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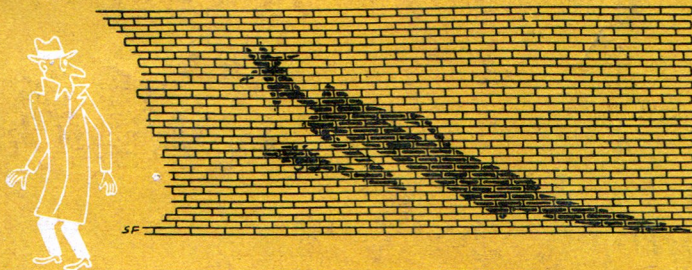


The Destroyers

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doctors and divas
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but mostly people like this Florida housewife
who wrote us just the other day . . .

725 - 69th Ave. So.
St. Petersburg, Fla.
April 10, 1956

Dear "Ellery Queen":

While reading the preface to "Rogues' Gallery" I was amazed to realize that your magazine has been in existence almost 15 years. I started to subscribe to it beginning with the second or third issue.

In casting my thoughts back over the last 15 years I found many changes in my life - 2 children, several changes of residence, and five years ago moving to Florida from my home in the Chicago area. Not as many changes have occurred in EQMM - and those only to give more enjoyment to your readers.

Do you remember James Yaffe's first story as a young boy and how you predicted good things for him? He certainly has progressed, and as I look on the cover - the new one I think is much better than the old - I always look forward with enjoyment to reading his newest story when I see his name.

I am certainly rambling on, reminiscing like an old woman, but you started it with your 150th issue.

All of which leads up to my very best wishes for many more than fifteen more years of "Ellery Queen." Each month they are a bright spot and a few pleasant hours of relaxation and entertainment. Good luck!

Sincerely,

Dorothy A. Johnson

Thank you, Mrs. Johnson.
We are delighted that you have taken the time to write us. And we are grateful to you—and to the thousands like you—for your abiding interest in our work. It represents the truest reward for our efforts in EQMM.

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Graham Greene needs no introduction to readers of EQMM, either as a "serious" novelist (the author of, say, BRIGHTON ROCK) or as a fashioner of so-called "entertainments" (the author of THIS GUN FOR HIRE and THE THIRD MAN). In both branches of his work (if, indeed, there are two separate and distinct branches) his preoccupation is usually with psychology, especially abnormal psychology — or, to put it another way, with people, their minds and feelings, rather than with events.

Phyllis Bentley, another distinguished British novelist, has said that Graham Greene "seems able to investigate sinister psychologies without sentimentalizing them; his prose has tension, but is never overwritten." The American critics' view is basically the same: for example, William Rose Benét described Mr. Greene's novels as works of "action dealing with peculiarities of psychology," and then added: "No man writing today is more a master of suspense. . . . He is one of the finest craftsmen of story-telling in our time."

But always, you notice, there is the underlying preoccupation with abnormal psychology. . . . And that is precisely what "The Destructors" is concerned with. It is a tale of British juvenile delinquency — about teen-age gangsters who call themselves the Wormsley Common Gang. The English novelist and critic, Maurice Edelman, wrote of this story that it "sweeps the imagination between an extreme of horror and farce." And that is true: "The Destructors" has an evil fascination and a fascination of evil — or, to quote Graham Greene himself, "an odd quality of danger."

THE DESTRUCTORS

by GRAHAM GREENE

IT WAS ON THE EVE OF AUGUST BANK Holiday that the latest recruit became the leader of the Wormsley Common Gang. No one was surprised except Mike, but Mike at the age of nine was surprised by everything. "If you don't shut your mouth," some-

body once said to him, "you'll get a frog down it." After that Mike had kept his teeth tightly clamped except when the surprise was too great.

The new recruit had been with the gang since the beginning of the summer holidays, and there were possi-

bilities about his brooding silence that all recognized. He never wasted a word even to tell his name until that was required of him by the rules. When he said "Trevor" it was a statement of fact, not as it would have been with the others a statement of shame or defiance. Nor did anyone laugh except Mike, who finding himself without support and meeting the dark gaze of the newcomer, opened his mouth and was quiet again. There was every reason why T., as he was afterwards referred to, should have been an object of mockery — there was his name (and they substituted the initial because otherwise they had no excuse not to laugh at it), the fact that his father, a former architect and present clerk, had "come down in the world" and that his mother considered herself better than the neighbors. What but an odd quality of danger, of the unpredictable, established him in the gang without any ignoble ceremony of initiation?

The gang met every morning in an impromptu car park, the site of the last bomb of the first blitz. The leader, who was known as Blackie, claimed to have heard it fall, and no one was precise enough in his dates to point out that he would have been one year old and fast asleep on the down platform of Wormsley Common Underground Station. On one side of the car park leaned the first occupied house, No. 3, of the shattered Northwood Terrace — literally leaned, for it had suffered from the blast of the bomb and the side walls were sup-

ported on wooden struts. A smaller bomb and some incendiaries had fallen beyond, so that the house stuck up like a jagged tooth and carried on the further wall relics of its neighbor, a dado and the remains of a fireplace. T., whose words were almost confined to voting "Yes" or "No" to the plan of operations proposed each day by Blackie, once startled the whole gang by saying broodingly, "Wren built that house, father says."

"Who's Wren?"

"The man who built St. Paul's."

"Who cares?" Blackie said. "It's only old Misery's."

Old Misery — whose real name was Thomas — had once been a builder and decorator. He lived alone in the crippled house, doing for himself: once a week you could see him coming back across the common with bread and vegetables, and once, as the boys played in the car park, he put his head over the smashed wall of his garden and looked at them.

"Been to the loo," one of the boys said, for it was common knowledge that since the bombs fell something had gone wrong with the pipes of the house and Old Misery was too mean to spend money on the property. He could do the redecorating himself at cost price, but he had never learned plumbing. The loo was a wooden shed at the bottom of the narrow garden with a star-shaped hole in the door: it had escaped the blast which had smashed the house next door and sucked out the window frames of No. 3.

The next time the gang became aware of Mr. Thomas was more surprising. Blackie, Mike, and a thin yellow boy, who for some reason was called by his surname Summers, met him on the common coming back from the market. Mr. Thomas stopped them. He said glumly, "You belong to the gang that play in the car park?"

Mike was about to answer when Blackie stopped him. As the leader he had responsibilities. "Suppose we are?" he said ambiguously.

"I got some chocolates," Mr. Thomas said. "Don't like 'em myself. Here you are. Not enough to go round, I don't suppose. There never is," he added with somber conviction. He handed over three packets of Smarties.

The gang were puzzled and perturbed by this action and tried to explain it away. "Bet someone dropped them and he picked 'em up," somebody suggested.

"Pinched 'em and then got in a bleeding funk," another thought aloud.

"It's a bribe," Summers said. "He wants us to stop bouncing balls on his wall."

"We'll show him we don't take bribes," Blackie said, and they sacrificed the whole morning to the game of bouncing that only Mike was young enough to enjoy. There was no sign from Mr. Thomas.

Next day T. astonished them all. He was late at the rendezvous, and the voting for that day's exploit took

place without him. At Blackie's suggestion the gang was to disperse in pairs, take buses at random, and see how many free rides could be snatched from unwary conductors (the operation was to be carried out in pairs to avoid cheating). They were drawing lots for their companions when T. arrived.

"Where you been, T.?" Blackie asked. "You can't vote now. You know the rules."

"I've been *there*," T. said. He looked at the ground, as though he had thoughts to hide.

"Where?"

"At Old Misery's."

Mike's mouth opened and then hurriedly closed again with a click. He had remembered the frog.

"At Old Misery's?" Blackie said. There was nothing in the rules against it, but he had a sensation that T. was treading on dangerous ground. He asked hopefully, "Did you break in?"

"No. I rang the bell."

"And what did you say?"

"I said I wanted to see his house."

"What did he do?"

"He showed it to me."

"Pinch anything?"

"No."

"What did you do it for then?"

The gang had gathered round: it was as though an impromptu court were about to form and to try some case of deviation. T. said, "It's a beautiful house," and still watching the ground, meeting no one's eyes, he licked his lips first one way, then the other.

"What do you mean, a beautiful house?" Blackie asked with scorn.

"It's got a staircase two hundred years old like a corkscrew. Nothing holds it up."

"What do you mean, nothing holds it up. Does it float?"

"It's to do with opposite forces, Old Misery said."

"What else?"

"There's paneling."

"Like in the Blue Boar?"

"Two hundred years old."

"Is Old Misery two hundred years old?"

Mike laughed suddenly and then was quiet again. The meeting was in a serious mood. For the first time since T. had strolled into the car park on the first day of the holidays his position was in danger. It only needed a single use of his real name and the gang would be at his heels.

"What did you do it for?" Blackie asked. He was just — he had no jealousy — and he was anxious to retain T. in the gang if he could. It was the word "beautiful" that worried him — that belonged to a class world that you could still see parodied at the Wormsley Common Empire by a man wearing a top hat and a monocle, with a haw-haw accent. He was tempted to say, "My dear Trevor, old chap," and unleash his hell hounds. "If you'd broken in," he said sadly — that indeed would have been an exploit worthy of the gang.

"This was better," T. said. "I found out things." He continued to

stare at his feet, not meeting anybody's eye, as though he were absorbed in some dream he was unwilling — or ashamed — to share.

"What things?"

"Old Misery's going to be away all tomorrow and Bank Holiday."

Blackie said with relief. "You mean we could break in?"

"And pinch things?" somebody asked.

Blackie said. "Nobody's going to pinch things. Breaking in — that's good enough, isn't it? We don't want any court stuff."

"I don't want to pinch anything," T. said. "I've got a better idea."

"What is it?"

T. raised eyes, as gray and disturbed as the drab August day. "We'll pull it down," he said. "We'll destroy it."

Blackie gave a single hoot of laughter and then, like Mike, fell quiet, daunted by the serious implacable gaze. "What'd the police be doing all the time?" he said.

"They'd never know. We'd do it from inside. I've found a way in." He said with a sort of intensity, "We'd be like worms, don't you see, in an apple. When we came out again there'd be nothing there — no staircase, no panels, nothing but just walls — and then we'd make the walls fall down — somehow."

"We'd go to jug," Blackie said.

"Who's to prove? And anyway we wouldn't have pinched anything." He added without the smallest flicker of glee, "There wouldn't be anything to pinch after we'd finished."

"I've never heard of going to prison for breaking things," Summers said.

"There wouldn't be time," Blackie said. "I've seen housebreakers at work."

"There are twelve of us," T. said. "We'd organize."

"None of us know how . . ."

"I know," T. said. He looked across at Blackie, "Have you got a better plan?"

"Today," Mike said tactlessly, "we're pinching free rides . . ."

"Free rides," T. said. "You can stand down, Blackie, if you'd rather . . ."

"The gang's got to vote."

"Put it up then."

Blackie said uneasily, "It's proposed that tomorrow and Monday we destroy Old Misery's house."

"Here, here," said a fat boy called Joe.

"Who's in favor?"

T. said, "It's carried."

"How do we start?" Summers asked.

"He'll tell you," Blackie said. It was the end of his leadership. He went away to the back of the car park and began to kick a stone, dribbling it this way and that. There was only one old Morris in the park, for few cars were left there except lorries: without an attendant there was no safety. He took a flying kick at the car and scraped a little paint off the rear mud-guard. Beyond, paying no more attention to him than to a stranger, the gang had gathered round T.; Blackie was dimly aware of the fickleness of

favor. He thought of going home, of never returning, of letting them all discover the hollowness of T.'s leadership, but suppose after all what T. proposed was possible — nothing like it had ever been done before. The fame of the Wormsley Common Gang would surely reach around London.

There would be headlines in the papers. Even the grown-up gangs who ran the betting at the all-in wrestling and the barrow boys would hear with respect of how Old Misery's house had been destroyed. Driven by the pure, simple, and altruistic ambition of fame for the gang, Blackie came back to where T. stood in the shadow of Misery's wall.

T. was giving his orders with decision: it was as though this plan had been with him all his life, pondered through the seasons, now in his fifteenth year crystallized with the pain of puberty. "You," he said to Mike, "bring some big nails, the biggest you can find, and a hammer. Anyone else who can, better bring a hammer and a screwdriver. We'll need plenty of them. Chisels too. We can't have too many chisels. Can anybody bring a saw?"

"I can," Mike said.

"Not a child's saw," T. said. "A real saw."

Blackie realized he had raised his hand like any member of the gang.

"Right, you bring one, Blackie. But now there's a difficulty. We want a hacksaw."

"What's a hacksaw?" someone asked.

"You can get 'em at Woolworth's," Summers said.

The fat boy called Joe said gloomily, "I knew it would end in a collection."

"I'll get one myself," T. said. "I don't want your money. But I can't buy a sledge hammer."

Blackie said, "They are working on No. 15. I know where they'll leave their stuff for Bank Holiday."

"Then that's all," T. said. "We meet here at nine sharp."

"I've got to go to church," Mike said.

"Come over the wall and whistle. We'll let you in."

On Sunday morning all were punctual except Blackie, even Mike. Mike had a stroke of luck. His mother felt ill, his father was tired after Saturday night, and he was told to go to church alone with many warnings of what would happen if he strayed.

Blackie had had difficulty in smuggling out the saw, and then in finding the sledge hammer at the back of No. 15. He now approached the house from a lane at the rear of the garden, for fear of the policeman's beat along the main road. The tired evergreens kept off a stormy sun: another wet Bank Holiday was being prepared over the Atlantic, beginning in swirls of dust under the trees. Blackie climbed the wall into Misery's garden.

There was no sign of anybody anywhere. The loo stood like a tomb in a neglected graveyard. The curtains were drawn. The house slept. Blackie

lumbered nearer with the saw and the sledge hammer. Perhaps after all nobody had turned up: the plan had been a wild invention. But when he came close to the back door he could hear a confusion of sound, hardly louder than a hive in swarm: a clickety-clack, a bang bang bang, a scraping, a creaking, a sudden painful crack. He thought: it's true, and whistled.

They opened the back door to him and he came in. He had at once the impression of organization, very different from the old happy-go-lucky ways under his leadership. For a while he wandered up and down the stairs looking for T. Nobody addressed him: he had a sense of great urgency and already he could begin to see the plan. The interior of the house was being carefully demolished without touching the outer walls. Summers with hammer and chisel was ripping out the skirting boards in the ground-floor dining room; he had already smashed the panels of the door. In the same room Joe was heaving up the parquet blocks, exposing the soft-wood floorboards over the cellar. Coils of wire came out of the damaged skirting and Mike sat happily on the floor, clipping the wires.

On the curved stairs two of the gang were working hard with an inadequate child's saw on the banisters — when they saw Blackie's big saw they signaled for it wordlessly. The time he next saw them, a quarter of the banisters had been dropped into the hall. He found T. at last in the

bathroom — he sat moodily in the least-cared-for room in the house, listening to the sounds coming up from below.

"You've really done it," Blackie said with awe. "What's going to happen?"

"We've only just begun," T. said. He looked at the sledge hammer and gave his instructions. "You stay here and break the bath and the wash basin. Don't bother about the pipes. They come later."

Mike appeared at the door. "I've finished the wire, T.," he said.

"Good. You've just got to go wandering round now. The kitchen's in the basement. Smash all the china and glass and bottles you can lay hold of. Don't turn on the taps — we don't want a flood — yet. Then go into all the rooms and turn out drawers. If they are locked get one of the others to break them open. Tear up any papers you find and smash all the ornaments. Better take a carving knife with you from the kitchen. The bedroom's opposite here. Open the pillows and tear up the sheets. That's enough for the moment. And you, Blackie, when you've finished in here crack the plaster in the passage with your sledge hammer."

"What are you going to do?" Blackie asked.

"I'm looking for something special," T. said.

It was nearly lunchtime before Blackie had finished and went in search of T. Chaos had advanced. The

kitchen was a shambles of broken glass and china. The dining room was stripped of parquet, the skirting was up, the door had been taken off its hinges, and the destroyers had moved up a floor. Streaks of light came in through the closed shutters where they worked with the seriousness of creators — and destruction is a form of creation. A kind of imagination had seen this house as it had now become.

Mike said, "I've got to go home for dinner."

"Who else?" T. asked, but all the others on one excuse or another had brought provisions with them.

They squatted in the ruins of the room and swapped unwanted sandwiches. Half an hour for lunch and they were at work again. By the time Mike returned, they were on the top floor, and by six the superficial damage was completed. The doors were all off, all the skirtings raised, the furniture pillaged and ripped and smashed — no one could have slept in the house except on a bed of broken plaster. T. gave his orders — eight o'clock next morning, and to escape notice they climbed singly over the garden wall into the car park. Only Blackie and T. were left; the light had nearly gone and when they touched a switch, nothing worked — Mike had done his job thoroughly.

"Did you find anything special?" Blackie asked.

T. nodded. "Come over here," he said, "and look." Out of both pockets he drew bundles of pound notes.

"Old Misery's savings," he said. "Mike ripped out the mattress, but he missed them."

"What are you going to do? Share them?"

"We aren't thieves," T. said. "Nobody's going to steal anything from this house. I kept these for you and me — a celebration." He knelt down on the floor and counted them out — there were seventy in all. "We'll burn them," he said, "one by one," and taking it in turns they held a note upwards and lit the top corner, so that the flame burned slowly towards their fingers. The gray ash floated above them and fell on their heads like age. "I'd like to see Old Misery's face when we are through," T. said.

"You hate him a lot?" Blackie asked.

"Of course I don't hate him," T. said. "There'd be no fun if I hated him." The last burning note illuminated his brooding face. "All this hate and love," he said, "it's soft, it's hoey. There's only things, Blackie," and he looked round the room crowded with the unfamiliar shadows of half things, broken things, former things. "I'll race you home, Blackie."

Next morning the serious destruction started. There were two casualties — Mike and another boy whose parents were off to Southend and Brighton in spite of the slow warm drops that had begun to fall and the rumble of thunder in the estuary like the first guns of the old blitz. "We've got to hurry," T. said.

Summers was restive. "Haven't we done enough?" he said. "I've been given a bob for slot machines. This is like work."

"We've hardly started," T. said. "Why, there's all the floors left, and the stairs. We haven't taken out a single window. You voted like the others. We are going to *destroy* this house. There won't be anything left when we've finished."

They began again on the first floor picking up the top floorboards next the outer wall, leaving the joists exposed. Then they sawed through the joists and retreated into the hall as what was left of the floor heeled and sank. They had learned with practice and the second floor collapsed more easily. By the evening an odd exhilaration seized them as they looked down the great hollow of the house. They ran risks and made mistakes: when they thought of the windows it was too late to reach them. "Cor," Joe said and dropped a penny down into the dry rubble-filled well. It cracked and spun among the broken glass.

"Why did we start this?" Summers asked with astonishment.

T. was already on the ground, digging at the rubble, clearing a space along the outer wall. "Turn on the taps," he said. "It's too dark for anyone to see now and in the morning it won't matter."

The water overtook them on the stairs and fell through the floorless rooms.

It was then they heard Mike's

whistle at the back. "Something's wrong," Blackie said. They could hear his urgent breathing as they unlocked the door.

"The bogies?" Summers asked.

"Old Misery," Mike said. "He's on his way." He put his head between his knees and retched. "I ran all the way," he said with pride.

"But why?" T. said. "He told me . . ." He protested with the fury of the child he had never been, "It isn't fair."

"He was down at Southend," Mike said, "and he was on the train coming back. Said it was too cold and wet." He paused and gazed at the water. "My, you've had a storm here. Is the roof leaking?"

"How long will he be?"

"Five minutes. I gave Ma the slip and ran."

"We better clear," Summers said. "We've done enough anyway."

"Oh, no, we haven't. Anybody could do this —"

"This" was the shattered hollowed house with nothing left but the walls. Yet walls could be preserved. Façades were valuable. They could build inside again more beautifully than before. This could again be a home. T. said angrily, "We've got to finish. Don't move. Let me think."

"There's no time," a boy said.

"There's got to be a way," T. said. "We couldn't have got this far . . ."

"We've done a lot," Blackie said.

"No. No, we haven't. Somebody watch the front."

"We can't do any more."

"He may come in at the back."

"Watch the back too." T. began to plead, "Just give me a minute and I'll fix it. I swear I'll fix it." But his authority had gone with his ambiguity. He was only one of the gang. "Please," he said.

"Please," Summers mimicked him and then suddenly struck home with the fatal name. "Run along home, Trevor."

T. stood with his back to the rubble like a boxer knocked groggy against the ropes. He had no words as his dreams shook and slid. Then Blackie acted before the gang had time to laugh, pushing Summers backward. "I'll watch the front, T.," he said, and cautiously he opened the shutters of the hall. The gray, wet common stretched ahead, and the lamps gleamed in the puddles. "Someone's coming, T. No, it's not him. What's your plan, T.?"

"Tell Mike to go out to the loo and hide close beside it. When he hears me whistle, he's got to count ten and then start to shout."

"Shout what?"

"Oh, 'Help' — anything."

"You hear, Mike," Blackie said. He was the leader again. He took a quick look between the shutters. "He's coming, T."

"Quick, Mike. The loo. Stay here, Blackie, all of you."

"Where are you going, T.?"

"Don't worry. I'll see to this. I said I would, didn't I?"

Old Misery came limping off the common. He had mud on his shoes

and he stopped to scrape them on the pavement's edge. He didn't want to soil his house, which stood jagged and dark between the bomb sites, saved so narrowly, as he believed, from destruction. Even the fanlight had been left unbroken by the bomb's blast.

