten Hagen exclaimed. "Of course zere are American folk songs. I have heard zem myself."

"Name one, old boy." Beecham showed his prominent teeth in irritation, rather than good humor. "Not the Old Kentucky Home sort of thing. That was written by Foster, you know. Name one real folk song."

"Red River Valley," Ten Hagen countered promptly. "Zis was sung for me ze ozzer night by my hostess. It grows up in ze western parts a great many years ago."

"None of the characteristics of a true folk song," Beecham declared flatly. "No simply stated tragedy or down-to-earth humor. Nothing but sickly sentimentality."

"You judge by words," the Dutchman retorted, nettled. "I judge by music. Ze air is typical folk melody. My ear tells me. You may be omniscient ausority on Shakespeare, Professor Beecham, but —"

"Don't try to gild the lily, old fellow," the Englishman snapped. "I'm just an ivory-tower scholar, but I do have a feeling for words. The Red River Valley is no more a folk song —"

"Folk music is not your field," Ten Hagen almost shouted. "What do you know about it?"

The words beat against Sheila's ears, only half heard. Would she never get a chance to talk to Bill? And if she did, what could he do against a gun? There was only one way: someone must slip off to get the police. Bill was lame; Mead and the cook were too old. She herself must go.

"You're both bluffing," the big Australian said contemptuously. "You're stating unsubstantial opinions. Very unscholarly. Miss Pennell, what has your library got on folk songs?"

Sheila shook her head and said, "I'm sorry."

Bill, following the argument with a grin, spoke up. "How about that history of popular music by Spaeth, Sheila? I was looking through it the other day. Would it help settle this argument?"

As she fetched the book, she was unsure what to do. The crash of a falling branch came dully through the window. If she didn't break a leg on some icy slope, her head might be caved in by a falling bough. But she was losing vital time by agonizing over the risks in going. Why was the killer waiting? What sort of cat-and-mouse business was this? Why didn't he go about his looting at once?

The men huddled by a candle were leafing through the book.

"Here!" Beecham crowed. "Originally called In the Bright Mohawk Valley and written by a man named Kerrigan in eighteen ninety-six! Right out of 'Tin Pan Alley,' my dear Ten Hagen! There's your folk song!"

The Dutchman's fat face slowly turned a deep red. "It is not really in my field. After all, most musicologists do not concern zemselves very much wiz zis sort of —"

Sheila did not follow Hagen's weak explanation. She was too absorbed in trying to think things through. If she was held prisoner by the ice, so was the killer. He could not get away as long as the storm lasted. For a little while, surely, she had nothing to fear.

Mead served dinner by candlelight. As Sheila tried to take part in the conversation that rippled around the table, she found herself checking over her reasoning with growing doubt. The storm had made temporary prisoners of them all, but it had not brought safety. As she ate and chatted, she tried to follow, with unflinching logic, the course the impostor's reasoning must take.

He had had to kill Simeon Barrington. He was already a murderer and so had little to lose. Now he must get away with all that he could carry of value. He must leave nothing behind to set pursuit in motion before he had a good start. Anyone left here must be tied up — or killed. Tying up would not be feasible. Too many to keep under gun point while the roping went on. But a quick volley of shots at an unexpected moment would take care of Bill and the two guests. She would be spared until she could be forced into opening the vault. Then Mead and the cook could be hunted down at leisure. The killer need get only as far as the railroad station, and the first train would take him to safety.

She looked at Bill's powerful shoulders. If she could tell him which of these three was the killer, and he could get his strong hands on the man . . .

There was no way of knowing which was Simeon Barrington's murderer. Certainly he would not be kind enough to announce himself. Murderers usually don't.

Her breath caught in a sharp little gasp of excitement. Mightn't he announce himself unknowingly? Two of these men were experts in their own fields — the third was only pretending. If she could get the murderer to talk enough, he might give himself away. Even if he had learned a few pat facts to impress everyone, he might betray himself by some little blunder.

"You were speaking of unusual greeting cards, Mr. Trench," she said, joining the conversation with a show of bright interest. "Do you really mean *everyone* should make his own? Take me. I'm hopeless at drawing."

"I do mean everybody," the big Australian declared. "Then the messages would be truly personal. Gay, colored prints to suit the occasion. Very simple designs, of course."

"Linoleum cuts?" Sheila suggested. "Woodcuts?"

"I recommend potato cuts."

"How does the process work, Mr. Trench? I've heard about it."

"Slice a potato in half, cut a design into it, and use that as a stamp to pick up wet color from a pad and transfer it to paper."

"At least," said Beecham, the gray-haired Englishman, "you advise using a *simple* pattern. Nowadays so many paintings are puzzles. Sculptures are enigmas. And in your field, Ten Hagen, it's no better. I've often thought that most contemporary music would be lovely if it only didn't *sound* so horrible." He chuckled over his little joke.

The Dutchman allowed himself a half smile. "Trench would probably protest if we told him zat his most advanced artistic possessions would be charming if zey only didn't *look* so ugly."

The Australian's mouth twisted. "Your modern poets, Beecham, are no better. Why do so many of them use chopped-up meter?"

"We call it sprung rhythm."

"I'm afraid," Sheila said, "that the rest of us are dreadfully ignorant about the technical aspects of poetry."

Beecham glanced at her shrewdly. " 'Methinks the lady doth protest too much,' as Hamlet said to his mother. Gurney tells us you're a very clever girl. I'm sure you know as much about these things as we do."

"I've never heard of sprung rhythm, Professor," Bill said.

"Every craft has its own jargon," the Englishman remarked lightly. "You and I, Trench, wouldn't be able to follow our musical friend through one of his compositions. Not technically, that is."

"Do you write in the atonal manner, Dr. Ten Hagen?" Sheila asked quickly.

The Dutchman frowned. "I am steeped in ze older music. What little composition I have done is not Schönbergian but on ze conservative side. I do not care for ze twelve-tone system. I sooner make melodies in ze five-tone scale."

The others broke in, and the talk went on and on. Above the sick excitement that Sheila hid with an interested smile, the question kept pounding through her mind: Which is fraud? The grave Australian? The cheerful little English scholar? Or the careful, didactic Dutchman?

The after-dinner coffee was soon finished. She rose, and the men stood up too, and all moved toward the big living room. A crash outside the windows marked the fall of another tree.

"Seems a pity we can't be looking at the collection," Beecham suggested, running slender fingers through his gray hair, "after venturing out into this beastly storm."

"You'll stay the night, of course," Sheila said, "and tomorrow Mr. Barrington will return and —"

"I must leave as soon as possible," Ten Hagen objected. "I have ozzer appointments."

"I, too," the Australian said. His manner was almost bullying, Sheila thought. "Didn't Gurney say you could show the collection if your employer approved? Surely our presence here is a sign of approval, or are your American ways different from ours?" His wry smile was angry.

Voices joined in a protesting trio. Two were innocently eager; the third man, she knew — and the knowledge set the blood pounding in her veins — had the means and the will to force her into obedience. He could threaten her, hurt her in ways she would not let herself think about, until she opened the vault. Afterward, he would leave no witness. Even as she told herself that her only hope was to stall for time, to postpone as long as possible the inevitable moment, she knew that she was drawing near the end of her resources.

She said, "Bill, perhaps our guests have a point. Come into the library with me, please. I'd like to talk it over with you."

There was a pleased murmur from the three as Bill hobbled after her.

She leaned against the oaken table. "Darling, no matter what I say, look pleasant and undisturbed," she said. "Mr. Barrington was shot in the city today. That telephone call I had before dinner was from the police chief. Beyond any doubt, the murderer is here now, intending to loot the collection. He's cut the telephone line."

Bill kept his eyes on hers. His voice was low and even. "Which one is it?"

"The last message I had from Mr. Barrington was that one of the three is an impostor; which one, he didn't know. I hoped the one who was pretending to be an expert would give himself away, make some mistake in what's supposed to be his specialty."

"Have you spotted anything phony?"

She glanced desperately around at the dark shelves of books. "No," she said. "Have you?"

"They all sounded off the beam to me. Potato cuts are okay?"

She nodded. "I've seen them."

"Sprung rhythm? Sounds as if Beecham made it up."

She made a gesture toward the big dictionary on its stand. "You'll find it in Webster. It's a meter built up of different kinds of poetic feet."

"Then Ten Hagen's your man! Five-tone scale! There are seven tones in the scale — do, re, mi, fa, sol, la, and ti. Everybody knows that. That pins it right on him."

She restrained him with a hand. "That's the pentatonic scale. Deep River is written in it, and lots of Scottish and Irish songs. They leave out the fourth and seventh of the scale."

His face suddenly brightened. "We forgot! Why, we've got him! Before dinner he blundered. The Red River Valley — remember? He's supposed to be a musician, but he didn't know his stuff on that one. Come on."

She held his arm. "Wait, Bill! We don't dare make a mistake. If he'd blundered about Bach or Beethoven, we'd be really sure. But he was right when he said that folk songs aren't

very important to most musicologists. They're a special field."

Bill gave a little grunt of defeat. In the silence that followed, she heard the laughter and talk of the three guests, but behind that, her sensitive ears became alert to a sound that was softer and infinitely menacing.

Bill saw the change in her face. "What is it?"

She pointed toward the window. There was no ticking of sleet against it now — only the rush of rain. She raised the sash a little. A branch outside, already weakened by the weight of ice, clattered to the ground, but the breeze had grown perceptibly warmer. In a few hours the ice would be off the roads. At any moment the killer would realize that the situation had changed the act.

Her gaze swept the room frantically. Books, books. In them she could check everything that had been said this evening — if she had weeks to recall each word and verify its accuracy in these volumes. Surely somewhere the impostor had made one tiny mistake that might give him away. But she had not heard one. He had been too clever, too well prepared. Apparently, anything unusual that he had mentioned, he had carefully checked while getting ready for his impersonation.

Unusual? Her mind raced back over the evening. Hadn't there been some thing? Every nerve in her body suddenly tightened.

"Bill, go in there. Stall. Stay near them. When I signal you which one it is, you'll know what to do. Good luck, darling."

As he limped out, she had already snatched a book from a shelf and was looking swiftly through it.

A few moments later, she moved toward the door. In a mirror she caught a glimpse of a slender, attractive figure, smiling as if it were stepping out onto a dance floor — instead of going in to confront a murderer.

The four men stood in a group near the broad window. She saw Ten Hagen raise his hand to quiet the others. His fat face was alert. "It is sawing."

"What's sawing what?" Beecham asked. "Oh — thawing, you mean. The ice is melting." The Englishman's merry little eyes turned intent and serious. He started toward the window. "Let's have a look."

The Australian's voice said abruptly, "Let's attend to something more imp —"

The picture window broke with a crash. Glass cascaded over the carpet and the top of a wet, ice-encrusted tree fell across the sofa, smashing the back down into the cushioned seat. A length of drapery, torn from its rings, hung from the end of a branch.

Sheila grabbed the heavy red cloth, as the men stood motionless with surprise. Then quickly she flung the drapery over the head of one of them, wrapped it tightly around his body with her arms, and clung to him with the sharp-clawed tenacity of an enraged alley cat.

"Grab him, Bill!" she cried.

And Bill Gurney made a diving tackle at the man.

When they had removed an automatic pistol from his shoulder holster, they lashed his hands with a curtain pull and pulled the drapery from his disheveled gray head. All the twinkle was gone from Professor Beecham's eyes, and the English accent gone from his speech, too, as he demanded sullenly, "How'd you know?"

Sheila's knees buckled. She sat down quickly on the edge of a chair. "You were clever enough to make sure beforehand of anything unusual you intended to say about your supposed specialty. But I realized you might make a mistake in something that seemed usual and ordinary and safe. And then I remembered. When you were arguing with Dr. Ten Hagen before dinner you spoke about 'gilding the lily.' "

"What's wrong with that?" Bill asked. "People say it all the time."

"People often misquote. When I thought back on it carefully, there was something about lily gilding that bothered me. It took only a moment to check in a book of familiar quotations. The line is from Shakespeare's King John, Act IV. 'To gild refined gold, to *paint* the lily.' The real Professor Beecham had written a scholarly work on that play. He would never have fallen into that common error."

"A thief caught by a single slip of the tongue," the big Australian said.

"Not just one," Sheila said. "Perhaps I wouldn't have noticed the lily-gilding if I hadn't suddenly remembered what he said at the dinner table. 'Methinks the lady doth protest too much.' "

"Everyone says that too, Sheila," Bill Gurney said.

"Everyone who does is wrong. I looked it up in Bartlett, too. The quotation is: 'The lady doth protest too much, methinks.' And it wasn't Hamlet who said it. It was his mother, the queen, speaking of one of the company of players."

"I sink ze greatest error of zis man," said Ten Hagen, "was neglecting to foresee so clever and charming a hostess." He bowed with precise courtesy and added wistfully, "We could see ze collection now?"

Trench awkwardly copied the Dutchman's bow. "My homage also, Miss Pennell. I suggest we follow Ten Hagen's suggestion."

Bill said grimly, "Let's forget the collection for now. This man might have murdered all of us tonight — if it hadn't been for Sheila."

EDITORS' FILE CARD

AUTHOR: **ELLIOT WEST**

TITLE: ***Business Trip***

TYPE: Crime-Suspense Story

LOCALES: Ankara, Turkey, and Malvern, England

TIME: The Present

COMMENTS: *The deceptively quiet tale of a professional assassin — a gentle, unpretentious man whose profound appreciation of life gave him an even profounder understanding of death . . .*

BELLINGHAM SEEMED ALWAYS TO have a wistful smile on his face. But though he was indeed a man of mild disposition, it was largely the natural cut of his mouth that produced this effect. His eyes were unwavering, gray and tranquil. They were otherwise undistinguished, as was his entire general appearance. Bellingham had no pretensions of any kind. His clothes, for example, were durable, and conservative in color and cut, and he seldom spoke in any but a polite, conversational tone of voice.

At 56, in a state of semi-retirement, he had managed to provide a solid, well-appointed house in the English Midlands for his wife Edith and their daughter Dorothy, and appeared to lead a most enviable kind of late middle life; one without strife or unrest. He could enjoy the taste of his pipe, the writings of certain ancient Greeks, the music of the Central Europeans. The time he had to listen and absorb had made him thoroughly familiar with the works of Beethoven, Bach, and Mozart. He was able to whistle, with fluent ease, melodic lines from the Eroica or the Ninth, from all of the Brandenburg Concerti, from many of Mozart's *divertimenti*. But he whistled so softly that only he could make out the melodies.

He loved to whistle to himself while walking through the pastures, the woods, and along the roads, and was often observed doing so by various residents of the Malvern district. Any and all weather was weather for walk-

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ing. Mrs. Bellingham, however, would take exception to rain or dankness, since he was not too robust and since she was, perhaps, a bit overprotective. This was especially so when he would prepare to embark on one of his not-too-frequent business trips.

On this occasion, she insisted upon his having something hot before leaving the house, as she always did, and with her redoubtable air forced a teacup and saucer into his hands.

"You're a fusser," he said. "But I'll compromise. Two sips — standing up."

"Uncivilized."

"Practical."

"Don't forget your warmed milk before bedtime. That's even more practical."

"I'm going only as far as Southampton, my sweet," he informed her patiently. "And only for a day or two. So little can happen to me between here and there."

"You sound regretful," Edith Bellingham declared.

Bellingham smiled. "I'm not," he assured her.

At the front door, Dorothy, who was just sixteen, kissed his cheek. "Goodbye, Daddy."

"Goodbye, darling," he said. "Look for me Thursday. My business should not take any longer than that."

"If it should rain," Edith Bellingham admonished him, "you'll remember to wear your rubbers."

"Yes, of course."

"You'll function much better with dry feet."

"Yes, my dear."

"And your warmed milk. You're not Heathcliffe, you know."

"Yes, my dear."

Her face softened and she peered lovingly at him. "I do fuss, don't I, darling?"

Bellingham returned her warm look, half smiling.

"I suppose," she went on, "a man can feel smothered by affection."

"I love it," he said.

He kissed her and was gone.

Eighteen hours later, Bellingham was in Ankara, Turkey.

In the back of a restaurant, oppressively dim and partitioned off by two beaded curtains, sat a man wearing a fez. He was dark, heavy-set, and unsmiling. Bellingham was escorted to him by a young woman. No one else seemed to be on the premises. Bellingham, his briefcase in hand, stood there with a benign expression on his face. When the young woman left them, Bellingham spoke.

"Good evening," he said to the seated man.

The man said nothing, but leaned forward with a hint of eagerness in his manner. Bellingham took the liberty of sitting down opposite him. The man stared at Bellingham a moment and said in precise, clipped English, "Very good," and nodded.

"Yes," Bellingham agreed. "For the best."

"Negotiation was the only course your friends could take," the other said.

"Perhaps."

"It was obvious I could be no more conciliatory than I had already been," the man in the fez said. Then: "But tell me, why such strict secrecy?"

"It's best at first," Bellingham said.

The man shrugged. "It's of no consequence," he said. "Now — shall we begin?"

Bellingham began to unzip the briefcase which was now on the table. "Yes," he answered.

The man in the fez said, "Good. Very good."

Then Bellingham leveled at him a .32 automatic with silencer attachment and fired point-blank. A little puff exploded in the air. The dead man slumped forward, his fez toppling from his head. Bellingham cleared his throat, calmly replaced the gun in the zippered briefcase, and stood up. The young woman re-entered the enclosure. She swept past Bellingham to another entrance and stood silently awaiting his departure.

"Thank you," he said as he moved out past her.

With the proper connections he would be home the next day.

Squeamish people are not the truly civilized people, he thought as his plane winged out over the Dardanelles. They can destroy by proxy, but pale at the sight of blood. They're not civilized, as they think themselves to be, but merely prissy and faint of heart. Bellingham allowed a passage from a Bach cantata to come into his head and replace the thought. But this proved tantalizing because he couldn't identify it and could hear only the choral parts. There are so many of them, he thought, and he began to whistle the melody under his breath, straining to recall what it was and where he had recently heard it. The flight was otherwise uneventful.

It was not until the train had pulled away from the platform at Southampton and Bellingham was seated comfortably and imperturbably in an empty third-class compartment, that Mr. Garrett made himself known. He had a sufficient lack of distinction for the work he was engaged in. His expression just now was furtive, and he was clearly upset. He came into the compartment and sat down uneasily, his bowler set stiffly on his lap. He wore a rain slicker.

"It's all there," he said quietly, transferring a thick, letter-size envelope from an inside coat pocket to Bellingham's hands. "Four thousand pounds. Just as they promised."

Bellingham slipped it, without fuss, into his inside breast pocket. "Thank you," he said.

"I shall be getting off at Romsey," Garrett said after a slight pause.

"Yes, I know."

Garrett, after another pause, said, "Was — your trip — pleasant?"

Bellingham looked at him with kind eyes. "Mr. Garrett, please don't feel the need to make conversation. I shan't be slighted if you remain silent until the train stops."

"Oh."

"You should not allow a business transaction to force you into a social entanglement," Bellingham told him. "Not even a temporary one."

Garrett replied a little awkwardly, "Not many people are paid for their services on trains, I should think."

"You must be new," Bellingham said.

"And you are not?"

"Why are you surprised?"

Garrett scratched his nose nervously. "You see, they didn't tell me what you were like," he said. "I would have expected someone quite different for this sort of thing. You seem to be so — gentle."

"I'm ideally suited to it just because of that. My adjustment would take too long to explain, and, of course, is a personal matter."

"Of course."

"I move according to plan and thank my lucky stars when nothing slips up. Then I forget the whole thing."

"I see."

"I trust your superiors have made clear that you must do the same. Once you leave this train, forget you've ever seen me."

"Yes — of course."

And Bellingham was quite certain he would.

Never once had Bellingham accepted payment for doing something he was ashamed of. Without fail, his heart was in his job. He believed in Hakete's death this time as he'd believed in Varescu's two years back, and Shilling's six months before that. If was different if you believed, if you understood the facts at the level of their true meanings. Because then you knew that blood was, after all, a chemical compound, and life was not sacred merely because of the phenomenon of heartbeat. One had to appreciate life, and respect its potential, to be clear on the subject of death. Then it became as simple and manifest as the weeding of a garden. If one man proved a hindrance to peace in a certain part of the world, his removal seemed logical. To Bellingham it was as logical as pulling weeds from his own garden in Malvern so that the flowers would have greater radiance. But beyond that, he had to be good, he had to be convinced, he had to be quick. If ever anything went wrong, he was on his own. No one could come to his aid — neither governments nor private parties. It was a touchy way to grow rich. He smiled now to think that after his death Edith would believe that his bequest to her had come solely from his law practice.

He looked out at the South country. It was rather bleak and the smoky haze over the land did not improve its looks. There, he thought, that cantata again. Which one was it?

The compartment door slid open.

Bellingham's solitude was now ended by a tall, very handsome man of about 35. He had his topcoat over one arm, the lights of Soho in his eyes, the tweeds of Bond Street on his back; he glistened.

"Hello," he said brightly. "A first-

class situation in a third-class coach, I'd call this." He tossed his coat to an overhead baggage rack. "Don't mind, do you?"

"Not at all," Bellingham said.

Sitting down opposite Bellingham, the fellow said, "Nonsmoker, but the leg room makes it worth the sacrifice."

Bellingham smiled politely.

"Of course," said the other, as an afterthought, "there's no one else in here and I *could* smoke if you didn't object." He slipped out a box of Craven A's. "You don't, do you?"

"Not at all."

"Care for one?" he asked, extending the box.

"No, thank you."

"My name is Devry — Arnold Devry."

"How do you do?" Bellingham mumured.

"Going far?"

"Malvern."

"That's very nice country. I'm going a bit beyond it. Kidderminster. But I'm not much for train rides — makes me restless."

"Really?"

"Give me air travel every time — or don't you agree?"

"Airplanes usually make me ill."

"That's psychological, I'm sure."

Bellingham said, "Perhaps."

"Oh, absolutely," Devry insisted cheerfully. "You should give it a try once or twice more. You'd shake it."

Bellingham looked away from him. "I'm afraid I never go any farther than Southampton."

"Business?" Devry asked.

After a small pause Bellingham said, "Yes."

"I'm on business, more or less, myself," Devry said. "Not too pleasant really. I'm settling my aunt's estate in Kidderminster."

"Oh."

"Really not too well equipped for it, either. Lawyers, papers, red tape — messy stuff, you know."

Not unpleasantly, Bellingham said, "Why do you tell me all this?"

Without being ruffled in the least, Devry answered, "Sake of conversation. Takes my mind off the ride, I suppose." He shrugged slightly and grinned.

The door slid open. "Tickets please," the guard announced.

Both men began to produce their tickets for punching.

"You're not permitted to smoke in here, sir," the guard said.

"Oh. Oh, how stupid of me," Devry said. "I didn't realize this was a nonsmoker." And he put out the butt with great vigor on the compartment floor.

Bellingham took his punched ticket from the guard and looked across at Devry for a moment. What a bother, he thought. Then he leaned back and closed his eyes.

Bellingham's sleep came quickly, but was not dreamless. For one thing, the cantata followed him. Fragments of the past 48 hours sifted in and out of memories of 30 bygone years of experience.

During a period in which he served as representative of a British import

company in Shanghai, a Manchu named Chu Yick had made a hostage of him. Bellingham had refused to write a ransom note, and had discovered that the bandit leader was able to present graphic arguments against this stubbornness; now, as Bellingham napped, he dreamed of the detached fingers of certain members of Chu's entourage which were shown to him in a little box. This was meant to indicate to what lengths Chu would go, and to imply that Bellingham's fingers might be next. He was properly nauseated by the demonstration but still refused to write the note.

One night Chu Yick had Bellingham brought to a sumptuous feast in his private dining room. The Nanchu, who was articulate in nine different languages, looked up from his oxtail soup and across the table at Bellingham. "What would you say," he asked, "if I told you that you were going to be shot immediately after the brandy and cigars?" And he removed his Luger from its holster and placed it on the table.

Bellingham picked up the pepper mill before him. He adjusted the top screw to its finest grind. This done, he ground out a hail of small grains into the palm of his hand as though to season his soup, shrugged his shoulders, and casually blew the pepper into Chu's eyes. The bandit screamed with pain, and as he sprang out of his chair, Bellingham seized the Luger and shot him through the heart. Chu Yick dropped to the floor, dead, and Bellingham was amazed to note that Chu's personal guard was immobilized at the sight. Their leader's death seemed to paralyze them. It paralyzed them to such an extent that Bellingham, completely ignored, was able to walk out of the place to his freedom.

This made a profound impression upon him, and a short time later, while in Egypt, he brought the lesson of this incident into play. It was a private venture he was involved in at the time, but its failure might have thrown the Middle East into chaos. One man seemed to govern the others with whom Bellingham was attempting to bargain. His stand was very bellicose, and was all that blocked an amiable settlement of the business at hand. Bellingham recalled the effect of Chu Yick's death on his followers: their ferocity had ceased to exist as soon as their ferocious leader had ceased to exist.

One morning during the following week the man who had led the opposition was found dead in his house outside of Cairo; he had been shot through the head during the night. Almost immediately negotiations went through. The people whom Bellingham represented, were of course, delighted, and content to ask no questions.

Expedience, intelligence — the words were clearly in his mind's eye. Suddenly he awoke.

Devry was reading the *Daily Mail*, and as Bellingham's eyes came open, Devry said, "Well. Have a good nap?"

Bellingham nodded with blinking eyes out of the window. The day was

not as gray as before, and the green roll and toss of the English landscape was being done some justice. "Where are we?" he said softly.

"We just passed Cheltenham. You slept through it. I've been reading your newspaper — I hope you don't mind."

"Of course not," Bellingham said.

And with a frowning look back at the newspaper, Devry asked. "How do they say this chap's name — the one they just knocked off in Ankara?"

"Ankara?" Bellingham repeated.

"H-a-k-e-t-e. Hackeet?"

Bellingham, after a pause, told him, "*Hock*etty."

Devry, his eyes still fastened to the *Daily Mail*, went on. "There's quite an account of it here. Man was some sort of troublemaker, wasn't he?"

"I suppose."

Devry cocked his head. "Seems to have been a neat, clean job," he said. "Took place in one of those creepy places in downtown Ankara."

Then he read aloud, " 'Unofficial opinion points to Hakete's death as the result of a carefully laid trap. There was no sign of a struggle, indicating that he sat in total unawareness of his assassin's intention until the instant he was shot — with a .32-caliber automatic probably with a silencer attached.' " Devry looked up. "Could cause an international situation, I suppose."

"More likely it averted one."

"Well, I really wouldn't know. I'm quite apolitical. What interests me is the cleanliness of the job. Who could have got that close to a man like Hakete?"

Bellingham smiled inwardly, considered his own unimpressive looks, and said, "A person he would least suspect of wanting to kill him."

"He seems to have been completely duped — probably because he misjudged someone's character. That happens all the time."

"Does it?"

"Of course," Devry replied with affable conviction. "Take here and now. You and I — sitting here, neither of us with a single fact concerning the other. And yet I'll bet we've both drawn conclusions about each other."

"Very general ones, I'm sure. Don't ever trust them."