Somewhere somebody whistled. Old Misery looked sharply round. He didn't trust whistles. A child was shouting: it seemed to come from his own garden. Then a boy ran into the road from the car park. "Mr. Thomas," he called, "Mr. Thomas."

"What is it?"

"I'm terribly sorry, Mr. Thomas. One of us got taken short and we thought you wouldn't mind and now he can't get out."

"What do you mean, boy?"

"He's got stuck in your loo."

"He'd no business . . . Haven't I seen you before?"

"You showed me your house."

"So I did. So I did. That doesn't give you the right to . . ."

"Do hurry, Mr. Thomas. He'll suffocate."

"Nonsense. He can't suffocate. Wait till I put my bag in."

"I'll carry your bag."

"Oh, no, you don't. I carry my own."

"This way, Mr. Thomas."

"I can't get in the garden that way. I've got to go through the house."

"But you *can* get in the garden this way, Mr. Thomas. We often do."

"You often do?" He followed the

boy with a scandalized fascination. "When? What right . . . ?"

"Do you see? The wall's low."

"I'm not going to climb walls into my own garden. It's absurd."

"This is how we do it. One foot here, one foot there, and over." The boy's face peered down, an arm shot out, and Mr. Thomas found his bag taken and deposited on the other side of the wall.

"Give me back my bag," Mr. Thomas said. From the loo a boy yelled and yelled. "I'll call the police."

"Your bag's all right, Mr. Thomas. Look. One foot there. On your right. Now just above. To your left." Mr. Thomas climbed over his own garden wall. "Here's your bag, Mr. Thomas."

"I'll have the wall built up," Mr. Thomas said, "I'll not have you boys coming over here, using my loo." He stumbled on the path, but the boy caught his elbow and supported him "Thank you, thank you, my boy," he murmured automatically.

Somebody shouted again through the dark. "I'm coming, I'm coming," Mr. Thomas called. He said to the boy beside him, "I'm not unreasonable. Been a boy myself. As long as things are done regular; I don't mind you playing round the place Saturday mornings. Sometimes I like company. Only it's got to be regular. One of you asks leave and I say Yes. Sometimes I'll say No. Won't feel like it. And you come in at the front door and out at the back. No garden walls."

"Do get him out, Mr. Thomas."

"He won't come to any harm in my loo," Mr. Thomas said, stumbling slowly down the garden. "Oh, my rheumatics," he said. "Always get 'em on Bank Holiday. I've got to go careful. There's loose stones here. Give me your hand. Do you know what my horoscope said yesterday? 'Abstain from any dealings in first half of week. Danger of serious crash.' That might be on this path," Mr. Thomas said. "They speak in parables and double meanings." He paused at the door of the loo. "What's the matter in there?" he called. There was no reply.

"Perhaps he's fainted," the boy said.

"Not in my loo. Here, you, come out," Mr. Thomas said, and giving a great jerk at the door, he nearly fell on his back when it swung easily open. A hand first supported him and then pushed him hard. His head hit the opposite wall and he sat heavily down. His bag hit his feet. A hand whipped the key out of the lock and the door slammed. "Let me out," he called and heard the key turn in the lock. "A serious crash," he thought and felt dithery and confused and old.

A voice spoke to him softly through the star-shaped hole in the door. "Don't worry, Mr. Thomas," it said, "we won't hurt you, not if you stay quiet."

Mr. Thomas put his head between his hands and pondered. He had noticed that there was only one lorry in the car park, and he felt certain that the driver would not come for it

before the morning. Nobody could hear him from the road in front, and the lane at the back was seldom used. Anyone who passed there would be hurrying home and would not pause for what they would certainly take to be drunken cries. And if he did call "Help," who, on a lonely Bank Holiday evening, would have the courage to investigate? Mr. Thomas sat on the loo and pondered with the wisdom of age.

After a while it seemed to him that there were sounds in the silence — they were faint and came from the direction of his house. He stood up and peered through the ventilation hole. Between the cracks in one of the shutters he saw a light — not the light of a lamp but the wavering light that a candle might give. Then he thought he heard the sound of hammering and scraping and chipping. He thought of burglars — perhaps they had employed the boy as a scout; but why should burglars engage in what sounded more and more like a stealthy form of carpentry? Mr. Thomas let out an experimental yell, but nobody answered. The noise could not even have reached his enemies.

Mike had gone home to bed, but the rest stayed. The question of leadership no longer concerned the gang. With nails, chisels, screwdrivers — anything that was sharp and penetrating — they moved around the inner walls worrying at the mortar between the bricks. They started too high, and it was Blackie who hit on

the damp course and realized the work could be halved if they weakened the joints immediately above. It was a long, tiring, unamusing job, but at last it was finished. The gutted house stood there balanced on a few inches of mortar between the damp course and the bricks.

There remained the most dangerous task of all, out in the open at the edge of the bomb site. Summers was sent to watch the road for passers-by, and Mr. Thomas sitting on the loo heard clearly now the sound of sawing. It no longer came from his house and that a little reassured him. He felt less concerned. Perhaps the other noises too had no significance.

A voice spoke to him through the hole. "Mr. Thomas."

"Let me out," Mr. Thomas said.

"Here's a blanket," the voice said, and a long gray sausage was worked through the hole and fell on Mr. Thomas's head.

"There's nothing personal," the voice said. "We want you to be comfortable tonight."

"Tonight," Mr. Thomas repeated incredulously.

"Catch," the voice said. "Penny buns — we've buttered them — and sausage rolls. We don't want you to starve, Mr. Thomas."

Mr. Thomas pleaded desperately. "A joke's a joke, boy. Let me out and I won't say a thing. I've got rheumatics. I got to sleep comfortable."

"You wouldn't be comfortable — not in your house, you wouldn't. Not now."

"What do you mean, boy?" but the footsteps receded. There was only the silence of night: no sound of sawing. Mr. Thomas tried one more yell, but he was daunted and rebuked by the silence — a long way off an owl hooted and made off again on its muffled flight through the soundless world.

At seven the next morning the driver came to fetch his lorry. He climbed into the seat and tried to start the engine. He was vaguely aware of a voice shouting, but it didn't concern him. At last the engine responded and he backed the lorry until it touched the great wooden shore that supported Mr. Thomas's house. That way he could drive right out and down the street without reversing. The lorry moved forward, was momentarily checked as though something were pulling it from behind, and then went on to the sound of a long rumbling crash. The driver was astonished to see bricks bouncing ahead of him while stones hit the roof of his cab. He put on his brakes. When he climbed out the whole landscape had suddenly altered. There was no house beside the car park, only a hill of rubble. He went round and examined the back of his car for damage and found a rope tied there that was still twisted at the other end round part of a wooden strut.

The driver again became aware of somebody shouting. It came from the wooden structure which was the nearest thing to a house in that desolation of broken brick. The driver climbed the smashed wall and

unlocked the door. Mr. Thomas came out of the lorry. He was wearing a gray blanket to which flakes of pastry adhered. He gave a sobbing cry. "My house," he said. "Where's my house?"

"Search me," the driver said. His eye lit on the remains of a bath and what had once been a dresser and he began to laugh. There wasn't anything left anywhere.

"How dare you laugh," Mr. Thomas said. "It was my house."

"I'm sorry," the driver said, making heroic efforts, but when he remembered the sudden check to his lorry, the crash of bricks falling, he became convulsed again. One moment the house had stood there with such dignity between the bomb sites like a man in a top hat, and then, bang, crash, there wasn't anything left — not anything. He said, "I'm sorry. I can't help it. There's nothing personal, but you got to admit it's funny."



AUTHOR: **THOMAS FLANAGAN**

TITLE: ***The Customs of the Country***

TYPE: Detective Story

DETECTIVE: Major Tennente

LOCALE: A certain Mediterranean "republic"

COMMENTS: *The welcome return of one of EQMM's favorite manhunters: harsh, sardonic, limping Major Tennente — the tall, thin, sloppy-looking, cigar-smoking soldier who believes there is no such thing as a mystery without a clue . . .*

PROFESSIONAL PRIDE, BECAUSE IT IS one of the least recognized of the passions, is one of the most corrupting. It was the besetting vice of a Captain Budran, who was in control of the Department of Passports and Customs for the Province of D., in a certain Mediterranean republic. The province was not really named D., of course, but then the Republic was not really a republic. Rather, it was the effigy of a republic, raised up upon the mounds of graves created by a civil war in which both sides were guilty, and presided over by a General who had been the principal gravedigger. Such a country cannot help but be corrupt; and an honest man, living in a corrupt land, finds his honesty growing fero-

cious and intransigent. Captain Budran was an honest man.

His command, which was centered in the provincial capital, controlled the point at which the only railway from a foreign country entered the Republic; consequently, his post entailed considerable responsibility. The only other ways of entering the Republic are by sea or across the mountains. The sea approaches are patrolled constantly, and the mountain passes are heavily guarded. If you want to enter the country legally, with a valid passport and visa, you must do so by means of the single railway through the Province of D.

It was Captain Budran's duty to see that all arrivals and departures by

rail were, in fact, legal and authorized. For this task he had developed a skill, and the skill engendered a pride, and pride was something new in his life. His military career had not been spent as a captain, or even as an officer. He had been a recruit under the old monarchy and had risen to the rating of sergeant of artillery; during the civil war he had served as a sergeant-major in the General's insurgent forces. That war took a heavy toll of officers. When it ended he could study, from the corner of his eye, the lieutenant's single strand of braid on his shoulder; and then, a few years later, the double strands of a captain. As a captain, he had been for the last two years Sectional Commandant of Passports and Customs at D.

He had developed an eye for passports. He could search out an inaccurate watermark; he could smell the glue which backed an altered photograph; he had a sixth sense for a signature which had been scribbled not on an onyx official desk but on the zinc surface of a Marseilles bar. He knew the wiles of smuggling as well: the false bottoms, the sewn-up hatbands, the books into which banknotes had been bound interleaf. He had at his disposal two squads of soldiers, as well as clerks, customs personnel, and a matron. And he saw to it that the composition of this staff changed frequently, for in a country like his the temptations and occasions for bribery are manifold.

During the first year of his command, his performance and reputa-

tion had progressed apace. With a perspiring dexterity he had seized those trying to leave the country without passports, and those trying to enter it with the wrong kind. Once every two days, at about 10 in the evening, a train entering the Republic would stop at D., and from this train, which Captain Budran had come to think of as a temperamental friend, he had over the months confiscated a creditable amount of contraband.

Such confiscation was very much to the good of the Republic. In the first place, it acted as a deterrent to would-be smugglers; in the second place, it brought copious sums into the national treasury in the form of fines which always greatly exceeded the value of the confiscated articles; in the third place, the confiscated articles were placed upon state auction. At the end of the first year, his zeal in apprehending illegal emigrants had won him a citation from the General, but it is possible that his humbler services as a source of revenue were what had really won the General's admiration. Budran had begun to hope that when he was retired, two years hence, it would be with the — for him — unheard-of rank of major.

During the second year, however, this hope, while it did not quite vanish, was placed in increasing peril. At the capital of the Republic the various Intelligence services, which ordinarily devoted themselves to ferreting out real and imaginary plots against the General, had had to concern them-

selves with the activities of what was probably the most flourishing black market in Europe. It was a black market that maintained itself by dealing in commodities which had been brought into the country illegally, hence were untouched by the extraordinary tariffs with which the shaky national economy sought to bolster itself.

At first, naturally, their attention had been fixed on the two traditional entranceways — the seacoasts and the mountains. There had come to these intelligence services, however, increasing and trustworthy reports that the railway through D. was an important channel for contraband — perhaps the most important. From time to time, indeed, they had been able to learn, in advance, of dates on which "a certain commodity" would be transported, and these dates had been passed on to Captain Budran. On such nights he was more than usually vigilant, but the vigilance was never rewarded in any spectacular way.

He was conscious that his efficiency was unimpaired, that his methods of organization and search were exemplary. But this conviction was of no great comfort to him. Communications from his superior, Brigadier Chauman, became increasingly waspish. Many men in his position would have feared for their future, or at the least for their chances for promotion; and Budran entertained such fears but not chiefly. For at the center of Budran's being, coexistent with his

pride of function, existed a doubt that his capacity, for all his soldierly merits, was equal to his rank. It was the fear of former Sergeant Budran that if his searches were unsuccessful it was proof that the Republic had been mistaken when it put officer's braid on his shoulders.

It is this fear alone that lifts his character and his fate out of the ordinary.

It was this fear that sat heavy upon him on a certain summer evening as he walked up and down the cement platform of the railway station at D. Arc lights illumined for him a segment of track which pointed beyond itself — in one direction to the outside world, in the other to the capital. It is a bizarre fact, and consonant with Captain Budran's hard-breathing honesty, that this stretch of track lying before his eyes was the only straightaway in the entire line; everywhere else, beyond his ken, the track writhed and twisted like a dying snake.

Budran was a short thick-set man, a little soft now with age and sedentary work, but still physically formidable. Behind him were two buildings whose relation to each other was evidenced by their proportions. One was a small wooden structure, badly in need of paint, built more than fifty years earlier at a time when it was the belief of railway companies that their stations should resemble Swiss chalets. Nowadays it was used for the brief formality of buying tickets, a

task as nothing compared with that of securing permission to buy tickets. This was done in the second building, the Provincial Department of Passports and Customs. It was an enormous and ugly block of concrete, broken through by windows that confronted like blind eyes the straight and shining track at D. Within was the tightly organized honeycomb that Captain Budran commanded. Recently the sight of this building, which had once seemed to him the last word in quasi-military architecture, had given him less and less pleasure, and he was standing with his back to it when his sergeant came to tell him that Brigadier Chauman had arrived.

Budran glanced at his watch. There was less than half an hour before the arrival of the train — scarcely time to show the Brigadier through the intricacies of the honeycomb. He walked through the station to the road, where the sergeant had already called a guard of honor to attention and a staff car was just pulling up. Budran brought his hand to salute as Chauman climbed out. Chauman returned the salute and held out his hand. Chauman, a tall lean man somewhat older than Budran, smiled down at the Captain, and made the polite sort of murmur Budran had never got the hang of.

He was about to tell the sergeant to stand the guard at ease when a second officer got out of the car. It was an officer Budran knew well by sight and reputation, and he felt, briefly, the

beating of dark wings against the walls of his stomach.

“Major Tennente,” Chauman said, “this is the Captain Budran of whom we have been talking.”

Budran took them to his office, a room as small and bare as the orderly room he had occupied as a sergeant. Chauman, declining the chair behind the desk, seated himself in one of two plain, uncushioned armchairs. Tennente walked with a stiff limp to the window, where he turned and rested his back against the wall. The sergeant brought in glasses and a bottle of brandy. Then Chauman, in a voice at once light, clipped, and desultory, described their trip from the capital. Budran waited patiently, for he knew that officers, being gentlemen, did not proceed immediately to business, but had their brandy and their chat first.

Finally, however, Chauman rested his half-empty glass on the chair-arm and said, “Now, Captain, about this evening.” His voice moved, through slight modulations, to business. “You have had transmitted to you our suspicion that an attempt will be made tonight to bring some sort of valuable commodity into the Republic. This information was first secured by our own Intelligence service, and subsequently and independently confirmed by that which Major Tennente commands.” He turned. “Is that not so, Major?”

Tennente, the untouched brandy in his hand, nodded.

“And Major Tennente has been

assigned to me to see if — not if we can better your performance, of course — but to see what three heads can decide.”

Budran said, “I have waited until your arrival for any special instructions.”

A smile broke across Chauman's long, gentle face. “My special instruction is that I have none. Simply show us how you customarily examine passengers, luggage, and so on.”

“Brigadier Chauman,” Budran said, “two months ago I turned up two English twenty-pound notes which had been placed between the bandages holding the splints to a broken finger. It does not seem likely that anything much bulkier could escape my attention.”

“Not at all likely,” the Brigadier agreed. “Perhaps my word to that effect, and the Major's, added to your own will counterbalance the unfavorable effect of these Intelligence reports.”

“Not my word,” Tennente said. “I am not inclined to give my word against that of my own Intelligence. If my service is satisfied that contraband is passing through here, then it is.”

Budran moved in his chair to look at Tennente. The Major's uniform was as well cut as Chauman's, but he wore it badly. The long ride through the sticky summer afternoon had wrinkled and creased it; and he had unbuttoned his tunic, revealing that, like any captain in the field, he wore sidearms. Again, he was as tall as Chau-

man, but ungainly; where Chauman was slim he was fleshless, with heavy-boned sagging shoulders. His face, like Chauman's, was long, but it was anything but gentle; the sunken cheeks were dark and rough, and the mouth was wide and harsh.

It might have seemed that Tennente, like Budran, had been commissioned from the ranks, but it could never have seemed so to eyes as experienced as Budran's. Tennente had been commissioned under the old monarchy, and although he was a different kind of gentleman from Chauman, he was still a gentleman. Chauman, as a young officer, had represented the nation and the army at the great horse shows of Dublin and Vienna, while the young Lieutenant Tennente had been representing these same abstractions on the wicked and deadly sands of North Africa, or in the mountains where the bone-chilling winds cut down from Adesta. Tennente had been a powerful figure in the army until, during the civil war, he had committed the unbelievable folly of bringing a regiment into the field against the General.

Budran said, “I am not a dishonest man, Major Tennente, and I could not be as stupid as all that. You must believe me.”

“Why?” Tennente asked. “What does it matter to me if you are honest or not? I am not you.”

Chauman smiled. “Let us assume tentatively, Major, that Captain Budran has the honesty and skill implied in his rank.”

Tennente flicked his dark, heavy-lidded eyes over Budran's chest. "You wear the ribbon of El Marfez," he said. "What rank did you hold at that time?"

"Not a rank, Major," Budran said, keeping his voice even. "I was a sergeant of artillery."

"You wear the White Cross," Tennente said. "Where did you earn that?"

"At El Marfez also," Budran said.

Tennente moved his eyes up for a moment to Budran's face, then turned his gaze to Chauman. "I will accept the word of a sergeant of artillery who won the White Cross at El Marfez."

"Agreed," Chauman said. "By all means. I had not noticed the White Cross."

But Budran was not deceived. He knew that to at least one of them he was either stupid or venal. He said, "When the train is stopped, all the passengers and the crew disembark. They are searched thoroughly. The train is searched. The luggage is searched. That is the practice I have always followed."

"Well," Chauman said in an amused voice, smiling at Tennente. "That would seem very thorough, indeed." He turned back to Budran. "Now, these specific dates we have been able to give you. There have been how many of them — seven or eight, something like that?"

"Eight," Budran said. "On the most recent one I uncovered a carved Madonna and Child from Italy and a

number of Parisian silk stockings."

"Not from the same person, I trust?"

"No," Budran said. "But the Madonna and Child may well have been valuable. It was an *objet d'art* and as such stands high on the contraband list."

"I remember it," Chauman said. "It was sold at state auction to an impoverished monastery for a price about equal to your salary for a week."

"In any event," Budran persisted, "that was all there was."

"What do you think you are looking for?" Tennente asked him suddenly. Budran looked at him, puzzled. "I mean," Tennente said, "has not your lack of success prompted you to speculate? Or is it that you are not a speculative man?"

"Before this," Budran said, "my work was always well spoken of. I can show you a citation signed by the General himself."

"Thank you, no," Tennente said. "I have never found any special delight in considering the General's signature. How did you earn this citation?"

"In one month alone — the month of September — I detected eleven people trying to leave the country under manufactured passports."

"It is hard to believe," Tennente said, "that anyone would want to leave the General's Republic. But then, September is a bad month for melancholy."

"This is off the point," the Brigadier interposed, for Tennente was

capable of becoming even more indiscreet. Tennente finally drank his brandy.

"Listen," Budran said, getting to his feet. "There is the train." It took the others, less alert for the sound, a moment, then they too heard it. "You watch it all now," Budran said, "From step to step."

The three men stood together on the hot windless platform as the soldiers, not brutally, but certainly without consideration, turned out the passengers. There were only two foreigners this trip, Tennente noticed — a tall fair-haired man, probably English, and his wife. He could tell that they were foreigners because they objected to being shoved from the train. They stood apart from the other passengers, who were about a dozen all told and who herded together docilely.

"Now you will see," Budran said. "One group of soldiers searches the train, and we move the passengers and luggage inside for examination."

Within the building, at a long baize-covered table, Budran began the examination of passports. Chauman and Tennente sat beside him. As the passengers moved past one by one, Tennente did not bother himself with Budran's meticulous scrutiny of their documents. He sat with his long balding head propped on his fist, eyes half-closed, looking at the passengers. There was a merchant, a slight man in black alpaca, perspiring in the hot room; then two men who had been

abroad arranging for the eventual importation of tractors; then a young and very nervous girl in a cheap white linen suit and sports shoes; then the fair-haired man.

The fair-haired man was indeed English. At least he had an English passport, he spoke the language of the Republic badly and with an English accent, and he was in the grip of that barely coherent temper that lays waste the British spirit when it is in the toils of a foreign bureaucracy. "I have never in my entire life," he said, "heard of this sort of customs examination." He addressed himself to Chauman as the senior officer.

"I am sorry," Chauman said, without interest or conviction.

"What sort of customs are these?" the Englishman asked, his cheeks flushed.

"These," Tennente said, "are the customs of the country."

"They are, are they? And what kind of country would you call it?"

Tennente's lip twitched. "This is the Republic."

The passenger seemed disposed to further argument, but his papers were in order and a corporal moved him on to the personal examination. He was followed to the table by his wife, who was as pale as he had been flushed; her hands were trembling slightly. Tennente sat looking at the hands; then, abruptly, he pushed back his chair and stood up.