Devry smiled, and with unlooked-for directness, he said, "What are yours about me?"

For the first time, Bellingham felt slightly irritated. "Don't be ridiculous," he said.

"No," Devry insisted. "I mean it. Tell me."

"No."

"Just for the sake of passing time. It will take our minds off the ride."

"Do you really want to know?" Bellingham said.

"Yes."

Bellingham waited, seemed to be measuring Devry with a parental eye for discipline in line with a not-too-serious offense. Then he said, "All right. I think you're a silly young man who has been bothering me with a lot of meaningless chatter, probably because you've been spoiled most of

your life by money, glitter, and too many frivolous people, and aren't able to face the quiet and solitude of your own mind for any length of time. Either that, or you're a complete rogue who is — for reasons known only to you — trying to lull me into a state of defenselessness."

Devry was amused, or pretended to be. Good-naturedly, he said, "Wonderful. Sorry my judgment of you doesn't have much color."

"Doesn't it?"

"Do you have a family?"

"No," Bellingham said unhesitatingly.

"Then I'm wrong for the first part. But generally you seem to be a civilized, gentle soul, probably completely absorbed by a rose garden in Malvern and stuffy business affairs in Southampton."

Bellingham smiled warmly. "You are absolutely correct," he said.

Devry's handsome face reflected some satisfaction. It was hard to say whether he was very silly or very smug. In any case, he was friendly, perhaps a little too much so, and Bellingham stood up.

"Will you excuse me?" he said.

Devry said, "Yes, of course," and Bellingham removed himself from the compartment. Immediately, Devry began to rifle through Bellingham's belongings. He was very expert about it.

Bellingham's topcoat yielded only a small check or ticket. It seemed to puzzle Devry at first. Then he slipped it into his pocket. From the baggage rack he took down the valise and briefcase. Nothing in the valise proved interesting. The rubbers that were packed away to keep Bellingham's feet dry brought a smile to Devry's face. With deft fingers he replaced the contents of the valise, snapped it shut, and hoisted it to the baggage rack. Next, the briefcase. Devry unzipped it, slipped his hand inside, pulled out the automatic with the silencer mechanism still attached. He looked thoughtfully at the gun and gradually a sly glint came into his eyes. Then he quickly slipped the weapon back, zipped the case shut, and was in the process of replacing it on the baggage rack when Bellingham re-entered the compartment.

Bellingham slid the door shut behind him and stared at the younger man, whose animation had become suddenly suspended.

"How awkward," Devry said. A sick smiled crawled to his lips.

Bellingham said nothing.

Devry, recovering himself slowly, said, "You are not going to call the guard, are you?"

"It's a possibility," Bellingham answered.

Instantly Devry drew a nickel-plated .38 automatic from his jacket. "Don't," he said. He said it with quiet authority. And real or fake, Bellingham obeyed it.

"Do you mind?" Devry said courteously as he reached inside Bellingham's breast pocket. The envelope came out. "Well," he said, hefting it. "Heavy enough, isn't it?"

Then, with his teeth, he tore open the envelope which contained the four thousand pounds. He pressed it by the narrow ends to make it billow and looked into it; he seemed quite impressed. He looked back at Bellingham, wide-eyed, pleased, a kind of conceit in his manner.

"Let's sit down, shall we?" he said. "There's no point in being uncomfortable."

"You're a common thief," Bellingham said, sitting down.

"That's a trite way of putting it."

"Trite but true."

"I like to think of myself as uncommon. In any case, there's nothing common about you, is there? How much is in this envelope? Quite a chunk from the looks of it."

"Why don't you count it for yourself?" Bellingham suggested.

"I shall," Devry assured him. "Later. But at the moment I'd prefer to sit here until the next stop — at which point I'll leave you with many thanks. We can chat in the meantime, if you like."

"I find your conversation a bit expensive."

"I find yours profitable."

In a sincere, even tone of voice Bellingham said, "I worked hard for that money."

"Did you now?"

"I did."

"There'll be more for you, I'm sure."

Bellingham looked away from him. "One doesn't grow younger, you know," he said, a wistful quality coming into his already hushed voice. "Opportunities occur less frequently as time goes by, and I've come to — old age — and its many accompanying factors" — he looked directly at Devry — "including the use of medicinal drugs." Wearily he reached into his pocket. "Do you mind?"

Devry alerted himself. "What is it?" he demanded quickly.

"Thiamin," Bellingham replied, bringing out a small, white box. "In powder form."

Devry relaxed and said, "Go right ahead."

Bellingham removed a powder from the box. "Physician's advice," he said, unfolding the paper. "I follow it to the letter."

"Very sound," commented Devry. "Don't you need water?"

By this time Bellingham had put the open paper with the contents on it to his mouth, having leaned forward toward Devry, whose face was already very close to the operation. "No," he answered. He blew sharply across the paper at Devry. The powdered substance flew into Devry's eyes, blinding him. He sprang to his feet, clutching at his face in agony. "What the hell!" he shrieked. The urbanity had left his voice. "My eyes!" he screamed in pain. "You've blinded me!"

His complaint had merit, but Bellingham was concerned only with the automatic which had fallen on the seat. While Devry did his tortured dance around the compartment, Bellingham retrieved it. "You'll be all

right in a moment or two," he said.

Devry continued to stagger about and move back and forth compulsively in the small area, gasping and moaning in pain. For several moments, it was as though violent motion itself brought him relief. "My eyes! I can't see, I tell you!"

"I believe you," Bellingham said.

"What have you done?"

"There's no need for alarm. It's only table pepper." Such a simple device, he thought, so accessible and uncomplicated. Bellingham had Chu Yick to thank for much.

Devry sat down blindly. "What a diabolical trick," he said.

Bellingham took back his four thousand pounds, saying, "It's all a question of your point of view."

"Yes, isn't it?" the other said bitterly.

Devry shook his head and blinked. "My eyes," he repeated wretchedly.

Bellingham extended his pocket handkerchief. "Here. Use this."

Devry accepted it blindly. "I don't suppose you could have warned me," he said.

"One must create opportunities when they don't create themselves."

"No old Arabian proverbs, please."

"As you like."

And quite bitterly, Devry said, "To think I watched you get on this train at Southampton and thought you were a sitting duck — just the man to finance my immediate future. Ha."

Bellingham held the gun lightly, but in readiness. "Life is filled with disappointments," he said.

"Yes, isn't it? I hope you won't be too disappointed to learn I have no aunt in Kidderminster."

"Not too disappointed. What was your immediate future to have been?"

"I've forgotten by now."

"Were you planning to leave the country perhaps?"

"You must be psychic."

"Trouble with the police?"

"Very psychic."

"You should have kept going in a straight line."

"You distracted me," Devry said, now able to see again and almost entirely recovered, except for some redness of the eyes. "You looked so sedate, predictable, and well-moneyed." He stopped, seemed suddenly to realize his probable fate, and with no trace of cynicism, he said, "I say, you are a reasonable fellow, aren't you? I mean, you wouldn't just turn me over to the police, would you?"

"Why not?"

Devry was stuck for a logical answer. "Well, you'd get so little satisfaction out of it," he said.

"Oh, you'll have to do better than that," Bellingham told him.

"Well," Devry said, "the point is, you've quite outmaneuvered me. I defer to a superior intellect."

"And armament," Bellingham added.

"So what good really would it do to turn me in?"

"You're looking for mercy?"

"For understanding, let us say — for one small kindness in an otherwise unkind world."

"How charming."

"You can think of it as charity — I don't care," Devry continued. "Perhaps I don't rate it, but really what would you lose? You might blight an otherwise useful life. I might go into trade — or become productive — raise a family —"

Bellingham laughed.

"Well, who knows?" Devry said almost irritably.

"Yes, of course — who does know?" Bellingham said.

"Things could change," Devry went on in a put-upon tone, but not an impolite one. "Up to now there've been too few opportunities and too many policemen."

"Yes," Bellingham agreed. "They arrest people on the silliest provocations — robbery, for example."

The remark struck Devry like a barbed whip. He grew visibly defiant. "Well, they won't arrest me, I can tell you," he said defiantly.

"Won't they?"

And after a calculated pause, Devry said, "No."

Bellingham studied him for several moments. Devry's attitude was not subtle. Clearly, he had some hidden counterplot, and was waiting for Bellingham to fall victim to it. Bellingham decided not to do this, and Devry's hand was forced. After a silence, he said, "But let's not talk about it. I'd rather you told me what you thought of Ankara while you were there?"

Bellingham, keeping the gun hidden on the window side of his body, said without a pause, "Did I say I'd been in Ankara?"

Devry produced the little ticket he'd taken from Bellingham's coat. "No," he said. "You distinctly said Southampton. But this claim check says Ankara." He showed it to Bellingham." Unless Southampton has recently fallen into Turkish hands and that's the new spelling."

Bellingham looked at the check and said nothing.

"And incidentally," Devry continued, very pleased with himself, "I left your gun *with* silencer in the briefcase, so you needn't worry about that. A .32, isn't it? Baretta makes a nice one."

"I'm afraid you're confused," Bellingham said.

"Fascinated is the word," Devry said. "And can you blame me? You see, I think you were the last man to see this Hakete fellow alive."

"You're mad."

"Possibly. But that's what I intend to say to anyone who will listen if you turn me over to the police."

"That's quite stupid of you," Bellingham said.

"I don't think it's stupid at all," Devry said, folding his arms across his chest.

"Ah, but it is," Bellingham insisted. "Whether I am this fellow or not, I never had any intention of turning you over to the police."

Devry eyed him carefully, but said nothing. "Does that shock you?" Bellingham asked him cheerfully.

"You're a liar."

"No. Up to this moment you didn't matter to me. You were almost amusing, as a matter of fact. But now — through the sheerest kind of wild guessing — you're a hazard — to me, and to others."

Devry's eyes narrowed. "What do you mean?"

"I think you're perceptive enough to know," Bellingham said.

"No, no," Devry said, stiffening and leaning forward. "What do you mean? Tell me."

"I'm going to kill you," Bellingham said simply.

Devry's eyes became perfect circles of fear. "Kill me?" he gasped.

"If I'm the person you say — I'm afraid I must."

"But you can't mean that!"

"Lower your voice, please."

"Listen —"

"I can't stand shouting."

"I'll whisper if you like. I didn't mean a word of what I said. It was a shot in the dark."

"It found its mark, unfortunately."

"Listen," Devry pleaded, his veneer chipping off. "This is no time for face-saving. If pleading will help any, I'll plead — on my knees, if need be —"

"That wouldn't appeal to me."

"Send me to prison," Devry begged. "I won't mind at all. Turn me over to the first policeman you see. That's fair enough, isn't it? I won't say any of that nonsense I was spouting before — not to anyone — I swear it! Really, you must give me a chance —"

"What I do, I don't do out of vengeance or personal animosity."

"But I'm only thirty-six years old."

"Which entitles you to nothing."

"But to *kill* me —" Devry said, panic-stricken. "No, you can't!"

"To kill you now is meaningful," Bellingham said musingly.

"Meaningful?"

Bellingham continued his thought. "A certain pattern is evident throughout history, and men — so-called good and bad alike — have never been able to alter it one whit."

"Oh, dear God."

"It is only intelligent to work *within* that pattern."

"I don't know what you're talking about."

"We don't, as a rule, delight in the pain of others," Bellingham explained. "But we unavoidably inflict pain in the process of living — of creating."

"Of killing?"

"Of killing," Bellingham answered. "Very often in order to sustain life."

"But why *me?*"

"You know too much."

"I don't! I was just guessing! I don't know a blasted thing!"

Bellingham glanced out of the window. "We're coming into Tewkesbury in just a few minutes," he announced.

"Listen — please —"

"I think we should prepare to leave the train."

"Won't you just —"

"It stops for only five minutes, and I shouldn't want to miss getting back on."

Devry's mouth was open, his expression was intense and anguished. He said nothing to his captor, who sat in stony calm, disregarding his pleading, but anger mounted within him and mixed itself into his fear. His eyes began to blaze with it. Then he said, "You're just a murderer."

It was the first time a victim of Bellingham's had had the opportunity to express himself before his end. Bellingham waited.

"Despite the lofty way you explain it — you *enjoy* killing — yes, *enjoy.* You want to kill me for the sense of power it gives you."

"I'm expected in Malvern shortly," Bellingham said, standing up.

"You're glad of the *reason* to kill me. You like to think of yourself as a man with some kind of mission —I can tell that from listening to you — but you're just a homicidal maniac."

"Get up, please."

"You've found a justification for your blood lust —"

"Please."

"Blood lust — yes! Nothing more, nothing less."

Bellingham pressed the gun against Devry's head. "I could shoot you here and call it self-defense, you know," he said. "And I would, but for the delay it would cause me."

Devry's shower of invective stopped. Tense, scared, angry, he stood up slowly. He was not the same suave-looking young man who had first entered the compartment. Bellingham slipped the automatic into his pocket. "Shall we?" he said.

The wheel and track noise was greater in the aisle. Several passengers squeezed by them going in both directions. Devry made no desperate moves. With his fine-looking topcoat over his arm, he preceded Bellingham toward the platform door at the end of the coach. The cantata came into Bellingham's head again, but he dismissed it, fixing his eyes on his captive's back. The train was slowing down.

But it was not slowing down enough to suit Bellingham. For the first time in his life he felt uncertain of what he was doing. Never before had he spent so much time with a target, never with a man who knew he was marked. That was it, perhaps — this man knew.

"Where are we going?" Devry asked.

"To the station washroom," Bellingham said.

"Couldn't you pick something better than that?" Devry asked seriously.

Bellingham suddenly felt uneasy. No one ever called him a murderer before. He thought of it as he looked at Devry's fingers gripping the window bar, the knuckles white. Blood lust was something else Devry had spoken of. Impatient at his unexpected emotion, Bellingham prodded Devry through the platform. The cantata ran through his head again; he suddenly remembered that it was called *Ich habe genug.* It is enough. Enough, no more; the words flashed through his mind; it gave him no satisfaction to remember them. Something else

was gnawing at him. Good God, was it possible to have a blood lust without knowing it? he wondered — a blood lust disguised as something else, disguised and buried so deep that it was never seen for what it was? What a horrible thought. And what nonsense, too, he insisted to himself. I'm losing my grip.

At the opposite end of the coach, the guard put his head in the door. "Tewkesbury," he announced. The train stopped.

They moved from the car quickly, but without the obtrusiveness of haste. Bellingham set the pace. A few scattered passengers exchanged platform for train. Not one of them even looked at the two men. Devry's doom was assured. Despite this or, perhaps, because of it, Bellingham couldn't quite rid himself of his uneasiness. His thoughts continued to rush at him. He knew he must kill this man and yet he did not want to — not out of pity, but for a reason more personally oppressive to Bellingham.

For the first time in his life he sensed peril from within rather than from outside himself. And this was like falling into a trap where one would least expect to find a trap — within his own well-ordered mind. Nonsense, he thought again, setting his usually relaxed mouth in a hard line of determination. Must get this over with quickly. That's all. He reminded Devry of his vigilance with a touch of the concealed gun.

The station was small, pleasant, and sunlit. Its washroom proved to be little more than a closet off the waiting room. No one was about.

"What would you say if I told you I was not going to kill you?" he asked the younger man once they were inside.

"What?" Devry gasped happily, a hint of hysteria in his voice. "Not kill me?"

"Don't turn around just yet," Bellingham warned.

"No, no, of course not. Anything you say."

"Calm yourself," Bellingham advised gently.

"Yes, yes, of course. Anything at all — anything."

Bellingham seemed all the while to be listening for something. Then, at the instant the train whistle emitted its prolonged warning blast of departure, Bellingham shot Devry through the back of the head.

The report of the .38 automatic wasn't loud enough to rise above a competing noise of any power. Devry fell dead on his face before the shrill blast had ended. He had caused no fuss in that final moment when Bellingham waited for the train whistle to cover the shot. He obviously died happy, believing that he was going to be spared. The device had served both men well. Bellingham pocketed the gun.

Now the train must be about to move, he thought. I'll reach the station platform just as it begins to pull away, but it will be moving slowly enough for me to board in safety. Once I am alone again, I will be able

to think clearly, he told himself. Then he went out.

There were three men in the waiting room — two of them were uniformed policemen, the other clearly a plainclothesman. They all stared at him with painfully official neutrality.

He returned the stare, hesitated but a fraction of a second, and smiled his wistful smile at them. "I'd best hurry," he said, "or I'll miss my train."

The policeman in civilian clothes stepped into his path. "I'm afraid you will, sir," he said.

"I'm sorry," Bellingham said. "I don't understand."

"I'm Inspector Wickes, if names matter to you," the other explained. "Is Devry in there?"

"Devry?" Bellingham repeated uncomprehendingly.

One of the other men, a sergeant, went wordlessly to the washroom door. He had the answer very quickly. So had the inspector, who looked at Devry's body on the washroom floor with some surprise. "We didn't consider this a possibility," he said.

"Why'd you kill him?" the sergeant asked, searching Bellingham and relieving him of Devry's gun.

Bellingham's lips parted but nothing came out.

"We've been tailing your friend Devry here for two days," the inspector went on.

"My friend Devry?" Bellingham repeated, and nearly laughed.

"Hoping he would lead us to some of his colleagues."

"I'm not a colleague," Bellingham said quietly.

"We followed you both from the train," the inspector countered. "You seemed quite a bit like colleagues then, walking arm in arm."

"Why'd you kill him?" the sergeant asked again.

Bellingham was not smiling, but he seemed to be. He stared off into space.

"Care to tell us about this?"

"No, I would not," he answered.

"Do you deny killing Devry?"

"I couldn't very well, could I?" Bellingham said, weighing the facts.

"Not very well," the inspector said.

Since Bellingham could call on no one for help he didn't think about it; only his recent doubts occupied his mind — those and the thought of his family's eventual torment and mystification.

Bellingham smiled wryly to think that the murder he'd just committed would not influence a single digit of the stock market reports. The cabinet of no government would convene because of it. He hadn't even received payment for it. It was unimportant and senseless and embarrassingly fatal — and it had destroyed the whole tenor and plan of his life. An unlooked-for encounter, a mere accident, had completely obliterated all the security he had so carefully established.

"It might make things easier for you if you told us a few things now," the inspector said.

"Would it?" Bellingham asked. And then he lapsed into what was going to be a long silence.

While preparing this issue for the printer, we suddenly awoke to the realization that this is Issue Number 150. We could hardly believe it! Imagine: 150 different issues in almost 15 years. Nearly 2000 different stories of mystery and detection — the crème du crime *of the past, present and future.*

Surely, we thought, Issue Number 150 calls for at least a modest celebration. Something unpretentious, say, yet kind of special. And then it occurred to us: why not check our records, find out which story represented EQMM's purchase order Number 150, and, if possible, reprint Story Number 150 in Issue Number 150?

Looking backward, we discovered that purchase Number 150 was MacKinlay Kantor's "Rogues' Gallery," originally reprinted in the May 1945 issue of EQMM. We promptly got in touch with Mr. Kantor, told him of our commemorative plan, and he graciously permitted us to publish the story again — eleven years to the month after its first appearance in EQMM.

Yes, the author was most considerate. For we asked his cooperation at a time when he might easily (and justifiably) have thought our request too small a matter to bother with — at a time when Mr. Kantor had hit the biggest jackpot of his distinguished career. His new novel, ANDERSONVILLE, *had just been selected by the Book-of-the-Month Club, had been purchased by Columbia Pictures for $250,000, had also been chosen by the Civil War Book Club, had been tapped (one chapter of it) for the Reader's Digest Condensed Book Club, and was destined to be a tremendous best seller.*

So we are grateful to MacKinlay Kantor for participating in this month's anniversary — EQMM's Issue Number 150. And readers will also be grateful for an opportunity to read (or re-read after eleven years) Mr. Kantor's memorable little gem of crime and detection.

ROGUES' GALLERY

by MACKINLAY KANTOR

NOW ONCE AGAIN MEYER CRUCIfied the Christ. He established the Crucifixion in moist sand on Red Fox Creek, 31 miles from Chicago.

If he had been aware that this was to be his final work of art, the pathetic culmination of a long life in which dreams and sculpture and

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whiskey were inextricably confused, he could not have brought more tenderness and skill to it than he did.

He wrought well, did Meyer — with a rusty bucket and a sack of salt to harden the mixture, and makeshift sticks and paddles for delivering anguish and beauty out of a sand bank. He worked from dawn on into the late afternoon.

Meyer was building the attendant cherubs — life-size visages complete with wings and wonder — when the blue car stopped by the deserted sand-pit road, and the four young men got out with their golf bags.

There may have been blood upon their hands, but Meyer could not see it. He saw only that they were hard-faced and nervous, that they wore open shirts and sweaters and flannel slacks like those worn by golfers on the nearby course. The zippers whistled in their bright leather bags, and out came ugly short-barreled guns, and out came money.

Money did not interest Meyer. He worked on, silently as an earthworm.

"It was Borelli cleaned that first cage," said Augie Shertz.

"Like hell," whined Borelli. "It was Pete."

Pete nodded. "I got it in this bag. A good twenty grand."

They lifted out the masses of fluttering banknotes: some were wrapped, some were crumpled, some were twenties and some were hundreds. "You're the top!" Shertz snarled at Borelli. "Damn you, why'd you squirt at that old dame?"

"She started to run out the door."

"Never make a chair date when you don't have to. Some day you're gonna fry!"

"Come on, come on," Pete implored. "Ain't it the same rap for everybody? Casey had already pushed over the teller and that old bank cop."

Shertz was estimating with shrewd, opaque gaze. "Looks like sixty or seventy grand. But we shouldn't have left the silver in that first car —"

"The heat'll be on," Borelli prophesied. "On us, too. Even changing cars three times, and changing to golf clothes."

"We'll bust apart, at the golf links," Shertz told them. "Go back to town, each guy by himself. What are you squawking about, Borelli? Nobody dropped a handkerchief off of his face, and we wore gloves. It's airtight."

It was then that Casey Wilchinski, who was lookout at the entrance of the old sand pit, drew his automatic and said things out of the corner of his mouth. The other men turned with ready guns, and they discovered Meyer. Also they discovered Da Vinci's Crucifixion — modeled life-size in the sunlit sand, with half-shaped cherubs lifting up their faces under the skillful turn of skillful fingers.

The men put their blue-steel muzzles to Meyer's head.

"Gonna lay quiet and then turn us in to the cops, wasn't you? Keep

digging in the sand, and then sing."

"You haff trampled mine statue," cried Meyer.

"Let him have it, then sling him in the weeds," Casey suggested.

Borelli said, "Wait! We got a split to make. It'll take time. Wait till we go. . . ."

"In Rome I studied," Meyer informed them. "In Paris, in Milan, in many places —"

"Yeh," Shertz kicked a foot from the recumbent statue, and the sand flew. "Maybe you never studied in Asbury Park, you old heel! If you'd had sense to make this sand statue somewhere else than off here in the weeds, you would have lived longer."

Meyer explained: "The sand, it vas so clean, so bright . . . I make my great statue of Crucifixion! But nobody comes to see. I do not care." His thin shoulders quivered beneath the frayed, stained shirt.

"He's nuts," said Pete. "Look at that sign he's got stuck up: 'On this coat put nickel for a poor artist.' And there ain't nobody around here to put nickels on it, except snakes and things —"

Augie Shertz slid his gun back inside his waistband. "Sure, he's nuts. But just the same, he ain't gonna sing. We'll split the dough, and then —"

They split. It took a long while, but they watched with care, and not a car turned off the humming highway a half-mile beyond. Meyer crouched in his beloved sand, and watched, and worked. He was afraid of these men, but, more than that, he was angry because they had broken the foot of his statue, and had talked with no respect. He touched up the foot, and remolded his choir of heavenly admirers. He hoped that these cruel young men would be punished for trampling the thing over which he had toiled, and which he knew to be beautiful.

After the money had been counted and divided (for none would trust the others to carry it to Chicago), the four young men abandoned their stolen car, tramped through the lonely weeds and woodland to mingle with the hordes of city-bound golfers who had spent a pleasant afternoon at the Red Fox Public Golf Course.

They killed Meyer before they left. They did it quickly, but he had been able to complete his task.

It was about 1 o'clock the next morning when three squads of detectives swooped down on the celebrants at the Chez Vienna restaurant, and gathered in Casey Wilchinski, Augie Shertz, and Pete Skolnit. They would have gathered in Nick Borelli as well, but Borelli went haywire and reached for his gun when somebody shoved a glistening badge under his nose. He had three slugs in him before he hit the floor.

The survivors howled and stammered as they were hauled into the squad cars. "Not a thing," they insisted. "You ain't got a thing on us! We'll be out in an hour."

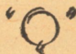
"There was a bank stick-up on Milwaukee Avenue yesterday noon"

said gray-haired old Sergeant Kahn. "Three people killed."

They screamed amid the sirens, "You can't hang that on us! You won't get a dime's worth on us. We're alibied!"

"There was an old tramp killed, yesterday afternoon," said Sergeant Kahn. "Some hikers found him, knocked on the head, away out by Red Fox Creek in the country. He was a queer old devil, kind of crazy. His name was Winky Meyer. And under the bridge where Meyer was killed, there was paper ribbons and currency wrappers from the Milwaukee Avenue Householders' Savings Bank."

He told them, quietly, "Listen to this, rats! Old Winky Meyer made Crucifixions for a good many years. He was pretty good at it — even artists used to say so. And he made cherubs, always — four of them. . . . And this time, when the detectives saw his cherubs, they didn't look like any angels in heaven. They looked like you, Augie — and you, Casey and Pete — and like Borelli. They were your faces, and the old man had sculptured them in the sand before he died."



NEXT MONTH . . .

Another adventure of Mr. Wickwire —

MIGNON G. EBERHART'S *Murder in the Rain*

We are happy to welcome St. John Ervine in his first appearance in the pages of EQMM. Mr. Ervine is the well-known Irish playwright, critic, novelist, and Professor of Dramatic Literature. He has been called, and rightly, one of the pioneers of homespun realism in the drama of the Irish Renaissance, and he belonged to the famous Abbey Theatre group, that celebrated coterie of true artists, when it included such great figures as Yeats and Synge.

St. John Ervine's "Crime of the Century" is a curious tale — the story of two old English laborers, each past 99 years of age, who are engaged in as strange a rivalry as you have ever read about — a race to see who will reach his 100th birthday. You will find this story oddly appealing and pathetic, yet with a deep insight into man's baser characteristics, especially those of jealousy and cruelty . . . indeed, the story is altogether a curious example of man's inhumanity to man. The dialogue between the old men is particularly interesting, with its wonderful dialect and intimations of senility.

We want to thank Everett Bleiler for calling this fine story to our attention (we had never come across it before) and for supplying us with the text. To the best of our knowledge, this tale of competitive centenarians has never before been published in the United States.

CRIME OF THE CENTURY

by ST. JOHN ERVINE

DR. EDWIN COLGIN TURNED TO HIS friend, Professor Andrew Derwent, the renowned authority on diabetes, who, however, fancied himself much more as a criminologist, even if he modestly disavowed authority on the subject by calling himself an amateur, and said, "Now, I'm going to show you our pride and joy."