He walked down the corridor to Budran's office, raised the window

as high as it would go, and turned on the small electric fan. Then he poured himself a brandy and sat down. In a few minutes he was joined by Chauman, who took the other armchair and said, "Our little captain will be here presently and then we can examine the night's haul. Don't you think there is something to be gained by hovering over the shoulders of the corporals as they rip things apart?"

Tennente shrugged, rolling the stubby glass of brandy back and forth between his fingers.

"What will he find tonight, do you suppose?" Chauman asked. "An old boot? A copy of Rabelais?"

"I don't know," Tennente said.

"What is there to find?" Chauman asked. "That is the puzzling part." He stretched out his legs. "As he tells us with such maddening persistency, he searches this, he searches that. And I'm quite sure he does that sort of thing well. He probably was a good sergeant."

"He probably was a very good sergeant," Tennente said, "and that is a difficult thing to be."

Budran came in at that moment and walked to the desk. "We will know very shortly now," the Captain said. "My men are finishing the search." He sat down. "You will see. When there is smuggling the suspect is arrested on a military warrant, and the goods are impounded and sent on to the Department of Passports and Customs in the capital." "As you know."

"It is finding contraband that concerns us at the moment, Captain," Chauman said, "not disposing of it." But his smile took the edge from what he said. He took an old and tarnished cigarette case from his pocket, proffered it to Budran, who shook his head, and to Tennente who, by way of reply, took a cigar from the pocket of his tunic and bent his head forward for a light.

"'This is the Republic,'" Chauman quoted to him, banteringly. "You are becoming as ambiguous as any diplomat."

Tennente grunted, his strong, slightly discolored teeth clenching the cigar, and leaned back in his chair.

Budran looked at both of them. There was something he could never understand about officers from the old days — he had almost said, real officers. During the civil war Chauman had commanded a brigade of the General's troops, yet he could joke about Tennente's near-treasonous remark. It was a kind of instinctive mastery of themselves and of their world which Budran would have felt a fool to imitate. But the lack of it made him sweat more than the summer heat did.

Just then the sergeant knocked and came in to tell Budran that the examinations had been completed. He brought with him the first of the evening's catch. It was the merchant, even smaller now — ludicrous, for he was barefoot and carried one shoe in his hand. The sergeant, who

had the other shoe, placed it on its side on the desk.

Budran picked it up and with an almost friendly smile nodded at the prisoner. He took a pocketknife from a drawer, snapped open the blade, and ran it around the leather heel until, at a certain point, it slipped in. Budran pressed hard, then twisted. The heel swung outward. He turned his hands over, and some wads of cotton and a small leather bag fell to the desk. He opened the mouth of the bag and shook out half a dozen diamonds. He looked at the merchant, his smile widening. Although the merchant's face had gone painfully white, Budran's was not a sadistic smile; it was a craftsman's pride in his craft.

Chauman picked up a couple of the stones and passed one to Tennente, who held it for a moment and then threw it back on the desk.

"I don't know about such things," he said to the merchant. "How much are they worth?"

"They aren't cheap," Chauman said. He put the one he was holding to the light. "They are nice stones, but they hardly represent a fortune. They are badly faceted; at least, this one is." He put it back with the others. "Not that my wife would despise one of them in a ring."

At this, the merchant spoke. "It would be a privilege," he said, "if I could contribute a few of them to a ring for the Brigadier's lady."

In the next moment, looking into the eyes of the Brigadier, he recog-

nized the enormity of his mistake. When, as happened frequently, Budran was offered a bribe, he would become an uncontrollable cascade of anger. But the Brigadier, with a glacial and terrifying calm, said only, "Captain, enter this in your report on the man." He brushed the tips of his fingers together as though to free them from contamination. "And take him," he said, "into some other room."

The second part of the evening's catch was less predictable. It was found on the young girl who came into the room weeping. The matron had found, fixed to the girl's thigh by adhesive tape, a string of heavy amber beads. Budran took them and held them extended. It did not require Chauman's nice eye to estimate their worth, which was about equal to that of her strapped and toeless shoes.

Budran looked at her with impatient concern, then said to the sergeant, "Enter it. Illegal transportation of contraband. Namely, jewelry. A string of semi-precious stones."

The girl, still crying, looked at the sergeant, whose face betrayed no sharp emotion because he felt none, and then back at Budran. She put her hands to her face.

With his sound leg, Tennente pushed a straight-backed chair toward her and told her to sit down. She lowered her hands and looked at the men who faced her. Then she sat down, slowly, on the edge of the

chair, and ran her fingers nervously along a pleat of her white skirt. She joined her knees together, staring down at her foolishly elaborate shoes. The thick yellow beads would have looked admirable, Tennente thought, against the white linen jacket and the tanned column of her throat.

"What do you think smuggling is?" he asked her. "A kind of game?" She did not reply. "When you play a game, you should be willing to pay the forfeit for losing."

"How do you mean?" she asked, her head still bent and her loose black hair falling against her cheek. "What will you do to me?"

"I will do nothing to you," Tennente said. "It is not my affair. Ask these officers."

Budran gestured awkwardly. "A fine. On such beads as these, not too much."

"You will send me to prison," she said, and she brought her fingers away from her skirt and to her lips.

"No, no," Budran said. "It will not be that bad. At least, I don't think so."

Tennente looked at Chauman. "It is ridiculously small, such smuggling, Captain. It seems hardly worth making a long report on. We might settle it all now, don't you think?"

The girl looked up then. She looked first, in surprise, at Tennente, for he had seemed the most implacable. Then at Budran. Finally at Chauman.

Budran too was looking at Chauman. After a pause the Brigadier said,

"I cannot decide it for you, Captain. But I think that in your place I would do what Major Tennente suggests." He moved his cigarette through the air. "It is a little irregular, perhaps, but sometimes to be irregular is not the worst of sins."

Budran rested his damp palms, the fingers stretched apart, on his blotter. Looking not at the girl but at his fingers, he said, "Take her outside, Sergeant, and have the charges against her drawn up."

When he heard the door close, he looked up to see on Chauman's face the same contempt he had seen there a few minutes before.

Budran said, "There is no specified exemption for youth, or for first offense, or what have you. If I am to interpret the law, the law loses its meaning. I, too, hope that she will not be sentenced. But that must be decided at the Ministry of Justice."

"Of course," Chauman said with a casual politeness that was like a glove struck against Budran's face.

Budran turned to Tennente. "You see my position, don't you, Major?"

Tennente shrugged. "It is nothing to me."

For a moment Budran forgot that he was talking to a Major and a Brigadier. "I was trained to obey orders, as every soldier should, whatever his rank. Good orders please me. Bad orders do not. But I obey *all* orders."

"Don't distress yourself," Tennente said. "We all know that the Ministry of Justice is a fountainhead

of mercy." He drew back his lips.

Budran lowered his eyes again. "Of course," he said. "Of course."

Finally, there was the Englishman. One of the customs examiners, suspicious of the lining of his attaché case, had ripped it open to find that it concealed Bank of England notes totaling over six hundred pounds. They would be worth considerably more than that on the black market.

The Englishman, who was now anything but indignant, admitted that the black market had been their destination. "You can't blame a man for trying," he said. If the girl did not think of smuggling as a game, it seemed clear that he did.

"Six hundred pounds," Chauman said. "That is worth smuggling. Six hundred pounds is a good haul for any agent in contraband."

"I am hardly that," the Englishman said. "You've seen my visa — this is my first trip here. I simply tried to put something over, and I didn't make it."

"No," Tennente said. "And when you are taken to the capital, have your consul inform you of the penalties for not making it. The illegal transportation of currency is in a class by itself, and demands a prison sentence which you will undoubtedly find harsh."

There was an uncomfortable pause. Then the Englishman said, "How harsh?"

"Earlier," Tennente said, "you asked what kind of country this is.

Among other things, it is a country where there is much want and actual hunger. When you bring currency to the black market, you bring hunger with you. We have no intention of treating it as a sporting venture."

"I believe," Chauman said, "that the mandatory sentence is ten years."

"Yes," the Englishman said; and, without knowing it, he borrowed words the merchant had used. "But you don't see what I mean."

"No one cares what you mean," Tennente said. "Intentions are always good — unlike people."

When the three officers were alone Chauman, looking at the closed door, said, "Then that is all, Captain Budran?"

"For tonight, yes."

"Well?" Chauman asked Tennente. It was the first time, Budran noticed, that the Brigadier had addressed the Major in the tone of a superior officer.

"Well, what?" Tennente asked, ignoring the tone.

"We have a clear choice now," Chauman said. "Either the commodity slipped through again, or there was none."

"Six hundred pounds," Budran protested. "You said yourself, Brigadier, that was a good haul."

"Good," Chauman said, "but not good enough for us. Am I not right, Major?"

"Yes," Tennente said. He was sitting in a half slouch, his elbows hooked around the back of his chair,

his crippled leg thrust out awkwardly. "You see, Budran, the point is this. It is not that the sum is small. The trouble is that small or large you found it with no difficulty. We are concerned with something that has happened on at least half a dozen occasions. You are a conscientious officer; we knew that about you before tonight. False linings and hollow heels could not have deceived you, not on six or eight nights in the past. We are concerned, after all, with a method, are we not?"

Budran threw up his hands in a gesture that his years as an officer had failed to chasten. "What are you looking for?"

"Why," Chauman said easily, "the method, of course."

"If there were any clues," Budran said. "If the Intelligence reports could be more specific."

"Yes," Tennente said, "I agree with you there. We know only that it is 'a certain commodity,' whatever it is, and each time the same commodity. Now perhaps that is something of a clue, but it is not the chief clue. You are the chief clue, Captain Budran."

Chauman opened his eyes wide in surprise and amusement. But Budran remained impassive, because he had no idea what Tennente was talking about.

"That much should have been clear to you, Captain," Tennente said. "It was the first question I asked myself when this affair became the problem of my Department as well as of yours.

What kind of officer is this who lets contraband slip through his fingers time after time despite specific warnings? I read your dossier, and I learned from it exactly what I have learned of you tonight. You are a good officer in most respects; you work hard, you are honest, you are capable, you are loyal to the letter of the law."

"As a clue," Chauman said, "that does not seem at all rewarding."

"All clues are rewarding," Tennente said, "if we read them right. And there is no such thing as a mystery without a clue. That is the fact I wish Captain Budran to appreciate. We are looking for a method, and a method implies an intelligence. This tells us something, does it not? For nowadays there are only a limited number of commodities which an intelligent man would find it worth his while to smuggle. To be precise, there are three which are literally worth their weight in gold — which are more valuable than gold. All three are easily transported and easily concealed. Two of them we see before us on the desk. There is a third. The method we were seeking happens to be useful for all three — particularly for the third."

"Were seeking?" the Brigadier asked. "Then you know what it is?"

"Yes," Tennente said. "I know." As he spoke he took his automatic from its holster and reversed it so that he was gripping the barrel. Then he leaned forward and brought the butt down hard on one of the

amber beads. It smashed open like a nut and spilled a white powder onto the desk. "And there is the third," he said, dropping his gun to the desk.

The Brigadier moistened his finger, touched it to the powder, and tasted. "Yes," he said. "That is the third."

Budran smashed another of the beads, then ran the palm of his hand across the opaque shards and the powder.

"Be careful," Tennente said. "Uncut heroin is very valuable."

For the moment Budran could not think beyond the fact which his sense carried to him, "That is how," he said at last. "I am a stupid man."

"More or less," Tennente said dispassionately. "More or less stupid. It is a function of your virtue. I do not know if honesty was ever simple, but it is not simple nowadays. It is as shadowy and ambiguous as the world in which it is exercised."

"I have said," Budran replied, like a man who wants the record straight, "I have said that I was stupid."

"That is God's will," Tennente said. He had removed the cigar from his mouth and he was regarding Budran with detached, unfriendly eyes. "But God does not require us to be stupid about our stupidity. It is a use of our free will to find out the ways and occasions of our stupidity. Look at the beads again, Captain. Do you not see what is implied by the fact that they are there for us to look at? Our objection to the diamonds in the hollow heel and the money in the false lining was that we were certain to find and to

seize them. Does not that apply — *even more strongly* — to beads fastened to a girl's thigh?"

Budran poked at the beads with his finger as he reflected upon this, but he said nothing.

"A devotion to the letter of the law," Tennente said, "usually issues from a devotion to the letter of the fact. The law gave you a list of contraband that included diamonds and currency and gimcrack jewelry and a hundred other things. It enabled you to recognize contraband when you saw it. But what if it wasn't the *real* contraband? What if it was used to *conceal* the real contraband. Clearly, this is what was done; and clearly, this is why you were deceived."

"When did you realize this?" the Brigadier asked him.

But Tennente continued to direct his words at the silent Captain. "You will ask yourself," he said, "what purpose or profit there is to such a method. Do you remember the Brigadier's telling you, not unnaturally, that we were not concerned with the disposing of contraband, but with the finding of it? I am afraid that just the reverse is true. For the success of this method depended on what you did with the concealed heroin *after you seized it*. And what you did was to ship it to your superior, in accordance with your orders. You shipped it to him on at least seven occasions, concealed within objects that were themselves contraband and that you would be certain to discover — beads, let us say, or a Madonna and Child." Ten-

nente drew in on his cigar. "And your superior removed the drug. Most smugglers depend on a corrupt customs; this smuggler depended on an honest officer. The only accomplices he needed were the carriers, who could depend upon a light sentence and a fine which would be paid for them."

Budran looked up from the beads, staring first at Tennente, then at the Brigadier, and then back at Tennente. He knew what he should say, but he could not give voice to the words.

Chauman, relieving him of the necessity, said, "You see, Captain, what he means is that I am the smuggler." Then he turned toward Tennente and said, "Offhand, I would say that your case does not seem strong enough." He took another cigarette and Tennente held the light for him.

"Strong enough, Brigadier," Tennente said, shaking out the match. "Under pressure the girl will cry not more convincingly, it is true, but with more reason. Then there are the other carriers, whose names are on record; they can be offered suitable inducements or threats."

Chauman drew his thumb over the worn chasing on his cigarette case. "There is that."

Budran looked at the two of them with surprise and astonishment. They were discussing the matter as calmly as though it had been a theoretical problem in field tactics.

"One thing about those Intelligence reports puzzled me," Tennente said. "I think I understand it now. 'A cer-

tain unknown commodity.' Each time, 'a certain unknown commodity.' It was an unusual way to receive information. Our sources, yours and mine, would know the date and the place, but never the object. Were you growing tired of the game, and making it a bit more dangerous? It seems foolish, and you are not a foolish man, are you?"

Budran had finally found his voice and said, to himself, but aloud, "Why, he received the highest decoration in the entire land from the hand of the General himself!"

"He is a man after the General's heart," Tennente said. "They have the same devotion to deceptive surfaces, the same preference for the hollow."

After a long silence the Brigadier said, "You have really become very good at these double meanings, Tennente."

For some reason he could not afterwards explain, it was this casual remark that decided Budran. He reached for the bell.

"What are you going to do?" Tennente asked.

Though appalled by his own words, Budran said firmly, "I am going to place the Brigadier under arrest."

"No," Tennente said sharply. "Let us walk around outside for a bit while we talk this thing over. It is a ticklish matter." He stood up slowly, his hand on the knee of his bad leg. He let his glance move over the diamonds, the banknotes, the shattered beads, and come to rest finally on his automatic,

which lay beside them. "We can leave things as they are in here for a while.

Chauman turned his head toward Tennente, caught his glance, and nodded slowly.

"No," Budran said in a loud voice. "This is not the old army."

"We are officers of the old army, the Brigadier and I," Tennente said. "And I am giving you an order."

For that moment, and that moment only, Budran spoke with a passion of which his years as an officer had robbed him. "I also am of the old army, Major. If a sergeant is in the wrong he has the hide taken off him, or he's slapped in a solitary tank. But a gentleman has a few minutes alone with a bullet of honor."

"I am glad, Major," Chauman said, ignoring Budran's outburst, "I am glad that you remember a little, at least, of the old code." He was sitting motionless, holding his cigarette between unwavering fingers.

But when Budran and Tennente had reached the door, with their backs to him, the Brigadier said, "Turn around slowly and come back here."

They turned to see that he was holding the automatic impartially between them. He was standing up. For an instant he fixed his gaze and his gentle smile on Tennente, and in that instant Budran, with an indistinct cry, hurled himself across the room. Chauman shifted the gun to Budran and squeezed the trigger twice.

There were two sharp and hollow clicks; then Budran was on top of

him, dragging him to the ground. Tennente threw away his cigar, opened the door, and called to the guards.

When they had pried Budran loose, they secured Chauman; and Tennente spoke to him from the doorway. "The evidence of the girl and the others might not have been quite enough, but this will do. You see, what I remembered about the old code was that it had very little connection with honor."

"Nor do you," Chauman said, his voice still capable of contempt.

"Nor do I," Tennente agreed. "Honor is not a game I find time for. With Budran you may have been playing a game. But not with me. I could have told you that. But I don't like you well enough, Brigadier—in fact, I don't like you at all."

As Tennente was about to climb into the staff car, where Chauman under guard sat waiting for him, he felt Budran's hand on his arm.

"You are a brave soldier, Budran," Tennente said. "You earned the White Cross and you charged into an automatic."

"An unloaded one," Budran said sheepishly.

"But you did not know that. It was pointed at you because Chauman has no honor, and it was unloaded because I have none."

Budran shook his head. "You have honor, Colonel."

"Major," Tennente corrected him angrily.

"Colonel," Budran said. "Colonel

the day at El Marfez when you pinned the cross on me.”

“I will tell you,” Tennente said. “I will tell you then. The next time a girl tries to bring in some amber beads on the sly, she will probably not be a narcotics smuggler but will want them because they look good against her skin. And that next time, be irregular for once. Try.”

He disengaged his arm and climbed into the car, but before he could tell

the driver to start, he saw Budran’s round face peering at him in the window.

“But that is just it,” Budran said. “I did just the right thing when I arrested that girl.”

For the first time that night there was nothing harsh in Tennente’s laugh. He reached out and patted Budran’s thick, scrubbed neck.

“Captain,” he said, “you are hopeless.”

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AUTHOR: **AGATHA CHRISTIE**

TITLE: ***The Double Clue***

TYPE: Detective Story

DETECTIVE: Hercule Poirot

LOCALE: London

TIME: Between World Wars

COMMENTS: *Remember this about Poirot: he does not have one law for the titled and another law for the plain. The sympathies of the man behind the "little gray cells" are always for the underdog.*

BUT ABOVE EVERYTHING — NO PUBLICITY," said Mr. Marcus Hardman for perhaps the fourteenth time.

The word *publicity* occurred throughout his conversation with the regularity of a leitmotif. Mr. Hardman was a small man, delicately plump, with exquisitely manicured hands and a plaintive tenor voice. In his way, he was somewhat of a celebrity and the fashionable life was his profession. He was rich, but not remarkably so, and he spent his money zealously in the pursuit of social pleasure. His hobby was collecting. He had the collector's soul. Old lace, old fans, antique jewelry — nothing crude or modern for the man called Marcus Hardman.

Poirot and I, obeying an urgent summons, had arrived to find the little man writhing in an agony of indecision. Under the circumstances, to call in the police was abhorrent to him. On the other hand, not to call them in was to acquiesce in the loss of some of the gems of his collection. He hit upon Poirot as a compromise.

"My rubies, M. Poirot, and the emerald necklace — said to have belonged to Catherine de Medici. Oh, the emerald necklace!"

"If you will recount to me the circumstances of their disappearance?" suggested Poirot gently.

"I am endeavoring to do so. Yesterday afternoon I had a little tea party

— quite an informal affair, some half a dozen people or so. I have given one or two of them during the season, and though perhaps I should not say so, they have been quite a success. Some good music — Nacora, the pianist, and Katherine Bird, the Australian contralto — in the big studio. Well, early in the afternoon, I was showing my guests my collection of medieval jewels. I keep them in the small wall safe over there. It is arranged like a cabinet inside, with a colored velvet background, to display the stones. Afterward we inspected the fans — in that case on the wall. Then we all went to the studio for music. It was not until after everyone had gone that I discovered the safe rifled! I must have failed to shut it properly, and someone had seized the opportunity to denude it of its contents. The rubies, M. Poirot, the emerald necklace — the collection of a lifetime! What would I not give to recover them! But there must be no publicity! You fully understand that, do you not, M. Poirot? My own guests, my personal friends — it would be a horrible scandal!”

“Who was the last person to leave this room when you went to the studio?”

“Mr. Johnston. You may know him? The South African millionaire. He has just rented the Abbotburys’ house in Park Lane. He lingered behind a few moments, I remember. But surely, oh, surely it could not be he!”

“Did any of your guests return to

this room during the afternoon on any pretext?”

“I was prepared for that question, M. Poirot. Three of them did so. Countess Vera Rossakoff, Mr. Bernard Parker, and Lady Runcorn.”

“Let us hear about them.”

“The Countess Rossakoff is a very charming Russian lady, a member of the old régime. She has recently come to this country. She had bade me goodbye, and I was therefore somewhat surprised to find her in this room apparently gazing in rapture at my cabinet of fans. You know, M. Poirot, the more I think of it, the more suspicious it seems to me. Don’t you agree?”

“Extremely suspicious; but let us hear about the others.”

“Well, Parker simply came here to fetch a case of miniatures that I was anxious to show to Lady Runcorn.”

“And Lady Runcorn herself?”

“As I daresay you know, Lady Runcorn is a middle-aged woman of considerable force of character who devotes most of her time to various charitable committees. She simply returned to fetch a handbag she had laid down somewhere.”

“*Bien, monsieur.* So we have four possible suspects. The Russian countess, the English *grande dame*, the South African millionaire, and Mr. Bernard Parker. Who *is* Mr. Parker, by the way?”