"Oh," said Derwent, in a tone which denoted incapacity for astonishment at anything in the world.

"Yes. There are two old birds in here — these are the Almhouses, by the way — who are within a couple of months of becoming centenarians, and they're as excited as a girl about to be presented at Buckingham Palace. Never saw such an excited couple! They're going to have a party on their birthday. The old buffer in this house has the better chance. He has only six weeks to go, and he's the healthier of the two, but the other old buck —

well, I'm not so sure about him. He's two weeks younger, *and* he's not doing too well. Come in and have a squint at 'em. Alfie, the elder, lives in here — Alfie Corbett is his name. The other one's next door — Robert Elderbury's his name."

The doctor did not wait to hear whether his friend wished to visit the old men, but pushed on into the house inhabited by Alfie Corbett. These Almshouses had been founded in memory of a lady, related to the present Lord of the Manor who had died in the year that William IV, for a reason that nobody can guess, came to the throne. There were nine "houses" or, rather, rooms, each consisting of a combined kitchen and bedroom. They were probably "model" dwellings in the days when they were built, but the inscription carved in stone over the middle one, in which the passer-by was informed that these cottages had been built as a memorial to Anna Jane Montgomery and, additionally, to the glory of God, excited derisive comment among some who read it; for the accommodations offered to the ancients, who had qualified for admission to the Almshouses by leading lives of almost incredible abstinence and virtue, were elementary, not to say primitive. On the other hand, the ancients were delighted to be there, and a vacancy caused an amount of wire-pulling in the village that would have been excessive if it had been employed in a presidential election.

Derwent, having hastily surveyed the exterior of the Almshouses, followed Colgin into Corbett's house. He was in time to hear the old man's response to the doctor's greeting and inquiry.

"I be grand, Doctor," he said. "Grander'n I've ever been. Why, I feel I could go two 'undred 'stead of only one."

"Splendid, splendid!" Dr. Colgin exclaimed. "And I shouldn't be surprised if you did. You'll live a long time yet."

"Yes, I'll live . . . I'll live. Live longer'n some's only 'alf my age. See 'em in their graves, I will!" He gave a senile chuckle, then glanced inquiringly at Professor Derwent.

"This is a friend of mine, Alfie," Dr. Colgin said. "He's a very eminent man — Professor Derwent from London. He's come to spend a holiday with me."

"Lunnon, be 'e. I was in Lunnon one time. I forget rightly when t'was, but 'twas a long time ago. Us 'ad to walk miles avore us come to the station, an' when us got there, I lost me purse. Seven shillin's I 'ad in it — a tidy bit of money 'twas — an' I come back 'ome as quick as I could, an' never went there no more. I didn't like they Lunnon ways. Never lost no money 'ere in village, but I 'adn't been in Lunnon 'alf-a-nour avore I lost seven shillin's . . ."

The old man looked as if he were likely to dilate on his loss for a long time, so Dr. Colgin, winking at Derwent, patted him on the back and said, "Well, I'm glad to see you look-

ing so fit. When you've had your party, you must go up to London and see if you can find your purse!"

"Oh, I'll never find 'e," the old man replied quite seriously. "I reckon 'e've been found long ago . . . an' spent. They Lunnoners don't waste no time."

"Have you seen Elderbury today?"

"Yes, I seen 'un. 'E don't look too good to me. I told 'un, 'You won't last, you won't, if you don't take care o' yourself,' An' 'e won't, neither. 'You'll be measured,' I said, 'avore you knows what's 'appenin' to 'ee, an' you won't 'ave no party.' 'E didn't like that, 'e didn't. Looked at me very old-fashioned, 'e did, an' said, 'Mind theeself, Alf Corbett,' 'e said, 'an' I'll mind myself!' Proper annoyed, 'e was."

"You shouldn't have said that to him, Alfie. He isn't as strong as you are."

"No, that 'e ain't!" the old man said, snapping his toothless gums together as if he were emphasizing the fact.

"Well, I'll go in and have a look at him. Goodbye, Alfie."

"Goodbye, Doctor, goodbye. Goodbye, sir!" He turned with ancient courtesy to Professor Derwent who took the old man's hand in his and shook it warmly.

"'Undred years is a long time . . . too long." Corbett's voice suddenly sounded tired and trailed away; he seemed to have forgotten his visitors, who departed without another word.

"Poor old thing!" said Derwent, as Colgin and he turned towards the house in which Elderbury lived.

"Yes. He's cheery enough as a rule. But it's a poor business at the best, waiting for the end like that. At least, it seems so to me. They don't seem to mind much. Here's the other one."

He stopped in the doorway of the second house, and Professor Derwent, looking over his shoulder, saw an old man, wrapped in shawls, sitting in an armchair just inside the door. "Taking the sun, eh?" said the doctor, bending down to him.

"Oh, yes, Doctor, I be takin' the sun. I likes the sun."

The formality of introduction was repeated, and Derwent congratulated Elderbury as he had congratulated Alfie, but with less expectation that the congratulation would be earned; for although Elderbury was the younger of the two old men, he looked much the older, and had such an appearance of fragility that a puff of wind might have blown him into his grave.

"I've just been in to see Alfie," the doctor shouted in the old man's ear. The information gave Elderbury no pleasure.

"'Im!" he said. "'E's a nasty old feller, 'e is — nasty's can be. Come in 'ere, 'e did, an' told me I wouldn't last out me 'undred. 'Oh, won't I?' I said, 'I'll be 'undred all right. I'll be more'n a 'undred! I'll be 'undred an' score years an' ten, I'll be,' I said. My family's long-lived, it be. My father, 'e was . . . what age was 'e? I don't rightly remember, but 'e was old, 'e

was, *very* old. An' my mother, she was old, too. I can't call to mind what she looked like. I get 'er muddled up with my missus that died young. Poor sort of a family she come from — no years in 'em at all. Couldn't last, couldn't last. Why, she must be dead over sixty years! . . . Purty little girl she was, too — very purty . . ."

They left him to his memories, and strode back to the village.

"Do you think people want to live when they're that age?" Derwent said.

"I'm sure they do," Colgin answered. "Nearly everybody wants to live as long as possible. I've been doctoring now for twenty years, and I've never met a living soul that really wanted to die, not even people who suffered frightfully and had no hope of recovery. That's why I hold back when I listen to people advocating euthanasia. The will to die scarcely exists. Those old bucks are holding on to life just as hard as they can. And so does every living thing. Insects, grass, animals, birds, fish — everything wants to live as long as it can. If you were to offer Alfie and Elderbury a happy release from life, they'd refuse it. The older they become, the tighter they'll hold on to existence."

"Do you think Elderbury'll stay the course? He looks pretty dicky to me."

Dr. Colgin pursed up his lips. "No-o," he said, "I don't think he'll live to be a hundred. He's about finished. If I were asked to estimate his expectation of life, I wouldn't give him a fortnight, let alone eight weeks. But old Alfie's as fit as a fiddle . . . Hello, Johnnie."

The interruption was addressed to a small, ferrety-eyed boy who had trundled a hoop against the doctor's legs. "I've just seen your great-grandfather," he continued. The boy did not speak. He seemed to be expecting further remarks from the doctor, and, indeed, his expectation was warranted. "He's not very well," Colgin continued. "You must be very kind to him." The boy made no comment, nor did Colgin appear to expect any. He and Derwent then continued on their way, and the lad trundled his hoop towards the Almhouses. He stood outside the gate for a moment or two, and then, tucking his hoop under his arm, went into old Elderbury's house.

"'Mornin', gran'fy!" he shouted.

"Eh, eh? What say? Who be 'ee?" the old man wheezed at him.

"I'm Johnnie . . ."

"Oh, Johnnie, be 'ee. An' 'oo might Johnnie be?"

"*Gran*'fy!" the boy exclaimed. "I'm your great-grandson."

"Ar, so you says. But 'ow do I know you bain't tellin' lies?"

Johnnie did not consider this question one that ought to be answered.

"I 'eard Doctor talkin' about 'ee," he said.

"Oh, an' what did 'ee say? I reckon 'ee be proud o' I — credit to 'un, I be."

The boy came close to the old man and shouted in his ear, "'E don't

think you'll last to be a 'undred!"

"What's that you say?" old Elderbury exclaimed.

"I 'eard 'un say to chap wi' 'un, 'e wouldn't give you a fortnight. Said you was 'bout finished . . ."

"Oh, 'e wouldn't, wouldn't 'e? An' 'ow much'll 'e give Alfie Corbett?"

"I dunno. 'E didn't say that. 'E just said 'e was fit as a fiddle."

"Fiddle*sticks!*" the old man said angrily.

Johnnie paused for a moment or two, watching his great-grandfather fuming in his chair. Then he leaned towards him again and said: "Gran'fy, I 'ope you don't die avore you're a 'undred. 'Twill spoil the tea party an' all if you die!"

The remark seemed to galvanize Elderbury. "Die!" he shouted. "'Oo says I be goin' to die? W'y doctor be less'n 'alf my age! What does 'e know about livin'? I be goin' to be a 'undred, I tell 'ee. An' tell Alfie Corbett that, too. 'E needn't think 'e'm goin' to beat me. 'E *bain't.* I bet a million poun's 'twas 'e put doctor up to sayin' that — to frighten me into me grave avore me time — so's 'e can 'ave all the honor an' glory to 'isself. Nasty, 'ypocritical old feller, 'e be. Always was nasty from the day 'e was born. 'Im an' 'is 'ole family — nasty as can be, they be. Tell 'un that, boy! Tell 'un I be goin' to be a 'undred in spite o' 'is nastiness. An' 'oo be you any'ow, comin' in 'ere wi' tales? 'Oo be'ee, eh?"

"I be your great-grandson," the boy said indignantly.

"My great-grandson? You bain't! You be Alfie Corbett's great-grandson — comin' in 'ere to frighten me."

"'E ain't got no great-grandson . . ."

"Ar, that's what 'e says, but I knows better. Get out of 'ere, you li'l varmint. Get back to your nasty gran'fy an' tell 'un I be goin' to be a 'undred, see!"

The boy, looking frightened, retreated towards the door.

"If I bain't goin' to be a 'undred, 'e bain't, neither. You tell 'un that!"

A week later, Dr. Colgin, again accompanied by Professor Derwent, called at the Almhouses, and this time found Elderbury in bed.

"Hello, what's this?" he exclaimed, as he sat down beside the old man.

"I be just restin', Doctor. Takin' things easy I be. See 'ow 'tis! I got to be careful of meself, so's that there Alfie Corbett don't take no mean advantage over I."

The doctor examined the old man, and then turned to Johnnie's mother, who was standing by. "You'd better send for his family," he said. "I'm afraid . . ."

"Oh, doctor . . ."

Colgin held up his hand. He had caught a gleam in old Elderbury's eyes that showed he was eager to hear what was being said. The woman subsided.

"Get them all as soon as possible," he whispered to her. "He has some relatives in Bristol, hasn't he?"

"Yes, but I doubt they'm fit to come so far."

"Well, tell them anyhow. I'll look in again later on."

The doctor left the room, rejoining Derwent, who had stayed by the door. "I thought so," he said, more to himself than to Derwent as they walked towards Alfie's house. "He's a goner."

"How long?" Derwent inquired.

"Oh, a day or two. Might last a week."

They turned into Corbett's house. "No need to ask how you are," Colgin exclaimed as he looked at Alfie. "You're looking better than you did last time I saw you."

"An' I *be* better, too. I be better'n better every day. Fit as a fiddle, I be. Fit as two fiddles, I be."

Colgin felt his pulse. "Excellent," he said. "You're a lot fitter than poor old Elderbury next door."

"Allus was, an' allus will be. 'E bain't fit. 'Ee never *was* fit. I dunno 'ow he's managed to last so long. Funny sort o' business, 'tis!"

He spoke as if he thought Elderbury had lived so long through some sort of fraud — obtaining 99 years by false pretenses, as it were.

"Well, good morning, Alfie. I congratulate you on your good health. You're a marvel, that's what you are. Don't you think so, Derwent?"

"Absolute marvel," Derwent agreed.

"I reckon I be. I was born 'bout time Queen Victoria come to throne, an' I be still alive now 'er great-gran'son 'ave come to throne. She be dead, an' 'er son be dead, an' 'is son be dead, but I be 'live an' kickin!" He chuckled to himself. "There's a many's been born an' died since I was born. 'Undreds on 'em. Thousands on 'em. Millions an' millions an' millions on 'em. An' I beat 'em all. An' I'll beat old Bob Elderbury, too, I will. I'll see 'un carried out in 'ees coffin to the cemetery, an' I'll go an' see 'un buried, too!"

He laughed away to himself, indifferent now to the presence of the doctor and Derwent. The thought that he would celebrate his centenary, but that Elderbury wouldn't, gave him infinite pleasure. The doctor withdrew, taking Derwent after him.

"You know," he said, "the queer thing about these old bucks is that they seem to have no human feeling left. Alfie's as pleased as Punch at the idea that Elderbury won't live to be a hundred and that he will. I believe if he could somehow make Elderbury die tonight, he'd do it!"

"Yes, but at that age, and in that class, little's left but infantile longings. You see, the quality of the mind in these old laborers never amounted to much. It amounts to nothing now."

Colgin nodded his head. "But they have an odd tenacity," he said. "Peasants cling very tightly to things. I don't suppose old Elderbury'll live much longer, but on the other hand, he's so keen on this hundred-years stuff and the tea party that I shouldn't be surprised if he survived just for it. Now, you and I, who don't value that sort of thing, would probably, if we were in the state Elderbury's in now,

pass out according to expectation. But his tenacious eagerness to be a hundred may keep him alive until he is."

"You don't think so, though?"

"No. But I'd gamble a bit on old Alfie."

Alfie sat in his chair and chuckled to himself. "The silly old fool, to think he could live to be a 'undred!"

The audacity of Elderbury daring to think of a centenary remained amazing to Alfie for the rest of the day. He was still amazed by it on the following morning, so much amazed that when his granddaughter, who came in every day to see him, had departed for her own cottage, a few yards away, he hoisted himself out of his chair and tottered into Elderbury's house to express his surprise.

"'Mornin', Bob," he said, as he entered and sat down beside his neighbor's bed.

"Eh?"

"'Mornin', I said."

"Oh, 'mornin'."

"I 'ear as 'ow you bain't so well."

Elderbury snapped at him. "Then you 'eard wrong," he said. "I be splendid, I be, but I be takin' care o' meself — not like some fools as be gallivantin' about village like they was two-year-olds."

"That bain't what I 'eard," Alfie insisted. "I 'eard you was pretty far gone. You ought to 'ave vicar in, to get 'ee ready to meet thee God. Don't do to go an' leave that sort of thing to the last minute — 'urrying into 'eaven, all mucky like. I'd send for vicar if I was 'ee."

"You'd 'ave need to," Elderbury replied, "but there bain't no need o' vicar for me. I be good-livin', I be, *an'* careful, so don't 'ee think you'm goin' to 'ave everythin' your own way, Alfie Corbett. Don't 'ee think it! I be ready to meet my God when I feels like meetin' 'un, an' I don't want no 'ints from you nor vicar neither about my 'eavenly 'opes!"

"All the same, I'd be prepared proper, if I was you. 'Tis vicar's duty to get 'ee ready, an' 'twould annoy 'un terrible if you was to slip off avore 'e'd done 'ee. Nice thing 'twould be for 'is reputation if you was to come 'ustlin' into 'eaven all unready. 'Tisn't seemly or fittin', Bob Elderbury, to go up avore the Great White Throne like you be, an' not a prayer said for 'ee or nothin'. 'Twould proper annoy vicar, 'twould."

Elderbury made no reply to these remarks, and Alfie, now thoroughly wound up, went on.

"'Ow be goin' to be buried?" he asked. "'Ave 'ee thought o' that?"

"I'll be buried 'ow I ought to be — like my father an' all my family — *respectable!*" Elderbury said.

"Pity you won't be at me tea party," Alfie murmured.

Elderbury shot up in his bed so suddenly that Alfie slipped a little in his seat.

"'Oo says I won't be at the party?" he demanded, glaring at Alfie.

"Don't look as if you would. Your days be numbered, Bob, an' there

ain't many on 'em. 'E 'as you in the 'ollow of 'Is 'and, 'E 'as."

Elderbury lay down again, and turned his head away. "I don't want to have no talk wi' 'ee," he said.

Alfie stood up. "Well," he said, as he shuffled towards the door, "I 'ope you'll be 'ere when I looks in again tomorrow."

"Don't 'ee dare to come in 'ere again — don't 'ee dare!"

"All the same, I'll come. I'd like to see the last of 'ee, Bob!"

Corbett chuckled again as he went out, and the sound infuriated Elderbury, who shed maudlin tears on his pillow as he lay muttering to himself: "Nasty old feller 'e allus was, an' a nasty old feller 'e still be!"

But next afternoon it was Bob who went to see Alfie, not Alfie who called to see Bob. The old man, overawing Johnnie's mother, rose from his bed soon after he had eaten his breakfast, and, with her help, dressed himself. He took a childish delight in being able to fasten his own buttons. "Let me," he protested querulously when she tried to button his waistcoat for him. "I can manage me own buttons — allus 'ave, an' allus shall!"

"Now, don't 'ee go an' worrit theeself," Johnnie's mother begged him. "'Twouldn't be seemly for 'ee to go an' die just avore the party — just out of contrariness, too."

"I bain't goin' to die, I tell 'ee! I keep on tellin' everybody I bain't goin' to die avore I'm a 'undred. An' I be goin' to tell that there Alfie what I think of 'n, tryin' to frighten me to death. I bain't aveard o' 'im or nobody, not nobody I bain't, an' let them above as thinks they can 'urry me, look to theirselves. I bain't goin' to be 'ustled into my grave avore my time. I'll complain to 'igher powers, I will, when I gets there, if they messes about wi' me. Where's my 'at an' stick?"

Out he went, as determined an old man as ever anyone had seen. He felt his way carefully along the gravel path to Alfie's door and he knocked on it very formally.

"Why, it's you!" Alfie exclaimed in astonishment. "Whatever did you knock for? I thought 'twas gentry or summut. Makin' me call out 'Come in!' an' all. 'Tis late in the day, Bob, for 'ee to start company manners wi' me!"

"I bain't 'ere on no friendly terms, Alfie Corbett. I be 'ere to tell 'ee not to try no tricks on me. Don't 'ee try to get advantage over me by frightenin' me. I bain't goin' to die 'till I've 'ad my party, see! An' I won't die then until I thinks fit, see!"

Alfie cocked an eye at the angry old man. "You'm all 'otted up, Bob," he said. "If you goes on like that much longer, you'll pop off sudden-like, an' I'd 'ate it to 'appen in 'ere. Why, they might say I done you in a-purpose to spoil your party!"

"Ar, you can laugh, Alfie Corbett, but I wouldn't put it parst you to 'arbor wicked thoughts in your wicked old 'ead. You'm a bad 'un, an' allus was a bad 'un. I ain't forgot 'ow you

got poor Emmy inter trouble!"

This ancient recollection, a considerable effort of memory for Elderbury to make, annoyed Alfie. "Why, she's bin dead nigh eighty years!" he exclaimed indignantly.

"Ar, but what is eighty years in the eyes of 'eaven? You got summut to answer for, Alfie, when you gets up above, I tell 'ee."

"An' I'll answer for it, too," Alfie stoutly replied. "I shan't come runnin' to you for 'elp! . . . An' get out of 'ere, Bob Elderbury, as quick as you can. I prefers your room to your company. Carstin' up things like that! You was always a two-faced, whiny-mouthed feller, an' time ain't taught you no better. So git out of 'ere!"

He stood up as he spoke, and reached for a pipe cleaner on his mantelshelf, and then made to sit down again, but he missed his mark and sat down heavily on the floor. The shock of the fall shook him badly. He looked up in surprise, then he gave a little groan, and slumped to his side on the floor. Bob gazed at him for a moment or two, without speaking. Then he tottered to the door and uttered a shrill cry. "'Elp! 'elp!" he shouted. "Oh, 'elp! Alfie's bin an' gone an' killed 'isself!"

It happened that Dr. Colgin was coming out of Tom Semple's cottage — Tom's wife had presented him with a token of her affection in the early hours of the morning, and the doctor had dropped in to see how she and the infant were getting on — and he was about to climb into his car, in which Professor Derwent was sitting, when he heard the senile cries. He ran across the road, and Derwent quickly descended from the car and followed him.

"What is it, Bob?" the doctor said.

"'E've killed 'isself! Oh, 'e've killed 'isself!"

"Who?"

"Alfie! An' just avore 'is party, too!"

The doctor entered the house and bent over the old man on the floor. After a few moments he stood up. "He's dead all right," he said.

"H'm!" said Professor Derwent, glancing at a chair in the center of the room.

There was an inquest, of course, and the facts, so far as Elderbury was able to relate them, were quickly disclosed. Or rather, some of the facts, for Bob Elderbury had a complete failure of memory concerning the conversation he had had with Alfie before the fatal fall. He had just dropped in on Alfie to talk about the tea-party "an' such like," and Alfie had risen from his chair to get a match "or summut" from the mantelpiece, and in attempting to reseat himself he had missed the chair and fallen on the floor.

The verdict was "Accidental Death," and the Coroner, who had recently been reprimanded in the press for some fatuous remarks in connection with a motor-car accident and was eager to put himself right with somebody, said he was sure everybody

would deeply regret the death of this fine old English laborer, especially as he was anticipating shortly to celebrate his hundredth birthday. Very sad, very sad . . . It was sad, too, for poor old Bob Elderbury, another fine example of sturdy English manhood, whom they were glad to see, was none the worse for his shocking experience. The Coroner was sure all present would join him in wishing this grand old man a happy centenary and many of 'em! . . . A chorus of "'Ear, 'ears!" from the jury confirmed the Coroner's opinion that everybody agreed with him.

"He looks the better of it," Derwent whispered to Colgin.

"Better of what?" Colgin answered. He knew the Coroner and had not listened to his brief remarks.

"The Coroner said he was glad to see old Bob was none the worse for his shocking experience. I say he looks the better of it."

Colgin glanced at the old man. "Yes, he does. Funny, isn't it? I would have taken my Bible oath that Alfie would live to be a hundred, and that old Bob here wouldn't. And yet, look at him! And Alfie's dead — missed it by a week. Ninety-nine — and out."

"Yes," said Derwent. "I'd like to go to Bob's birthday party."

"Well, why not? I'll speak to the vicar. He's seeing to the tickets."

And on the evening of the party Professor Derwent was present. The Parish Hall was crammed, for no one in that village had ever been to a centenarian's party before, and everybody was anxious to boast of having been to one. Bob was in fine fettle. He had been thoroughly scrubbed and combed, and he looked good for another ten years as he sat, in a Sunday suit that had been found for him, on the vicar's right. He did himself proud with the "vittles," in spite of plaintive appeals from his relatives that he should go slow. "You never know what'll 'appen!" they said anxiously, as if they thought that Bob might pass out with his mouth full of veal and ham pie.

"I don't care what 'appens *now*," he smirked at them. "I be a 'undred, I be, an' I'll eat what I darn like. An' drink, too. I said I'd be a 'undred, an' a 'undred I be. That old feller, Alfie, 'e missed 'is 'undred. I told 'un!"

It was at that moment that Professor Derwent, who was sitting opposite to him, leaned forward and said, "Tell me, Bob, what happened to that chair the day Alfie died?"

"What chair?"

"The chair he was sitting in."

"I don't know nothin' about no chair. What you askin' me that for? I be a 'undred, I be, an' my memory bain't what 'twas. What chair?"

Professor Derwent turned away.

"That's all right, Bob," he said, "it doesn't matter."

He moved away from his seat, and presently found himself beside Dr. Colgin.

"Well," said Colgin, "I'm bound to say the old buck's a wonder. Sheer will power, that's what kept him alive for this. He ought to be dead —

ought to have died at least twice in the last six months."

"Twice?"

"You know what I mean. He's been ill enough to justify his family in warning the undertaker. But look at him — hale and hearty. As fine a specimen of —"

"A murderer as you ever saw." Derwent interrupted.

"What?"

"Not too loud. A murderer, I said. Didn't you realize that he *killed* Alfie?"

Colgin blanched. "My God, Derwent!" he began, but Derwent hushed him. "Come outside," he said, and he pushed the doctor out of the stuffy Parish Hall into the village street.

"Now, what is this cock-and-bull story?" Colgin cried.

"Cock-and-bull, my grandmother! That ancient buffer in there, whom you are all stuffing with food and drink, killed old Corbett as sure as I'm standing here. Do you remember the circumstances of Alfie's death?"

"Yes, of course I do. He fell suddenly to the floor."

"Why did he fall?"

"How the deuce should I know? Slipped or turned giddy or something!"

"Now, come, Colgin. Recall the facts. Old Bob was standing near him when he fell, wasn't he?"

"You're not suggesting that Bob pushed him down, are you?"

"No, he was subtler than that. He let Alfie throw himself down. Listen. Alfie rose from his chair to get matches or something from the mantelshelf. He had been sitting close to the fire, warming himself, and when he stood up he could have reached for the matches easily without any movement of his feet."

"Yes."

"So that when he sat down he should have subsided onto the chair again."

"You mean . . ."

"But he didn't. Why? I'll tell you," Derwent continued. "Because the chair wasn't there. The old man, expecting to find the chair where it was when he had risen from it, sat down again without looking, and because the chair wasn't there, he collapsed on the floor . . ."

"Are you suggesting that Elderbury shifted the chair?"

"Yes. No one else could have shifted it. Didn't you notice where it was when we came into the house? It was in the middle of the floor. Alfie didn't shift it himself. If he had shifted it, he wouldn't have sat down again as if it were there. I suggest to you, Colgin, that as Alfie rose to get the matches, Bob swung the chair lightly away. The rest followed naturally."

"Good God!"

"I've tested my suggestion by standing where I imagine Bob stood, and it would be quite easy to move a chair noiselessly to the position where I saw Alfie's that day. Old Bob did him in!"

"But why?"

"Oh, senile jealousy. Alfie was always taunting him with the likelihood

of death before his centenary. He knew too, that you thought his chances of survival were poor. Johnnie's mother told me that yesterday. He was determined that if *he* didn't live to be a hundred, Alfie shouldn't."

"But what on earth are we to do?"

"Nothing, my dear fellow. One can't arrest an old man of a hundred and hang him! Besides, who'd believe it? No, he's got away with it. Come in and listen to the old devil!"

For the vicar's voice, booming pleasantly, came to them through the door, as he proposed their dear friend Bob Elderbury's health. "A fine old specimen of English manhood!" he concluded, as the doctor and Derwent re-entered the room. There was loud applause at the end of the vicar's speech, which swelled into tumultuous applause as Bob Elderbury struggled to his feet to reply to the toast of his health. They all knew he weren't no speaker. 'Adn't never been trained up for it, like vicar 'ad! . . . "I bain't no oratorationist! . . ." he floundered through the word he had just invented, "though I can make fair to shift my vittles! . . ."

This remark evoked loud laughter from the audience, and various people were heard to assure each other that old Bob was a caution, a fair caution, 'e wur!