The question appeared to embarrass Mr. Hardman considerably.

“He is — er — he is a young fellow. Well, in fact, a young fellow I know.”

"I had already deduced as much," replied Poirot gravely. "What does he do, this M. Parker?"

"He is a young man about town — not, perhaps, quite in the swim, if I may so express myself."

"How did he come to be a friend of yours, may I ask?"

"Well — er — on one or two occasions he has — performed certain little commissions for me."

"Continue, monsieur," said Poirot.

Hardman looked piteously at him. Evidently the last thing he wanted to do was to continue. But as Poirot maintained an inexorable silence, he capitulated.

"You see, M. Poirot — it is well known that I am interested in antique jewels. Sometimes there is a family heirloom to be disposed of — which, mind you, would never be sold in the open market or to a dealer. But a private sale to me is a very different matter. Parker arranges the details of such things — he is in touch with both sides, and thus any little embarrassment is avoided. He brings anything of that kind to my notice. For instance, the Countess Rossakoff has brought some family jewels with her from Russia. She is anxious to sell them. Bernard Parker was to have arranged the transaction."

"I see," said Poirot thoughtfully. "And you trust him implicitly?"

"I have had no reason to do otherwise."

"M. Hardman, of these four people, which do you yourself suspect?"

"Oh, M. Poirot, what a question!

They are my friends, as I told you. I suspect none of them — or all of them, whichever way you like to put it."

"I do not agree. You suspect one of those four. It is not Countess Rossakoff. It is not Mr. Parker. Is it Lady Runcorn or Mr. Johnston?"

"You drive me into a corner, M. Poirot, you do indeed. I am most anxious to have no scandal. Lady Runcorn belongs to one of the oldest families in England; but it is true, it is most unfortunately true, that her aunt, Lady Caroline, suffered from a most melancholy affliction. It was understood, of course, by all her friends, and her maid returned the teaspoons, or whatever it was, as promptly as possible. You see my predicament!"

"So Lady Runcorn had an aunt who was a kleptomaniac? Very interesting. You permit that I examine the safe?"

Mr. Hardman assenting, Poirot pushed back the door of the safe and examined the interior. The empty velvet-lined shelves gaped at us.

"Even now the door does not shut properly," murmured Poirot, as he swung it to and fro. "I wonder why? Ah, what have we here? A glove, caught in the hinge. A man's glove."

He held it out to Mr. Hardman.

"That's not one of my gloves," the latter declared.

"Aha! Something more!" Poirot bent deftly and picked up a small object from the floor of the safe. It was a flat cigarette case made of black moiré.

"My cigarette case!" cried Mr. Hardman.

"Yours? Surely not, monsieur. Those are not your initials."

He pointed to an entwined monogram of two letters executed in platinum.

Hardman took it in his hand.

"You are right," he declared. "It is very like mine, but the initials are different. A *B* and a *P*. Good heavens — Bernard Parker!"

"It would seem so," said Poirot. "A somewhat careless young man — especially if the glove is his also. That would be a double clue, would it not?"

"Bernard Parker!" murmured Hardman. "What a relief! Well, M. Poirot, I leave it to you to recover the jewels. Place the matter in the hands of the police if you think fit — that is, if you are quite sure that it is he who is guilty."

"See you, my friend," said Poirot to me, as we left the house together, "he has one law for the titled, and another law for the plain, this Mr. Hardman. Me, I have not yet been ennobled, so I am on the side of the plain. I have sympathy for this young man. The whole thing was a little curious, was it not? There was Hardman suspecting Lady Runcorn; there was I, suspecting the Countess and Johnston; and all the time, the obscure Mr. Parker was our man."

"Why did you suspect the other two?"

"*Parbleu!* It is such a simple thing

to be a Russian refugee or a South African millionaire! Any woman can call herself a Russian countess; anyone can buy a house in Park Lane and call himself a South African millionaire. Who is going to contradict them? But I observe that we are passing through Bury Street. Our careless young friend lives here. Let us, as you say, strike while the iron is in the fire."

Mr. Bernard Parker was at home. We found him reclining on some cushions, clad in an amazing dressing gown of purple and orange. I have seldom taken a greater dislike to anyone than I did to this particular young man with his white, effeminate face and affected lisping speech.

"Good morning, monsieur," said Poirot briskly. "I come from M. Hardman. Yesterday, at the party, somebody stole all his jewels. Permit me to ask you, monsieur — is this your glove?"

Mr. Parker's mental processes did not seem very rapid. He stared at the glove, as though gathering his wits together.

"Where did you find it?" he asked at last.

"Is it your glove, monsieur?"

Mr. Parker appeared to make up his mind.

"No, it isn't," he declared.

"And this cigarette case, is that yours?"

"Certainly not. I always carry a silver one."

"Very well, monsieur. I go to put matters in the hands of the police."

"Oh, I say, I wouldn't do that, if I

were you," cried Mr. Parker in some concern. "Beastly unsympathetic people, the police. Wait a bit. I'll go round and see old Hardman. Look here — oh, stop a minute."

But Poirot beat a determined retreat.

"We have given him something to think about, have we not?" he chuckled. "Tomorrow we will observe what has occurred."

But we were destined to have a reminder of the Hardman case that afternoon. Without the least warning the door flew open, and a whirlwind in human form invaded our privacy, bringing with her a swirl of sables (it was as cold as only an English June day can be) and a hat rampant with slaughtered ospreys. Countess Vera Rossakoff was a somewhat disturbing personality.

"You are M. Poirot? What is this that you have done? You accuse that poor boy! It is infamous. It is scandalous. I know him. He is a chicken, a lamb — never would he steal. He has done everything for me. Will I stand by and see him martyred and butchered?"

"Tell me, madame, is this his cigarette case?" Poirot held out the black moiré case.

The Countess paused for a moment while she inspected it.

"Yes, it is his. I know it well. What of it? Did you find it in the room? We were all there — he dropped it then, I suppose. Ah, you policemen, you are worse than —"

"And is this his glove?"

"How should I know? One glove is like another. Do not try to stop me — he must be set free. His character must be cleared. You shall do it. I will sell my jewels and give you much money."

"Madame —"

"It is agreed, then? No, no, do not argue. The poor boy! He came to me, the tears in his eyes. 'I will save you,' I said. 'I will go to this man — this ogre, this monster! Leave it to Vera.' Now it is settled, I go."

With as little ceremony as she had come, she swept from the room, leaving an overpowering perfume of an exotic nature behind her.

"What a woman!" I exclaimed. "And what furs!"

"Ah, yes, *they* were genuine enough! Could a spurious countess have real furs? My little joke, Hastings. . . . No, she is truly Russian, I fancy. Well, well, so Master Bernard went bleating to her."

"The cigarette case is his. I wonder if the glove is also —"

With a smile Poirot drew from his pocket a second glove and placed it by the first. There was no doubt of their being a pair.

"Where did you get the second one, Poirot?"

"It was thrown down with a stick on the table in the hall in Bury Street. Truly, a very careless young man, Monsieur Parker. Well, well, *mon ami* — we must be thorough. Just for the form of the thing, I will make a little visit to Park Lane."

Needless to say, I accompanied my

friend. Johnston was out, but we saw his private secretary. It transpired that Johnston had only recently arrived from South Africa. He had never been in England before.

"He is interested in precious stones, is he not?" hazarded Poirot.

"Gold mining is nearer the mark," said the secretary.

Poirot came away from the interview thoughtful. Late that evening, to my utter surprise, I found him earnestly studying a Russian grammar.

"Good heavens, Poirot!" I cried. "Are you learning Russian in order to converse with the Countess in her own language?"

"She certainly would not listen to my English, my friend!"

"But surely, Poirot, well-born Russians invariably speak French?"

"You are a mine of information, Hastings! I will cease puzzling over the intricacies of the Russian alphabet."

He threw the book from him with a dramatic gesture. I was not entirely satisfied. There was a twinkle in his eye which I knew of old. It was an invariable sign that Hercule Poirot was pleased with himself.

"Perhaps," I said patiently, "you doubt her being really a Russian. You are going to test her?"

"Ah, no, no, she is Russian."

"Well, then —"

"If you really want to distinguish yourself over this case, Hastings, I recommend *First Steps in Russian* as an invaluable aid."

Then he laughed and would say no more. I picked up the book from the floor and dipped into it curiously, but could make neither head nor tail of Poirot's remarks.

The following morning brought us no news of any kind, but that did not seem to worry my little friend. At breakfast, he announced his intention of calling upon Mr. Hardman early in the day. We found the elderly society butterfly at home, and seemingly a little calmer than on the previous day.

"Well, M. Poirot, any news?" he demanded eagerly.

Poirot handed him a slip of paper.

"That is the name of the person who took the jewels, monsieur. Shall I put matters in the hands of the police? Or would you prefer me to recover the jewels without bringing the police into the matter?"

Mr. Hardman was staring at the paper. At last he found his voice.

"Most astonishing. I should infinitely prefer to have no scandal in the matter. I give you *carte blanche*, M. Poirot. I am sure you will be discreet."

Our next procedure was to hail a taxi, which Poirot ordered to drive to the Carlton. There he inquired for Countess Rossakoff. In a few minutes we were ushered up into the lady's suite. She came to meet us with outstretched hands, arrayed in a marvelous *négligée* of barbaric design.

"M. Poirot!" she cried. "You have succeeded? You have cleared that poor infant?"

"Madame la Comtesse, your friend

M. Parker is perfectly safe from arrest."

"Ah, but you are the clever little man! Superb! And so quickly too."

"On the other hand, I have promised Mr. Hardman that the jewels shall be returned to him today."

"So?"

"Therefore, madame, I should be extremely obliged if you would place them in my hands without delay. I am sorry to hurry you, but I am keeping a taxi — in case it should be necessary for me to go on to Scotland Yard. And we Belgians, madame, we practice the thrift."

The Countess had lighted a cigarette. For some seconds she sat perfectly still, blowing smoke rings, and gazing steadily at Poirot. Then she burst into a laugh, and rose. She went across to the bureau, opened a drawer, and took out a black silk handbag. She tossed it lightly to Poirot. Her tone, when she spoke, was perfectly light and unmoved.

"We Russians, on the contrary, practice prodigality," she said. "And to do that, unfortunately, one must have money. You need not look inside. They are all there."

Poirot rose.

"I congratulate you, madame, on your quick intelligence and your promptitude."

"Ah! But since you were keeping your taxi waiting, what else could I do?"

"You are too amiable, madame. You are remaining long in London?"

"I am afraid not — owing to you."

"Accept my apologies."

"We shall meet again elsewhere, perhaps."

"I hope so."

"And I — do not!" exclaimed the Countess with a laugh. "It is a great compliment that I pay you there — there are very few men in the world whom I fear. Goodbye, M. Poirot."

"Goodbye, Madame la Comtesse. Ah — pardon me, I forgot! Allow me to return you your cigarette case."

And with a bow he handed to her the little black moiré case we had found in the safe. She accepted it without any change of expression — just a lifted eyebrow and a murmured "I see!"

"What a woman!" cried Poirot enthusiastically as we descended the stairs. "*Mon Dieu, quelle femme!* Not a word of argument — of protestation, of bluff! One quick glance, and she had sized up the position correctly. I tell you, Hastings, a woman who can accept defeat like that — with a careless smile — will go far! She is dangerous; she has the nerves of steel; she — " He tripped heavily.

"If you can manage to moderate your transports and look where you're going, it might be as well," I suggested. "When did you first suspect the Countess?"

"*Mon ami*, it was the glove and the cigarette case — the double clue, shall we say? — that worried me. Bernard Parker might easily have dropped one or the other — but hardly both. Ah, no, that would have been *too* careless!"

In the same way, if someone else had placed them there to incriminate Parker, one would have been sufficient — the cigarette case *or* the glove — again not both. So I was forced to the conclusion that one of the two things did *not* belong to Parker. I imagined at first that the case was his, and that the glove was not. But when I discovered the fellow to the glove, I saw that it was the other way about. Whose, then, was the cigarette case? Clearly, it could not belong to Lady Runcorn. The initials were wrong. Mr. Johnston? Only if he were here under a false name. I interviewed his secretary, and it was apparent at once that everything was clear and above-board. There was no reticence about Mr. Johnston's past. The Countess, then? She was supposed to have brought jewels with her from Russia; she had only to take the stones from

their settings, and it was extremely doubtful if they could ever be identified. What could be easier for her than to pick up one of Parker's gloves from the hall that day and thrust it into the safe? But, *bien sûr*, she did not intend to drop her own cigarette case."

"But if the case was hers, why did it have *B. P.* on it? The Countess' initials are *V. R.*"

Poirot smiled gently upon me.

"Exactly, *mon ami*; but in the Russian alphabet, *B* is *V* and *P* is *R*."

"Well, you couldn't expect me to guess that. I don't know Russian."

"Neither do I, Hastings. That is why I bought my little book — and urged it on your attention."

He sighed.

"A remarkable woman. I have a feeling, my friend — a very decided feeling — I shall meet her again. Where, I wonder?"



NEXT MONTH . . .

You won't want to miss —

ORSON WELLES's *Diplomatic Crisis*

Ruth McKenney (of MY SISTER EILEEN fame) was born in Indiana but grew up in Ohio. She became a newspaperwoman at an early age — at fourteen she was a “pretty good printer and had a union card”; at the ripe young age of seventeen she “switched to reporting”; in between, she was “an extremely bad waitress and an enormously unsuccessful book saleswoman (house to house).”

After the Columbus, Ohio “Dispatch” and the Akron, Ohio “Beacon-Journal” she and her sister Eileen came to New York City to seek their fortunes — remember their first dismal basement-apartment on Christopher Street in Greenwich Village? Ruth McKenney got a job on the New York “Post,” and shortly thereafter she began writing humorous sketches about herself, her family, and especially her sister. The sketches first appeared in “The New Yorker,” but eventually they performed the hat trick, becoming a best-selling book, then, in turn, a fabulously successful Broadway play, Hollywood motion picture, and Broadway-Hollywood musical comedy. Who doesn’t know, who hasn’t heard of, the comic adventures of Ruth McKenney and her sister Eileen?

Now we give you a rollicking remembrance of Ruth McKenney’s first reporting assignment on the New York “Post” — the simple task of getting the dope on a Brooklyn murder mob. What else would you expect a cynical, blasé metropolitan city editor to ask of “Ohio’s Best Newspaperwoman of 1934?”

DAPPER JOHNNY BROWN

by RUTH MCKENNEY

I NEVER CARED FOR *The Taming of the Shrew* — it makes my hackles rise — but my sister Eileen and I early took for our motto the lines:

*Such wind as scatters young men
through the world,
To seek their fortunes further than at
home,
Where small experience grows. . . .*

Father, on the other hand, disapproved of Dick Whittington, Shakespeare, Boswell, Rabelais, Cardinal Wolsey, James Thurber, and other adventurers (seedy, excitable, gross, passionate, high-principled, or otherwise) who abandoned the quiet dust of home for the noisier lures of London, Paris, New York City, and similar dens of large experience. Father

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has lived in Cleveland, Ohio, all his life, and he is glad of it. Eileen and I had our glittering, beady gaze fixed on New York City even during the years we whiled away in grammar school. We regarded Ohio as a mere anteroom, a training ground, the minor leagues. We made up our minds to seek our fortunes in New York so young that now I cannot remember why. Nobody else in the family ever heard of such a thing. The Flannigans and the McKenneys are still cozily established in Ohio. Eileen and I were the only ones of the whole tribe whom the wind scattered.

"What's wrong with Ohio?" Father argued. Father was never a fierce man, but it irked him to hear his own daughters talk about going to New York. Father thought there was something unwholesome, something dubious and un-American about a one-way ticket from Cleveland to New York City. He considered it going backward; it was antipioneer, anti-Daniel Boone, anti-covered wagon. California, now, he might understand. But New York!

"Rackety place," Father said. "What are you going to do in New York? Smoke cigarettes, drink liquor, and do the Charleston?"

Eileen and I sniffed. We were not sure what people actually did on that towered island of Manhattan, but we were confident that New York was a wider, grander, sweeter world than Cleveland.

"Talk, talk, talk," Father re-

marked. "You mark my words. You girls will settle down right here in good old Cleveland."

We laughed. Father voted against Al Smith, to show where he stood.

But one year after another passed. Eileen and I grew up. We were eighteen, nineteen, twenty; and nothing happened, nothing important. After dabbling in culture at Ohio State University, I went to work as a newspaper reporter.

Eileen acquired an immense diamond ring, her picture in the society section of the *Plain Dealer*, and a young man named Robert (Bidgie) Thomaston III, Princeton '31, steel scion, and man about Cleveland.

"I'm just marking time," Eileen told me bravely.

I marked time, too. I puttered about with murders, riots, strikes, breadlines, campaigns, marathon dances, spelling bees, and the like. All very banal. Finally I was elected "Ohio's Best Newspaperwoman." My employer celebrated this event by a front-page headline: *GIRL REPORTER, ONLY 21, COPS COVERED PRIZE*. There was also a picture of me, heavily retouched, shyly pointing to my pewter plaque.

Father bustled down from Cleveland. His eyes danced. "I always knew you'd make good!" he said. "This'll show Mrs. Griffin!"

Mrs. Griffin was the Cassandra of East Cleveland; she lived across the street, and had long predicted something dire in the way of a future for Eileen and me.

Eileen and Bidgie were getting married in October, too, Father reported smugly. Mr. Thomaston, the steel king (or anyway, duke), was giving the happy young couple a completely furnished house. "Four bathrooms, built-in tile showers," Father said with satisfaction. "Mrs. Griffin can hardly believe it."

One week later, Eileen and I took the Greyhound bus for New York. We hated to spoil Father's innocent triumph, but we could not cut off our noses to spite Mrs. Griffin. Four bathrooms! Built-in tile showers! Pewter plaques! Ohio's Best Newspaperwoman! Another six months — another six weeks — and Eileen and I would be permanently trapped, Buck-eyes forever. It was now or never; do or die. I was twenty-one, Eileen twenty; we were aging fast. "To horse!" Eileen said, with an attempt at insouciance.

To tell the truth, we were scared to death. We arrived in New York City with no jobs, no diamond rings, no prospects, no place to sleep, not a friend in the world, and fifty-one dollars and seventy-eight cents between us. It was the middle of the depression, and Father said not to bother wiring him for money, just hitchhike home to Cleveland — or walk.

The first four days in New York were nervous. I called on the city editors of New York newspapers, but one and all, they seemed to be very busy. On the fourth day, I went back to the *New York Post*. The office boy presided over a small, stuffy ante-

room. "You again," he said. He also pointed out that the city editor, Mr. Bixbee, did not like women reporters, and never, under any circumstances, hired them, especially if they came from out of town.

"Is that so?" I was beginning to dislike office boys. Hoity-toity!

"I suppose you don't mind," I said icily, "if I wait — until Mr. Bixbee has a moment to look at my string?" A "string" was a pasted-up file of newspaper clippings; I had my prize-winning Ohio masterpieces conveniently tucked away in my purse.

"Go right ahead," the office boy replied. "Wait, wait. What's the matter? It's raining outside?"

I disdained a reply to this impertinence. There was a long bench across one wall of the anteroom. I took a seat. On my right was a gentleman, not quite clean, but eager. He showed me his blueprints for a global highway to end wars and depressions — four lanes, poured concrete, floating pylons on the Pacific and the Atlantic.

"Instead of wasting money on battleships and guns, the nations will all get together and build a parkway. People will drive around the world and have good will toward one another. The project will make so many jobs that . . ."

On my left was a Prophet of Old. He had a long, mangy beard and wore a burlap robe and tennis shoes. "The Lord cometh," he confided. "I'm giving it to Mr. Bixbee exclusive. He's a friend of mine. It's either the 17th of October or the 5th of next Febru-

ary. We'll have to wait and see."

I looked at the clock: nine thirty-four. At nine forty, the anteroom struck me as much, much stuffier. At ten eleven, I definitely made up my mind: It was the prophet. No doubt he was waiting for doomsday to be washed as white as snow. Why trifle with inessentials, now that the sands were running out?

I changed places. At the far end of the bench, a tall, dark, hawk-nosed gentleman in a Broadway suit and shiny tan shoes grudgingly gave me room. At eleven five, he addressed the office boy in a rough, rude voice. He sounded raspy. "Hey! you wit' the ears! Ya tell this cluck Bixbee I'm waitin'?"

"Sure did, pal." The office boy hummed a tune.

"Ya told him John Brown's here?"

"That's it!" the office boy caroled.

Mr. Brown subsided.

At eleven fifty-five, the office boy went to lunch.

At exactly noon, Mr. Brown stood up. His face was mottled — rage, I feared. He reminded me of some Ohio gangsters I'd met once at a marathon dance. New York was a regular melting pot, all right.

"Listen," Mr. Brown said, suddenly fixing me with his black, eyes. "Ya goin' to see this Bixbee?"

I blushed. "Well, if Mr. Bixbee happens to have time, I hope I —"

Mr. Brown took a piece of paper from a natty tan wallet, and carefully wrote: *106-A Greene Street, ring twice, Jersey City.*

"Here. Tell this Bixbee joker I give him until tonight. See? After that, I hit the Telly. Wha'z Bixbee think? I got all my life?"

"Yes, but what if I don't —"

Mr. Brown, a dynamic personality, turned on a polished heel and stalked out the door.

I shrugged. Probably Mr. Brown thought he was Napoleon and wanted Mr. Bixbee to have the news first — for a price. Or maybe Mr. Brown had invented something, although he did not look much like an inventor.