"I thank 'e all kindly for comin' 'ere to celebrate my cen . . . cen . . . my 'undred years of age. 'Tis a great age, 'tis, an' I can tell 'ee I feel the weight of my years. I thank 'ee kind again, an' I on'y wish as 'ow my ol' pal, Alfie Corbett, was 'ere, too!" Sympathetic murmurs rose from all lips. "Yes, I wish 'e was 'ere now, but I reckon 'e be lookin' down on us from 'eaven, where I shall join 'im avore long. An' I'll tell 'un, if 'e don't know, 'ow sorry we all was 'e died avore 'e could celebrate 'is cen . . . cen . . . 'is 'undred years!"

Professor Derwent winked at Dr. Colgin.

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Beelzebub ex Machina in the Black Mask manner . . .

THE ABSENT-MINDED MURDER

by CORNELL WOOLRICH

MRS. RYDER'S VOICE WAS A THIN factory-whistle wail from the doorway of the house. "Har-veeee!" She waved something indistinguishable in her hand, as she called out again.

Ryder, midway down the tree-lined street, turned and started back. This was not an unusual occurrence by any means. It was almost a part of his daily routine. The unusual occurrence would have been if that bleat of reminder failed to sound after him whenever he left the house in the morning.

She started part way down the street toward him, in order to save time. She handed him a billfold containing his expense money for the day, his book of transportation tickets, and various other necessary items. She shook her head hopelessly.

"Could you start out or come back from anywhere *once* without leaving something behind you? It's not a failing with you any more, Harvey, it's a disease! I didn't realize anyone *could* be that absent-minded. I thought they just made it up in jokes, about the absent-minded professor."

"I have a thousand things on my mind," he excused himself brusquely. He lied — he had only one thing on his mind. Murder. Day and night — murder.

The man's name was Kirk Billings. He lived in the same suburb with the Ryders, but at the other end of it. They'd known each other half their lives. They'd even been partners in business, formerly. They weren't now.

The original cause had been a bankruptcy. Billings, at the time, had claimed it was unavoidable. On their books it had seemed so. But books have been known to be doctored. Ryder had afterwards become convinced it was faked, trumped-up to squeeze him out, defraud him of his original capital investment and all the accrued profits he'd had a right to expect. Certainly, the results seemed to prove his suspicions. The bankruptcy had left him penniless, down-and-out. He'd had to sell his house, move with his wife into a miserable furnished room, start all over again.

But he noticed Billings *didn't* have to start over, didn't have to give up his home or any of the rest of it. In fact, Billings didn't have to go ahead working at all — he'd retired, then and there. An unexpected bequest from some relative, he'd claimed.

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Ryder had his own ideas about that.

That started the slow red wheels grinding in his mind. A determined lawsuit would have probably taken the dynamite out of the situation. But he knew it was hopeless — Billings was too clever to leave any proof around that could be uncovered. Besides, lawyers cost money, and he couldn't afford one. After a while, he found that he preferred the idea of wreaking personal vengeance on Billings. It had grown on him. He'd nursed the thing along, watered it as tenderly as a delicate plant, hour by hour, day by day.

So for a long time past, Billings had been walking around as good as dead. Ryder hadn't said a word, given a sign. Outwardly he'd just dropped Billings in a cold, sullen hostility. He was biding his time. Everything was going to be just the way he wanted it. He was going to be good and ready before he lifted a finger.

There was not only the question of timing, of misdirected suspicion, of everything else that he felt should enter into a successfully committed murder, but Ryder had had to wait for a feasible means to come along. He wasn't going to go out and buy some easily traced poison, or brain him with an iron poker and get all smirched up — not if he had to wait forever to do it. And finally, as sometimes happens, the means had presented itself ready-made.

In a safe hiding place known only to himself, back in his house at this very moment, there was a gun, well-hidden even from Mrs. Ryder's all-seeing eye. Now, the gun did not belong to him. He had been out walking his dog one evening when the latter turned aside, reared up on its hind paws, began to nose into an ashcan standing out before a flat, waiting to be emptied.

In pulling the dog away, Ryder glimpsed a protruding wedge of half-buried metal, glinting dully through the surface of the ash. He pulled it the rest of the way out and it was a gun, in good working order, and half wrapped in a piece of bloodied rag. It was probably this that had attracted his dog's nose.

He let the rag drop with a fastidious fling of his hand and examined the gun, blowing the film of ash off it. While he was not an expert with guns, he knew how to handle them and break them open. He saw that two shots had been fired from it; the rest of the chambers were still fully loaded.

It must have been only recently discarded, perhaps within the past hour, perhaps even less. A number of things showed that. The stains on the cloth around it hadn't even dried yet, and they had almost certainly come from its last user. The gun itself obviously hadn't come from inside the house, but had been thrust down into the ashes by someone in hasty passage. It was in perfect, well-oiled condition, all but the outer film of ash. It showed no rust or signs of exposure to the elements.

He gave it a preliminary wiping with his handkerchief — it scarcely

needed more than that — put it in the deep inside pocket of his coat, and continued down the street after his dog.

Less than two blocks away he had come upon two men, one a policeman and one in civilian clothes, rummaging in a row of similar ashcans before another set of flats. It was easy to guess what they were looking for. They were working their way back toward the point he had already passed.

He even slowed down momentarily and half reached toward the coat pocket he was carrying it in, to bring it out and hand it over to them. Then he changed his mind. It could come in handy. Why throw away a heaven-sent opportunity like this? There might never be another like it. He continued on his way, and they didn't even look up and try to question him.

"He said he chucked it along here some place, if he's telling the truth," he heard one of them grunt discouragedly, just before he moved on out of earshot.

He went home and didn't mention it to his wife. So he was in the clear, as far as possession of it went. Next day he read a brief item in the papers about an armed hold-up man who had been pursued by the police, had exchanged shots with them and been wounded in the hand during the course of the chase, had finally been overtaken and captured. No mention was made of the unsuccessful search for the missing gun, probably because they had the bandit himself and that was the most important thing.

In any case, all that mattered to Harvey Ryder, murderer-to-be, was that when this same gun was next found, it could have no possible connection with him, couldn't be traced to his ownership or possession in any shape, form or manner.

But just because he had gotten his hands on a gun didn't mean he was going to rush right out and use it the very first thing. A crime committed in a hurry and without proper preparation was simply asking for discovery. That was where most people made their mistake — and paid dearly for it. Everything had to be taken into consideration. Every step, every move, had to be carefully thought out ahead, mentally rehearsed, gone over again and again. The petty details were as important as the main ones, maybe even more so, for it was they, usually, that tripped up the perpetrator.

Naturally, this aberration of his, this affliction of leaving trivial personal objects behind him wherever and whenever he went, had entered into his calculations. Not to take that into account would have been foolhardy in the extreme. He admitted it was a failing of his, but he refused to agree it was as serious as his wife would have him believe.

In any case, the precaution he intended taking against it was a quite simple one. Since the trivia he habitually left behind were always loose, detached objects, the preventive was simply not to take anything like that with him to start with — to make

sure that the only separate, detached thing apart from his body and the clothing on it was what he intended to leave on the scene of the crime anyway — namely, the gun.

If you have nothing on you that *can* be left behind, how are you to leave anything?

Now all this had been undergoing a process of slow gestation over a period of not only weeks but months, and he had finally arrived at the point of readiness. He wanted complete privacy — as what murderer doesn't? Plenty of elbow-room. If he was nervous immediately afterwards, thoughtful or abstracted, he didn't want anyone to see it. He didn't want to be hampered by the time of night he might have to choose, nor have his coming and going questioned because of the unusualness of the hour. So he selected the next occasion of his wife's regular twice-yearly visit to her mother as the time for the murder to happen.

He didn't even make the tactical error of urging her to go, or asking when she was going, or showing any interest in it at all. He just bided his time and let it come by itself, unforced.

It finally did, and she told him of her own accord she was leaving in three days' time. He didn't say anything, pro or con. And when he saw her off, the last thing she said to him, plaintively, was: "Harvey, I feel so conscience-stricken about leaving you like this. I don't know what you're going to do without me."

I'm going to get a murder off my chest without you, Ryder thought grimly.

"Please, dear," she went on, "*try* not to ride past your own station when you come home evenings. And Harvey, unless it's raining, maybe you'd better not wear any hat at all until I get back. You've lost three this season, already."

Far from weakening his resolve, this well-meant cautioning from one who knew him so well only strengthened it. He was sure there would be no slip-ups of that sort, because he'd found the remedy. Just don't take any superfluous belongings with you, and you won't leave any behind. Of course, you couldn't carry out such a system very readily in going about your daily business; but you could in going about a murder.

The requisite elbow-room having been obtained by his wife's departure, the event was now at hand. Nothing remained but the last-minute details. She was going to be away three nights. He chose the middle one of the three for two very good reasons. One was, that would give him one whole night and a day to regain his composure before he next faced her, in case there were any possible after-effects. The other reason was, the middle night of the three happened to fall on the second Thursday of the month. Now, the second Thursday of every month, for years back, had been Billings's lodge night. He hadn't missed attending one since he'd first become a member. Nothing could keep him away, neither rain nor snow nor ill-

ness nor even a broken leg. He always came back with a little under his belt — Ryder remembered that well, from of old.

But that wasn't it. It was that Billings had a peculiar habit, which had once been accidentally revealed to Ryder. When Billings went out on those monthly Thursday nights, he always hid his door-key on a string inside the mail-slot of his front door.

He had once lost his door-key during the course of an hilarious evening and had had to stay out all night — his housekeeper only came by the day. He'd never forgotten that. And then one night when they were still friendly, Ryder had remembered something he wanted to say to him right after seeing him to his door, and coming back unobserved, had been just in time to witness him dredging up the key from inside the slot.

Ryder had stored up that bit of information for future use.

The whole point was: on the second Thursday of the month, Ryder could get into the house *ahead* of Billings and take his time getting set before he returned. On the other 29 or 30 nights he would have to let Billings admit him, and muster up the courage to go through with it under Billings's cold-sober, suspicious eyes. There was too much room for a slip-up there. There's nothing like having the inside track when you're committing murder.

As for an alibi, he intended doing without one altogether. They were more often dangerous than helpful. He was home asleep in bed. He couldn't prove that? All right, then let them try to disprove it. Not that it would come to that, because there was no reason why he should enter into their investigation at all. But it was a darned sight safer to rely on your own unsupported word than to have to drag in other people to prove you were seen at a certain place at a certain time, when you hadn't been there at all. Why rig up a whole elaborate structure of interlocking lies that might collapse at a touch? Then where were you?

The first night of his wife's absence passed as uneventfully as it had every other time she was away. He ate down at the "village," came home, read a book, and went to bed about his usual time, at 11:30.

The second night was different. After his evening meal he stopped in at a movie. This was not by way of alibi, this was just to take up the slack. There was no use holing up in Billings's empty house that far ahead of time. When the picture had got around again to the point at which he had come in, he got up and went home, as anyone normally would have.

He locked the door, went upstairs to the second floor, and pulled down the shades. He took out the long-waiting gun, inspected it closely, made sure it was ready and wouldn't let him down. He telephoned Billings's house and there was no answer. Billings hadn't missed his lodge night. Ryder hadn't thought he would. He

cleaned the surface of the gun thoroughly and slipped on a little "holder" he'd made himself, of an old pair of gloves, over the butt, to keep all further prints off. He intended gloving his own hands, in addition, to keep the doorknobs and whatever other objects he might touch free from his prints.

And now came that important business about his leaving things behind. He admitted that it was important, but it was going to be all right because this was the guarantee he was taking against it right now. He stripped himself, and then re-dressed. Each separate garment, before he put it on again, got an exhaustive going-over that a customs official or health inspector would have envied.

Anything and everything loose that he came across in his pockets, he took out and piled neatly on the bed. From his shirt there was nothing to remove but a loosened button dangling at the end of its thread. He snapped that off then and there, to prevent its loss later at the scene of the crime. Buttons could be traced. From his soft collar he removed the gilt collar-clasp he habitually wore, even though it had a patented fastening. He even took the ring off his finger, though it fitted snugly and he was going to wear gloves over it anyway.

He retained just one single detached object, and even that he didn't leave in a disconnected state. His own latchkey, which he needed to get back home again, he removed from his key-holder and fastened firmly to the underside of his vest, with a safety-pin run through the little hole in the key-head.

And then when he was all through, just to do things up brown, he deliberately went over his whole person a second time, thumbed into every pocket, every cranny, every seam of the garments he now had on, tapped himself all over, riffled through the stuff on the bed to make sure nothing was left out. A sort of double check-up.

Beyond that, human ingenuity and forethought couldn't go. It was now simply impossible for him to leave anything at the scene of the crime. The only detached article that was now on him, from head to foot, was what was in his pocket — the gun belonging to a convicted hold-up man who was at this minute in a prison far up the river.

He set out on foot, coat collar up around his face, hat-brim down, unseen, unrecognized, by a single person.

Kirk Billings's house was lightless when he came in sight of it. Billings was too stingy even to leave a hall-light burning during his absence. It was the sort of house that is lucky if it avoids harboring at least one murder during the span of its existence — isolated from its neighbors, beyond sound or sight of the nearest dwelling. It was set back from the roadway and there were trees around three sides of it, partly hiding the upper part.

Ryder didn't slink or sidle in toward it. If anyone had happened to glimpse him doing that, even from a

distance, it would only have excited suspicion. If no one did, then it didn't matter how openly he went up to it. And no one had, he was sure of that — there was no one around. His familiarity with Billings's habits gave him a peculiar kind of confidence that was far safer than timidity would have been. It was the same principle as when you try to cross a creaky floor unheard: if you strike out quickly, boldly, get it over with, you are far less likely to make noise than if you pick your way, hesitating where to plant your foot at each step.

He went straight up the walk and the blackness of the small porch swallowed him. He waited there a moment, motionless, to make doubly sure there was no one stirring in the immediate neighborhood. No one came by, nothing broke the silence.

He found the crevice of the letter-slot, dipped two fingers through one end of it as he had seen Billings do that unforgotten time years before. (Murder is so slow in hatching!) Nothing there. For the first time since the undertaking had gotten under way, his confidence failed him, and he had a numbing sense of frustration. But it was only momentary. He shifted to the other end of the crevice. His probing fingers found a string, weighted with something, tied around a small nail-head just below the slot. It was hard drawing it up — he wasn't as practiced at it as Billings — but finally the door-key dropped into his waiting palm,

A moment later he was standing in the hall, the door was closed once more, and the key had been placed where it had originally dangled on the inside.

He didn't even have to light the lights, he knew the house so well. It was like entering his own, even though it had been some time since he'd last been over here. It all came back to him — the position of every chair, every doorway. Billings was a slave to habit, nothing ever changed. That can be a destructive, as well as a beneficial, trait.

This was going to be the perfect crime — this had everything in its favor.

He reached the second floor and made his way to Billings's bedroom by his sense of direction alone. He discovered the bed with his knees, and sat down on the edge of it, to let himself get used to the dark.

It was all over, now, all over but the shooting.

Things could still go wrong, of course. Billings could overstep his usual limit, be taken ill instead of just getting drunk, and have to be helped in by his fellow lodge-members instead of coming in alone. In which case Ryder would be found waiting there, and all chances of undetected murder would be gone.

Somehow he didn't think it would be that way. He had that *feel* of perfect rightness that comes at times to every gambler, every plunger. Tonight was the night for it. It was going to work out like velvet. Every nerve in his body told him so.

When his eyes had grown accustomed to the gloom and the room was more visible to him, he got up from the bed, pulled a chair over to one side of the window, and sat there, where he could command a view of the front walk. It was a peculiar technique, maybe, to sit waiting in full sight, unhidden, in a man's bedroom — waiting for him to come home. But just because it hadn't been used before, in cases of premeditated murder, didn't mean it wasn't a good one. This was going to be a work of art, not a hack job.

After a wait that hadn't seemed as long as he might have expected, the stillness of the thoroughfare outside was shattered by the arrival and braking of a car, full of men. Their voices, raised in convivial hilarity, reached him so distinctly that he could even catch various things they were saying out there.

"Can you make it all right, Kirk, or you want one of us to help you in?"

"Shay, lishen, you talk like I was drunk. You think I can't walk into my own house without help?"

And then laughter, and a babble of leave-takings. "Good night, Kirk! We'll be seeing you!"

Goodbye, you mean, Ryder thought grimly. You'll never see him alive again, any of you. Better take a good look at him now.

The car drove off and Billings came up the front walk alone, just a little unsteady but not helplessly so. There was a wait while he fished for his key. He was deft enough about pulling it out through the slot, he'd been doing it for so long. He came in and the door slammed vibratingly after him. The hall downstairs lit up and a faint yellow reflection of it reached the floor above. Ryder stayed where he was, only he took the precaution of reaching behind the curtain and pulling down the window-shade; this room was going to be lighted up in a few minutes, and he didn't want any stray passerby to have a chance to glance into it from the street and sight a second person inside. Little mischances like that could defeat the best-laid plans, he knew.

Billings hung up his hat and coat, blacked out the lower hall, and was coming slowly up the stairs now. He yawned once, on the way up, and it made a funny sound in the dark.

You won't be bored very much longer, Ryder promised him silently. For his part, he didn't feel the least bit of tension, even yet. He felt as relaxed as though this wasn't going to end up in violent death. And that was highly important, he realized. Half the danger in these things came from losing your head, not keeping cool enough and in perfect control of yourself the whole time. He got up quietly.

Billings stopped off in the bathroom down the hall and sketchily brushed his teeth. Ryder could hear the rasp of the toothbrush bristles. You could save yourself that trouble, he addressed the doomed man unheard.

Then Billings came out, entered

the bedroom doorway, and poked on the light.

He was surprised, but not frightened. There was enough liquor in him to blunt his sense of caution. He didn't even notice the gun in Ryder's hand. Billings said: "Well I'll be — Look who's here! It's about time you came around, you stubborn cuss!" The alcoholic glow that filled him blanked out all recollection of the bad blood between them. He evidently had forgotten it altogether for the moment, had been carried back to the days of their previous cordiality. He even came across the room with his hand outstretched. "Why didn't you put on the lights — couldn't you find the switch?"

Ryder slipped the gun back into his coat pocket, evaded the offered hand, said tonelessly: "Never mind shaking."

Billings said: "Whatsa matter, you got something against me?"

"Nothing that can't be fixed up," Ryder said. He eyed Billings impassively for a moment or two. "You go ahead and get ready for bed, I'm going to leave soon."

Billings hesitated for a moment, not because of any apprehension but with some vague ideas of hospitality in the back of his befuddled mind.

"Go ahead, you don't have to stand on ceremony with me," Ryder encouraged. "Make yourself comfortable." He went back to his chair by the window.

Sober, the strangeness of this visit would have penetrated Billings's awareness, sounded some sort of a warning. He was just drunk enough for it not to. He went ahead undressing. He was starting to use this former friend's given name again, from old habit. "Why don't you stay over, Harve?"

"No," Ryder said as matter-of-factly as though the invitation was to be expected. "I don't think I'd enjoy it."

"Why not? There's room enough."

"Sure there's room enough," Ryder agreed, "but I wouldn't care to spend the night in the same bed with a dead guy. Thanks just the same."

"What dead guy? There's no dead guy here."

"There's going to be," Ryder remarked, as unexcited as ever. "You."

Billings gave a roar of appreciative laughter. Then he broke off short because he saw that Ryder wasn't laughing with him. He scratched his forehead, as one does when the point of a good joke escapes him.

"Finish buttoning your pajama-top," Ryder suggested. "It looks like hell gaping open that way."

Billings fumbled with a button, lost his hold on it. He was starting to get sober. It showed in his eyes first.

"What're you getting nervous about?" Ryder inquired coolly. "What're you getting so thick-fingered about? You button up those pajamas every night."

Billings said, with sudden, strident tension: "I don't like the way you're talking. Get out of here!"

"I told you I was going pretty soon."

"Get out of here *now!*"

"All right, have it now then. You're not going to see me go. You know that, don't you?" He uncrossed his legs, unclasped his hands from behind his head. He stood up, reached inside his coat for the gun, took it out. The whole thing was carried out at the casual tempo of reaching for a cigarette. "Turn this way."

Billings's face got a bright white, the sort of white that gleams.

Ryder said impatiently, as though he were posing him for a portrait-photograph: "Don't back away. Stand still. Backing away isn't going to help you any. The closer you are, the less you'll feel it."

"You can't do this! Man — it's — it's murder!"

Ryder nodded in judicious agreement. "Sure it's murder."

The first shot punctuated the question. Billings creased across the middle, as though he were built in sections. Ryder aimed higher the second time. He could almost hear the bullet hit the bony structure of the breastbone. At least, he could tell by the jar Billings's whole body gave that it had hit bone and not plowed into flesh.

Billings caught at the crossbar at the foot of the bed and went draggingly down alongside it, one knee staying grotesquely up. It was slanted inward toward the bed, didn't have room to unbend. Ryder stepped over, crouched, and gave him one more into the side of the head. He heard it strike wood, so it must have gone through his skull into the flooring beneath. Then he nodded, spoke aloud to him in grim satisfaction, as though Billings could still hear him. "That about does the trick, my friend."

He went over to the dead man's coat, found his wallet, took it out. He stripped the money out of it and threw the wallet down on the floor, where it couldn't be missed. He tucked the bills into his own pocket for the time being. He didn't want the money. He wasn't going to keep it. But the police had to have their motive, and it was better to give them one ready-made than to make them dig around for one. It would keep them further away from the truth.

He crossed to the bedroom doorway, stood there a minute surveying the scene, to make sure everything was the way he wanted it. Then he punched out the light, closed the door after him, and trundled briskly down the stairs. His thoughts would have stood the hair of a demon on end: *I feel better after that. That sure did me good!*

He paused for a moment inside the house-door. Should he leave the gun behind him or discard it somwhere in the open? Outside, he decided. It would look too much like a deliberate plant if he left it inside. He opened the door, looked out into the surrounding darkness before proceeding. Streets empty, not a soul around.

Shots not even heard. He'd known it was going to be like that — he'd known it was going to be a push-over.

He closed the door after him, descended the walk to the street at a normal-appearing gait, turned down it in the direction he'd come from. He waited until he'd passed beyond the bounds of Billings's plot of ground, threw the gun away into a vacant lot, first carefully removing the print-guard and stowing that in his pocket for later disposal. The weapon fell into a clump of weeds, made just a disturbed rustle in landing. They'd find it in a day or two. He wanted them to.

And now it was over.

Or was it?

Is it ever?

Ten minutes later he was back in his own house. The first thing he did was go down to the cellar and rake up the furnace a little, make sure there was enough coal to last the night. But he did that other nights too, even when he hadn't committed a murder. Into the blazing fire went the guard he'd used around the gun-butt, the cotton gloves he'd worn on his own hands, and the $30 or $40 he'd just taken out of Billings's wallet.

Then he went upstairs and replaced all the things he'd taken out of his pockets before starting out — in order to be ready to start without delay in the morning. And finally he undressed and went to bed.

He slept. Actually *slept*. Not right away, of course. Not even he could have fallen asleep right away, after a thing like that. But he lay there in the dark, and after a half hour or so, he dozed off.

He woke up with a start and wondered what had awakened him. He hadn't even been dreaming of the thing. He chuckled to himself in the silence of his room. Imagine, sleeping soundly right on top of committing a murder! The psychiatrists would have been interested. It was still dark out. He looked at the radium dial of the clock and it was only 3:30. About an hour and a half since the thing had happened.

He turned over and tried to go back to sleep again. It wouldn't work. Suddenly the stream of his thoughts, as tranquil as a mill-pond until then, struck a snag. They wouldn't flow on past that certain point any more. They began to dam up, as at an obstruction.

He hated to face this submerged reef, where all had been smooth sailing until now, but he had to. He dredged it up, looked at it in the face, and it was sheer horror. It was this curdling thought: *I don't remember clipping that silver pencil into my pocket*, the one his wife had given him last Christmas with his name — both names — engraved on it!

He sat up like a shot and the whole bedframe shook under him. That was because he was shaking on top of it.

It must be there, he tried to quiet himself. You put it back, you put everything back when you came home.

He left the bed, put on the light, pawed his inner coat-pocket. His wallet was back in it, everything else was back in it. But the pencil wasn't clamped where he usually carried it. The mark of its clip was plainly visible — *but the pencil wasn't there now!*

He dropped the coat, got down on hands and knees, scanned the floor, went over every inch of it. He pulled all the bedding off the bed, to make sure it hadn't rolled in among it. He flung open all the drawers in the bureau.

He tried to reason with himself. Now listen, don't get frightened. You didn't take it with you. You didn't take *anything* with you. You went over yourself twice, as if with a vacuum cleaner.

All right, he was willing to accept that premise. But then, in its place, he demanded an answer to the alternative. Then where is it? If I didn't take it with me, so why isn't it here?

While he continued the fruitless search, his mind kept shrieking: It's got to be here! I remember seeing it earlier in the evening, when I first came back from work. So it can only be in one of two places, here or there. And if it isn't here, that means I *did* take it over there! It's got to be here, it's got to!

But it wasn't.

Now doubts crept in, began to riddle what had been 100 per cent certainty until then. The pencil hadn't been detached, strictly speaking. It had been hooked to his pocket. Maybe that was why it had slipped his notice. Or maybe his very thoroughness had defeated itself. Perhaps that second check-up, after he had everything out, had canceled out the efficacy of the first. He had put it back in out of sheer habit and absent-mindedly gone out with it on him.

With every minute came further confirmation. I was fiddling with something in my hands over there, while I was sitting in the dark, waiting for him to come back. What was it? It wasn't the gun, because I took that out of my pocket just before I shot him. It must have been *that!* I absent-mindedly took it out and fooled with it, twisted the barrel around and around in my hands. I've caught myself doing that a hundred times, whenever I'm waiting with nothing to do. And then the car drove up unexpectedly outside, caught me off-guard, and I hastily put it down, *left it lying there in the room*, instead of clipping it back into my pocket!

He was distracted. He ran down to the lower floor, barefooted, and set up a frantic search down there. But he already knew it would be unavailing. It was. Drops of sweat flew off his face and he plowed harassed fingers through his hair. Both names on it, lengthwise, in capitals. *Harvey Ryder.* Damn that novelty shop that had offered that additional feature gratis as bait to prospective purchasers! All his carefully thought-out preparations gone for nothing. His treasuring of the gun for months past. He might just as well have walked up to Billings in full sight of the entire membership

of his lodge and shot him down!

He ran back upstairs again, searched hectically through his other suits in the closet. It wouldn't be in any of them. He used it daily — he hadn't been a day without it since his wife had first given it to him. It was no earthly use. If it had been around here at all he would have found it by now.

His face was gray and shining with sweat. He looked at the clock. A little after 4. Wait — he still had a slim chance left of repairing the damage. It wouldn't get light for another 40 or 50 minutes yet. If he hustled, he might still be able to get over there and back under cover of darkness, retrieve it before anyone else found it. It was dangerous, but he had no choice. But every minute he delayed increased the hazard against him.