Time dragged. The office boy came back from lunch. The prophet unwrapped a vegetarian snack and fell to; but the end-wars man and I did not bother with refreshments. Eileen and I were on a diet, for lunch. The way things looked, we were going to be on a diet for dinner, too, starting about next Monday.

At two-forty-one, the telephone on the office boy's desk rang. The prophet, the end-wars man, and I came to electric attention. The office boy listened, and then replied in a whine: "I already did tell her, Mr. Bixbee . . . Yes, Mr. Bixbee . . . I know it, Mr. Bixbee . . . Well, I tried to get rid of her, Mr. Bixbee, but she —"

The office boy banged down the phone and pointed at me. "Five minutes. No jobs. Got it?"

Five minutes! My heart leaped up. I did not care what the office boy said; when Mr. Bixbee saw my prize-winning feature, he would be overwhelmed, I hoped. *Orphan, Nine,*

Starves, As Granny, 82, Is Jailed For Stealing Coal. Or perhaps Mr. Bixbee would be more interested in my front-page scoop: *Gang Massacre Horrifies Crossroads Hamlet.* It was a nice point. Maybe Mr. Bixbee read fast and I could show him both.

I walked down the aisle of the *Post* city room, weighing orphans against gangsters. But the city room seemed very large (about ten times bigger than Ohio city rooms), and men looked at me curiously as I tramped down what began to feel like the Last Mile. I was stuttering mentally long before Mr. Bixbee asked me my name and how old I was.

Mr. Bixbee, a sophisticated, handsome man, reclined in a swivel chair. He was not like city editors back home. He had clean fingernails. He looked suave. His attitude was languid, relaxed, negligent, even airy.

A considerable audience had assembled for Mr. Bixbee's interview with the girl reporter from the provinces. Amused, weary men in pressed pants, and no green eye shades, leaned against desks, or draped themselves gracefully over typewriters. Newspapermen were more rumpled and alert in Ohio.

Mr. Bixbee waved aside my clippings. He did not care to read about *Orphan, Nine, Starves, As Granny Jailed* he smiled a wintry smile when I proposed *Gang Massacre*.

"Just give me one good reason why I should hire a twenty-one-year-old girl who came to New York Monday. Be brief. Keep to the point."

I swallowed. "Well, I —"

"Speak up!"

"Yes, sir."

Somebody chuckled, to the right of Mr. Bixbee's elbow.

I took a deep breath. "I was elected Ohio's Best Newspaperwoman for '34."

It appeared that a creamier jest had never been heard in the *Post* city room. People laughed and laughed. Mr. Bixbee had to wipe the tears from his eyes. Men rushed over from the copy desk to get in on the fun.

I regretted I had not brought along a knife, like Charlotte Corday. "Thank you very much," I said bitterly, and started back up the aisle. I thought of running, but decided against it.

Mr. Bixbee called me back. He apologized. He said he was sorry he had laughed. It had been rude. He couldn't hire me, because I didn't know anything about New York City. I wouldn't be of any use to him. Probably I didn't even know how to get to Brooklyn.

"I could look it up on a map."

Mr. Bixbee said well, yes, but it wasn't the same as knowing Brooklyn in your bones. Then Mr. Bixbee became fatherly. It was not just a matter of geography. I was too young. I had no Metropolitan Experience. "I tell you what. I'll give you an assignment. If you carry out the assignment, I'll put you on the staff. If you fall down on it, you make me a promise you'll take the next train back to Ohio."

"Okay," I said eagerly, "I'll bet I can do any —"

I heard the mirth, right and left.

"Freddie!" Mr. Bixbee called, trying to keep a straight face himself, "give her the dope on Molliati."

I saw people shake their heads. Some gentlemen were openly sorry for me; they thought Mr. Bixbee was carrying the joke too far.

"Left-handed monkey wrenches!" I snarled. By this time I had given up hope, and did not care what Mr. Bixbee thought of me.

Mr. Bixbee seemed piqued. "No. It's a thousand-to-one shot. But then, it's a thousand to one I'd ever hire Ohio's Best Newspaperwoman. It evens out."

I marched over to Freddie's desk, my nose in the air and my face a rich shade of purple.

Freddie, the assistant city editor, was laconic. On Monday, the day Eileen and I had arrived in New York — what a coincidence — a man, or anyway a voice, name of Molliati, had called up Mr. Bixbee and offered to sell him some kind of a story about a Brooklyn murder ring.

"It must be quite sensational," Freddie said. "Mr. Bixbee's been burning up the staff ever since. I had four men out on the story yesterday. We were supposed to meet this Molliati character in some Jersey City dive — a lot of hocus-pocus about gardenias in buttonholes, signals, and Molliati following our man to the rendezvous. Either we missed connections or the whole thing is a

phony. Personally, I think it's Benny Stevens at the West Forty-seventh Street station. Benny's a wit, he imagines. On the other hand, maybe there really is a Brooklyn murder mob, and they decided to use our friend Molliati for target practice. Who can tell?"

Freddie seemed indifferent to Molliati, dead or alive. He tossed over a memo from the *Post's* Centre Street reporter. It appeared that there actually was a Molliati in the police files. He was wanted for various trivial items: throwing acid on plants pressers during a dry-cleaners' strike, squashing tomatoes and tomato vendors in an effort to "organize" the tomato pushcart industry — that sort of thing.

The reporter's description of Mr. Molliati wasn't much of a surprise to me. The words "Jersey City" were already singing in my soul. Hark, Hark, Molliati the lark, of Jersey City.

Mr. Molliati, the Centre Street man reported, was tall, thin, dark-skinned, dark-haired, and had a Roman nose. He sometimes used the alias John Brown; the police reporter could not think why. He wore sharp clothes (when off duty from squashing things and throwing acid), and was partial to highly polished tan shoes, which he flicked from time to time, with a clean white handkerchief. The memo went on: *Started life as boot-black, educated reform schools and one term Sing Sing. Character: bad. Despised by fellow toilers in Brooklyn*

vineyards. Possible Bixbee's phone call planted by annoyed acquaintance of Molliati, to get M. in bad with Brooklyn employers. Such phone call would get Molliati in something terrible. In fact, might as well start checking morgue for Molliati. Brooklyn organization puts high premium on loyalty, school spirit, team play, cooperation, etc. Would resent Molliati selling story of organization's activities to newspaper.

Freddie took the memo back. "Quite a joker," he said sourly.

"Well — when would Mr. Bixbee like to see Molliati?"

Freddie looked at me. "Oh, any time," he said gently.

"Should I phone in first?"

Freddie yelled — loudly — across the rewrite bank. "Jeff! Lady wants to know should she give you a ring? Before she brings in Molliati?"

Mr. Bixbee and eight or ten rewrite men tried, without success, to choke back their mirth. "No," Mr. Bixbee said, when he'd stopped laughing, "don't waste time with telephone calls. Take no chances. Don't let him out of your sight. Moment you catch up with him, push him in a taxi and bring him right to this desk. Got it?"

"Thank you, sir."

I hardly heard the merriment. I did not walk out of the *Post* city room; I floated out, on wings of purest joy.

I had a little trouble getting to Jersey City. As Mr. Bixbee had feared, I did not know my way around New York. Somebody mentioned a ferry in connection with Jersey City, so I went to Staten Island; then opinion

veered, in favor of taking a tube, and I arrived in Newark. All in all, Mr. Molliati was irritated, when at last I rang his bell in Jersey City. Mr. Molliati said (from a shadowed, dank staircase) that it was about time Mr. Bixbee got on the ball.

When I trotted into Mr. Molliati's crummy headquarters, however, he took a good look at me under the naked bulb. He recognized me right away; I'd been sitting next to him in the *Post* anteroom all morning. Mr. Molliati took alarm. He wondered if I were not a spy, either from the cops or from the Brooklyn mob.

"I am not a spy!" I said indignantly.

Mr. Molliati peered earnestly at my freckled face and stout form. He had to admit I did not look like the ordinary type of spy. Then the wind shifted to another quarter. Mr. Molliati took offense at Mr. Bixbee sending what he ungallantly called a "punk dame reporter" to "contact" him. He considered it *lèse-majesté*.

"When did they let ya outta pantywaists?" he snarled. "Wha'z Bixbee think this is? A lousy society-page story?"

I drew myself up. "Mr. Molliati, I hardly think it's any of your business what Mr. Bixbee —"

Mr. Molliati made it clear that he had expected somebody older, wiler, in pants, no doubt with a hat pulled down over his eyes and a toothpick jammed between his teeth, as in *The Front Page*.

"This is not the movies, Mr. Molliati," I said coldly.

"Well —" Mr. Molliati was dubious. For two cents he'd call up the Telly.

"Mr. Bixbee said to bring you in a taxi. Right away."

It was a cunning stroke, if I said so myself. Mr. Molliati was fired by the idea of riding across on the ferry, all the way to Manhattan, in a taxi. However, I was appalled when we got to the *Post* office, and discovered that Mr. Molliati expected me to pay the driver.

"It's practically all the money I've got in the whole world, Mr. Molliati," I argued.

"You mean Bixbee says for me to pay my own taxi fare? He must be some cheap crumb, awright. I never heard of no city editor like him. I shoulda contacted Winchell."

I paid the fare plus a quarter tip. I could see why Mr. Molliati's friends did not like him. I hoped Mr. Bixbee paid expense accounts from current petty cash. I glanced at the clock in the lobby. It was after six. I hoped Mr. Bixbee had not gone home. What on earth would I do with Mr. Molliati until tomorrow morning? I didn't think Eileen would like Mr. Molliati; he wasn't exactly a lovable personality.

The office boy had left for the day. The anteroom was dark. Mr. Molliati and I walked right into the city room. It was also empty. Our footsteps echoed. Some cleaning ladies came in a back door and started to sweep up the litter. My heart sank. Then I spotted Mr. Bixbee playing bridge

with three cronies in the managing editor's glass-partitioned cubbyhole.

"Come on."

Mr. Molliati hung back a little. His eyes darted around. "Where's all the reporters?"

"This is an afternoon paper," I said patiently. "Now, Mr. Molliati, you don't want to get scared at the last minute."

"Who, *me*?" Mr. Molliati snarled.

The cleaning ladies looked at us. They seemed surprised. I trotted down the long city-room aisle. Mr. Molliati followed, diffidently. Once he stopped to straighten his tie (red roses on bright blue), and flick imaginary dust from his tan shoes.

The door to the managing editor's office was open. I leaned in and began, "Oh, Mr. Bixbee! I'm certainly glad to see you! I was afraid maybe you'd gone."

Mr. Bixbee was studying his cards. He looked up. He did not seem at all friendly. "I thought I told you to go back to Ohio."

"Huh?" Mr. Molliati said. He narrowed his eyes at me.

"Mr. Bixbee!" I cried hastily. "This is Mr. Molliati! After all!"

Mr. Bixbee had returned to his bridge hand. "I'll bet it is," he replied rudely. "Four spades."

"Double," Freddie said.

Mr. Molliati was startled, I think, by his cool reception. He peered over my shoulder; he looked at the back of Mr. Bixbee's balding head. He muttered. He stood first on one foot, then on the other.

"Pass," Mr. Bixbee's partner said. Freddie's partner reflected. "Pass."

"Say, Mr. Bixbee," I ventured. I hoped Mr. Bixbee had not lost interest in the Brooklyn murder mob. In that event, what about my job? And my taxi fare?

Mr. Bixbee drummed his clean fingernails on the desk. "Four no trump," he said.

Freddie laughed. "Double four no trump. Ha, ha, Bixbee's folly."

"Five no trump," Mr. Bixbee's partner cooed, in the voice of a dove.

Mr. Bixbee played the hand at five no trump, doubled and redoubled. Mr. Molliati and I watched. We were a little impatient, but then again, we hated to interrupt. At least I did. Mr. Molliati kept muttering. I believe he was baffled.

Mr. Bixbee made five no trump — by the skin of his teeth, however.

"What dumb, dumb luck," Freddie said. "That last finesse was strictly seven-come-eleven."

"Oh, sure, sure." Mr. Bixbee cut the fresh pack with an expansive gesture.

Freddie noticed me, still standing in the doorway. He got up. He said, "Now, look Miss-what's-your-name, don't you think you're pressing this act a bit too far?"

Mr. Bixbee wheeled around sharply in his chair. "For the love of God!" he shouted.

Mr. Molliati and I backed up nervously. "Mr. M-m-m-molliat-t-ti," I managed to get out; and I stood aside, to point at my prize.

Mr. Bixbee blinked. He put down the cards. He stood up. He frowned. He pushed back his chair and walked up to Mr. Molliati, very deliberately. Mr. Molliati looked at Mr. Bixbee with a dumb anguish.

"What's your name?"

"M-m-m-molliat-t-t-i." I don't know whether Mr. Molliati always stuttered in moments of stress, or whether I had hypnotized him.

Mr. Bixbee breathed deeply.

"I called ya up," Mr. Molliati said piteously. "About some fellows in Canarsie."

"You mean you're Molliati!"

Mr. Molliati and I giggled wildly.

"He certainly is," I put in. "Aren't you, Mr. Molliati?"

"Bet yer life," Mr. Molliati said.

Mr. Bixbee could not get over it. He said, "No!" and "I don't believe it!" several times. He seemed angry. "How'd she find you?" Mr. Bixbee stroked the "she" in a tone of utter contempt.

"I gave 'er my address." Mr. Molliati was bewildered. I suppose the whole thing did not seem very well organized to him.

"You gave *her* your address!" Mr. Bixbee was shaken. "I see. Old friends, no doubt?" Mr. Bixbee laughed, like Pagliacci. "Now I believe in Tinker Bell. She even looks like Ohio's Best Newspaperwoman. I have not been played for such a sucker since jolly college days."

"Yes, but Mr. Bixbee," I kept trying to say.

"Well, what's your angle, sister?"

Mr. Bixbee inquired, after he had calmed down somewhat. "You cut in on this deal of Molliati's? Or do you just deliver the body?"

"B-b-body?" Mr. Molliati quavered. His conscience smote him, I think.

At last I had an opportunity to converse with Mr. Bixbee. I explained that Mr. Molliati and I had sat next to each other in the ante-room all morning. Happenstance, of course.

Mr. Bixbee was deeply grieved by this intelligence. He planned reprisals against the office boy, until I hastily told about "John Brown."

"I wasn't goin' tuh give name a Molliati to no punk kid," Mr. Molliati said loftily. "Anyways, everybody calls me Dapper Johnny Brown. It's my alias, see?"

"Dapper Johnny Brown!" Mr. Bixbee gave a hoarse chuckle. "Ironic, isn't it?"

After these exciting preliminaries, Mr. Bixbee decided it was about time to get down to business. He said if Mr. Molliati would please take a seat at the desk, he would call a stenographer.

Mr. Molliati mentioned money. Mr. Bixbee said yes, yes, he would come to that, but first . . .

Freddie added up the score. The other bridge players collected the cards.

I cleared my throat. Everybody seemed to have forgotten me. Mr. Bixbee almost barked. "Now what?"

"Well — uh — Mr. Bixbee —"

"Oh!" Mr. Bixbee was enraged.

He said he absolutely detested women reporters. They made him nervous. Women should be gun molls or mothers or something. They should not sit around in city rooms, smoking cigarettes. He had no opening on the staff of the *Post*. He was sorry, but he had not expected me to find Mr. Molliati. After all, it was just a fluke, was it not?"

I couldn't think of anything to say.

"I'm sorry," Mr. Bixbee repeated.

"It's all right."

This time nobody laughed. I remembered about the cab fare before I got to the door, but I could not bear to go back and talk to Mr. Bixbee again. I took the subway — to Brooklyn, as it turned out — and then, after some difficulty, to Christopher Street, where Eileen and I had just rented a dismal apartment in the basement. I was depressed. So was Eileen, when I told her about the taxi fare.

"That Bixbee ought to be ashamed of himself!" Eileen said hotly.

"Oh, well. I guess it was just a fluke."

"Don't cry," Eileen exhorted me. "We can always pawn your typewriter."

After a meager meal, we tried on each other's clothes for a while to cheer ourselves up. A little after ten, the telephone rang for the first time — we had just had it installed, after pawning my winter coat.

"Hello?" I said eagerly, but it was a wrong number.

"Don't look like that," Eileen said crossly. "It's harrowing. Did you give Bixbee your telephone number?"

"I didn't know it."

"Does he have your name?"

I remembered Freddie's "Miss-what's your-name."

"Then quit looking eager when the phone rings."

At eleven thirty, the telephone rang.

I looked eager. "Hello?" I cried anxiously.

"Honestly!" Eileen was disgusted.

However, it was Mr. Bixbee, after all. I recognized his voice right away. He sounded furious, as usual. "Is this Ohio's Best Newspaperwoman?" he shouted.

"Yes, sir." I hoped Mr. Bixbee had not called up just to be funny.

"Well, why don't you leave your name and address when you ask for a job!" Mr. Bixbee said indignantly. "I had to call the A.P. in Cleveland. Imagine! People think I'm out of my mind. New York calling! Who's Ohio's Best Newspaperwoman? They gave me the Four-H Champion, too, just in case."

"I'm sorry," I muttered.

"Anyway," Mr. Bixbee went on crossly, "I've finally tracked you down. What's the idea of walking out

of the office that way? I turn my back, and you're gone."

"Well, but Mr. Bixbee —"

"I owe you taxi fare."

"Taxi fare?"

"And a job, I suppose," Mr. Bixbee said bitterly. "It's against my principles. When do you want to start?"

"Mr. Bixbee! Oh, thank you! Thank you!"

"When do you want to start?" Mr. Bixbee inquired, pronouncing each word loudly and distinctly.

"Tomorrow, Mr. Bixbee! First thing!"

"I knew it," Mr. Bixbee said, and, after a groan, he hung up.

I was always very grateful to Mr. Molliati, and sincerely sorry when, a year or so after I went to work on the *Post*, he was found, charred, but only partly cemented, in a Canarsie dump. He would have been pleased by his obituary: *Dapper Johnny Brown Identified By Snappy Tan Shoe, Shreds of Silk Necktie.*

But if Mr. Molliati was Dapper Johnny Brown to his public, to Eileen and me he was the peculiar wind that scattered us to seek our larger fortunes in New York.

"It's an ill Molliati —" Eileen said. "R.I.P."



AUTHOR: **CHARLES B. CHILD**

TITLE: ***Murder Weaves a Pattern***

TYPE: Detective Story

DETECTIVE: Inspector Chafik of Baghdad

LOCALE: Iraq (formerly called Mesopotamia)

TIME: The Present

COMMENTS: *Inspector Chafik really meant it when he said, with the greatest regret, that he often introduced the nicest people to the hangman . . .*

MAHMUD ALI, A BEGGAR OF BAGHDAD, who had his pitch on the Street of the Servant of the Prophet, was roused by the birds that swarmed into the city as the hot day ended. Their fluting disturbed his slumbers, and he cursed them as he looked up. The brilliant sunset was fading in the high desert sky, and the flat roofs and tiled domes of the city were becoming cloaked in shadows. And then a young man in ragged clothes raced by, with arms extended, chest heaving and wide-set eyes staring. The fleeing figure had come and gone in a moment, and only the beggar was left in the narrow street.

He runs from fear, thought Mahmud Ali. Yes, he runs from fear — and I know that one well . . .

He grasped his cudgel and peered about. It was a business neighborhood, and the offices were dark, except for a suite in a nearby building where a light had just come on. A breeze from the river scattered some rubbish that littered the street. The silence became oppressive.

All at once a door slammed, and there was the clatter of feet. A thin voice shouted. "Help!" Then, deepening with emotion, the voice called, "Murder!"

The beggar picked up the cry and amplified it, shouting: "Murder! Murder! Police! Police!"

The police inspector was at the Al Hamra, a garden cinema, enjoying a mystery film, his favorite relaxation,

when they called him. "My dear Yusif," he said to the constable who tapped his shoulder, "kindly take my seat and report tomorrow how it comes out. Personally I suspect the blonde with the delightfully distracting curves." He finished the glass of pink sherbet he had been sipping, took a last look at the screen, and went out. He was a neat little man in a civilian suit of white linen, his sleek head topped by the black *sidara* of a Moslem.

He was of very ancient race, even for the Middle East. Profiles not unlike his own — fine-featured, rather heavy-lipped and with sunken cheeks — were embossed on relics dug out of the rubble of Babylon. He had a swarthy complexion, and flat, dun-colored eyes that reflected the cynicism of four thousand years of civilization. His voice was soft, he walked like a cat, and his pride was the pride of kings.

The driver of the squad car briefed him as they threaded their way through the traffic. The dead man was Hanna Kamil, a lawyer who was respected in Baghdad, and he had been killed in his office on the Street of the Servant of the Prophet in the old part of the city.

A crowd loitered outside the three-story building, and the Inspector used his elbows to clear a way. Authority failed to dislodge a gaunt old Bedouin who was arguing with the guard at the entrance, and, rising on tiptoe to give himself stature, the Inspector touched the Bedouin's

flowing robes and said, "O Father of Burning Sands, the lawyer you seek cannot attend to your business — he has had a prior appointment with Death."

Brushing by, the Inspector went up a flight of worn steps and was received by a dark, towering man who wore the uniform of a police sergeant.

The sergeant, whose mahogany face was carved in the likeness of a hanging judge, said, "Sir, I fear you have been inconvenienced —"

"Alas, Abdullah! Those who get themselves killed never do so at my pleasure." He patted his assistant's arm and then paused on the threshold to salaam to the corpse. "Chafik J. Chafik, Criminal Investigation Department, Baghdad Police," he announced himself. "May your soul be at rest, Mr. Kamil," he added piously.