He plunged into his preparation for the return visit, not coolly, calculatingly, as he had the first time, but recklessly, desperately. He had never dressed so fast in his life before. He swung out of his house and headed for Billings's through the waning night almost at a jog-trot. It was all he could do to keep from breaking into an outright run, but he might have been seen by some night-bound patrolman or prowl car, so he forced himself down to a fast walk.

He arrived in sight of the house panting, but as much from fear as exertion. He stopped and reconnoitered from a safe distance away. Still dark, lifeless in the before-dawn gloom. No lighted windows, no figures bustling in and out, no white-roofed car standing out in front of it. It hadn't given up its secret yet.

He closed in, found himself up on the porch again. He'd never intended coming near here again in his life, and here he was back again less than two hours later. He fished through the letter-slot for the key with trembling fingers that defeated themselves again and again by their very nervousness. He kept looking around over his shoulder the whole time.

Finally he got it, pulled it up, got in. He padded up the stairs in the dark, found the closed door of the deathchamber, opened it. You could still smell the stale gunpowder from his three shots. Dare he put on the lights? Someone passing by outside might think it strange at this hour, knowing Billings's regularity of habit. But he had to, if he hoped to find what he'd come back for.

He thumbed the switch and his misdeed flashed back in view, making his skin crawl in spite of himself. He moved swiftly by the corpse to the chair near the window he had occupied, bent over it. He pulled out the padded seat, looked below that. He got down and looked on the floor under it. He even tipped the bottom of the curtain, looked along the inside window-sill. No pencil.

He went back to the bed where he remembered having first sat. He could still see the depression from his own body on it. He looked all over it, and under it, and between the bed clothes.

Nothing. Nowhere to be found. He didn't know whether to be relieved or more uneasy than ever. Obviously he hadn't left it here, for no one had been in this room since he had, or the alarm would have been raised by now. But then where had he left it?

He tried to pump air into his deflated self-confidence. As long as it wasn't here, what was the difference where it was? He'd better get out of here fast, that was one sure thing. Do his heavy thinking somewhere else.

He tried one more place. Conquering his aversion, he bent down over the body, raised it slightly, and looked under it. The missing object might have been lying unnoticed on the floor and Billings might have fallen on top of it. That wasn't entirely beyond the bounds of possibility.

No, it wasn't there either. He let the inert burden fall flat again.

The touch of it sent horror coursing up his skin. The blood was dry and caked, but he had a sticky feeling of having smeared some on his fingertips. It was probably only his own clammy perspiration, but he took his handkerchief and rubbed his fingertips fiercely.

Then he straightened up, retreated to the door, darkened the room once more, and fled down the stairs.

He had a narrow escape at the front door. It was already getting a little light out, lighter than it was indoors. Just as he reached out to grasp the doorknob and pull it open, a looming shadow, as of someone straightening up from a bending position, blurred the curtained glass inset in the upper half of the door.

Ryder nearly died before the familiar plunk of bottle-glass had time to reach him and reassure him. It was only the milkman, on his before-dawn rounds. But if Ryder had been a fraction of a second sooner, he would have opened the door and gone tumbling over the other's bent back in an inadvertent sort of leapfrog.

He shrank back to one side, crouched there holding his breath, waiting for the milkman to go away. He heard his step leave the porch, but he had to peer cautiously out of the lower corner of the pane to make certain when the delivery-wagon had moved on.

Luckily, there were no other houses on this block for the milkman to make deliveries to, otherwise he would have been held up in there longer. He gave the wagon time enough to round the corner, then opened the door, arched his foot carefully over the bottle of milk that Billings would never drink, closed the door after him, and hurried down the front walk and away.

It was already too light out for comfort, although it still wasn't full daylight. But his luck held up. He got back to his own house without having passed a solitary being along the whole way. Two round-trips in one night without being seen — that was pretty good.

But he derived no real consolation from the thought. That damned pen-

cil! Why had she given it to him in the first place? Or why hadn't he lost it long ago, if he was going to lose it at all, so that it would have been safely gone and forgotten? It had marred what would have otherwise been a perfectly planned and perfectly executed crime. He knew he wasn't going to know a minute's peace from now on.

He didn't.

He couldn't sleep any more that night. He kept worrying about it, trying to trace it. True, he hadn't found it over there in the same room with Billings, but that was no guarantee. If he'd dropped it along the street anywhere near there, that could be just as dangerous. Suggest his name to them, if nothing else. He'd been afraid to linger and scan the sidewalks on his way back — someone might have spotted him in the growing daylight. Or maybe, in some inexplicable way, it had gotten tangled with the gun, and when he'd thrown the latter into that clump of weeds, the pencil had gone with it. That thought made his hair stand on end. After all his pains about picking up someone else's gun from an ashcan and guarding it against prints, to leave a pencil with his full name engraved on it alongside it! He should have looked in those weeds on his way back. He hadn't had the courage to go near them — you leave so many unsuspected traces as soon as you step off hard pavement.

He got up finally, haggard and unslept, and went to his work. He kept hoping that he'd notice it sticking out of someone's vest-pocket down there. It had been borrowed from him once or twice. But he didn't see it and he was afraid to ask, afraid if the answer turned out to be no, he'd be attracting attention to the fact that he had lost it. And then too, he distinctly remembered it *after* he'd left here and reached home last night, so he knew he'd taken it with him.

He went home at the end of the day, ate, tried to read a book to take his mind off it. But it didn't work — he just couldn't stop thinking about it. He paced restlessly, suffering agonies of apprehension. When the time came for him to rake the furnace for the night, he even put the fire out, emptied out the ashes, sifted through them, to make sure he hadn't thrown it in by mistake, along with the gloves and gun-guard. It would have showed up if he had, and it didn't.

He went to bed finally. He was suffering the exact pangs of mortal terror, the homicidal hangover, that he'd tried all along to avoid by careful planning and precision. A little tube of metal, maybe six inches long, had let him in for all this.

Next day when he got up, he saw that he was beginning to look like the very thing he'd tried so hard not to look like — a murderer haunted by fears of discovery. He not only didn't like the idea of his wife seeing him this way, but if the police should haul him in for even a routine questioning, it wouldn't help his chances.

At work they were beginning to notice it, too. Someone asked him jokingly: "What've you been up to?" He gave a nervous start — and didn't answer.

His wife must have taken an earlier train back than he'd expected her to. He'd just reached home and was getting ready to go over to the station and meet her when her ring at the doorbell sounded. He looked himself over carefully in the mirror to see if he could pass muster, if she could detect anything by looking at him. He'd tell her that —

She was tired after her long trip, in a hurry to get in, and she could probably tell by the light in his bedroom window that he was home — she rang again, louder than the first time. He hurried downstairs to open the door for her, as scared as if it had been the police themselves. But then she'd always been so smart at guessing things about him. "Gee, I didn't expect you back until —" he started to say breathlessly, as he flung the door back.

The man standing motionless out there had suddenly wedged the door with his foot. "Your name Harvey Ryder?" he said, tight-lipped.

"Yes," Ryder faltered. The cold realization drenched him that this was it — now, already. Less than forty-eight hours after. That infernal pencil!

A hand reached out for his, and he was already handcuffed before he'd even seen the thing go on.

The detective said: "We think you murdered Kirk Billings around two o'clock night before last. You'd better come quietly, Ryder. I've got a man at the back door."

He knew the game was up. He knew this wasn't just for questioning, or they wouldn't have used a manacle. He knew this was the axe. They must be pretty sure of their facts or they wouldn't have come here after him like this. Something deep down inside him told him he'd never get out of it again.

He didn't admit anything. All he said was: "Let's clear out of here quickly. I expect my wife back from the station, and I'd rather not face her."

They had gotten halfway down the street, walking along side by side so you couldn't notice the handcuff, when one of those usual hails of reminder reached Ryder. Only this time it wasn't a thin falsetto — it was a man's voice, from the other side of the street.

A man who had been strolling by with his wife left her for a moment and came hurrying over. Ryder just had time to murmur under his breath to the detective. "Don't let on, will you? This is one of the neighbors."

The detective pressed up closer alongside him, blotting out the handcuff.

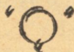
The newcomer said: "I was just on my way over to your house to give this back to you, when I saw you leave. You got up so suddenly at the bazaar the other night, when I borrowed it to fill out my Bingo card,

that you'd gone before I noticed I still had it. Luckily it had your name on it, and my missus is acquainted with yours —".

Ryder looked down and saw the silver pencil resting in the palm of his free hand. The detective gave him a slight tug and they set out again. All the way down the street he kept looking at it as if hypnotized. Finally he blurted out: "So it wasn't this. What was it you found over there that made you connect me with it?"

The detective said: "You left one of your pocket handkerchiefs lying right *on top* of the corpse. Must have taken it out to wipe your hands or something, and forgotten to put it back in your excitement. It had different initials from Billings's on it, and we traced it by the laundry mark. It was only a twenty-four-hour job."

"And I didn't even have it on me the first time I went over there," Ryder murmured to himself . . .



NEXT MONTH . . .

Winner of a Second Prize in EQMM's Eleventh Contest —

FREDERICK NEBEL'S *Try It My Way*

EQMM's DETECTIVE DIRECTORY

edited by ROBERT P. MILLS

THE STRANGE BEDFELLOW *by EVELYN BERCKMAN* (DODD, MEAD, $2.95)	". . . a wondrous evocation of terror lurking in the depths of the past . . ." (AB)	". . . felicity of phrase and . . . pungent, original thinking." (H-M)
THE MAN IN MY GRAVE *by WILSON TUCKER* (RINEHART, $2.75)	". . . the profession of cemetery-detective proves a fascinating one. . ." (AB)	". . . a highly original if gruesome mystery . . . Offbeat." (AdV)
POSTMARK MURDER *by MIGNON G. EBERHART* (RANDOM, $2.95)	". . . astonishingly disappointing from such an old pro . . ." (AB)	". . . a better than usual Eberhart novel . . . gratifying depth of emotion . . ." (AdV)
THE LONER *by FAN NICHOLS* (SIMON & SCHUSTER, $2.75)	"This tale has some capable writing, but seems quackishly fashioned." (DD)	". . . an admirable idea, carried out with a neat, consistent story-line." (H-M)
DELAYED PAYMENT *by JOHN RHODE* (DODD, MEAD, $2.75)	". . . one of the longer and duller cases of . . . Superintendent Waghorn . . ." (AB)	"English police move at a polite crawl, though plot is fairly complex. Rest cure." (AdV)
ROYAL BED FOR A CORPSE *by MAX MURRAY* (IVES WASHBURN, $2.75)	"Pace not killing . . . but nice writing, abundant peppering of wit . . ." (SC)	"Cloak and dagger job on the slight side, faintly unreal but quite pleasantly written . . ." (AdV)
STORM OVER PARIS *by STERLING NOEL* (FARRAR, STRAUS AND CUDAHY, $3.)	"The story rattles right along, but . . . suspension of disbelief is hard . . ." (AB)	". . . concludes with a dramatic (if far-fetched) coup. Regular spy stuff, lively but not too original." (LGO)

AB: *Anthony Boucher in the New York Times*

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 BASLE EXPRESS *by MANNING COLES* (DOUBLEDAY, $2.75)	"It's all fairly slight and a bit foolish . . . but . . . a ripe blend of farce and adventure . . ." (AB)	"Missing plans turn up as expected . . . cops OK; crooks run-of-the-cell. Gay as ever." (SC)
BORROW THE NIGHT *by HELEN NIELSEN* (MORROW, $2.75)	"Skillfully devised and movingly presented drama of sin, retribution, and supreme sacrifice." (DD)	"Sober, a bit confusing, readable." (LGO)
BURDEN OF PROOF *by VICTOR CANNING* (SLOAN, $3.50)	". . . too slickly superficial to justify the straight-novel price, but readable entertainment" (AB)	"Expert and exciting, with a touching love story and a quite unexpected climactic twist." (AdV)
LET DEAD ENOUGH ALONE *by RICHARD AND FRANCES LOCKRIDGE* (LIPPINCOTT, $2.50)	". . . lively, interesting, neatly characterized story . . . first class entertainment . . ." (H-M)	". . . Heimrich's best style, and a pleasing heroine adds charm." (LGO)
JUDAS JOURNEY *by LEE ROBERTS* (DODD, MEAD, $2.75)	A surplus of story elements . . . keeps narrative from jelling . . ." (AB)	"Awfully fast action, but nothing goes very deep . . . Automatic." (AdV)
THE CASE OF THE BENEVOLENT BOOKIE *by CHRISTOPHER BUSH* (MACMILLAN, $2.75)	". . . unusually tangled cluster of adventures . . . For that long sea trip." (SC)	". . . though long-winded, this is a better than average Bush. Goodish." (AdV)
WHOSE BODY? *by DOROTHY L. SAYERS* (HARPER, $2.50)	". . . short, relatively simple in puzzle and characterization and highly satisfactory." (AB)	"Simply and rather transparently plotted, it introduces Lord Peter . . ." (LGO)

H-M: *Brett Halliday and Helen McCloy in the Fairfield County Fair*

LGO: *Lenore Glen Offord in the San Francisco Chronicle*

AdV: *Avis de Voto in the Boston Globe*

EDITORS' FILE CARD

AUTHOR: **BARRY PEROWNE**

TITLE: ***The Six Golden Nymphs***

CRIMINAL: Raffles

LOCALES: London and the West Country

TIME: The 1890s

COMMENTS: *A new adventure of A. J. Raffles — a spectacularly romantic one combining cricket and crime, the two pursuits which have given Raffles his "subtlest sensations" . . .*

THE TELEGRAM READ: "A. J. RAFfles, The Albany, Piccadilly. Could you fill gap our team against the Denmans on eighth and ninth at Falloak? Wire urgent. John Furney."

Attached to the telegram was a note from Raffles: "Bunny: This'll be the strangest country cricket match ever played. I've wired Furney, accepting, and saying I'm bringing you down with me in case a scorer should be needed. Meet me 10:15, Waterloo Station, tomorrow morning."

I had found the note and telegram lying on the doormat when I had returned to my flat in Mount Street late last night from a somewhat convivial dinner party. This morning I re-read them for about the twentieth time as my hansom, with the horse at a brisk clip-clop, threaded its way through the procession of brewers' drays and crowded two-horse 'buses lumbering across Waterloo Bridge.

With an uneasy feeling, I tucked the note and the telegram back into the pocket of my light flannel suit. My head was tender from my overnight potations, and I tilted my boater further forward over my eyes against the midsummer sun-dazzle reflected from the wide river. Fervently, I cursed Raffles for having involved me, without a by-your-leave, in this damnable cricket match between the West Country neighbours, the Furneys and the Denmans.

It was incredible to me that the match was to be played at all.

Raffles and I had been at school with some of the Furneys. Both they and the Denmans were very old families, of the kind that, though acquir-

ing broad acres through the centuries, had stubbornly remained yeoman commoners. They farmed their land, hunted, played cricket, and begot sons. In this latter respect, old Matthew Furney of Falloak and old Nevil Denman of Knightswade, the present heads of the families, were exceptionally prolific. Though no great cricketer myself, I could easily imagine the view Raffles would have taken of the Furneys' invitation.

"I've had most kinds of cricket experience in a misspent life," he would have argued, "but I've never yet filled the one vacancy in a team composed of a father and nine sons, in a match against a team composed of a father and ten sons!"

The attraction which this encounter would have for him did not end there. The date for the match had been set many years ago when Matthew Furney and Nevil Denman, then in their prime, had been close cronies and, each already having a fair brood of sons, were friendly rivals in the Fatherhood Stakes. They had set the date for the match arbitrarily — each was confident that he would be able to fulfil a long-standing ambition and lead on to the cricket field a team composed entirely of his own adult sons. So sure were they of their philoprogenitive prowess that they had even tossed a coin to decide which of their grounds the match was to be played on.

I long had known of the fixture from the Furneys who had been at school with us. For years it had been the talk of the sporting West Country, the *Lorna Doone* country. Heavy bets had been laid on the outcome, for both families included some notable smiters of a cricket ball. But, just three years ago, Fate had shattered the plans of the over-confident fathers. The unforseeable had happened.

One of the Furney sons — Dennis, aged twenty at the time — had got into a bloody and ferocious fight with one of the Denman sons, Bob, of the same age, and his inseparable friend. How it had started nobody ever had learned, but the scene of the fight had been a cliff near their respective homes, and the struggle had ended in Dennis pitching Bob over the cliff-edge. Though there had been one or two yachts winking their sails out at sea on that blue summer day, the only actual witness had been an old shepherd scything thistles on a distant hillside. By the time he had been able to fetch help from the village and reach the scene, Bob Denman had vanished forever, drowned, and Dennis Furney had taken to his heels. He had remained a fugitive, uncaught and unheard-of, from that day to this.

I frowned at the horse's jogging back, at the glint and gleam of the harness in the sunshine. I could not understand why, now that the date arranged for the match so long ago had rolled round at last, the game actually was to be played. For the tragedy had hit both families hard; I had been told that there had been no communication whatever between them from the day it had hap-

pened. Moreover, there seemed no longer any point to the match. For though each father had achieved in all eleven children — and with Bob Denman dead, and Dennis Furney a fugitive, each had lost one — there remained a disequilibrium between them. For old Denman's children were all sons, so that he still could lead a full team on to the field to-morrow; but old Furney could not, for one of his children was a daughter. Hence the vacancy in the Furney side, and the co-opting of A. J. Raffles.

"Miss this, Bunny?" I could hear Raffles's voice as clearly as if he had been in the hansom with me. "Not on your life! Here cricket and crime, the two pursuits which have given me my subtlest sensations in life, overlap in a unique way. How will it *feel*, I wonder, to turn out, in so strange a match as this — in the shoes, figuratively speaking, of a wanted murderer?"

The hansom swung to the right, into Waterloo Station, and the horse's hoofs, sounding suddenly hollow under the domed roof, clip-clopped to a standstill.

I spotted Raffles at once. He was standing near the departure platform, talking to a girl. As I approached, carrying my Gladstone bag, I glanced curiously at her attractive profile, her soft hair in which the sunshine, mellowed by the grimed glass far overhead, brought out gold-dust lights. I relished her little straw hat and simple travelling costume.

Raffles glanced round and saw me. "Ah, here he is!" he said. "Our volunteer scorer!" Hatless, his hair dark and crisp, his keen face tanned, he was casual in a summer suit. His green baize cricket bag lay at his feet. Putting a friendly hand on my shoulder, he presented me to the girl. "Bunny Manders, Miss Jane. Bunny, Miss Jane Furney."

I had not dreamed of meeting her at Waterloo — this only daughter of old Matthew Furney. Unprepared, I was embarrassed by the thought of the violent episode in the background of a family otherwise well-regulated, and I felt myself flush as I met her vividly blue eyes, and clasped her small, firm hand. I could have kicked myself.

Raffles, in his easy way, came to my rescue. "Shall we find our seats?" he suggested. "I fancy I see the guard unfurling his little banner." He shifted the magazines under his arm and took up his cricket bag. "A pleasant surprise, meeting Miss Jane here, Bunny. She's been spending a few weeks in London, but is going home for the match. She's kindly invited us to share her compartment."

Cupping a hand under her arm, he moved off with her, along the platform. I followed and, still feeling embarrassed and reluctant, stood waiting as Raffles settled her in a corner seat of a First Class compartment. Her labelled suitcase already was in the rack, and a man in tweeds and dusty boots, with rough sandy hair and a beard, sat partially obliterated by the *Times* newspaper which he was reading in the far corner.

"Right-o, Bunny," Raffles said, turning to me, "let's have our traps."

I handed him the Gladstone and the cricket bag; but at that moment, as he stood there in the doorway, his grey eyes hardened to a sudden intentness. I followed his glance to two burly men of dignified presence, wearing blue serge suits and hard hats and carrying carpet-bags, who walked past along the platform and got into the train two compartments along.

"Know 'em, Bunny?" Raffles said softly, as he took our gear from me.

I shook my head.

"Scotland Yard men," he said—"Inspector Kortright and Sergeant Ellis."

My mouth went dry.

"Food for thought," Raffles murmured.

It was, indeed, and as the train, with ponderous reverberations under the station roof, steamed out into the full glare of the morning sun, I devoutly wished myself elsewhere. I sat beside Raffles, who had the corner facing the girl. At first he tried to make conversation, but Jane Furney was unresponsive. She seemed preoccupied and troubled, and I was in no better case, though I no longer was thinking about the cricket match. I was thinking about the detectives.

After a while Raffles gave us both up as bad jobs, and began to turn the pages of one of his magazines. Jane gazed from the window, and so did I. The countryside, basking under a visible heat-tremor, fled smoothly past. Cows at their placid cuds swished their tails meditatively in the shade of great oaks, and the hedges were pink with the wild rose. Inability to account for the presence of detectives on the train prevented me from drawing any great sense of peace from the passing scene. In fact, I gladly would have given every penny of loot our past felonies had brought us to change places with the smocked yokel out there in the hay meadow, tranquilly watching the train pass as he stoned his scythe.

Raffles, laying down his magazine on his knee, broke a long silence.

"By the by, Miss Jane," he said, "it's just dawned upon me that Bunny and I have been remiss. Am I mistaken in thinking that congratulations are in order?"

She turned her gaze from the window. "Congratulations?"

He motioned to the magazine on his knee. I saw that the magazine lay open at a full-page photograph of a Palladian mansion, with a smaller photograph, inset, of a middle-aged man with a narrow, stern face and tight lips. The caption read:

> "*A Stately Home.* Houndsdown Hall, situated between the villages of Falloak and Knightswade, in the romantic *Lorna Doone* country, is the seat of Sir Gregory Markis, Bart. Sir Gregory is a distinguished connoisseur and collector. For his six gold coins of ancient Syracuse, bearing the likeness of Arethusa, Nymph of the Springs, numismatists all over the world have vainly offered record sums."

"Surely," said Raffles, "it must be nearly a year now since I saw the announcement of your engagement to Sir Gregory Markis's son, Walter? I know Walter slightly, a good all-round sportsman — sailing, cricket. To tell the truth, I'm rather wondering why Walter wasn't called on, instead of me, for this match tomorrow, he being a neighbour of yours and — almost one of the family," he added, smiling.

She bit her lip. "He wasn't asked," she said. "I broke off the engagement months ago." Impulsively, she added, "It was my fault. I ought never to have got engaged. I —" She checked herself. She looked down for a moment at her hands, clasped tightly in her lap. Then, looking up, she said simply, "You're friends of my brothers, so I can tell you. I shan't ever marry. I loved Bob Denman. I thought I could forget him. I tried. I got engaged to Walter, but it wasn't any good. If you'd known Bob —" Her lips trembled. "And now this match," she said, "this awful, hideous cricket match!"

She turned her head abruptly and looked from the window.

I met Raffles's eyes. I had never dreamed of this poignant twist in the story of the Furneys and the Denmans — that she had loved the young man her brother had killed. I could see that Raffles was as shaken as I was. He took a Sullivan from his case, but, instead of lighting the cigarette, sat turning it over and over between his tanned, lithe, cracksman's fingers, glancing now and then in a troubled way at the girl.

"Miss Jane," he said slowly, at last, "do you think it wise to go home for this match? Surely it will be very painful for you. We're barely halfway, and in a few minutes the train makes a halt. Wouldn't it, perhaps, be better to leave it and return to London — until the match is all over?"

"How can I?" she said. "As friends of my brothers, surely you can understand! Old Mr. Denman sent a note to Father — and let the whole countryside know he'd sent it — saying he expected the fixture to be kept. It's his *revenge*, don't you see? In spite of Bob's death, Mr. Denman still can lead ten sons on to the field — a full team. Father can't, because Dennis is a fugitive, skulking heaven knows where, who dare not show his face. With all our neighbours present tomorrow, from miles around, Dennis's absence, with everyone knowing the reason for it, will be underlined, emphasized, glaring — a terrible, humiliating thing for my father and brothers. Can't you imagine what they will be feeling? Yet how cowardly and shameful and despicable it would be if they didn't keep the fixture? They've no choice. And neither have I. I must be there, to face it out with them, to share whatever happens. *I must!* I love them all."

The abrupt rustle of a newspaper drew my glance, startled, to the man in the far corner, on Jane's side. He had been so silent, for so long, that I had forgotten his presence; no doubt,

we all had. His heavy tweeds and dusty boots, his rough sandy hair, his beard, somehow had given me the impression of a middle-aged man; but now that he had cast aside his newspaper I saw that, despite the lines in his sunburned forehead, he was young. His eyes, as vividly blue as Jane's own, were fixed on her. He passed his tongue along his bearded lips, and I heard the strain in his voice.

"All of them, Janie?" he said. "All but me? Dennis?"

She sat utterly still, gazing at him. The colour drained from her face. And Dennis Furney made a slight, explanatory gesture toward her suitcase in the rack.

"I noticed the label as I walked along the platform at Waterloo," he said. "So I got in here. I didn't know there'd be anyone with you."

Oblivious of us, they gazed at each other across a gulf of three years. The train rattled noisily over switchpoints. The girl did not stir.

"Janie, I couldn't have saved him," Dennis Furney said. "I couldn't — even if I'd climbed down the cliff after him. But I wish I'd tried, instead of losing my head and bolting. Janie, I swear I didn't know how you felt about him. I didn't know that. D'you see?" He looked at her desperately, but she did not move, or speak to him. He said, in a low voice, "How you must hate me —"

Suddenly he turned on us.

"Raffles! What could I do?" he begged. "You see that I've come back. I had to. I kept thinking about this damned cricket match, wondering what would happen, what it would mean to them, Father and the rest of them. I was in Australia. I started drifting back. I hardly knew why. Only, the nearer the date of the match drew, the nearer I drew to England. I couldn't seem to help myself. I was in Calais night before last. I sat in a café, drinking red wine. I could see the pinprick lights of Dover, away across the Channel, and I tell you, I could feel the rope around my neck and the damned knot of it squeezing my ear. But finally I thought, 'Oh, hell, let Father lead ten sons on to the field just once in life, if it means so much to him! Let him lead us on to the field, and hand me straight over there, himself, to old Denman, and let old Denman shout for the police, and there'll be an end of it!' "

He appealed again to the girl.

"See what I mean, Janie?" he said. "End the whole miserable business, clear up the mess and uncertainty for for you all — pay the piper. See what I mean? That was my idea — to get it over with. Only, Janie — try not to hate me too much. I've been in hell. I didn't mean to kill him."

She moved, at last. She put out both her hands to her brother, and said in a whisper, "Poor Dennis . . ."

I felt Raffles's fingers bite into my arm. He jerked his head at the door, and I awoke to the realization that the train was standing in a station. Never had I felt such relief; in my

embarrassment, I scarcely had known where to look. I ducked out of the train after Raffles. Sunshine over banks of flowers, where blue lobelias spelled out the name of the station in a border of oyster shells, dazzled my eyes. Along the platform, milk churns from neighbouring farms were being clangingly loaded. Broad West Country accents sounded. And my scalp tingled to a sudden, chilling thought.

"Raffles! Those Scotland Yard men —"

"Just so," he said grimly. "Not much doubt who they're after. They must have had information." He pushed open the door of the Refreshment Room. "Get a couple of beers, Bunny," he said, and turned quickly to peer from the window.