Inspector Chafik pushed up his sleeves, flexed slender fingers, and briskly went to work.

Hanna Kamil had been sitting at his desk when he had been killed by a bullet fired into the back of his head at close range. He still held the pen with which he had been preparing a brief; there had been no struggle, but the murderer had evidently made a hurried search of the room after the shooting, for it was strewn with papers.

"He was working late," explained Sergeant Abdullah, who loomed behind Chafik, like the Inspector's shadow elongated on a wall.

"Who found his body?"

"The confidential clerk, sir, one named Sayed Abbas. I have all the details here," Abdullah said and produced a notebook.

"Be brief."

"Yes, sir. The witness, Abbas, states he received permission to go to the mosque for the sunset prayer. *Maghrib*, today, was shortly after 6 o'clock. At about 7 the witness returned. He was late, his watch had stopped —"

"Hearsay or fact?"

"Fact," the sergeant said reproachfully. "I have ascertained that Abbas stopped at a café to ask the time and, being told, he ran —"

The Inspector's smile was thin. "Hanna Kamil had a reputation and I can well understand why his clerk ran," he said. "Continue."

"Sir, the witness saw the alleged murderer coming out. He is very observant for a witness and has well described the individual. Furthermore, there is corroboration — a mendicant at the street corner also observed the suspect, and avers he knows him." Sergeant Abdullah stopped abruptly, and the Inspector looked at him curiously.

"This secondary witness is unsatisfactory?" Chafik asked.

"Sir, he is avaricious and demands payment for information."

"A paid witness has no favor in the eyes of the law. Encourage him to be a better citizen, Abdullah. Meanwhile, send me Sayed Abbas —"

"Here?" the sergeant said, and

looked meaningly at the corpse.

"Here," Chafik said. "Now go to the mercenary witness."

"Yes, sir," the sergeant said.

Sayed Abbas was middle-aged and colorless. He wore somber clothes, and his withered neck was encased in a high collar.

The Inspector was abrupt. "Who was the man who visited your employer in your absence?" he asked.

"I do not know," Sayed Abbas said, trying not to look at the body. "Neither client nor friend was expected —"

"Yet somebody came here, and Mr. Kamil found their company agreeable, for a time," Chafik said grimly. "Here is the document your master was working on when he was killed. Toward the end of it he paused twice, and was sufficiently distracted by conversation each time to let the writings dry naturally. Elsewhere he blotted each line, possibly a habit —"

The clerk made a distressed sound. "How well I remember that habit," he said, "Almost you make him live again —"

"How long were you in Mr. Kamil's employ?"

"Fifteen years, five months, and three days."

The man's mind for details was a rare pleasure, and Inspector Chafik warmed to him. "So," he said in a friendly voice, "you saw a stranger come out of the building, running, yet you did not stop him. Why?"

"He had authority," explained

Sayed Abbas timidly. "He was shabby, but something about him made me stand aside."

"Your respect was perhaps fortunate. Did he see you?"

"I think not. Surely if he had just come from killing my master — O Merciful One! If I had not heard him on the stairs — the sound of his heavy boots, such a clatter! — if I had stopped him — if —"

"Exorcise those ifs," Chafik said gently. "Otherwise they will rise and gibber at you in the watches of the night."

He went and raised the dead man's head. "This puzzles me," he said, indicating the waxy face to the shocked clerk. "There is an amiable expression. Mr. Kamil was not put out by his unexpected visitor. Conversation at the moment of death must have been casual, even pleasant. I do not understand it at all. He had been interrupted, he had quite a notorious temper, and yet —"

"My master was a pious man," Sayed Abbas said defensively.

"Pious but harsh. There was a recent incident. It is in my mind — something concerning somebody who was employed here . . ." The Inspector was vexed because he could not remember.

The clerk said, "Is it possible you refer to our former office boy, Farisi?"

"Ah, yes! — Mohammed Farisi, a youth whom Mr. Kamil charged with petty theft. This foolish individual then made a threat with a knife and was jailed for a year," he said, and

then added thoughtfully, "He was released last week."

The Inspector reached over the corpse with a murmured apology, lifted the telephone, and told police headquarters what to do.

"Poor Farisi," Chafik said compassionately. "You see what happens, Mr. Abbas, when a small transgression is not forgiven."

The clerk sighed. "My master was a hard man," he admitted. "Farisi's theft was indeed a petty one, but remember what the Koran tells us: 'As for the man who steals and the woman who steals, cut off their hands as a punishment.'" When the clerk quoted the scripture, his reedy voice deepened, and it was as if two men had talked.

An echo from the grave, thought Chafik. If I opened this very confidential clerk, sawdust would come out; he is still Kamil's puppet. Aloud the Inspector said, "Fortunately we do not interpret Islamic law so literally in this country." He took out a cigarette and, after a few draws, let it smolder unheeded in his fingers. A draft from the open window fluttered the papers on the floor. "Why this wanton scattering of documents?" he asked in the distant voice of a man thinking aloud.

"They are private, very private," Sayed Abbas said as he knelt to gather them. "A deed box has been profaned, Inspector! The secrets of clients —"

Chafik snatched the papers. He skimmed them and then said, "They

concern one Trad. Who is this Trad?"

The clerk hesitated. "I am not sure I have the authority to disclose —"

"I warn you, I become as pettish as a wife when secrets are kept from me. Trad is surely the son of Sheik Hussian al Rafaat, one of our great landowners, and I remember a scandal — the sheik exiled his son for a marriage —"

"The woman was of no family," Sayed Abbas said.

"What is family? Do we not all come from the same potter's wheel? However, a father's edict commands obedience, and although I understand this woman is virtuous . . ." The Inspector stopped. He was thinking: Chafik J. Chafik, you, too, have a son who one day will grow up. Would you deny yourself the delight of him because he took a bride not of your choosing? Embarrassment made him angry, and he slapped the papers down. "These are receipts, each for a hundred dinars. It would appear the sheik made a monthly allowance to his son, paid through Mr. Kamil. Did Trad come here to draw the money?"

Sayed Abbas shook his head and said, "My master must have arranged such payments privately. I knew nothing about them. A hundred dinars was quite generous," he added enviously.

"It's not scrapings from a pot. You and I live on less," the Inspector said. He had had his back to the clerk, and now he turned suddenly. "Was Trad your employer's visitor?" he asked.

"I do not know Trad," the clerk

said, and then his voice changed to the deep bass and he went on judiciously, "Furthermore, the man I saw was poor, shockingly poor."

"Was he dissipated?"

"Oh, no, Inspector! I said he was shabby, but his clothes were cared for. Oh, no! No profligate he!"

Emotion had put color in the clerk's pale face and Chafik was moved to pat the man's arm. "He obviously made a good impression — you feel sympathy and defend him well," he said. "Sometimes it happens to me. With the greatest regret I have often had to introduce the nicest people to the hangman."

The clerk beat his hands together and was about to continue his protest, when there was a knock on the door and Sergeant Abdullah came in. "The secondary witness," he said, "is now most cooperative. We conversed in the basement, and it was quite airless. The mendicant has identified the running man and is prepared to lead us to where he lives. It is unbelievable, sir, but he states —"

"The son of a sheik, one called Trad," Inspector Chafik said as he selected a cigarette.

The wall was ancient and enclosed the labyrinth of the great bazaar of Baghdad. There was a strip of wasteland between it and the modern town, and here the homeless had put up shacks made of dried palm fronds and mud, roofed with flattened gasoline cans. The smoke of cow-dung fires rose from the compounds where the cook-

ing was done, and everywhere there were children and dogs, prowling.

The beggar Mahmud Ali pointed and said, "There he lives, that *shaitan* who passed me with blood dripping from his hands."

Inspector Chafik asked, "Shall the sergeant test your truthfulness?"

The beggar said sullenly, "It may have been the sunset, but I thought the hands were red."

Chafik picked a path through litter and refuse, which decreased as he approached the shack Mahmud Ali had indicated. The sandy forecourt was bordered with whitened stones, and an attempt had been made at a garden. Burlap covered the doorway.

The Inspector reached out to raise it, and then clapped his hands instead, saying, "Permit me to enter. I am the police."

A man came out. He was of medium build and as deceptively fragile as the tempered blade of a sword. His shabby clothes were Western; frayed trouser cuffs flapped around his bare ankles. "Yes?" he said.

Just in time the Inspector checked a salaam. Behind the man he saw the one room of the lean-to. It was clean, and he saw a woman crouched there, cradling a child.

Chafik had pity for these young people. He was troubled by his policeman's duty and took refuge from compassion in abruptness. "You are Trad, son of Hussian?" he said.

"I am so named, and you will say Sheik Hussian al Rafaat when you speak of my father."

"Your pride is worthy of him. But please do not be arrogant. I, too, am arrogant when afraid."

"Why should I be afraid?"

"It would be reasonable. You were seen coming from the presence of a corpse, and although corpses are not uncommon, this one had a bullet —"

"I did not kill Kamil!"

"You are ahead of me," the Inspector said softly. "I mentioned no name. And there is no accusation, yet." He turned to Sayed Abbas, whom he had brought with him, and asked formally, "Is this the man?"

The beggar, Mahmud Ali, pushed forward and shouted, "That's the one! I saw him running from his crime! I —"

Abdullah silenced him.

The commotion caused the woman to put down her child and to come out and stand by her man. She said in a gentle voice, "I beg you not to disturb our son. He sleeps." She had veiled herself with a corner of her tattered robe, but the round of her cheek and one eye were exposed, and Chafik could see she was beautiful.

Trad said, "The Lady Alisha — my wife."

The Inspector salaamed. "I know now why you defied your father," he said, admiring the woman. "And yet I confess I am puzzled that you keep her in poverty."

"I am a sheik's son," Trad said, and added bitterly, "That was my training, and who will give me work? I cannot even carry loads like a common back porter. Not a *fils* can I earn, although I have tried."

"But what have you done with your money? "Your allowance?"

"Allowance?"

The Inspector produced the receipts he had found in Kamil's office. "Explain these," he said.

The young man looked at the papers. "I cannot explain," he said in bewilderment. "I know nothing about an allowance, nothing. The signatures are very like mine, but I signed nothing!"

"Do you suggest a reputable lawyer risked forgery for such a small return?" Chafik asked, raising his eyebrows.

"I would go to greater risks for less," Trad said grimly. "Just now I gave my boots for money to get food for my son." His thin face was bitter as he pointed to his bare feet.

"Yes," the Inspector said. "So if Mr. Kamil pocketed the allowance your father made — or you thought he pocketed it — it would be a motive." He stopped and looked at the squalor. "A sheik among his own people knows no law but his own, and you are a sheik's son," he said softly.

Chafik turned from the couple and peered through the doorway of the shack. There was a blanket in a corner where the child lay, a nursling of a few months. Faint choking sounds came from it, and the inspector ran and snatched up the bundle. The tiny face was puckered and red. "What have you given him?" Chafik asked indignantly as he put the child against

his shoulder and patted the small back.

When the choking changed to healthy crying he surrendered the baby to the mother. "How old?" he asked.

The woman whispered, "Little Hussian is five months."

Chafik took off his coat and looked at the spot on it ruefully. "You feed *kafta* and *pilav* at that age?" he asked.

"My man —" Alisha said and gestured helplessly. "There is no nourishment in me, and Trad, he —"

"But meatballs and fried rice!"

Trad said defensively, "I got the food from the street vendor, Sadi Salah. They are all thieves, those vendors, and it was all he would give me."

"And then you went and murdered Mr. Kamil?"

"I did not murder Kamil!" Trad said. "I went to him by appointment. He was dead when I got there. I was frightened and ran."

"Why?"

"Because the man had warned me of danger, and I was fearful for my son and wife."

"What man warned you?"

"The man who sent me to the appointment with Kamil," Trad said. He was now calm. "I am not religious but I always keep the sunset prayer. I go over there under the wall where it is quiet —"

"Admirable!"

"— I had started the second *rak'at* when the man came and said, 'Go you to your father's lawyer! Go quickly, he awaits you.'"

"It was very wrong of him to interrupt your prayers," Inspector Chafik said. "What kind of man was he?"

"A Bedouin."

"Describe him."

"A man wearing a cloak."

Chafik said, "A paltry description."

"How can I describe a Bedouin?" demanded Trad with anger. "His voice had a certain quality. I might recognize that, but the cloak covered his body, and his headcloth was drawn over his face. All he had time for was to tell me to go to Kamil, and to warn me of the danger."

"Danger to you or Kamil?"

"He did not say. He gave me the gun, and —" Trad covered his mouth with his hand.

"You foolish young man!" Inspector Chafik said. He extended his hand and snapped his fingers. "Surrender it!"

There was an ominous sound — the creak of Sergeant Abdullah's leather holster — and Chafik saw Trad's face darken with the challenge. "Do not wave a flag at a bull; put your pistol away," the Inspector said to his assistant without turning his head.

"Give him the gun," Alisha said quietly to her husband.

Chafik looked at the woman gratefully. "A Beretta," he announced as he took the gun. He sniffed at the muzzle. "She has been fired recently — fortunately she cannot hold her tongue and will gossip to ballistics —"

Trad shook off his wife's hand and lunged; but the arm of Abdullah fell like a shield, and there were others

who had gathered who came to secure him. "I did not kill Kamil!" Trad shouted as he struggled. "The gun was given me! I told the truth — the truth —"

Chafik's drab eyes were cynical with the experience of many such scenes. "Take him away," he said.

The woman flung herself at Chafik and beat at his chest. "My man did meet a Bedouin!" she cried. "I, too, saw him! Several times in recent days."

He put her away. "You are a loyal wife, but the evidence of a wife is neither here nor there when it concerns a husband," he said.

He felt a hand pluck his sleeve and turned wearily. It was Kamil's clerk. "You will at least check the story?" Sayed Abbas asked Chafik anxiously.

"But Trad has no witness," he said. "You yourself know how numerous Bedouins are in Baghdad. I cannot question every one." The Inspector frowned then, for he remembered the gaunt old Bedouin who had blocked his path while arguing with the guard outside the scene of the crime.

That Father of Burning Sands who had an appointment with Kamil! thought Chafik. I sent him away. I did not question why he was there at that late hour. Truly I deserve reprimand!

"Yes, it was very careless of me," he reproved himself aloud. Suddenly aware that Sayed Abbas was looking at him, puzzled, he hid his confusion by saying, "I can do nothing for Trad."

"But the sacrifice he made for his child! Surely —"

"Mr. Abbas, if Trad sold his boots for food, the incident may move a judge to mercy. I will inquire into it. That is all."

"How implacable you are!" the clerk said, and he let go of the Inspector's sleeve and stumbled off into the darkness, brushing his eyes.

Chafik called after him, "I have not finished with the witnesses yet. Go to the precinct station, Mr. Abbas." He ground out his cigarette and said to Sergeant Abdullah, "Take these other people there. I will come later. Like Mr. Abbas, I need a walk."

As he went away, he muttered, "So I'm implacable? Well, what else do they expect? I'm a policeman."

The Inspector walked through narrow streets overhung by balconies. "A policeman!" he repeated to himself in a flat voice. "What a detestable profession! I have seen how Trad lives, but instead of being moved by pity, I use his misfortune to explain why Kamil was killed — but does it? Would *you* cheat for a few paltry dinars, Mr. Kamil? But you are dead, and I should respect your beard —"

He heard the echo of his voice and slapped his face. "Chafik J. Chafik, why can't you think silently?" he said.

He stopped under an oil lamp set in a sconce on a house wall and got out his cigarettes. He was aware of the silence and the shifting shadows, and all at once, although the night was warm, he felt cold. There was somebody at his back. He welcomed the

threat; it was good to escape from thoughts. He walked on then, and when he came to a suitable doorway he stepped into it and stood twisting the heavy signet ring on his finger with pleasurable anticipation.

He expected a footpad; but the man was a Bedouin, and the Inspector recognized the gaunt old man as he went by. Chafik stepped forward and tapped him on the shoulder and said, "O Father of Burning Sands! You were the one at Kamil's door —"

The Bedouin turned swiftly. He wore a loose cloak over an undergarment of fine muslin, and his headcloth of gray printed Paisley hung to his shoulders and partially hid his face. He carried a formidable staff. "You lurk like a snake and you hiss like one," he said, looking at Chafik with leaden eyes.

"Why do you follow me?" the Inspector asked.

"Because you took Hussian's son —"

"What is that to you?"

"I eat Sheik Hussian's salt. Jabir ibn Jabir they named me. I am my lord's steward," the Bedouin said and showed Chafik a silver chain of office.

"I salaam to your lord," Chafik said, raising his hand. He finished the salaam casually, with his hand on his breast, near his shoulder gun. He knew how swiftly a knife could be drawn from under a robe.

Jabir said, "I did not follow you to kill you, only to ask why Trad was —"

"The evidence says he killed your lord's lawyer."

"If he killed because he was cheated out of moneys, it was a just killing," the Bedouin said.

"Tribal law — an eye for an eye — does not extend to Baghdad," Chafik said. "Now tell me why you knew the money was not paid."

Sheik Hussian's steward took a paper from his pouch. "The lady sent a letter," he said. "It grieved my lord," he added with an old man's sadness.

Chafik held the letter to the street light. Alisha had written: *In the name of the Compassionate One, take Trad back into your tents, and his son too, to be raised as a sheik's grandson. Then I, displeasing to you, will go hence, asking nothing. By God I declare never again will I show my face to my man or my son! Better my heart breaks than they be destroyed by poverty . . .*

"May my son win such a wife!" the Inspector said passionately.

"Hussian regrets his hastiness in condemning the lady," confessed the steward. "He wrote to Kamil, his lawyer, asking why the allowance had not been paid. There was no reply, so he sent me to Baghdad —"

"And when you saw the poverty of Trad, you were angered?"

"I did not know until just now how Trad lived. I did not take vengeance on a cheating lawyer, as you suggest," said the shrewd old man.

"A desert man is alleged to have given a message, and a gun, to Trad tonight —"

"I was not that man."

Chafik said softly. "I am beginning

to understand. There are new threads to go into the pattern." His hands made the motions of weaving, as if he fed the loom of his brain: "An unpaid allowance, a gentle woman's letter, the curious discourtesy of a lawyer who did not answer his client — and this lawyer a hard man, severe in justice, as witness the youth who transgressed . . ." The Inspector's shuttling hands became still, and he added thoughtfully. "A thread forgotten — it was very remiss of me to forget the youth. He stole such a small sum, but the harshness of the punishment caused him to threaten his employer with a knife."

"Do you talk to me or another?" Jabir asked roughly.

"Eh? I talked? Oh, that unconquerable habit!"

A whistle shrilled in the distance, another nearer, and then others came in rapid succession. "This arpeggio opens a police symphony," the Inspector said absently. He apologized to Sheik Hussian's steward, took him by the arm, and hurried him along.

They followed the strident call to a dead-end lane not far from the wasteland where the homeless, and Trad, lived. Here a brazier had been set up, and a tangy odor of barbecued fish, saffron rice, and heated oil filled the air. A man lay sprawled by his wayside kitchen, and a small crowd was being hustled away by the patrols.

Chafik reproved them. "Today's carbine in the back is tomorrow's dead policeman," he warned his men.

"Who did this?" he asked, looking down.

The police told him they did not know. One said, "He is a street vendor and, being a vendor of food, he must have many enemies. One came and stabbed him just now." And another added, "He made hard bargains."

"What is his name?"

"Sadi Salah," a constable said.

Chafik repeated it and said, "I know that name. Yes, this one was a hard bargainer." He bent to examine the corpse. "Swiftly killed," he announced, and then added in a worried voice, "but his feet are rubbed clean. He must have worn boots recently. Furthermore, I was told he *did* have boots — Trad's! Compassionate One! Why did I forget?" He rapped his head with his signet ring, and his eyes were opaque like the stone.

The precinct station had a sour smell, and Inspector Chafik sprinkled orange water on his handkerchief. He had commandeered the *mufawwad's* office, a bare room with a brick floor. A table-top on trestles served as a desk, and there were a few chairs. The rank of district officer did not rate a carpet, and Chafik, with pride, thought of the one in his office at headquarters.

He read a report from the police laboratory. The experts stated that the gun taken from Trad had killed Kamil. "I can no more doubt ballistics than I can doubt the infallibility of fingerprints," said the Inspector. "However, science is not human, and

I am. . . ." He turned out the ceiling light and adjusted the green shade of the desk lamp so that he stood in shadow. "Lighting is so important when one creates illusion," he explained to Sergeant Abdullah.

"Sir?"

"You are about to witness a play."

"Sir?"

"I have a plot in mind with a more pleasant ending than the one suggested by ballistics. Unfortunately there is no script, and I must improvise. Surely, at the end, somebody will speak the line to ring down the curtain." The little man made an actor's gesture and said, "Bring in the actors."

Mahmud Ali, the beggar of the Street of the Servant of the Prophet, was ushered in, along with the wife of Trad, carrying her son. Sayed Abbas followed; then came Jabir ibn Jabir, steward of Sheik Hussian. And then the door opened for a young man, a plump and surly youth, at whose appearance Chafik raised neat eyebrows. "I do not know this one," he complained. Sergeant Abdullah said, "You ordered his detention, sir, and so I parade him. He is named Farisi —"

"Ah, yes! Mohammed Farisi, the office boy who was so harshly dealt with by Mr. Kamil. Poor adolescent." Chafik added, shaking his head.

The door opened again, and the last one to enter was Trad, Sheik Hussain's son, wearing handcuffs.

The Inspector looked at the group and his sharp face softened only for the child sleeping in the mother's lap.

"So late for him," he said solicitously. "I trust his digestion is better?"

"He is well," Alisha answered from the folds of her *chader*.

"I am relieved. At that age they resemble clocks, and a foreign body on the balance wheel inevitably stops the works. However, your son's stomach provided a clue, madame."

The Inspector took out a cigarette and rolled it between thumb and forefinger. The light of the desk lamp sharpened his cheekbones and darkened the hollows of his eyes. He peered from the web of shadows like a spider. "Hanna Kamil is not with us," he announced. "He had a prior appointment with the corpse washers. And also not answering the roll call is the phantom who Trad claims gave him the gun —"

The sheik's son rattled his handcuffs. "You mock me!" he said.

"— a veiled man who had only a voice," the Inspector needled.

"I would recognize the voice!" Trad shouted. "He was a Bedouin, and —"

Chafik rapped on the desk. "Bedouins!" he cried with mounting anger. "Must I parade voices and Bedouins to please you? Can't you be satisfied with this one?" He tilted the lamp and the light fell on Jabir ibn Jabir.

The gaunt old man did not blink. He said in measured tones, "Next time you walk alone in Baghdad, I shall come silently and go silently, and you thereafter will always be silent."

His master's son said, "Cover your

mouth, old man! I rode your knee before I rode a horse. You did not give me the gun." Trad looked away from the Inspector as he added coldly, "One does not hope for justice from a policeman."

The Inspector rose on tiptoe. "Mr. Abbas!" he shrilled at the clerk who had a chair near him. "You, as a law expert, tell this individual the extent of my duty."

Sayed Abbas polished his glasses thoughtfully. "Yours is the unenviable duty of proving guilt," he said at length.

"And has not Trad's guilt been proved?" Chafik demanded. "Must I also do the work of the investigating judge and extract a confession?" He threw away his unlighted, crumpled cigarette and reached for another. "Or must I hang him personally?" he asked.

The law clerk raised protesting hands and pleaded in a reedy voice: "Surely, mercy is also expected of you —"

"Mercy? Do any of us know the meaning of the word?" The little man tilted the desk lamp so that it blinded the plump youth who had once been Kamil's office boy. "What mercy did this one get?" he asked, his voice quiet.

In prison they had taught Mohammed Farisi how to hate, and his voice was thick with it as he said, "Why can't you let me alone?" The Inspector remained silent, and the youth moved uneasily; finally self-pity cracked the shell of defiance and, hud-

dled in the chair, choked with tears, Farisi said, "I did nothing! I did nothing!"

The light on him was merciless and so was Chafik's voice when he said, "See what happens when a hard man uses the lash instead of the reproachful, parental hand. Oh, yes! Hanna Kamil was quite a hard man, and that is why he died." He waited and then added absently, "The slaying of Sadi Salah, the food vendor, also comes into the story. He died because a man pawned his boots." The tilted lamp moved to pick out Mahmud Ali, the beggar of the Street of the Servant of the Prophet, and Chafik commanded, "Stand up, mendicant!"

Mahmud Ali whined, "Your honor, what have I done? I told the truth about the man running, this Trad. I —"

"Did the noise of his running awaken you?"

The beggar said indignantly, "I was meditating, not sleeping. The cursed birds disturbed me with their impious cries, and when I looked up, Trad had gone by. He made no sound —"

"No sound," Chafik repeated. "So you corroborate the evidence of a baby's stomach, O Father of Lamentations! Trad was barefooted when he went to Kamil's office —"

As the words echoed in the silent room, the Inspector looped the cord of the desk lamp around his foot, jerked, and plunged the room into darkness. "How clumsy of me!" he exclaimed, and knelt to find the plug.

Fumbling, he went on casually,

"Mr. Abbas, in your evidence why did you say Trad wore boots? You even stressed it, and told me of the clatter he made coming down the office stairs."

"I was mistaken," Abbas whispered.

"You were," Chafik said conversationally, still kneeling. "Your watch had stopped, and you returned later than you had planned. Trad was already some distance down the street by then, and in the fading light you did not see him clearly. Therefore you described him *as you last saw him*: Trad at his prayers with his boots at his side, as they would be when a Moslem talks with God."

There was the noise of a chair being pushed back. "Your detailed mind, Mr. Abbas!" Chafik said. "You remembered too much!"

"O Merciful One! Merciful One!" the clerk exclaimed.

"I might never have thought of the boots if the food vendor had not been killed. Of course it would seem essential to stop his evidence. There was nothing really conclusive about the child's upset stomach —" The Inspector waited. He was still on his knees and had the connection ready to slip into the socket. "Really, fate has been too cruel," he went on. "It could happen to any one of us. A normally honest man is trusted by his employer with certain payments. He is tempted and embezzles. All goes well until Trad's wife writes her father-in-law, and he sends an inquiring letter to his lawyer. The embezzler intercepts it, but this is only a stopgap. Jabir ibn

Jabir is on the way, and Mr. Kamil's harshness is notorious, witness the youth whose crime was so petty —" Chafik sighed. His pity was for the man in the web.

"So Kamil must die. He is shot while he sits at his desk. He is tranquil because he has no reason to fear the old employee who stands behind him. Useful clues are scattered. And then the murderer puts on the robes of a Bedouin over his Western clothes, an excellent disguise needing neither a false beard nor facial padding, and he goes and gives the gun to the young

man he chose to hang for his crime —"

A chair was overturned with a crash. "What are you saying?" Sayed Abbas cried. "O Merciful One! What are you saying?" The reedy voice changed to a deep bass before it was cut off.

Trad shouted, "That is the voice of the Bedouin!"

"Yes, that is the voice, this man's second voice," Chafik said. "He came to you veiled in anonymity, and I veiled him in darkness so that you would know him again. Yes, here is the poor fool whom death tempted."

The Inspector plugged in the lamp.



NEXT MONTH . . .

The newest Department of Dead Ends story —

ROY VICKERS's *A Toy for Jiffy*

AUTHOR: **BARRY PEROWNE**

TITLE: ***The Birthday Diamonds***

TYPE: Detective Story

CRIMINAL: Raffles

LOCALE: Paris

TIME: The 1890's

COMMENTS: *How the International Congress of Police Officials led Raffles to a famous jeweller and woman-hater . . . perhaps the most ingenious of Raffles's new adventures.*

WITH CLIP-CLOP OF HORSES' hooves and glimmer of candle lamps through the mist of a winter evening, innumerable carriages were passing up and down the Champs Elysées. Inconspicuous among them was a *fiacre* carrying A. J. Raffles and myself, Bunny Manders, to the Annual Dinner of the Antique Dealers of Paris.

"This may not prove a terribly exciting function, Bunny," said Raffles. "Still, as Ivor gave us the invitation cards, and we've nothing better to do, we might as well make use of them."

Ivor Kern, the prominent London antique dealer, was the receiver through whom Raffles disposed of

such articles as our felonious exploits brought us from time to time.

"Personally," I said, as I took a Sullivan from Raffles's proffered cigarette case, "I can think of a lot better things to do on the first night of a visit to Paris than dine with several hundred antique dealers."

I looked at the twin lines of misty gas-lamps converging up the slope before me to the brooding shadow of the Arc de Triomphe. I looked between the bare trees passing on either side at the blue-red glow of great coke braziers in the glassed-in terraces of cafés. Above all, I looked at the ladies of Paris gliding by mysteriously in their carriages, and I felt a yearning for an adventure of a kind

unlikely to be found among antique dealers. I said as much.

"As to that," said Raffles, "one never knows what might crop up." He struck a match, holding it first to my cigarette, then to his own, then before the face of the gold half-hunter which he took from the pocket of his white waistcoat. "We're going to be late, I'm afraid," he said.

Our *fiacre* swung out of the stream of carriages circling the Place de l'Etoile, entered the darker Avenue Victor Hugo. Here the horse came jingling to a standstill before a large but sombre hotel, the Hotel des Reunions, which specialized in catering to just such formal functions as that for which we were bound.

Anything more tedious than the foyer we entered, with its red rep and red plush, its gilt-framed pier-glasses, ponderous chandeliers, and groups of droning habitués, would have been hard to imagine. My gloom was deep as, having deposited our dress-capes and opera hats, we approached a noticeboard which stood on an easel, between potted palms, at the head of two wide, shallow steps leading to a higher level of the foyer. This noticeboard indicated in which rooms were to be found that evening's banquets. There were two only, spelled out in wooden letters slid into grooves of the noticeboard. I spotted ours at once, for it was the topmost:

Annual Dinner: Antique Dealers of Paris →

I was about to turn to the right

accordingly, toward the lofty double doors indicated by the arrow, when Raffles's hand on my arm checked me. He pointed to the second announcement on the noticeboard:

← *Social Banquet: International Congress of Police Officials*

"You wanted an adventure, Bunny?" Raffles said softly. "You shall have one!" He glanced back over his shoulder toward the lower, more populous level of the foyer. "Stand a bit closer to me," he muttered. "That's it. Just to cover my hands while I slip these wooden arrows out of their grooves. So! And slip them back in so that they indicate the opposite rooms from what they did before. So!"

My heart gave a great thump. "What's the meaning of this tomfoolery?"

"Not tomfoolery," said Raffles. "Prudence. Should a need for explanation arise, we've only to point to this noticeboard for it to be seen that we're the mere innocent dupes of some passing humorist. It's our alibi."

"Our alibi for what?"

"For participating, I hope," said Raffles, "in the Social Banquet of the International Congress of Police Officials."

He was steering me firmly toward the doors on the left. Perspiration broke out all over me. I tried to hang back.

"Are you out of your mind?" I gasped. "This —"

"Note, first," said Raffles, "that an international congress implies a gathering of people who are strangers to each other. Note, second, that the doors of both banqueting-rooms are closed. That means that the dinners have got under way, and that the men who just now doubtless were at the respective doors, collecting invitation cards, have been withdrawn. I see no reason why we shouldn't get in quite easily, and among an international assortment of several hundred policemen we might hear some rewarding things. Just one point, though —"

He paused. We were a bare couple of paces from the lofty double doors with their panels after Winterhalter. From the look on his keen face, the vivacity which danced in his grey eyes, I knew he was resolved on this escapade.

"A word of warning," he said. "Whatever happens, don't lie. Be evasive. Be specious. Or be dense. But don't lie. Right? Then let's hope these rather florid doors don't prove to be locked. Pull yourself together. Here we go!"

He stepped forward and turned one of the great crystal doorknobs. The door opened a crack. He pushed it wider. Cupping a compelling hand under my elbow, he steered me forward into a polyglot roar of voices, a clatter of cutlery, a scurrying to and fro of bedevilled waiters.

Open-mouthed, I gazed on a fabulous sight — the stiff shirtfronts and shining faces of several hundred of Europe's leading police personalities

in convivial mood. Under dazzling chandeliers, they were seated on either side of four tables which ran the length of the banqueting-room to an elevated, crosswise table from which presided what I could only assume to be the elect, or super, policemen of the continent.

Raffles's hand kept urging me forward. At this end, the least distinguished, of the table nearest the door, were a number of vacant places. Putting his other hand on the back of the chair next to that of the endmost diner, Raffles addressed him in excellent French: "With permission, sir?"

"*Je vous en prie,*" said the diner, with a cordial gesture.

We sat down. As in a dream, I shook out the starched folds of the napkin before me. Raffles's neighbour, the endmost diner, turned to us. He was a man of about fifty, of an agreeable appearance, big and broad-shouldered, with a trim beard but rather ruffled hair, both quite grey, though his eyes were blue and bright, and rather disconcerting in their alertness and intelligence. His smile was pleasant.

"Englishmen, I think?" he said. "May I introduce myself? My name is Louis Tral."

"I," said Raffles, advancing a cue for aliases while yet speaking the truth, "am called A. J. This is my friend Bunny. We're inexcusably late, I'm afraid."

"You've missed nothing Mr. Jay and Mr. Bunney," said Tral, accepting the cue and bestowing upon us

the aliases Raffles had angled for. "A soup without distinction. Still, the wine is palatable and this salmon not bad. You must start with this. Garçon!"

Dish succeeded dish before me. I scarcely knew what I ate. I could not credit in what strange company we were dining and wining. In the uproar I could hear little of what Raffles and Tral were talking about, though they seemed to be finding each other congenial to the point of affinity. On my left I had no neighbour. Thus I became aware, as the roar of talk swelled louder and the signal was given to smoke, of the stealthy opening of the door a little to my left there, and behind me. I glanced in that direction, to see a cloaked gendarme peering into the room.

I instantly thought of the noticeboard, so flagrantly tampered with, and my blood ran cold. The gendarme stepped in. His eyes searched the tables, then he tiptoed up behind Louis Tral and handed him a note. Tral nodded. The gendarme, still tiptoeing despite the din in the room, withdrew. Tral lighted a pipe. Then he opened the note, studied it frowningly. My collar felt tight. I eased a finger round inside it, keeping an eye on Tral. My misgiving deepened as he turned and spoke quietly to Raffles. "This is a sticky wicket! Keep your head!" But his voice was easy as he remarked, "Bunny, Mr. Tral suggests we slip out before the speeches start."

I did not like the look of it. As the closing of the doors behind us shut off

the roar of the banquet, I fully expected to see the gendarme awaiting us behind the turned noticeboard. But there was no sign of him, and I exchanged an uneasy glance with Raffles as we followed behind Tral to the *vestiaire*. We withdrew our things. Tral slung a cape over his evening dress, donned a wide-brimmed black felt hat of rather bohemian appearance and, tossing pipe smoke vigorously over his shoulder, led us out to a neat brougham waiting before the hotel. The gendarme also was waiting. He opened the door of the brougham for us, closed it on us, mounted to the box beside the driver, and the horse set off at a brisk trot.

"Bunny," Raffles said, "our friend, Mr. Tral here, is a divisional inspector of police. His headquarters is in the Rue de la Pompe, nearby. He's suggested that, instead of listening to after-dinner speeches, we might like to see a typical Paris police station from the inside."

I could think of nothing I wanted to see less; I had rather have had the speeches. But I forced myself to say, "Oh, really?"

"I suggested it, Mr. Bunney," said Tral, "as I've just been called to a case that promises to be piquant. I should like to give you and Mr. Jay an insight into our actual work here, and my assistant wouldn't have sent for me had the matter been commonplace."

This was all very well; it sounded quite genuine. I could quite see why, in the circumstances, Raffles had felt

in no position to demur to the suggestion. On the other hand, I thought — and I knew Raffles must be thinking — surely the wretched gendarme bringing the note must have been misled by the noticeboard and so have intruded first upon the antique dealers at their repast? Surely he must eventually remark on the phenomenon to Tral?

I said, "You are very kind, Mr. Tral," but my smile must have looked rather ghastly in the dimness of the brougham.

I could see, of course, that the gendarme might have asked at the desk for the whereabouts of the police dinner and, the door being pointed out to him, not had occasion to see the noticeboard at all. That seemed possible — but I did not know. I could only grind my teeth over Raffles's initial recklessness as the horse turned into a quiet, narrow street of tall, old, grey buildings, and jingled to a standstill. The blue lamp of a police station shone wanly in the mist.

The gendarme sprang down from the box and opened the door of the brougham for us. He did not address Tral, nor accompany us into the station; and I exchanged with Raffles a brief glance of relief. It was evident that luck was with us and that the gendarme must have inquired at the desk and not looked at the noticeboard at all. Just the same, I devoutly wished myself elsewhere as Tral ushered us into his office, a bare room lit by a naked gas-mantel, with white-washed walls lined with shelves hold-

ing dusty pink dossiers. A bald man sitting behind the desk, and a young woman sitting before it, both jumped up at our entrance, as though they had been impatiently awaiting Tral's arrival.

The woman was about twenty-two, elegantly dressed, of a glowing brunette beauty, with slender, eloquent hands, and brown eyes that sparkled with a look of anger.

"Inspector," said the bald man, "this lady is Mme. Colette Guyomar. She reports that she's been robbed. As I said in my note to you, there are features of the case which made me think you might wish to handle it personally."

"Of what have you been robbed, madame?" asked Tral, as he threw off his things.

"Of a necklace," she said vehemently, "a necklace of twenty-one diamonds given me by my father on my twenty-first birthday. But this is not a matter of the sentimental or even the intrinsic value of the necklace. My father is a dying man, monsieur, and this is a matter of the necklace's importance in my father's testamentary intentions."

Tral waved Raffles and myself to a row of hard wooden chairs. He himself took the desk-chair respectfully quit by the bald man, his assistant, who remained standing.

"Your father, madame," Tral said, "is —"

"Lucien D'Arzac, the jeweller, of the Rue de la Paix."

Resuming her seat in the chair be-

fore the desk, she explained to Tral that though Lucien D'Arzac, one of the most eminent jewellers of Paris, had devoted his life to the adorning of feminine beauty, he was at heart an implacable woman-hater. This eccentricity had its origin in the fact that years ago his wife, a lovely, flighty, wilfully extravagant woman much younger than himself, had fallen in love with another man and run away with him, deserting not only her husband but her daughters, Denise and Colette, then aged eleven and nine.

For the two little girls life had been made miserable thereafter by the behaviour of their father. To the beautiful women who frequented his treasure house in the Rue de la Paix he had dissembled the bitter disillusion he had conceived for their sex. But at his home in the Avenue Montmorency he had not scrupled to show his true feelings for everything female, and the girls had grown up in the knowledge that he detested the very sight of them, a sentiment which they soon had come to reciprocate.

The one alleviating influence in their lives had been the care and affection of their elderly nurse, Héléne. This woman had shielded the girls as far as possible from their father's harsh treatment, and it was thanks entirely to her nagging that he had made a gesture of sorts when first Denise and later Colette had attained their twenty-first birthdays. Grudgingly, he had presented each of them with a necklace of twenty-one diamonds — one diamond for each year

of the lives he had done his best to make unhappy for them.

"Call the necklace your dowry," he had said brutally to each of them. "It's all you need look to me for. And I predict that within a year you'll have started selling the stones bit by bit and frittering away the proceeds, just as your irresponsible mother frittered away everything I ever gave her."

Within a year of her twenty-first birthday, each girl had married.

"Denise three years ago," said Colette. "And I've been married eighteen months. My husband, André Guyomar, is the soul of honour. But Paul Bechtel, Denise's husband, is a low, lying, degraded, semi-bankrupt waster. He —"

She checked her startling flash of passion.

"You'll see soon enough," she said. And she went on, "About 4 o'clock this afternoon, our old nurse, Héléne, came to see me. She stayed on with father after Denise and I left his house. At this moment, she's nursing *him*. She came to tell me that he was fatally ill. Oh, no, he didn't want to see me. His death-bed hasn't softened him. What she had come to tell me was that she'd learned by chance of his will which, she says, provides that Denise and I shall share his entire estate — but only if each of us has preserved our twenty-first birthday necklaces intact."

She raised a hand quickly as Tral was about to speak.

"If only one of us should have her

necklace intact," Colette continued, "she's to get everything. If neither of us should have her necklace intact, everything's to go to some unheard-of organization. And *there*, monsieur, you have his real intention! He believes implicitly in his cynical prediction, and is convinced we have behaved extravagantly, as our mother would have done, and frittered our necklaces away. Hélène told me that the clauses touching ourselves are conceived in a spirit of pure malice, pure mockery. She was most anxious to know whether I had my necklace intact. Thank heaven, I was able to assure her that I had, that my husband André would never dream of letting me sell a single stone. But now here, monsieur, is the damning thing: what Hélène confided to me she'd already confided, since she never favours one of us above the other, earlier in the afternoon to Denise."

Colette rose from her chair.

"*Now* do you see why my necklace has been stolen? Denise and her vile husband have frittered her necklace away long ago. This afternoon, Hélène can scarcely have left their house to come to me than they conferred and decided there was only one thing to be done — and done quickly, while the iron was hot — and that was to possess themselves of *my* necklace! They *had* to, don't you see? So I am here to demand that their house be searched and the necklace found and returned to me instantly!"

She was imperious. She looked wonderful. I glanced at Raffles. He

was watching her with an impassive face.

"Please sit down again, madame," said Tral, "and tell me: are, or were, these necklaces identical?"

"Virtually so," said Colette. "What of it? I tell you, only one necklace now exists intact, and that one is *therefore* mine."

"No doubt," said Tral. "Now, when did you first miss your necklace?"

"This evening," she said. "Isn't it obvious? My husband went away yesterday on a business trip. I was alone. After Hélène's visit, I sat for some time in my salon, thinking over what she had told me. Then, as I hadn't worn my necklace for several nights, I had a fancy to take it out and look at it. Figure yourself, it had become of a certain significance! I keep the necklace, in its case, in a drawer of my dressing-table. Monsieur, when I went into the bedroom and lighted the gas, I got the shock of my life. I tell you, my heart stopped! The window was standing open to the fire-escape, mist was creeping into the room, the drawer of my dressing-table was open and both the necklace and case was gone. In a flash I realized that, either at the very time when Hélène was talking to me in my salon, or perhaps afterward as I sat alone there thinking of what she had told me, Denise — or, more probably, her sneaking husband Paul, with Denise's connivance — had forced my bedroom window and taken the necklace!"

"Your sister visits you frequently?" Tral asked.

"Never! We haven't been on speaking terms for nearly three years — since she married. But that's not to say," declared Colette, "that she wouldn't guess perfectly well where to tell Paul to look for my necklace."

Tral rubbed his bearded cheek with his pipestem, studying her with his blue, lively, disconcerting eyes. "*Bon!*" he said abruptly. "I see here, from the notes made by my assistant, that your apartment is on Floor Seven of a house in the Avenue Mozart. Your sister, Mme. Paul Bechtel, lives in the Rue Chalgrin. Both quite close." He rose. "You will please return to your home, Mme. Guyomar. Leave everything just as you found it. I shall call upon you shortly."