When I carried two foaming tankards across to him, he took one and gave me a queer look. "Neither Kortright nor Ellis," he said, "has so much as glanced from the window of their compartment. You'd think, if they'd had a tip that Dennis Furney crossed yesterday from Calais and may be on this train, they'd take a stroll along the platform at every opportunity, to glance in at the other compartments. Yet there they are, look — sitting in there, peacefully reading!"

I peered from the window, and it was true; I could see them. I was puzzled. "What do you make of it?" I said.

Raffles raised his tankard to his lips, diminished its contents by a good two-thirds, and said, "Taken and wanted!" He went on, "Bunny, I don't believe those two have the faintest suspicion that Dennis Furney's in England. Know what I begin to think? As you're aware, I've always made it my business to keep fairly well informed about Scotland Yard personalities. Now, Kortright and Ellis are both West Countrymen. And I'm beginning seriously to think that they're on this train for no other reason than that; like the whole sporting West Country, they're curious to see this cricket match tomorrow, and are treating themselves to a little holiday for the purpose."

"If you're right," I said, "it'll be a lucky holiday for them. They'll pick up Dennis Furney the minute they see him walk on to that field tomorrow."

He seemed scarcely to hear me. "They say revenge is sweet," he said musingly. "Nonsense! For the normal person, the *anticipation* of revenge can be sweet. But when it's in his grasp, when he actually has the whip hand, it's surprising how often the savour departs and the gesture of magnanimity seems more satisfying. Old Nevil Denman has brooded, yes, or this match wouldn't be on tomorrow. But at heart he's a perfectly normal old English country squire. I know his kind."

"What are you driving at?" I said.

"This," said Raffles. "Picture old Furney walking up to old Denman on that field tomorrow and saying, 'Here's my boy Dennis. In a fight that sprang up between two hot-tempered youngsters, he killed your boy Bob.

He's suffered for it. He'll suffer all his life. Now, here he is. He's come back of his own accord. Take him and do what you like with him.' Now, then — would you be prepared to bet your shirt, Bunny, that old Denman's instant reaction will be to shout for the police? Or that it's just about equally likely that his instant reaction will be to snarl, 'Get him out of sight, quick, you blockheaded old fool!'?"

I considered the point, and for the life of me I could not with confidence have predicted which way old Denman would be most likely to react. My heart began to thump. "Raffles," I said, "I swear it looks to me just about an even chance. Do you think Dennis realizes it?"

"Not for a second," Raffles said. "He's obsessed with the idea that his father, just once in his life, must lead ten sons on to the cricket field — then hand him over. He sees it as the end for himself, but, by heaven, Bunny, I think it's just about — as you say — an even chance that it could be a new beginning! He has his sister's forgiveness — we saw that. And if tomorrow he should, by implication, have old Denman's — You follow me? The forgiveness of the girl who loved Bob, the forgiveness of Bob's father! He'll never have his *own* forgiveness, of course; he'll never again be a happy man. But if he could be got out of England again, I really think he'd have a hope, this time, of working out some kind of salvation for himself. Better than swinging by the neck, or rotting out a life sentence."

"True," I said. "But what's the use of talking? If Kortright and Ellis are on that cricket field tomorrow morning, where's Dennis Furney's even chance?"

"*We're* going to give it to him," Raffles said. An icy vivacity danced in his eyes. "By a diversionary action that'll keep Kortright and Ellis away from the Furney cricket ground for at least the first hour or so of the match tomorrow."

A thrill went through me. "What kind of diversionary action?"

"Robbery!"

"But of what?"

"Of the six golden nymphs of Sir Gregory Markis!" said A. J. Raffles.

As he spoke the guard's whistle shrilled. We clapped down our tankards on the window-ledge. Sprinting across the platform, we flung ourselves back into the compartment just as the train began to move.

What might have passed between Jane and Dennis Furney in our absence I had no idea; and I heard precious little of what few words were spoken between then and the time of the train's arrival at the small market town which was the station for the village of Falloak. My mind was racing with this conception of Raffles' — a diversionary action.

John, who had sent Raffles the telegram, and Peter, another Furney brother, met the train. They had a dogcart waiting for us. They were big chaps, in flannels and blazers, with the same rough kind of sandy hair as Dennis, but no beards. Just how they

looked when they recognized Dennis, I simply did not see; I was too busy watching the Yard men. Carrying their carpet-bags, they walked, in their deliberate, dignified way, across the little cattle market before the station. They went into the ivied, thatched-eaved *Farmers' Arms* inn. Not far off I spotted the police station, and I guessed that Raffles was counting on their looking in there, in the course of the evening, for a courtesy call on the local inspector.

Falloak was about five miles out from the little town. We were a silent party in the dogcart. White dust smoked up under the trotting hoofs of the sturdy cob between the shafts. John was driving. Both he and Peter seemed stunned by Dennis's arrival. They, and Jane, too, and Dennis himself, no doubt were haunted by the thought of what their father was going to say — or do.

It was a worrying ride, though the air was sweet with the scent of new-made haystacks, and honeysuckle breathed its fragrance from the hedgerows. The sky ahead was luminous with sunset and seemed the more vast for the presence of the sea, glimpsed now and then away to our left. We passed a long, high wall of weathered brick in which was set a pair of lofty, wrought-iron gates between stone pillars surmounted by griffons. I felt Raffles's elbow in my side. It was the house of Sir Gregory Markis.

Presently, there rose up, dark against the fading radiance of the sky, the furze-grown hump of a cliff-top — the cliff, I guessed, that had played so tragic a part in the lives of the Furneys and the Denmans. The dogcart, swinging to the right, passed through a gateway, with a five-barred gate standing open, onto a rutted farm track. Fields of rustling corn either side gave way to an orchard on the right and a pretty little cricket ground on the left. There was a sizeable thatched pavilion with a verandah; in the dusk, a home-made sightscreen glimmered white, and half a dozen big chaps — Furney brothers — were lugging a heavy roller in silence up and down the wicket. From the green terraces of lawn between which the ground was sunk came now and then the strident cry of a peacock. The twilight bats were flickering soundlessly above our heads as the dogcart came to a standstill before a rambling old grey stone house overlooking the cricket ground. We got out. I saw Jane look steadily at Dennis for a moment, then she took his hand and they went into the house together.

"I'll put the horse up," John Furney said awkwardly.

Raffles dumped his cricket bag on the gravel. "We'll come and help you."

In the cool of the evening, we loitered in the stables. None of us wanted to go into the house. When at last we had to, it was filled with a hush which, I fancied, was unusual there, and a sense of tension. Even the rosy-faced maidservants, in their starched caps and aprons, seemed oppressed by a consciousness of drama. Several

times I caught the name, whispered in awe and excitement, "Mr. Dennis!"

Jane did not appear at dinner; she was with her mother, who apparently had been deeply affected by Dennis's return. We sat down, round the big table under the low, beamed ceiling of the dining-room, without old Matthew Furney, either, and without Dennis. There were just Raffles and myself, the other Furney brothers — who ranged in age from eighteen to thirty-five — and the nice, wholesome-looking wives of the three of them who were married.

In the tense silences which kept falling during the meal, the murmuring voices of old Furney and Dennis were audible from the old man's den, nearby. As though fearful of what the sound might portend, somebody or other would make a hasty attempt at conversation; but it soon withered and that fateful murmuring would become audible again — until suddenly, toward the end of dinner, it ceased.

We were all aware of it. And round the table, lit by candles in sconces of the solid old Furney silver, we exchanged glances. No one spoke. Footsteps approached across the oaken floor of the hall. Old Furney came in. He was tall, gaunt; his broad shoulders stooped; his muttonchop whiskers and bristly hair were grey; his hard-angled, mahogany face looked drawn. We men rose instinctively. Old Furney's faded blue eyes travelled over us. Dennis stood behind him in the doorway. Old Furney singled out Raffles and moved toward him.

"Mr. Raffles? I owe you an apology," he said. "I have a request to make that I find awkward in view of the journey you've made — a request that, if you grant it, will mean you won't get an opportunity to bat or to bowl in this match, though you will be called upon to substitute in the field."

"Twelfth man, sir?" Raffles said.

"Twelfth man," said old Furney grimly.

"Certainly," said Raffles.

Then I knew what was going to happen tomorrow. I knew that Dennis Furney had forced his father's agreement to the gesture that obsessed him, and that tomorrow, for the first and last time in his life, Matthew Furney of Falloak would lead on to his little cricket ground a team of his own ten sons.

Meantime, there remained tonight . . .

The little cricket ground lay peaceful in the moon-glimmer when Raffles and myself, hugging the tree shadow, walked swiftly and silently past it at a little before one A.M. Behind us, the Furneys' windows showed no light, though I was pretty sure a good many of the family lay sleepless in their beds, thinking of the morrow, and we'd had to exercise the utmost caution in dropping from the window of the room we shared.

A half hour of fast walking brought us to the high wall surrounding the Markis estate. We tied dark handkerchiefs over our faces. I gave Raffles a

shoulder. He pulled himself to the top of the wall, then reached down a hand to me. We dropped silently to the ground on the other side. The soft air of the summer night was drenched with the scent of roses. The little ground-owls were calling. Before us, mysterious in the moonlight, stretched formal gardens of sunken flagstoned paths, sculptured figures in white marble, black yews tortured by clippers into the likenesses of heraldic beasts. Crouched in the shadow of a Venus de Milo, we studied the façade of the house, with its tall, Palladian windows, all dark, looking out over a broad terrace.

"Pity we haven't had a chance to case the crib," Raffles muttered. "If we can pull this off and get away with those six gold coins, they're of such importance that it's long odds the local police, knowing two Yard men are handy, will call them in when the robbery's discovered tomorrow morning. So long as Kortright and Ellis aren't present on the cricket ground when the match starts, Dennis'll have his fifty-fifty chance. Well, we can but try it, Bunny. Come on, old lad!"

Swiftly, hugging the shadows, we crossed the gardens, darted up the steps to the terrace. The shadow of the house fell upon us. Raffles climbed to the broad sill of one of the lofty windows. I was conscious of a slow, heavy thump in my chest as I kept my eyes, above the masking handkerchief, watchfully roving the gardens. Raffles had only a pocket-knife to work with, but he was a craftsman. I heard no sound from him. It was the light touch of his hand on my shoulder that told me he had the window open. I turned. He motioned me to follow — and stepped down into the room.

In a moment I was at his side. We stood listening, holding our breath. All was still. The curtains of the windows were looped back. Faintly, I could make out the shapes of massive furniture, the crystal sheen of pendent chandeliers.

"A drawing-room," Raffles whispered. "More likely to find his safe or showcases in a library or study."

I nodded. As unerringly as if he could see in the dark, he moved forward. I followed closely, till his hand reached back to stay me. We had come to double-leaf doors, one leaf standing open. And I saw why he had paused. Before us, across the wide, dark space of what evidently was a hall, a line of light showed under a door. I heard voices.

In the same moment another light appeared — faint, reddish, flickering. Raffles drew back slightly, peering upward. A candle had come into view, up on a gallery-landing. The candle was in a candlestick held in the hand of a man. With his other hand, the man shielded the flame as he leaned forward over the banister, as though listening. The light flickered on his face — the narrow, tight-lipped face I had seen in the magazine photograph, the face of Sir Gregory Markis.

After a moment he moved. His

dressing-gowned figure passed from view briefly, then reappeared on our level, crossing the hall quickly and quietly to the door beneath which light showed. He stood there, quite still, holding the candlestick, his head cocked. His free hand went slowly to the door-knob. Suddenly he turned it and flung open the door. Two young men at a table in the lamplit room sprang to their feet.

"Walter," Sir Gregory said peremptorily, "who is this fellow?"

One of the young men — he held a sheet of notepaper in his hand — said, "Father, I beg you to leave us. This matter —"

"Answer my question!"

"Very well," Walter Markis said, "if you *must* have it. He's Bob Denman!" He shouted suddenly, "Do you understand, *Bob Denman!* He landed at Plymouth today. He reached this house at eleven this evening, but I had to keep him waiting in this room till you'd gone to bed, so that I could talk to him privately. I hoped to spare you — but now you leave me no choice. I'd better read you this document I've written for Bob."

"Read it," Sir Gregory said.

Walter Markis read, in a shaking voice, " 'This is a truthful and voluntary confession. I witnessed the fight between Bob Denman and Dennis Furney from the deck of my yacht *Sprite*, in which I was sailing alone. I searched for Bob and picked him up half-drowned and unconscious. I was, and am, deeply in love with Jane Furney. She had no use for anyone but Bob. Nobody had seen me pull him out of the sea, and the idea flashed into my mind that here was a chance to get him out of my way. I put straight out to sea. When he recovered consciousness, I told him that Dennis Furney had gone over the cliff with him, and was dead, and that if it became known that he, Bob, had survived, he would be charged with manslaughter, possibly murder. He had no idea of my feelings for Jane and, believing my story, thought that for her sake it would be better if he remained "dead," since he believed he had killed her brother. I landed Bob on the French coast, near Quimper, where I subsequently sent him, in the name he had assumed, money with which to make his way to South America.' "

Walter Markis glanced for a moment at his father, then read on quickly.

" 'After more than two years I succeeded in persuading Jane to become engaged to me. But gradually I realized that it was an empty triumph, that she loved Bob and always would. When finally she broke our engagement, my feeling for her remained such that I determined to repair, at whatever cost to myself, the ruination I had brought to her happiness and that of so many others. I knew Bob's wherabouts. I wrote to him telling him that the situation had changed, and sending him a draft to finance his return to England. I asked him to come direct to me first. On his arrival I shall hand him this document,

for him to take such action upon as he may decide. I am sorry for the great harm I have done. Signed — Walter Markis.' "

The silence was electric. Sir Gregory was the first to speak.

"Remain here," he said.

The shadows wheeled over the gallery-landing as, carrying the candlestick, he moved to another room. Walter and Bob stood unmoving. Again the shadows wheeled, and the tall, lean, tight-lipped man reappeared. He put the candlestick on the hall table.

"Come here!"

They moved to his side. The candlelight flickered over their faces.

"Denman," Sir Gregory said, "I am a man most bitterly ashamed. There's not much I can do, I'm afraid, by way of compensation for my son's appalling act. I can only say to you —" he set down upon the table a small, flat, oblong case, leather-covered — "that here is the most precious possession that I have." He opened the case. "There it is. Take it, Denman. It's yours."

Bob Denman reached out a hand. But what he took was the sheet of notepaper which Walter Markis still held. Bob held a corner of the paper to the candle flame.

"Jane still is free," he said, as the paper curled and blackened. "For me, sir, that knowledge is enough to wipe out the last three years. My story will be simply that I hit my head when I went over that cliff, and that I remember nothing between then and about one hour from now, when I'm going to find myself walking up the drive to our home at Knightswade. Good night to you both."

He strode from view. I heard the rattle of a door-bolt shot back, then the slam of the door. In the silence that followed, Sir Gregory's hard breathing was audible. He turned slowly to his son.

"As for you," he said, "I have a thing or two to say to *you!* Come with me."

He walked into the room where the lamp burned. Walter followed. His face was white. The door closed. On the hall table, the candle in the tall candlestick burned serenely. Raffles moved. He walked swiftly, silently, to the hall table. I followed. We stood looking down at the open case. It was lined with purple velvet. On the velvet lay six golden coins, thin with the wear of centuries, each coin limned, scarcely perceptibly, with an image from the morning of the world Arethusa, Nymph of the Springs.

My heart beat stiflingly. I glanced at Raffles. Above the handkerchief that masked his face I saw the grey gleam of his eyes, fixed on the golden nymphs . . .

The moment was one which would remain forever stamped on my mind. It haunted me even in the full blaze of the morning sunshine, as I stood on one of the grassy terraces that surrounded the little cricket ground of the Furney family. All down the farm track, to the five-barred gate, stood

rows of traps, flys, gigs, dogcarts, wagonettes, governess carts, and phaetons. More were arriving every minute. Nearest the house stood the big shooting-brake in which the Denman family, of Knightswade, had driven up about an hour ago.

All the sporting West Country was here today. Never before had the little cricket ground presented such a sight. The lawn-like terraces were brilliant with the parasols and bustled gowns of the ladies, the blazers and straw hats of the men. Out in the centre, fresh whitewash marked the popping crease, and the stumps cast slanting shadows across the emerald turf. The bails were on. The umpires, one of them preserving the shine on the bright red ball by smoothing it lovingly up and down his white coat, already were at the wicket.

Raffles, as twelfth man, had changed into white flannels. He wore the cap, ringed in black, purple, and gold, of the exclusive Zingari Cricket Club, as he lounged in a deck-chair on one of the terraces. Standing beside him, I was expecting at every minute a summons co-opting me to the scorer's box.

In the strange hush which lay over the crowded terraces, one of the Furney peacocks, spreading its iridescent tail as it pecked the turf before the sight-screen, emitted a banshee scream. A smocked old gaffer stepped out to prod the gaudy fowl from the ground with his stick.

At that moment a kind of sigh of expectancy seemed to rustle round the terraces. The gaunt, stooped, white-flannelled figure of old Matthew Furney, wearing a faded blue cricket cap, had appeared at the head of the pavilion steps. For a moment, he stood surveying the thronged terraces. Then, visibly squaring his shoulders, he walked slowly down the steps, out onto the field, and one by one his ten tall sons came sauntering after him.

The umpire tossed the ball to old Furney. In such a silence as I never had known, old Furney, in turn, lobbed the ball to one of his sons, who was capless and clean-shaven. Old Furney's voice was clearly audible, supremely casual.

"Open the bowling from the pavilion end, Dennis," he said.

Every person in the little ground must have heard it. And a sudden buzz of whispers swept round the sweltering terraces: "Dennis? *Dennis?*"

Behind and above me, a voice said sharply, "It's him! By heaven, it *is* him!"

I glanced round and, with a shock, recognized the big, hard-faced Inspector Kortright. With Sergeant Ellis, he was standing on the next grassy step up. I put a hand quickly on Raffles's shoulder. He glanced round and saw them.

Sergeant Ellis said, "It *can't* be, sir. He wouldn't —"

"It's him, I tell you," said Kortright. Both men were staring over our heads. Excitement clogged Kortright's voice. "It's the man, all right,

Ellis! Dennis Furney! Wanted for murder!"

Raffles raised his voice courteously. "Whose murder?" he asked.

Neither of the detectives so much as glanced at us; they had eyes only for the field. But Inspector Kortright said impatiently, "The murder of young Bob Denman!"

"You mean," said Raffles, in a bland tone, "that fellow just coming out from the pavilion to bat?"

I saw Kortright's mouth fall open. I saw his eyes start from his head. The next second, he was thrusting headlong through the crowd, elbowing his way in the direction of the pavilion, Sergeant Ellis hastening after him.

"It's to be hoped," said Raffles, "that they don't delay the opening of the game with their fatuous investigations. Too bad we couldn't have pursued our plan to provide them with something worth-while to investigate! Never again in our lives, probably, shall we have such swag to our hand for the taking as we had last night in Sir Gregory Markis's hall! Six golden nymphs —"

He shook his head and a smile flitted across his face.

"You know, Bunny," he said, "there are times when it's ridiculously easy to be a burglar — and so damned hard to remember that, after all, one also plays cricket!"

FOR MYSTERY FANS — these swiftly paced mystery thrillers, all Mercury Publications are now on sale at your newsstand:

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DEPARTMENT OF "FIRST STORIES"

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

Up to last year the record for "first stories" purchased in any one contest sponsored by EQMM was thirteen — a record achieved in our Eighth, Ninth, and Tenth contests. But last year's competition produced a bumper criminological crop — no less than twenty-two "first stories" in a single year's submissions! This new record represents such a highwater mark that we cannot help but despair for the immediate future.

So we hasten to make our annual announcement: EQMM'S TWELFTH CONTEST IS NOW OFFICIALLY OPEN.

Again we offer a special prize of $500 for the best "first story" — to be submitted between now and October 20, 1956. Readers and would-be writers, please take note: our editorial door is wide open, as proved by our buying twenty-two "first stories" last year; if you have the yen to write, we urge you to obey that impulse — and try to set an even higher record for EQMM by topping last year's tremendous performance. Although your story is a "first," you still may win one of the big prizes, including the $1500 First Prize and the $1000 Special Award of Merit; or you may win the $500 award for the best "first story"; or your maiden effort in prose may be purchased at our regular space rates for "first stories."

So, come on, you ambitious ones, you persistent ones, you dedicated ones; write your first story — of mystery, suspense, crime, or detection — and see it published in EQMM, the magazine, we are proud to boast, that has published more "first stories" and discovered more new writers than all the other magazines in our field put together!

In last year's contest the $500 prize for the best "first story" was awarded to Michael Forrestier for his "Gifts to My People." This is the poignant tale of a tough slum kid from one of the Pachuco gangs who is on the lam and wants desperately to stay lost. The story has wonderful local color and that rare blend of realism and poetry — almost brutally realistic material treated with poetic sensitivity.

We do not know too much about the author — simply that the name of Michael Forrestier is a pseudonym; that early in his life he became an artist, still is a professional painter, and that his canvases are included in museums and private collections in the United States, England, Canada, Mexico, Venezuela, and even in Russia; that he turned from the brush

to the typewriter as a further means of self-expression; that he was born in Calcutta, India, of Anglo-Irish parentage; that he was educated — at least, "absorbed the rudiments" — in India, England, and France, and that the process of absorption continues. . . . But come to think of it, we do know quite a lot about the author, don't we? And you will know more — about the "inner man" — by the time you have finished reading his fine and distinguished "first story."

GIFTS TO MY PEOPLE

by MICHAEL FORRESTIER

THE FIRST THING HE DID WHEN HE awoke was to remember that his name these days was Tomás Gonsalez. It was a good habit to develop. He reached for a cigarette, lit it, and lay back with his hands beneath his head to watch the morning sun slanting across the wall.

"Another day." He smiled wryly behind his cigarette. "It's been more than two whole months. Maybe I've really lost them this time."

The creeping sun lit up the colors of the picture tacked to the wall, an oleo of the Virgin of Guadalupe. He listened to the street noises, someone shouting "Burr-rro, burr-rro!" and he remembered the other times he thought he had lost them. In Valles, in Guadalajara, in San Miguel, in Orizaba. But they had found him each time. Even in Mexico City they had found him. *Pronto.*

He had never been free this long before.

He got up and dressed, whistling. He went out and down the street to Tía Rosa's, and sat in the restaurant and ate an orange and eggs and beans. He kidded with Carmen when she brought his coffee, inventing boy friends for her and commenting on their lack of virility. After a while he walked out to the patio to smoke a cheap cigar, and the sun was good across his shoulders.

Someone had left a newspaper. Turning the pages idly, he became interested in a boxed item.

Los Angeles, July 6: Astronomers at Palomar Observatory predict that tonight will witness a total eclipse of the moon. The earth, passing between it and the sun, will cast its shadow across the moon's surface, completely obliterating that orb. The occulation, starting at 10:30 P.M. Pacific Time, may be seen as far north as San Francisco, and south to the Equator. Scientists in these regions are hoping that the weather will remain clear in order that they may observe the spectacle.

He glanced at the paper's date. *Martes 6 de julio*. Today. He stretched and looked up at the blue, cloudless sky.

A little later he went down to the beach and strolled in the hot sunshine along the line of weeds and broken shells that marked the reach of the tide. He skipped pebbles along the lip of the sea, watching the stain of smoke where a freighter rode on the horizon and wondering what his chances were across that barrier of water.

Memories came crowding. San Pedro, and standing on the rocks; like this, only looking across to the other side of the world and asking himself if he'd ever get to see it. He smiled thinly. He'd seen the other side, all right.

The gang back home at Rose Hills: Benny and Mingo, Loco Joe, Gacho Nacho, Duke, Chacho. Tough kids, each one trying to prove that he was tougher than the rest. You had to belong, you were glad to belong. Where else to look for security and friends? Who wanted to be a square? He still had the gang sign inside his arm, tattooed with ink and a pin. The fights with the other Pachuco gangs from Happy Valley or Califa, from Macy, Alpine, or Thirty-Eighth Street. You ended up either in Lincoln Heights Jail or the Georgia Street Hospital.

The white summer mornings in the Hanford hills, picking apricots to get enough money for a set of drapes. *Que suave!*

And as he grew up, the black hate against the cops and the *gabachos*. What's a slum kid good for when you're not a Mexican, not an American — just something in between? Good for picking fruit, good for laying railroad ties, good for starving . . . and acting up, to prove that you're a man just the same, that you can take it.

To show how tough he was he had joined the Marines. Yeah, he'd seen the other side of the water! In the latrine stench of Korea he'd had the bright idea. Get in line, you're an American citizen. Make something of yourself. Go to college.

State-side, he'd gone to college on the G.I. Bill.

He thought a while about that. It had been like busting open a barred-up door in a dirty shack and suddenly seeing the fields and flowers and distant hills. He'd wanted to get through that door, walk out into the bright world. But there hadn't been enough money with the rest of the family to look after. So he'd got a job with Big Tacho, running the stuff for the extra dough. He was a tough *hombre*, he could do it easy.

Easy, like hell.

He picked up the rock and heaved it savagely into the sea. Enough of this thinking; anyway, the sun was still shining. He started for home.

When he got back to his room he found a letter slipped under his door. He recognized the writing; it was addressed to Sr. Tomás Gonsalez.

The sun went out for him.

"Our estimated friend," it read.

"Did you think we would let you go? Always remember, you are too valuable to us. There is an old hacienda two kilometres out of town on the road to Vera Cruz. Only one room stands; I think it was a pigsty, so it will be suitable for you. Be there tonight with the usual amount in small bills. We should double it, to impress upon you the folly of your running away. But we are by nature generous."

It didn't have to be signed.

Tomás Gonsalez lay down on the bed.

By late afternoon his tongue was furred from smoking. Butts strewed the floor and there was a gray dust of ashes on his chest. He had skittered around in his mind like a mouse in a maze, frantically trying to find a way out. But there was no way out. Always he came up against the same answer. Each time he shied away from it and went around the treadmill of argument, and each time he came back to the same conclusion. He knew what he had to do and now, reluctantly, he was forced to accept it. He said aloud to the room, "That was what you wanted, so you went out and got it. Okay, tough guy, now you're paying for it."

He got up and placed a chair by the clothes cupboard, climbed, brought down the bundled shirt, and unwrapped the gun. He broke it and worked the action a few times. Then he loaded it and slipped a shell into the firing chamber. He thrust the gun inside his shirt under his belt and went out, closing the door gently.

When he reached the plaza the children came running to him, his friends — the bootblacks, the boys who watched the cars, the others who played in the dust. They shoved around him, laughing and wrestling. He greeted them all by name. They exchanged healths and the healths of each member of their families. He looked them over: young, eager, with patched overalls and bare feet; shaggy, dusty hair; grimy hands and dirt under the fingernails; brilliant teeth and vivid eyes. "You are my people," he wept in his heart. "You, and the kids across the border, and all the kids in this whole loused-up world. *Aie*, forgive me, you kids!"

Together they walked chattering under the laurels and mimosas, around the iron bandstand and the green-streaked statue of Santa Ana, while the pigeons rose lazily before them, clapping their wings. As they walked they began the game.

"Señor Gonsalez, what have you got for me today?"

"And me?"

"And me?"

"For you, Paco, three teeth from a green hummingbird. For you, a match box that dances the mambo. I'll give you an automobile of feathers with wings instead of wheels."

"And me, Señor?"

"You, Chuchito? A five peso piece that always comes back to your pocket. The song that the oysters sing under the sea. A ladder with six rungs to climb up to the phoenix's nest.

If you grab its tail you will live forever."

"And me, Señor? You have something for me?" asked Pepe, the stupid one.

"Certainly, *chico*. A leaf from the *casiloco* tree that makes you so smart you never have to go to school."

"This he needs!" Everybody laughed. He put his arm across the boy's shoulder.

"And me, Don Tomás?"

"And me?"

"Something for me!"

"The tongue of Saint Peter, so that you can talk to the fishes. A golden guitar and you will sing like Pedro Infante. Cats' eyes for marbles. The word that the hawk writes on the air as he hovers and plunges."

"And yourself, Señor? What do you want?"

He smiled. "A little candle, to light me up to heaven."

"When, Señor Tomás? When do we get all these things?"

"When the moon turns into green cheese!"

Again everybody laughed.

"And me, Don Tomás. Please, you forgot me," said a hesitant voice at his elbow.

He looked down into serious dark eyes. She was smaller than the rest — not more, he thought, than five years old. Her hair was braided with scarlet wool and she wore a crucifix on a chain around her neck.

"Today is Angelita's birthday," Paco told him.

Angelita smiled shyly.

"Is that right?" he said. "Then it must be something extra-special. Let me think now." He looked up and scratched his head. "Ah, I have it! For you, Angelita, since it is your birthday, I will do something that is very difficult. I can do it only once, and never again. For you, tonight I will wipe the moon out of the sky. Like this, look!" He passed his thumb across the face of a silver coin. "I will do it slowly, so that all the world will see, and know it is the birthday of Angelita."

"Everyone? Then my uncle who lives on the other side of the mountain, who brings me the red and yellow sugar moons on sticks, even he will see it?"

"Certainly."

She clasped her hands at her mouth. "Good! Then he will remember my birthday and come to see us next Sunday in his truck."

The older children laughed again. "Will the moon turn into green cheese tonight, Don Tomás?"

"*Quizás?* But what I tell you is true, since this is an occasion. Only one thing," he said to Angelita. "It will be a little late, since I am busy tonight. After your bedtime perhaps. Yet believe me, it will happen."

"I believe, Señor," she said. "And I shall see it."

They came to the plaza's edge and he left them. Sunset had bleached out of the tropic sky: it was almost dark.

He walked slowly, to time it right. At the end of town he turned into a bar, ordered a tequila, and spent a

long time working on the lemon. He went out at last into the empty road.

In the warm night he shivered as he walked away from the clustered lights into moonlit darkness. There was only the usual late rasping of innumerable crickets and the barking of lone dogs far away. He moved easily, as though he had shed an accustomed weight. His body felt empty.

It had been like this in the cold hills of Korea when his platoon went into action. "God, if only I can come through it; how sweet life looks up ahead, on the far side of now. Wipe your mind clean; don't think at all. Just live through your senses. Keep alert, ready for anything. If only I can break it clean. This is my chance, this is the one that's got to stick. Yes, but this isn't Korea, you've got nobody backing you up. Stop thinking, you idiot. Hey, what's that, there in the shadow? Nothing, you damn fool. Don't go getting jittery on me now — feel how my heart is thumping! *Ave Maria, gratia plena, Dominus tecum.* You've got to get it some time, everybody's got to get it some time. Could be this is the time. Will it hurt? Shut up, will you, in the name of God! Okay, so if I get it now, what of it? Better than running away and hiding all the time, isn't it? Is it? These boys are armed, don't kid yourself."

Too soon he came to the place: a broken wall by the side of the ditch, an arched stone gateway, and beyond it the ruins of buildings. He glanced at his watch; it said twenty-five minutes past eight. He stretched his fingers till the joints cracked. When he relaxed them they were tingling, sensitive.

He went in under the arch. The moon rode at the top of the sky, remote and unconcerned, its light slicing the walls and throwing shadows of opaque blackness. Across the yard he saw the corral. This is it, he thought, and was surprised at his own detachment.

He stooped and entered the narrow door.

The sloping roof was slatted with wood which threw a pattern of light into the small room. One side was completely dark. A big man stood by the wall, his bulk striped with lozenges of moonlight. The tip of his cigarette glowed red. "Aha, Joe Vasquez — or should I say Tomás Gonsalez? Good evening. You are late, my friend. Almost we went to see if you had stubbed your toe on the road." Words came out of him like a rope of thick oil.

"*Hórale, gato!*" Joe spoke in Caló, the jailbirds' slang. He came into the center of the room, holding his arms away from his sides. "A little late, excuse me. Why should I run away any more?"

There was a shuffling behind him. "Well," Joe said. "You here too, Rodrigo?"

"Yeah." A voice came hoarsely from the blackness. "You got something for us?"

"I got something for you. Don't I always?"

"Our boy is getting smart again," the big man said. "For a while there he had a brainstorm, he thought he could shake us. Eh, Joe? You tried it before, eh? Now you catch wise, we can tail you any place. So let's not have any more games, eh?"

"You're right," Joe said. "What does it get me?"

"See, *carnal?* Joe's smart. He's going to play along. Any time you want to take a trip, Joe, that's all right. Just let me know is all. No reason a man shouldn't travel around, see the sights of our great invincible republic. That's fine. Only let us know, see? It saves us worrying about making our collection."

"Cut it!" Rodrigo growled. "You said all this a few times before."

The big man laughed fat and low. "That Rodrigo. He sure hates for anyone to use up words! All he understands is muscles. He's the least talking *hombre* I ever met. He's so tight with words, sometimes I think he's an Indian. How about that?"

"Ah, nuts! Who wants to yak? Get on with it. Joe knows."

"Take it easy, Rodrigo. I got to explain to him so he'll remember. Look at it our way, Joe. You ran out on the racket; you quit cold. Now you want to stay lost so the boys don't catch up with you. But we know where you are, Rodrigo and me. Ain't it worth a little something for us to keep your secret? We're doing you a favor, pal, you get it? So from now on you're going to string along nice and gentle, eh?"

"Nice and gentle," Joe said. "I should have dropped you a card. I apologize." He watched the moonlight on the big man's shoulders. It was as bright as ever. Keep them talking, Joe thought; it's due any time now. "Just for the record," he said, "how did you find me?"

"With our organization? Nothing to it, pal — we have contacts. But don't alarm yourself. They pass the word, but they don't know the score. Just the three of us know, me and Rodrigo and you."

"How come?" Joe asked.

"You think I'm stupid or something? I should let them chisel in? You're our pay check, Joe. Just for us, nice and neat. Even the boys on the border don't know. And you won't complain, will you, kid? You wouldn't want a smell of the Feds, eh?"

"Not me," Joe said. "I can handle my own deals. You got a cigarette?"

"Want a stick, Joe?"

"Just ordinary tobacco will do. You know that."

"Yeah. Maybe you should try it sometime. Make you forget your troubles." The big man chuckled and threw him a pack. He didn't come any nearer.

Joe took one and tossed the cigarettes back. "Light?"

"Ain't you got nothing of your own these days? Here, catch!" He threw a lighter across.

Joe rasped it into flame and dragged deep on the cigarette. He turned the lighter over in his hand, in the moon-

light. "Gold lighters with monograms yet," he said. "The blackmail racket must be good these days." Carelessly he threw the lighter back, too low for the big man to catch. It skittered on the tiled floor.

The big man tensed. When he spoke his voice was soft. "Running dope is cleaner, maybe? Ah, I get it; Joe finds out the kind of goods he's handling, it ain't face powder. So he's hurt in his little white soul, he washes his hands and he says I ain't gonna play no more, I wanna go home. Chah! Don't give me that! We caught you and we're going to squeeze you, buster, from here to hell. Once you're in, you think you can get away? Sucker!"

Joe watched the big man. The light that barred his body was beginning to dim a rusty color. Shivers ran down Joe's arms; the hair on his neck prickled.

Joe said, "Sure, I was in a dirty racket, and I knew it. I figured it was a fast way to make dough. I'm a pachuco, remember? So long as there's guys who want to goof off on the stuff somebody's going to keep them supplied. *Pos sí*, *batos*, there's some things that make even a pachuco sick to his stomach. It took me a long time to catch on they were peddling the stuff to kids — those lousy, stinking runners hanging around the school yards and handing out free samples to get the new ones started so they can gouge a few greasy bucks out of them once they get the taste for it. And the poor little goons lying and cheating and swiping their mama's eating money to buy themselves another jag. How rotten can you get?"

Behind him Rodrigo snorted. "This guy talks like he ain't scared. And you tell me he's softened up! Let's grab the dough and fade."

"Sure," Joe said. "Here it is." He reached for his hip pocket.

"Hold it!" the big man barked. "Rodrigo, you get it. Keep your hands in front, Joe."

Rodrigo came up behind him and put his hand in Joe's pocket.

Joe's arm snaked and he twisted away from them into a corner. "Reach!" he said. He held the gun loosely, its barrel weaving. The men stood apart. Slowly they raised their arms. The stable swam in low red light and the shadows, strangely, were almost gone. The men were blurred in the fading dusk.

Rodrigo began to swear. "The *cabron* had nothing in his pocket." He cursed in a steady stream.

The big man said, "What's this going to get you, Joe? You think you can kill the two of us? You may plug one, but the other will nail you sure as hell. What do you want, a murder rap on top of the other? You got no friends around here, Joe, remember that. C'mon, put up your gun."

"No," Joe said. "I ain't going to kill you — just hit you where it hurts. Lay you up for a while, so when you move again you're going to drag yourself like a snake with a broken back. Yeah, you're lucky; I'm no murderer. And when you're pulling yourself around again, remem-

ber — blackmail ain't so healthy."

In the gloom Joe could hear the big man suck air.

Rodrigo spat, "Take him, boy!"

Quickly Joe swung his gun on the big man. Rodrigo moved. There was a flick through the air like a streak of blood and Joe felt a red-hot searing in his chest. He fired twice, and the shape that was Rodrigo went down. The big man fired and Joe was spun halfway around. Crouching, he emptied his gun at the outline of the big man.

In the silence that followed Joe reached with his right hand and felt the knife's small grip protruding from his chest. He shook his head in disbelief. He was waiting for the hurt, but no hurt came.

Slowly his legs began to fold under him. He tried to steady himself with his left arm against the wall, but the arm wouldn't move. He sank to his knees. "*Ai te watcho.*" He whispered the pachuco goodbye to the two still shapes.

He slid forward on his face.

Joe was very tired. Home, he thought, I must go home. The Virgin of Guadalupe came into his mind, in the sun-bright colors of the picture tacked to the wall of his rented room. He sighed. Home was such a long way off; it was so much easier to stay where he was, to rest until the weariness went away.

The pain came over him then in a towering wave that racked and twisted his body, and wrenched his mind into a soundless shriek. He lay breathing harshly with his eyes open, staring into the blood-red light. He was afraid of what would happen if he closed his eyes.

After a time the blood went out of the light. It grew brighter and the shadows took on a cold white edge.

Home, Joe sighed. It's getting late.

He pulled himself up on his hands and knees, and hung there panting like a dog. He forced himself to his feet and stumbled out into the moonlight.

The road stretched straight and black before him. He kept going; he staggered and tripped and sometimes he fell, but he kept going. The world was closing in on Joe. All he saw was the straight compulsive road leading through a glimmer of brightness.

When the figure detached itself from the side of the road, it took him a while to realize she was there. With an effort he brought her delicate face into focus.

"Good evening, Don Tomás," she said.

"Angelita, you should be home. It's late." Each word was torn from him. He tried to stand erect, holding his coat together across his riven chest.

"*Sí*, Señor, I'm going right away. I just wanted to wait and thank you. It was the nicest birthday present I ever had."

"What present?" he said numbly.

"When you wiped the moon out of the sky, of course!"

"Oh, yes. That's fine," Joe said. He began to cough.

"What's the matter?" she asked. "Are you not well?"

"Nothing. Just tired."

"You must go home too. The night air can be dangerous, *mamacita* always tells me. But it was wonderful! Imagine, just for me! You must have a lot of influence up there."

"Not so much, *chata*," he mumbled.

"I bet you can go up among the stars any time you wish. Straight up to heaven. I bet you can do it again tonight, even."

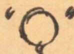
"I think I will," he said.

"You will? Good! When you get there, please thank God for my birthday. Tell Him I said Thank You. And tell Him you're a friend of mine; tell Him I said to look after you good."

"*Muchisimas gracias*," he said. "I'll do that." He could hardly stand.

"Good night, Señor," she called. She crossed the road and went from him into the moon-bleached landscape.

Joe didn't see her go.



NEXT MONTH . .

You won't want to miss

THOMAS WALSH'S "*I Killed John Harrington*"

EDITORS' FILE CARD

AUTHOR:	**EDMUND CRISPIN**
TITLE:	***What's His Line?***
TYPE:	Detective Story
DETECTIVE:	Gervase Fen
LOCALE:	London
TIME:	The Present
COMMENTS:	*Undoubtedly the popular TV show called "What's My Line?" is known to British detective-story writers. Here is a pure deductive variation of the American game. Can you spot the answer?*

IT WAS NEARLY HALF-PAST TWO BY the time Detective-Inspector Humbleby arrived at *The Grapes*. Weaving his way across the upstairs dining-room, he slumped down in a chair beside a tall, lean man who was drinking coffee at a table by a window.

"Sorry about this," said Humbleby. "And now that I *am* here, I'm afraid I can't stop for more than a few minutes." He ordered sandwiches and a pint of bitter. "You got my message all right?"

"Oh, yes." The tall man, whose name was Gervase Fen, nodded cheerfully enough as he lit a fresh cigarette. " 'Detained on official business.' Anything interesting?"

Humbleby grunted. "In some ways. But chiefly it's *awkward*. Am I to let a certain eminent professional man catch the evening plane to Rome, or am I not? That's my problem. There isn't really enough evidence to justify my holding him here. But then, for that matter, there's not much evidence of *any* sort.

"You see, it's like this . . . Late yesterday afternoon there was a burial in the churchyard of St. Simeon's, in Belgravia. At the time, the grave was only half filled in; but they did, of course, leave a fair amount of earth covering the coffin — so that when the sexton went along early this morning to finish the job and dropped his pipe out of his waistcoat pocket into the hole, he clambered down to get it and felt his foot strike wood. He then decided he'd better investigate.

"Underneath the coffin he found

the naked body of a man, which it's obvious must have been dumped there — and a very good hiding place too — under cover of last night's fog. The man was thin, elderly, distinguished-looking. He'd been killed by a violent blow on the back of the head. His dentures were gone, and there were no obvious identifying marks on his body. In due course he was taken to the nearest police station.

"And there, for the second time, chance took a hand. One of the Sergeants, a reliable man called Redditch, recognized this corpse as someone he'd talked to in a pub near Victoria Station early yesterday evening.

"Redditch — a plain-clothes officer — was going off duty at the time, and had stepped in for the odd pint on his way home. The stranger was sitting alone at one of the tables, Redditch says, drinking brandy and scribbling music of some sort on a scrap of music *MS.* paper. There was no other seat free, so Redditch settled down beside him — and presently they got into conversation.

"The conversation to start with was general. Redditch mentioned that he was thinking of having a fishing holiday in the West Country, and the old gentleman recommended a particular inn in Devonshire. He wrote it down for Redditch. His pockets were full of odd bits of paper, Redditch says, and he tore the top off one of these and wrote the address on the back." Humbleby groped in his pocket. "Here's what he wrote. It's been tested for prints, so. . . ."

He handed the scrap of paper to Fen, who examined it pensively. On one side, written in pencil in a large and sloping but none the less educated hand, was the legend *Angler's Rest Hotel, Yeopool, nr. Barnstaple;* on the other, in the same calligraphy, a fragment which ran: *— ving hysterical fugues wh —*.

"A music critic?" Fen suggested as he passed this tenuous piece of evidence back.

"We think it's obvious he must have been some sort of musician, yes."

"A musician, or else. . . ." Fen hesitated. "I say, Humbleby, what was Redditch's impression of the man? How did he size him up?"

"Well, as *cultivated*, certainly," said Humbleby. "Cultivated, retiring, not rich but decidedly respectable, honest, dignified — and in spite of the education, a rather simple and unsophisticated mind where worldly matters were concerned. Also not, Redditch thinks, at all a practised drinker. Which is just as well. Because if not for the fact, that this kindly, respectable old party was guzzling brandy without, apparently, any clear conception of what it was likely to do to him, we'd probably never have known where to begin to look for his murderer. The brandy went to his head, you see, and he became suddenly confiding. He was up from the country — Redditch had already gathered that much. Now, moved by alcohol and moral indignation, he fell abruptly to telling Redditch why.

"Some eight months previously, it seemed, the old gentleman had taken on a servant girl, a stranger to his part of the world, to help look after him. She appears to have been a pleasant straightforward creature, and her employer soon became very fond of her, in what Redditch is quite sure was a genuinely paternal way. Presently, however, the signs of this girl's pregnancy became too plain to ignore. The old gentleman wasn't at all the sort to turn her out of his house on that account; on the contrary, as she had no relations to go to, he was quite agreeable to her having the child on his premises. . . . But if he wasn't angry with the girl, he was certainly angry with her seducer. The girl refused, obstinately, to name this person. But then, in bearing the child, she died — and her employer, going through her belongings after her death, found a letter which enabled him to identify the guilty party with a virtual certainty. A knight, he told Redditch: a knight, and an eminent professional man, and pretty well off: definitely *not* the sort of person who ought to be allowed to wriggle out of his responsibilities in the matter. Our man wrote to this knight, saying as much. He got no reply. Whereupon, full of dignified fury, he had determined to come to London to attend to the business in person.

"And this, he told Redditch in conclusion, he was now about to do. He had telephoned the guilty party on arrival, and had made an appointment to meet him in the evening at his flat, where he proposed to confront him with the incriminating letter and demand that he shoulder his liabilities. . . . At this, Redditch felt a twinge of uneasiness, he says. Eminent professional men, with a position to keep up in the world, are not at all likely to welcome stern old gentlemen who are resolved to bring their illegitimate babies home to roost with them. However, there was nothing Redditch could do about it, except ask the name of the man this old gentleman was going to visit; and that the old gentleman firmly declined to give. With his tale told, he asked Redditch the way to Harcutt Terrace in Westminster, then said goodbye, went out into the fog, and so far as we know was never seen alive by anyone, other than his murderer, again."

Humbleby gulped his beer and sighed. "It's evident, then, that Redditch's forebodings were justified. And the situation we're left with is that we have three suspects from Harcutt Terrace — Sir George Dyland, the banker; Sir Sidney Cartrow, the psychiatrist; and Sir Richard Pelling, the barrister — without, however, anything at all to indicate which of them is likely to be our man. They're all coming along to the Yard some time this afternoon to look at the body (though if any of them identifies it I shall be very surprised indeed); and one of them — as I mentioned earlier — wants to go off subsequently to a conference in Rome. Should I let him? *I* don't know. If I could just find *some* indication that one of the three

was to be preferred, as a suspect, to the others. . . ."

Fen considered; then he said: "Are you intending to give them the background? To tell them about Redditch, and all that?"

"I'm not intending to tell them a single thing," replied Humbleby with emphasis, "until I have a very much clearer idea of where we stand."

"M'm," said Fen. "In that case, you know, there's a simple little trap that you could spring. Admittedly there's only one chance in three of its working. But if it doesn't work, I can't see that any harm will have been done, and if it does, you'll know whom to concentrate on.

"Here's what I suggest: show them that scrap of paper the old gentleman gave to Redditch, and ask each of them to make a quick guess at the writer's occupation. Ask them to make alternative guesses if you feel like it, but don't *labor* the business too much; don't let them brood over it for *minutes*, I mean. If you do that —"

Humbleby was staring. "But look, Gervase, it's surely obvious what they'll all say. What good —"

"Is it?" Fen chuckled. "Still, for old times' sake, give it a try, will you? And ring me at the United University as soon as you have their answers. I'll be there all afternoon."

The call came through at about four-thirty.

"They said," reported Humbleby, who sounded annoyed, "just exactly what you'd expect them to say: namely, that the person who had written on that scrap of paper was presumably a musician or a music critic. *All* of them said that."

"No alternative guesses?"

"None."

"And which," Fen asked, "is the one who wants to go to Rome?"

Humbleby told him.

"Let him go," said Fen. "*He* isn't your man."

"But who is our man? Do you know, Gervase?" Humbleby sounded even more annoyed.

Fen nodded, then explained. "You see, the phrase *hysterical fugues*, though it could be music criticism — and in the case of your old gentleman undoubtedly was — has another and much simpler connotation: in psychiatry and medicine, a hysterical fugue is a certain type of amnesia. That being so, your psychiatrist, Sir Sidney Cartrow, ought at least to have had an *alternative* guess at the writer's occupation — if he really *was* guessing, and not speaking from knowledge. His carelessness in suggesting only music must, I think, mean that he already *knew* the writer's occupation — knew that the old gentleman was connected somehow with music. And if he already knew that, then patently he'd *recognized the handwriting*. . . .

"None of which is hanging evidence, of course — you'll have to delve for that. But as a working hypothesis I should say it was fairly sound, wouldn't you?"

EDITORS' FILE CARD

AUTHOR: **JAMES YAFFE**

TITLE: ***One of the Family***

TYPE: Suspense Story

LOCALE: New Rochelle, New York

TIME: The Present

COMMENTS: *With James Yaffe's priceless ingredients: human interest; warmth of viewpoint; emotional impact; realistic characters in an intensely realistic situation — and all veined with terror.*

EVER SINCE THE BEGINNING OF winter the big worry in Joan Porter's life had been what to do when the nurse left. Little Bruce was three months old now, and Mrs. Finney couldn't stay with him much longer. She was an infant nurse, and plenty of other newborn infants were clamoring for her services. She had agreed to remain in the Porter home only until they found some older, less highly trained woman to take over the job.

But this wasn't so easy. Joan had made up her mind that just anybody wouldn't do. After all, this woman would be Bruce's constant companion for the next two or three years, maybe even longer. And all the psychology books emphasized how important those two or three years could be. Why, the wrong kind of influence at this early age might mar the child's whole life.

What a relief it was, then, when Harry came home one night and told Joan the wonderful news. "You know who called me up at the office this afternoon? Frieda, of all people! Frieda — you remember, I've told you all about her — she was my old nurse when I was a kid, she was with me till I was six years old. Well, she read about Brucie in the New Rochelle papers, and she wants to know if we'd like her to take care of him."

It was a real miracle. Joan certainly did remember what Harry had told her about his old nurse Frieda — her funny German accent, her warm affectionate temperament, her firmness when Harry was naughty, her little lullabies and her wonderful bedtime stories, her fussiness over his personal appearance, her pride at his childish accomplishments.

Harry didn't even know Frieda's last name — she had been married, but her husband was dead for many years and Harry had no idea who he had been. All Harry knew was that she was his Frieda. How many times he had said, "If I can look back to a happy childhood, and if I'm a reasonably well-balanced man today, I think I owe most of it to Frieda." And how many times Joan had dreamed of finding just such a perfect nurse for her own little boy.

Frieda arrived the following Monday morning, and Harry and Joan met her at the New Rochelle station.

Right away Joan knew everything was going to be all right. Frieda was a heavily built woman in her early sixties, with large features, thick grayish hair, and a brown, lined face. But there was nothing coarse about her looks in spite of their plainness. Joan saw compassion in her eyes as well as the usual German briskness and efficiency. And there was something oddly sad and delicate about her smile. She wore a plain gray coat, slightly shabby but still respectable. On her head was a sensible, somewhat old-fashioned hat. Her shoes were heavy and solid and they suggested a complete absence of female vanity.

The two women warmed up to each other immediately. "Mrs. Porter," Frieda said, holding Joan at arm's length on the station platform. "So this is my little Harry's wife. I always knew he would marry a fine pretty girl, that one." Harry blushed and said that Frieda made him feel like six years old again. Joan laughed, shook Frieda's hand warmly, and took her arm to help her into the car.

All during the ride they told stories about "their Harry," while Harry made feeble protests from the driver's seat.

As they pulled up to the house Frieda began to grow excited. "I cannot wait to see him," she said. "The little baby. I must know is he as handsome as his papa was."

Harry parked the car, and Frieda said some nice things about the house. But her excitement was growing — she couldn't conceal the fact that the main thing on her mind was the baby. This pleased Joan very much.

Finally they were upstairs in the nursery and Frieda was looking down at Bruce in his play pen. For a long time she didn't say anything. Then her voice came, low and trembling. "He is beautiful. He is the most beautiful baby that ever was."

Joan looked at her and saw with a little pang of sympathy that there were tears in Frieda's eyes. "Mrs. Porter, how do I thank you?" Frieda said. "It is like the old days once more."

On a sudden impulse Joan reached out and put her arms around the old lady. "You don't have to thank me," she said. "From now on you're going to be just like one of the family."

Joan's instinct was justified. Frieda quickly proved to be what Westchester matrons call "a perfect jewel." With her two suitcases, which apparently contained all the clothes and possessions she had in the world, she moved into the maid's room adjoining the nursery, and within a week it was hard to imagine how the household had ever managed to run without her.

Most important, of course, was her devotion to Bruce. Quietly, without any fuss, she took over all the duties of tending for him. She fed him — and far less of the strained food was lost on his chin than in the days when Joan used to feed him. She washed him — and it was amazing how little squirming and squealing he did under her magic touch. She had an uncanny instinct, almost a second sight, for knowing when his diapers needed changing. And she seemed to get endless delight out of cooing at him, humming to him, tickling him, and bringing a smile to his face.

At the same time she didn't monopolize him. She was that most astounding phenomenon, a nurse who didn't consider herself infinitely more important in the child's life than his own mother. When the time came for Joan to take over the cooing and tickling, Frieda always stepped into the background, without the trace of a sour look. And if Joan asked to do the washing or the feeding, Frieda simply let her do it, and never went through the usual repertoire of grunts and sneers and superior sniffs.

In addition to all this, Frieda was perfectly willing to help out with the housework. She did the cleaning right along with Joan. She even insisted in being allowed to take turns with the cooking. "I know you are a good cook," Frieda said, "but I too have much experience with cooking. And sometimes a nice young couple that's in love, you like to sit together at the table, with a couple of candles maybe, and look in the eyes, and don't have to worry if the roast is burning."

Joan laughed and said, "You sound as if you're talking from first-hand knowledge. I'll bet when you were first married —"

Frieda gave a rueful little smile. "No, no, it was not like this for me, Mrs. Porter. My husband was not like my little Harry. He was a Prussian, you understand —" She laughed and changed the subject, and Joan never asked her again.

"I don't know what I'd do without Frieda." That was how Joan summed it up to her mother one month after Frieda's arrival. It was Frieda's afternoon off, and Joan and her mother were sitting in the nursery, drinking coffee and watching Bruce crawl around in his play pen. "In fact," Joan went on, "I sometimes think it's too good to be true."

"It *is* too good to be true," her mother said. "That's the way it always goes with these possessive old nurses. The minute they move in, they start taking things over. Before you know it, they won't let you touch your own baby."

"But Frieda's not like that at all. She's not the least bit possessive. She wants to see Bruce happy. Nothing pleases her more than when I'm playing with him. If you knew how sweet she is —"

"Oh, I'm sure of it." Mother raised her chin in that imperious way of hers. "They're always sweet as honey at the start. Little by little they make themselves indispensable. And when the time comes, watch out! You can't do this, you can't do that, baby has to take his nap now, baby can't be disturbed, baby doesn't want to see you. In the end you're lucky if they don't lock you out of the nursery."

But Joan just smiled and patted her mother's hand. "Well, one thing you'll have to admit. It's better to have a possessive nurse who really loves your child than *this* kind of nurse." She motioned at the afternoon newspaper which was folded on the arm of her chair.

"What kind of nurse?" Mother said.

"Didn't you read it in the paper yet? This terrible case out in San Francisco." Joan opened the paper and read the story aloud.

It was about a family in San Francisco whose infant boy had died a month and a half before. The doctor had thought it was one of those mysterious viral infections that sometimes carried infants off, and the baby had been buried in the regular way. But just recently some relative in the family, an old-maid aunt who lived with them, convinced the authorities to exhume the body and do a post-mortem — and sure enough, they discovered the baby had been poisoned. Now they were looking for the baby's old nurse, a woman who had been discharged shortly before the tragedy. This nurse had always been very fussy and didn't like anyone but herself to touch the baby. But the most suspicious thing of all was that the day before the baby's death she had actually locked the nursery door and refused to let the mother and aunt come in at feeding time. This, in fact, was the reason she had been discharged.

There wasn't any proof against the woman, of course, but already the newspapers were beginning to refer to her as Nurse Butcher . . .

"Now that's a dreadful thing," Joan's mother said with a shudder. "But it doesn't change my opinion any. These old nurses always think they know better than the mother, and believe me that's — Joan, look out!" She gave a little scream. "He's going to get his fingers caught in the bars of the play pen!"

"He won't hurt himself, Mother. You have to let a baby experiment, otherwise he'll be timid and self-conscious all his life."

"That's something out of your ridiculous psychology books, I suppose! Well, I don't intend to sit by quietly and watch *my* grandson break his fingers! All right, Brucie baby, all right, all right, don't cry, Grandma's here . . ."

It was just two days later that Bruce got the first of his stomach attacks. He started crying in the middle of the night. Joan woke up sharply and realized even from her bedroom that this wasn't his usual cry. By the time she reached the nursery Frieda was already there, bending over him and whispering to him comfortingly.

They called Dr. Flowers. Under ideal circumstances he wasn't the doctor Joan would have chosen — he was very old and a little bit too vague and easy-going for her taste. But he had been Harry's family doctor for years, and he would have been hurt if Harry had called in anybody else.

"Nothing to worry about, my dear, nothing at all," said old Dr. Flowers in his high droning voice. "Just a little stomach upset, that's all. I've called the pharmacy, they're sending out a prescription. Meanwhile keep him warm and quiet, and that strong young fellow of yours'll be good as new by morning."

It was two more mornings before he was good as new. During that time he alternated fits of choking and retching with long periods of lying on his back, staring dully at the ceiling. Joan could hardly think straight during those two days, she was so frantic. The only thing that enabled her to get through the ordeal was Frieda. Frieda was a miracle of efficiency — she took care of the baby, gave him his medicine, sang him to sleep, eased his pain, cleaned up after his vomitings, kept the house running smoothly, calmed Joan's nerves, and dealt with Harry's appetite. And yet there was never a moment when she wasn't cheerful, quiet, and unobtrusive. She didn't act like some bossy Trained Nurse, forever "managing" things.

At last Bruce was wriggling and giggling again, just like normal. And Joan got ready to throw herself down on her bed and sleep for a week. But not before she took Frieda's hand and squeezed it quickly and murmured, "Thank you."

The next day the household was back to its regular routine. At six in the evening Frieda was upstairs putting the baby to bed, and Harry and Joan were downstairs having a cocktail before dinner.

"Oh, look," Joan said, glancing through the second section of the evening paper, "here's some more about that case out in California — that Nurse Butcher, they call her."

"A lot of sensationalism," Harry said. "It says here the new hydrogen bomb could wipe out a whole city, and everybody gets all excited over some dull little murder out in San Francisco."

"Well, it's only natural. Killing a little baby like that — it's so brutal."

Harry looked up at her, amused. "And why is it more brutal to kill one little baby than a whole city full of people, including thousands of babies?"

"I don't know. It just is. It's only logical." Obscurely dissatisfied with her reasoning, Joan looked down at the paper quickly and began to read the story.

A few minutes later she gave an odd little laugh.

"What's the joke?" Harry said.

"It's just a funny coincidence. When the police searched the house where that baby died, they found a bottle hidden behind the dresser in the nurse's room. The bottle was still half full of arsenic. So now they're looking for her. They want to arrest her for murder."

"Okay, but where's this funny coincidence you mentioned?"

"Well, they give her description here in the paper. 'In her sixties. Stout and heavy. About five-foot three. Gray hair. Dark complexion. Wears plain, cheap clothes. Speaks with a German accent.'" Joan stopped reading and looked up at him. "Don't you see? That description sort of — well, it fits Frieda."

Harry stared at her a moment. Then he threw back his head and burst out laughing.

Joan lowered her eyes and grew red. "I don't see what you're laughing about. I only said it was a coincidence."

"Sure, sure. Shirley Holmes Porter is on the case. Poor Frieda — we only happen to have known her for more than twenty-five years, she only happens to have practically raised me single-handed. But that's all right, she's got gray hair and a German accent, so we'd better start sniffing our food for the telltale odor of bitter almonds." He laughed some more. "Darling, you're all worn out, you've had a rough time the last few days, and you're not thinking clearly. Don't you see, that description in the paper fits nine out of every ten German nursemaids who ever lived! Go into Central Park any morning of the week, and I'll make you a bet that every other bench will have at least one old lady on it who fits that description."

Already Joan was feeling a little peeved at herself. So she took a peeved tone with him. "I didn't say I thought this meant anything, did I? I was simply pointing out a coincidence, and now you treat me like a mental incompetent."

"Darling, I'm sorry." He came up to her and kissed her gravely on the forehead. "I certainly wouldn't want to imply that you're a mental incompetent. Or a mental anything else."

After that he didn't refer to the matter again. Except once, during dinner, he made his face very solemn and took a long significant sniff at the salad. Then he winked at her, maddeningly.

Well, that's the end of it, Joan told herself. That silly idea was out of her head once and for all.

But sometimes it isn't as easy to get an idea out of your head as it was to get it in there in the first place. Anyway, that's how it had always been with Joan. Odd notions and suspicions came to her out of nowhere, and even though she knew how absurd they were, she just couldn't be satisfied until she had followed them up and proved to herself that there was nothing in them. For instance, back in college, when she was first engaged to Harry, and somebody mentioned that he had been seen with that Natalie Taylor from South Carolina — Joan had tortured herself for days, and finally told Harry she was breaking the engagement, and said the most awful things to him. She still remembered her humiliation when she found out that Natalie Taylor was his first cousin, and the only reason he had taken her out that night was because his mother asked him to.

It's the same thing now, Joan told herself. She was simply letting her imagination run away with her.

And yet, the very next morning, while she and Frieda were cleaning up the master bedroom, she found herself moving — as if against her own will — towards that dangerous subject.

"You know, Frieda," she said, as they stood across the bed from each other and shook out a sheet, "you've never told us much about your life during the last twenty years . . . since you took care of Harry. I don't want to pry, goodness knows, but since you're practically one of the family, we *are* interested . . ."

Was it still her imagination, or did Frieda's good-humored smile tighten up a little at this question? "My life is not interesting, Mrs. Porter. After I stop working for my Harry's mama, I went to the Atkins, these were friends of his mama on West End Avenue —"

"Oh, I know about the Atkins, of course. You were with them for almost seven years. And after that you were with that artist and his family. Harry has told me all about that, he says you used to send him birthday cards regularly all that time. It's *after* the artist that I'm curious about, Frieda. You wrote Harry that you were going to give up nursing and live out West with your married daughter. That was ten years ago, and he didn't hear from you since."

Frieda was busy tucking in the blankets. "It did not work out with my married daughter, Mrs. Porter. The house was too small, and I was not sympathetic with her husband, that no-good Carl. I am there one year, and they move to St. Louis. They ask me to move with them, but I say no, I will to nursing go back. And so this is what I do." She lifted her chin and gave a stiff laugh. "So this is not very interesting, is it?"

"Whom did you work for out West?

"I work for many people, Mrs. Porter."

"But the last ones you worked for, what were *their* names?"

"Their names?" Frieda fluffed up the pillow vigorously for a moment. "Their name is — Munster. Mr. and Mrs. William Munster."

Joan noted that this wasn't anything like the name of those people in San Francisco whose baby had died. "Was that out in San Francisco?"

"No. It was a small city, Bakersfield. I have never been to San Francisco."

Joan took a breath. Then she brought out her next question, trembling a little. "And their baby — this Mr. and Mrs. Munster — was it a little boy, too?"

Frieda seemed to relax. She smiled. "Oh, yes. It is always a little boy. I am great friends with them always, little boys. I think I do the bathroom now, Mrs. Porter." She was gone before Joan could ask another question.

For the rest of the morning Joan thought about this conversation. Frieda's manner had been evasive. There was no doubt about that, it wasn't Joan's imagination at all. And why on earth should she want to conceal the details of her life these last few years if there wasn't something to conceal? — Perhaps something dreadful?

Lots of reasons, Joan answered herself. Personal and private reasons. People have a right to their privacy, don't they? Why should they pour out their life history to every nosy Westchester housewife who comes along? Mind your own business, Joan told herself firmly.

Softly, insinuatingly, a small inner voice said to her: Bruce is your baby, *that's* your business, that's the only business that really matters.

And a few days later three things happened that brought all her submerged suspicions right back up to the surface.

The first thing happened at breakfast. On the back page of the *Times* she ran across a small item about Nurse Butcher.

"Listen to this, Harry," she said, trying to keep her voice casual. "You know that San Francisco murder case we were talking about the other day? Well, they've got some more information about the nurse who's supposed to have done it. This ticket seller from the railroad station remembers seeing her the day after the baby's funeral. He says he sold her a coach ticket to New York. That's a three or four day trip by train, and this murder happened about six weeks ago — that's just about a week before Frieda got in touch with you and asked for the job, isn't it?"

Harry lowered his half of the paper slowly and gave a sigh. "And exactly what is *that* supposed to mean?"

"I don't say it means anything —"

"Oh, you don't, do you? What else have you been saying, I'd like to know? My God, honey, use a little common sense, will you? Hundreds of people take the train to New York every day. Besides, that woman may not have been going to New York

at all. She could just as easily have got off at Chicago, or never taken the train in the first place. I don't understand how you can be so silly."

"I know it, I know I'm silly. Only — in the second part of this story they give a quotation from a big psychiatrist. They asked him if he had any theory as to why this Nurse Butcher poisoned that baby. And listen to what he says — he says she is undoubtedly a victim of a common type of psychosis that attacks women of middle age who have no children, or whose children have neglected them. Such women, as a result of their frustration, grow to feel great resentment against younger women with small babies. They feel that it is unjust for such women to be happier than themselves, and often they will resort to extreme and violent methods to punish these young mothers for this fancied injustice."

"Very ingenious," Harry said. "If there's one type of person I hate, it's a breakfast-table psychiatrist."

"Harry," Joan pushed on despite his sarcasm, "I have to know once and for all! I have to be sure, otherwise I'll never have another moment's peace. Frieda told me her last employers were a Mr. and Mrs. William Munster in Bakersfield, California. Well, I'm going to send a telegram to my brother Eddie in Los Angeles — he's a lawyer, he's got ways of looking things up — and ask him to get in touch with these Munster people and wire me right back. And another thing — I'm going to ask Eddie if the papers out there have printed a picture of this nurse. If they have, I'm going to ask him to send it to me. I *know* it's silly," she said, forestalling his objection, "but I have to do it!"

So right after breakfast she did it — while Frieda was out in the backyard hanging up the wash.

That same afternoon the second thing happened. Frieda was outside with the baby carriage, and Joan suddenly felt an intense desire to search Frieda's room, to see if there was anything there which might set her mind at ease. She knew this was a terrible thing to do, she hated snoopy people — "but it's for Bruce's sake," she told herself.

As it turned out she didn't have to search the room. Because the moment she stepped into it, her eye was caught by something on the dresser. It was a bottle, a large bottle about three-quarters full of a thick brownish liquid. Joan went up to it and took it in her hands, but there was no label on it, nothing at all to indicate what it contained. Quickly she unscrewed the top and smelled it. The liquid, whatever it was, had no smell at all.

A little later, when Frieda and Bruce came back to the house, Joan spoke up thoughtfully. "I was passing your room, Frieda, and your door was open and I happened to notice this bottle on the dresser. I was wondering — is it something out of our medicine cabinet?"

Frieda didn't seem at all perturbed

by this question. She went right on taking off the baby's little sweater. "Yes, it is medicine, Mrs. Porter, but not from the medicine cabinet. It is my own."

"Something you take yourself?"

"No, no. It is not for me. It is for the baby."

The easy cheerfulness with which she said this made Joan turn cold. "But I don't remember Dr. Flowers prescribing anything like that."

"It is not from Dr. Flowers. He knows nothing, that one. This is my own medicine, something I use when I am a girl in Germany. If my baby don't feel so good, he has a little cold or a bad stomach maybe, I will give him this. Much better it works than the medicine Dr. Flowers gives him."

"Frieda —" Joan couldn't keep the panic out of her voice. "— you're not to give any of that to Bruce!"

"But Mrs. Porter, I cannot understand. It is very good for him. I give this medicine to all my babies."

"Don't you dare give any of it to Bruce!" Joan could feel the tears rushing to her eyes. "Don't you dare, do you hear me!"

She saw the look of hurt and bewilderment on Frieda's face. "Mrs. Porter, I would do nothing to hurt my baby. Don't you know this, how much I love him?"

A wave of shame came over Joan. "Frieda — I don't know what — I'm sorry!" She gasped out the last word, then turned and ran off to her room.

When she saw Frieda at dinner that night, both were as calm and amiable as ever. Neither of them said a word about the incident.

And then, around 10 o'clock, the third thing happened. Frieda was upstairs asleep, and Joan and Harry were watching television, when the phone rang. It was Western Union. Joan had received an answer from her brother Eddie in Los Angeles. The girl read it to her over the phone:

CALLED CONTACTS IN BAKERSFIELD. LOOKED UP TOWN RECORDS, PHONE BOOKS, TAX ROLLS. NOBODY NAMED WILLIAM MUNSTER LIVING THERE LAST FIVE YEARS. WILL DIG UP PICTURE, SEND SPECIAL DELIVERY.

Even Harry was a little shaken by this. He kept frowning and saying, "I don't get it. Why should she lie to you? What reason would she have?"

There was an edge of hysteria in Joan's voice as she answered him. "I can think of one good reason!"

Harry went on frowning. "We'll talk to her about it in the morning. I'm sure there's some perfectly reasonable explanation. Besides, when you get that photograph you'll see how silly all this is. My God, I've known Frieda since I was a boy! She's always been like one of the family."

"One of the family," Joan said.

But they didn't talk to Frieda about it in the morning. During the

night Bruce got sick again, and his suffering drove everything else out of their minds.

Dr. Flowers said it was the same trouble as before: "A simple upset stomach, nothing at all to get concerned about. There's probably something he's allergic to. Just as soon as this little siege is over, I'll run a series of tests."

By this time Joan had no faith at all in Dr. Flowers. The idea gripped her that Bruce would only be safe if she never left his side or let him out of her sight. She cancelled all her dates and committee meetings, took over Bruce's washing and feeding, moved a cot into the nursery, and spent the second night of his illness with him.

Every single time he turned over or sighed she was out of her cot, bending over his crib.

Frieda offered to help many times. "You are working too hard. You are not used to this. Go and sleep, I will take care of him." But Joan refused all Frieda's offers, hastily at first, then more and more firmly. And she steeled herself against that confused, disappointed look which came over the old woman's face.

One time, after Bruce had an especially violent fit of retching, Frieda made another offer to help, and Joan lashed out at her furiously, "Go away! We don't want your help! We can do without your kind of help!"

She apologized a moment later. She explained that she was tired and worried and didn't know what she was saying. But even the smile with which Frieda accepted this apology couldn't cover up the pain in her eyes.

On the third night of Bruce's illness, Harry called up and said he couldn't come home for dinner, he had to stay in New York with some out-of-town buyers.

"Darling, when will you get here?"

The fear must have sounded in her voice. He answered her with a reassuring laugh. "Now why are you so upset? I'll be back around midnight. If Brucie gets any worse, call Dr. Flowers."

She hung up and hurried back to the nursery. Bruce was alone, just as she had left him.

Slowly the twilight faded into darkness. Slowly and agonizingly the night passed. Joan prepared Bruce's dinner herself. But she kept Frieda in the kitchen with her while she was doing so. She told Frieda that she needed her help, but when it actually came to the point she wouldn't let Frieda touch a thing. Then she went upstairs to the nursery and fed Bruce, and Frieda stood in the doorway and watched but didn't come any closer.

Then Frieda and Joan had their own dinner. All Joan would eat was a sandwich she made herself and a glass of milk. Frieda offered to cook something for her, but she shook her head hard. "I'm not really hungry," she said. "And I don't want to leave Bruce by himself too long."

After that, as they ate, the women exchanged hardly a word. Once

Frieda made a remark about the old days in Germany, another time about all the signs Bruce was showing of being a superior child. Infallible conversation-starters usually. But tonight Joan couldn't begin to respond.

When they went up to the nursery and sat with Bruce, they perched on chairs at opposite sides of the crib and watched him as he slept. Again they exchanged hardly a word.

"He is getting better, I think," Frieda said once. "He was more comfortable today." She hesitated, then went on, "You agree, yes, he was comfortable today?"

Joan didn't answer.

Later Frieda gave a little laugh and spoke again. "That Dr. Flowers, he knows nothing of little babies. It is a good thing we don't have to depend on him, I think."

Joan looked up sharply, wondering what Frieda meant by that remark. But she didn't say anything.

The night wore on. The two women cast thick shadows across the room in the light of the small night-lamp. Once in a while, when she knew Frieda wasn't looking, Joan stared at her hard, trying to understand what this old woman was really like. Was she what she seemed to be, innocent old Frieda, the conventional German nanny devoted to her charge? Or were the thoughts in that wrinkled head deeper and blacker and more muddied, full of undercurrents of jealousy, frustration, and suppressed violence? Joan just couldn't tell. One minute Frieda's face seemed the incarnation of evil, the next it was everything sweet and simple and comforting in this world —

How do you ever know about anybody? Joan asked herself. Faces, ordinary faces, the faces that seem the warmest and fondest and that mean the most to you — can you ever be sure what's behind them? For a moment, with a thrill of horror, it seemed to Joan that life was a nightmare, the whole world a pack of grinning devils . . .

Downstairs the doorbell rang. Joan started and looked at her watch. 11:30. "Frieda, answer the door, will you?"

Frieda left the room. A minute later she was calling up the stairs. "It is from the post office. A letter, special delivery."

Joan went downstairs and took the letter from Frieda's hand, trying not to show her excitement. She turned away slightly so that Frieda couldn't watch her opening it. Then, with trembling fingers, she tore open the envelope. A folded newspaper clipping dropped onto her hand. At the top of the clipping, in heavy print, was a caption: "Mrs. Oscar Baumgartner — Police are looking for this woman in connection with the death of —"

Joan didn't have to read any further. The picture underneath the caption was a little blurred and a little dark, but it was still clear enough.

It was Frieda's picture.

There couldn't be any doubt of it.

Then she noticed that Frieda was no longer standing by her side.

The first clutch of panic froze Joan to the spot.

Then it was gone, and a terrible cry burst out of her.

"Bruce!"

She was climbing the stairs, she was running up the hall. The nursery door was shut. She yanked it open, gasped at what she saw . . .

Frieda was stooping over the crib. In one of her hands was a spoon. In the other hand was the bottle Joan had seen on Frieda's dresser, the bottle of brownish liquid. In her softest, most soothing voice, Frieda was whispering to Bruce, "All right, my baby, now you swallow this and it will stop the pain, it will make you feel nice again. Frieda tells you so —" Bruce was awake now, looking up at her solemnly. He smiled and stretched out his hand. She brought the spoon up to his lips.

Joan dashed forward, lunged at Frieda, pulled the spoon from her hand. The brownish liquid spattered over Bruce's crib, the bottle fell to the floor with a crash. Bruce started to cry.

"Murderess!" Joan shouted at Frieda. "Butcher! Nurse Butcher!"

Frieda took a step towards her. Her mouth was twisted to one side.

"Stay away from us!" Joan shouted, her voice hoarse and exhausted. "Stay away from my baby!"

And then It was a whirl in her head — Frieda's twisted mouth, Bruce's cries, the roaring in her ears, the night-lamp growing brighter and brighter. The last thing she knew was the tight clutch of Frieda's bony fingers on her arm . . .

She was lying on her back. Harry's face was looking down at her.

It was a mist at first, she thought she must be dreaming it. Then it grew sharper, she became aware of the familiar pattern of wallpaper, the feel of her own bed under her.

Suddenly Joan started up with a cry. "Bruce!"

Harry's hand was on her shoulder, easing her gently down on the pillow. "He's all right, honey. He's sleeping now."

"But Frieda —"

"Frieda's in her room."

"In her room!" Once more Joan tried to sit up. "But Harry, she's not *alone?* She'll try again — she wants to kill him —"

Harry gave a troubled sigh. "Yes — she told me what happened before I got home. She told me those things you said to her. Joan darling," he leaned forward, "it was all in the papers tonight, I read it on the train from the city. The killer of that baby has been caught. She's made a full confession. Frieda had nothing to do with it."

Joan stared up at him, taking in his words slowly.

"But Harry . . . that picture in the newspaper . . . that was Frieda's picture . . ."

"Yes, Frieda was that baby's nurse, all right. She had her suspicions that

somebody was trying to harm him. That's why she locked the door at feeding time."

"But she lied to me! Telling me she worked for those Munsters —"

"Don't you see, darling? She was frightened. When she read in the papers that the baby was dead, and that she was wanted for murder, she was afraid to say anything. The facts looked so bad against her — somebody had carefully seen to that. She thought the police would never believe her story. After all," Harry lowered his eyes nervously, "she couldn't expect the police to know how kind and gentle she is. The way the rest of us should have known."

"But she was feeding that stuff to Bruce . . . And the way she grabbed me before I fainted —"

Harry smiled wearily. "She told you what the stuff was. Her own favorite home medicine. She used to pour it down my throat twice a week when I was a kid. As for the way she grabbed hold of you — she saw you falling, and she was trying to help you."

"Trying to help me." A painful shudder began to shake Joan's body. "But, Harry, if she really was that baby's nurse — what about the bottle of arsenic they found in her room?"

"It was put there to implicate her. By the real killer."

"The real killer?"

Harry sighed again. "It was the baby's old-maid aunt. It was just as that psychiatrist said — a frustrated middle-aged woman with no children of her own, full of resentment against women more fortunate than she. That's why she pestered them to have the body exhumed a month after the funeral, that's why she tried to get Frieda blamed for the crime. It wasn't enough for her to take out her resentment on the baby's mother. She had to do something terrible to Frieda, too — because Frieda, who wasn't even related to the baby, had so much of his love."

"So much of his love." Joan repeated the words slowly, feeling at last the full horror of what she had done.

She sat up.

"I'm going to her."

Frieda was in her room, packing a suitcase. She looked up as Joan entered. Her eyes were red, her face was gray and old.

Joan went up to her, and spoke as earnestly and intently as she could. "Frieda, I apologize. Please forgive me. Please stay here with Bruce and us."

Frieda's lips trembled. It was a few moments before she could stop the trembling. And then she managed a smile of great sweetness and sadness. "I do not blame you for anything, Mrs. Porter. A mother must protect her baby. But I think it is better I go now."

"We want you so much, Frieda. You're just like one of the family. That's really true —"

But Frieda was shaking her head slowly. "One of the family," she said, so lightly and softly, without a

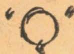
touch of bitterness. "No, this is not so. This is how we fool ourselves, women like me. We are never one of the family. We are in the house. We look after the baby. Everybody speaks politely to us. But for us there is no family any more." She paused a moment, then gave a quiet smile. "I will give it up, I think, the nursing. I have a little money. I will find somewhere a place to live, and there I will live, and that will make me happy." She lowered her head, and quickly went on with her packing.

That night Joan couldn't fall asleep. She lay on her back in the darkness. Finally she spoke.

"I'll never forget what I did to her — no, never."

"Of course you will," Harry said from the twin bed. "You're upset now. But after a while, as time goes by — believe me, honey, people always forget these things."

Joan thought this over a moment. Then she spoke in a flat even voice. "You're right," she said. "That's the most terrible part."



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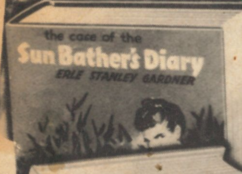

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Perry Mason has an ace up his sleeve—a gorgeous red-head! She's the surprise witness he's counting on to save his client from the electric chair. But she DISAPPEARS. Perry can't locate her. But when the trial opens she's *in the courtroom*. SHE'S going to be the star witness FOR the D. A.!

❷ **The Case of The NERVOUS ACCOMPLICE**

Mason's beautiful client, Sybil Harlan, is on trial for murder. The District Attorney produces one witness after another—right down to a ballistics expert who says that the fatal bullet came from Sybil's gun! And all Perry offers in her defense is—*a wheelbarrow filled with rusty scrap iron!*

❸ **The Case of The SUN BATHER'S DIARY**

Perry gets a frantic phone call—from a woman who says all her clothes and her auto trailer were stolen while she was sunbathing. She offers Perry $1500 to recover them. The investigation leads Mason into a MURDER case. According to the evidence, the killer is either Perry's client . . . *or Perry himself!*

❹ **The Case of The GLAMOROUS GHOST**

Perry's client has amnesia. She can't remember a thing that happened on the fateful night her husband was murdered. She can't even recognize her own gun — the MURDER WEAPON!

❺ **The Case of The RESTLESS REDHEAD**

Perry Mason's client is the victim of a double frame-up . . . or IS she? The first time she called up Steve Merrill, the police came—and accused her of stealing $40,000 in jewels from Merrill's wife. The SECOND time she called him, the police came again. This time they accused her of MURDERING Merrill!

❻ **The Case of The RUNAWAY CORPSE**

Myrna Davenport hires Mason to get a letter which accuses her of planning to poison her husband Ed. (Ed has just died of arsenic poisoning!) Perry searches Ed's office and finds an envelope with six sheets of *blank* paper! Then the police accuse Perry of substituting the blanks for the REAL letter!

—Continued on Inside Cover

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