As the bald assistant ushered her out, Tral rubbed his hands. "You find it *chic*, my friends," he said to us, "this little affair? More so than the after-dinner speeches now in progress? I trust burglary is in your line?"

"I've made some study of its technique," Raffles admitted.

"*Tant mieux*, Mr. Jay!" said Tral. "Now, a word, I think, with the person who best knows these contentious daughters of D'Arzac, the jeweller. The nurse — Héléne."

Mist haloed the street-lamps, and the horse's clip-clop woke the echoes in the quiet streets as the brougham, with the gendarme no longer on the box, bore us to the nearby Avenue Montmorency and the mansion of the dying woman-hater.

In an imposing but ill-lit and ice-cold hall we interviewed Héléne, a tall, worn woman in a black dress, with scraped-back hair under a starched cap, her apron, collar, and cuffs also stiffly starched. She admitted at once having told the sisters of their father's will.

"I acted in accord with my conscience," she said. "They're the intentions of a bitter and cynical man. My poor girls, their young lives were made very unhappy by him. The loyalty I feel is to *them*. The husbands they married aren't wealthy men. So I was anxious for the girls' prospects, anxious to know that their necklaces were safe. They both set my mind at rest. And I said, 'It is well that you have your necklaces intact,' and indeed, monsieur, it lifted a load from me and made it easier for me to sit at the bedside of a very wicked man."

"You better than anyone," said Tral, "know these two girls. In your opinion, Mme. Héléne, is it in the character of Denise to have connived at the theft of Colette's necklace?"

"It's not for me to uphold one girl against the other," said Héléne. "I love them both. But after this news you bring me, I begin to wish I'd kept my mouth shut. It seems I said too much this afternoon. Too much. I'll say no more."

In the brougham again, bound now for the Rue Chalgrin, it was some time before the scrape of a match broke our own silence. The fitful flame cast a glow on the bearded face of the detective, sitting opposite

Raffles and myself, as he sucked his pipe alight.

"My friends," he said, between puffs, "you'll be thinking, as I am, that this affair tends in a certain direction. Namely, should Denise prove to be in possession of a necklace of twenty-one diamonds, how are we to prove whether it's rightfully hers or rightfully Colette's?"

"Just so," said Raffles.

"In that connection," said Tral, "you'll also be meditating, as I am, on the possible significance of Héléne's use of the plural."

"The plural?" Raffles said.

"You missed that?" said Tral. "You surprise me. I refer to Héléne's remark, 'It is well that you have your necklaces intact.'"

I was startled. I had entered so deeply into the unfamiliar situation in which Raffles and I found ourselves that I had almost begun to think of ourselves as the detectives Tral believed us to be. The fact that I did not now see quite what he was getting at, and the further fact that he seemed to have picked up some significance in a single consonant — which both Raffles and I had missed — served as a salutary reminder as to who was the trained detective in this case and who were the impostors.

"I foresee," said Tral, "that much may hinge on that remark of Héléne's. But here we are," he added, as the horse jingled again to a standstill, "at the Rue Chalgrin. Now for sister Denise and her — in the trenchant words of Colette — 'low, lying, de-

graded, semi-bankrupt waster' of a husband, Paul."

His jerk at the bellpull set up a clangour within and brought to the door a tall, singularly pleasant-faced young man wearing a smoking-jacket. "Yes, I am Paul Bechtel," he said. "Yes, my wife is here. Please come in."

In marked contrast to the hall in which we had interviewed Héléne, the one into which we were now invited was warm, cosy, homely, lighted by a fringed standard-lamp. Between draped portières framing the open door of an unpretentious parlour, a fair-haired young woman appeared, saying, "Who is it, Paul dear?"

Her husband glanced at the card Tral had handed him, and said, in some surprise, "Divisional-Inspector Louis Tral, Rue de la Pompe."

"Indeed?" In her blue eyes was no sign of perturbation, only of polite inquiry. Though the elder, she was smaller than her sister, more simply dressed, and her whole appearance suggested — to me at least — the sweetness, gentleness, and placidity of a woman content in her marriage. "What can we do for Inspector Tral?" she said.

"I'm told," said Tral, "that you possess a necklace of twenty-one diamonds. I have reason to ask, madame, whether I may, if you please, see it."

"You're seeing it," she said. She moved forward into the hall, and the light kindled a sudden sparkle at her

throat. "I put it on this evening," she said, "because my father, who gave it to me, is a dying man, and whatever his feelings toward me — I'm afraid they're not kindly — I can't help my thoughts dwelling on him tonight, and I feel sorry for him, and wish him well."

"Correct me," said Tral, "if my eyes deceive me, but I seem to count in the necklace you're wearing only fifteen diamonds."

Denise glanced up at her husband with a little smile. She put a hand in his. "Inspector," she said, "we've had rather a struggle during the three years we've been married. Now and then, to help out, I've *insisted* on selling a diamond from my necklace."

"Precisely as your father predicted!" Tral exclaimed. "Oh, yes, madame, I know all about that. I also know that, unless your necklace is intact, you can't qualify for participation in his estate."

"Oh, no," she said, "I'm totally disqualified, I'm afraid. I only hope that my sister Colette isn't."

"A sentiment, if I may say so," said Tral, "of remarkable generosity, in view of the fact that, according to my information, you've not been on speaking terms with her for the past three years!"

Her face clouded. "That's true, I'm sorry to say. As children, we were allies in a difficult home; we were everything to each other. But later — well, frankly, Colette was in love with Paul here. He married me. And I'm afraid Colette's a little like

father — she doesn't forgive very easily."

Tral's eyes probed her. "This afternoon your old nurse H el ene called on you. She asked if your necklace were intact. Why did you lie to her?"

Paul Bechtel flushed angrily, but Denise in her calm voice said, "For the simple reason, Inspector, that if H el ene knew I was disqualified from all participation in my father's estate, she'd feel even more bitter toward him than she does already. The knowledge might easily have made her — the only person who can do anything whatever for him — walk out of his house and leave him to his fate. So when she told me of his testamentary intentions, and asked if my necklace were intact, I just patted her hand and said, 'Yes, of course.' Later will be quite soon enough for her to learn the truth."

There was a moment of silence, then Tral said, "Thank you. That will be all for the present."

Back in the brougham, bound for Colette's home in the Avenue Mozart, Tral said, "Well, my friends, was that a truthful, generous-hearted, and charming young woman? Or was she lying and was that necklace really Colette's and had Denise and her husband removed six diamonds from it, and hidden them, because our visit was expected and we were to be thereby hoodwinked?"

"It seems a tricky point to me," said Raffles, and I agreed with him.

"Oh, come!" said Tral. "Obviously, Denise wouldn't dare produce a neck-

lace of fifteen diamonds to me, then produce afterward a necklace of twenty-one to her father's executors! No, she was telling the truth. The one who's lying is Colette. She lied when she told H  l  ne her necklace was intact. Knowing how much depended on it, she'd have lied — to give herself time to think — if the Archangel Gabriel himself had put the question to her. My friends, it will grieve you, as it grieves me, to know that the woman-hating jeweller was right in his cynical prediction. *Neither* girl has kept her necklace intact! When Denise told H  l  ne she had done so, that was a so-called 'white lie.' On it, this whole case turns. As I foresaw, H  l  ne's use of the plural is significant. 'It is well,' remarked that good woman, 'that you have your necklaces intact.' To whom was this remark addressed? Obviously not Denise, since H  l  ne visited Denise first. It was addressed to Colette. What did it tell Colette? It told her that Denise had *her* necklace intact. And the thought made Colette desperate. What did she do? She promptly ran to the police station in the Rue de la Pompe with a tale that she had been robbed. What was her object? Without doubt, it was to try to create, right at the outset, at least sufficient doubt as to make possible a subsequent litigation over the will. I shall now set about finding a way to break her down — compel her to withdraw her charge before she lies her way to the witness-bar and a perjury indictment."

I was still thinking over this very able analysis when the horse jingled to a stop in the Avenue Mozart. The house was a large one.

"Guyomar?" said the *conci  rge* who answered Tral's ring. "Seventh floor left."

Though each landing was lighted by a gas-jet, pulsing bluely in a wire cage, the carpeted staircases were in almost total darkness. We groped our way up on Tral's heels, and in response to his tattoo on the knocker of the seventh floor left, the door was flung open.

"At last!" exclaimed Colette in her vivid, fiery way, so different from the placid manner of her sister. "Why so long? Come in, come in!"

The salon into which she led us was furnished with far more pretention than the simple parlour of Denise and Paul Bechtel. Impressive oil-paintings in gilded frames hung on the walls.

"Well?" she demanded, her fine eyes sparkling. "My necklace! You've recovered it?"

"Madame," said Tral, "is it your intention formally to charge your sister and her husband with the theft of a necklace of twenty-one diamonds?"

"Yes, yes! I'll drag them through every court in the land!"

"That evidently," said Tral. "First, then, I'll examine the bedroom."

"In here," she said eagerly. "The light's already on." She threw open a door to the right. "There! You see? Everything is just as I found it — the

window wide open to the fire-escape, the mist stealing in, the drawer of the dressing-table open, the necklace in its case gone!"

Tral pointed his pipestem at her suddenly. His voice was hard. "Why keep a diamond necklace in a flimsy drawer when there's a safe in the other room?"

The abrupt question came as a shock to her. I saw her eyes widen. Personally, I had seen no sign whatever of a safe in the other room. I glanced at Raffles. He was looking at Tral with such genuine respect that I knew that he, too, had seen no sign of a safe in the other room.

Hastily, breathlessly, Colette said, "It's nothing to do with me, that safe. It has no bearing. It's my husband's, for his business papers. He —"

"It occurs to me," said Tral, "that you may have suffered all your anxiety needlessly — that, in fact, the person who broke into this room was just an ordinary burglar and that he went away empty-handed. No, wait please! Where there's a safe in a house, and a wife possesses diamonds, then a husband often is insistent that those diamonds be kept in that safe. Further," said Tral implacably, "should he come upon those diamonds in an insecure place, then he is quite apt to snatch them up with a curse and put them in the safe himself. Believe me, madame, I speak from experience. I've known this very thing to happen. Many times. Now, you mentioned, I recall, that it was some nights since you'd had occasion to wear your necklace.

Also, that your husband went away yesterday on business. To satisfy ourselves, therefore, before we proceed further, that it wasn't an ordinary burglar who broke in here and went away empty-handed, I must ask if you've looked to make sure that your necklace isn't in the safe, placed there by your husband in a moment of marital vexation?"

"No, no," she said. "Impossible!"

She was very pale. She was badly shaken. So accustomed were Raffles and I to being in the position of the hare, rather than of the hounds approved by society, that for myself, I was beginning to sweat from sympathy with her. I had to admire the spirit with which she shouted at Tral, "Your whole suggestion is imbecile!"

"*Merci*," said Tral. "Nevertheless, have you checked? If not, we'd better do so at once."

He strode back into the salon. In obvious distress, she followed him almost at a run. Exchanging a glance, Raffles and I followed, too.

Tral looked at us. "You'll note, Mr. Jay, Mr. Bunney, that all the pictures in this room are suspended by long wires from a high picture-rail. With one exception. I refer to this medium-sized *Courtiers at the Tuileries*, after Delacroix, above the escritoire here. This particular painting is suspended by a short wire from a nail. Why the exception unless for convenience in removing and replacing this particular painting? I infer that this picture conceals one of the wallsafes now much in use." He lifted down the pic-

ture. "Voilà!" he said. "A recent model of a keyless combination-lock lever wall-safe. Now, if you will please open it, madame, and check that —"

"Impossible!" she gasped. "Only my husband knows the combination. He's away. He can't be reached. He won't be back. It's —"

"A predicament," agreed Tral, and he rubbed his bearded cheek with his pipestem.

I could not help feeling sorry for Colette. She looked dreadful. I understood, now, the skill and cunning of this Paris detective. He had judged from Colette's reaction to his mention of the safe — the presence of which he had spotted so cleverly — that, just as Denise had done, so, too, had Colette sold *some* of the diamonds from her necklace; and that what remained were in the safe — to give the lie to her entire story that her intact necklace had been stolen.

Suddenly Tral pointed his pipestem at Raffles.

"Now, here, Mr. Jay," said Tral, "is where your presence is fortunate. Madame, Mr. A. Jay here is an English expert on burglary and safes. With your permission, Mr. Jay will see if his study of techniques is equal to ferreting out this combination for us. Mr. Jay —"

Poor Colette swayed. She put out a trembling hand to a chair back. I saw Tral's left eyelid flicker at Raffles in a shadow of a wink. I understood. Raffles was being recruited to go through the motions of cracking the

combination, so bringing Colette to such a pitch of strain — as she watched — that before the crucial moment she would break down and confess.

Slowly, Raffles walked forward to the safe. Thus to lend himself to a device for stripping from a misguided young woman her last poor rags of pride must have gone bitterly against the grain with him. Yet he could not do otherwise. Tral believed him a colleague, a detective. He had no choice but to play the part through.

Never in our felonious experience had I known a stranger situation. There, before the very eyes of the Paris detective — certainly one of the ablest detectives in Europe — was Raffles, the neatest cracksman in London, manipulating the combination of a safe.

There was not a sound in the room.

After an almost careless twist or two of the small cylinder of the combination, Raffles seemed to settle to the task. He brought an ear close to the cylinder. His face was keen, his hair dark and crisp, his evening black-and-white immaculate. His brown, lithe fingers moved delicately. I dared not look at Colette. I was acutely conscious of her beside me, of the fern fragrance of the perfume she used, of her slim, clenched hands and her pent breath.

Raffles's grey eyes roamed over us sidelong. They seemed not to see us. They looked through us. We might not have been there. His expression was remote, withdrawn, abstracted.

He was biting at his lip, as in a concentration akin almost to pain. Then, suddenly, his face cleared and the tension of his posture relaxed. He nodded, put a hand on the lever. And Colette sprang like a cat, catching him by the wrist.

"No!" she blazed. "You shan't! You shan't! You shall not open my husband's safe! I won't have it! I won't *have* it!" She hurled his hand from her. She was raging. "Get out!" she shouted. "All of you! Out! Out! Get out of my home!"

"Madame," said Tral blandly, "what does this mean? Am I to take it that you wish to withdraw your charge against your sister and her husband?"

"Damn you," she panted, "all right, I withdraw it! All *right*, all *right*! Now, go! Damn my father's money! I won't lower myself — I don't want it — I won't touch it — I don't care —" Her voice broke. She brushed back a fallen lock of hair savagely from her forehead. "Go! Get out! *Leave me alone!*"

Her voice rose in a wail. She pressed her hands to her face. She rushed into the bedroom. The slam of the door made the windows rattle. There was an outcry of bedsprings as she flung herself on the bed.

This time it was Raffles who winked. He winked at Tral. He gave the lever of the safe a jerk. The safe-door remained immovable. He and Tral grinned at each other. Raffles took up the picture and replaced it on its nail.

"Good enough," said Tral. "*En avant!*"

He clapped on his hat, and I followed him from the apartment, Raffles bringing up the rear. There was little satisfaction in me; but as I groped after the detective down those seven flights of dark stairs, I could hear him laughing to himself.

"No need for Denise to know anything about Colette's 'burglary' charge," Tral's voice came up to me. It sounded hollow in the dark stairwell. "I found a pretty neat way to break her down, *hein?* Better than to let her go on to the point of perjury. You backed my hand superbly, Mr. Jay. Why, do you know what?"

Raffles made no reply. Surprised by his silence, I peered round. The hair rose up on my head. I could see no shadow of him, hear no sound of his footsteps.

Raffles was not with us!

"Do you know what, Mr. Jay?" Tral's voice came up to me.

"What?" I said, trying with parched lips to sound like Raffles.

"Why, you did it so well at the safe," came Tral's voice, "that for a second you had me worried. I don't know just why, but a worried feeling came over me. You know, you should have been an actor, Mr. Jay!"

I forced a laugh, trying to make it sound like Raffles feeling gratified. My head was a tumult of surmises. I kept peering back up, and very nearly fell headlong. Tral, with me making as much noise as possible just behind him, almost had reached the ground-

floor lobby. Suddenly I caught a sound, and I knew it was Raffles coming. He was coming down from the top of this dark, tall house, racing down the seven flights of black staircases, with flying feet, recklessly, risking his neck to overtake us. I felt him check himself just behind me, and heard his quickened breathing, at the very instant Tral emerged into the lobby and the *concierge* came out, scratching, from his cubbyhole to let us forth into the night.

Never had the cool touch of mist been so grateful on my burning face.

"It's very late," said Tral, turning to us as he opened the door of the brougham. "Still, we really must have one small drink before we part. I insist!"

"Delighted," said Raffles. "In you get, Bunny."

I ducked into the brougham, but, had I been able, gladly would have ducked out again when I heard Tral's direction to the coachman.

"Hotel des Reunions, Avenue Victor Hugo," Tral said. He was chuckling as he got in with us, pulling the door shut. "We may find one or two of our colleagues still about at the hotel," he said, "It is *chic*, this little affair of the jeweller's daughters. It might divert our colleagues."

To my intense relief, however, we found the huge foyer almost deserted, and looking gloomier than ever with most of its lights turned out. Sitting at one of the occasional tables on the lower level, we had a couple of brandies apiece, brought to us by the

night porter; then Tral excused himself.

"I must let my coachman go off duty," he said. He looked at us with his blue, shrewd, disconcerting eyes. "Well, Mr. Jay and Mr. Bunney, I hope you don't regret missing the after-dinner speeches. And that we'll meet again some time — in your bailiwick or mine. *À bientôt, hein?*"

"*À bientôt!*" we echoed warmly, and, with a final handshake, off he strode in his vigorous way, cape swinging, bohemian black felt hat atilt, the pipe smoke of achievement tossing back over his shoulder.

"Damned clever chap," said Raffles admiringly, as we sank back into our chairs with sighs of relief. "He ran rings around us, Bunny. I don't think we contributed a single detail to the detection, did we? Still, it's his line, of course. Trained man."

"Raffles," I said tensely, "you *did* crack that combination!"

"Now, there again," said Raffles, "the cobbler is well advised who sticks to his last. Of course I cracked it. And I left the front door ajar when I came out. All I had to do was see you two started down the stairs, then nip back in and — this time *turning* the lever before pulling it — open the safe door. Poor Colette was crying buckets in the bedroom."

"And the diamonds?" I demanded.

"She had nine left, in the safe. I scribbled her a note — unsigned, of course — telling her Denise had fifteen, and they'd better join forces and make up one complete necklace.

That'll qualify one of them to inherit, and they really must work it out for themselves which it's to be and how they're to share the estate."

"Fifteen plus nine," I said, staring at him, "is twenty-four."

"Just so," said Raffles. "And, you know, Bunny, it's damned odd to think that because those two girls weren't on speaking terms neither would be qualified for a single franc from their father's estate, and we wouldn't be the richer by three superfluous diamonds, if it hadn't been for —"

He nodded across the foyer. The

night porter was standing before the easel, between its potted palms. He had a wooden box in his hand. Something seemed to be puzzling him. He glanced toward the doors on the left, then toward the doors on the right. He looked at the noticeboard again. He scratched his head. He shrugged. He slid the wooden letters out of their grooves into the box he carried, took up the easel and noticeboard under his arm, and walked off with them.

I heard a chuckle, beside me.

"Shall we go now, Mr. Bunney?" said A. J. Raffles.



NEXT MONTH . . .

Another don't-miss story —

BEN HECHT's *The Tired Horse*

DEPARTMENT OF "FIRST STORIES"

and another original for our **Black Mask** section

Paul E. Walsh's "\$100,000 a Pint" is one of the twenty-two "first stories" which won special awards in EQMM's Eleventh Annual Contest. It is a hardboiled yarn about a no-longer-young sharpie who realized that all he knew was how to doctor a deck of cards and steer a sucker into a fixed game — and the dangerous decision he made to rectify that state of affairs . . . At the time he submitted his story, the author was in his late twenties, married, and had one son. He began to write back in 1947 when he found himself on eight-hour stretches as a cryptographic technician, locked up in a code room and with more time on his hands than he had work. It has been a long pull for Mr. Walsh to sell his first story, but we hope the sale to EQMM is the beginning of a fruitful and successful career for him.

Mr. Walsh tells us that he was graduated from New York University cum laude, a member of Phi Beta Kappa, Alpha Kappa Delta, and Psi Chi. Then, engagingly but cynically, Mr. Walsh remarked in his letter: "I am informed that these last three honors together with one 15-cent token will assure my admission to any New York City subway station." True; but if while riding the subway Mr. Walsh should happen to hit on a big story idea, and if that particular story should carry Mr. Walsh further in his literary career . . . Well, you see, even honors have their hidden place in the scheme of things — as we have a gambler's hunch they will for Mr. Walsh.

\$100,000 A PINT

by PAUL E. WALSH

THE CROWD AT THE HIGH HAT CLUB was exactly the small-change, four-days-before-payday crowd that Arty had figured. The emcee was knocking himself out with off-color jokes and the hostesses were playing football with each other every time some soldier or farmer walked into the place and looked as if he had more than a ten spot on him. Three couples were dancing in rough time to the five man combo on the dance floor and there

was even less action in the gambling room, which was adroitly hidden from the ever-present eyes of the law by a two-foot curtain hung in a six-foot doorway.

Arty was working one of the dice tables, waiting patiently for a smooth-faced soldier to lose his limit and make a grand exit with the ancient blonde at his side when the two hard ones walked in. For a second he thought they were gunning for somebody and he decided that if anything popped, he could probably drop to the floor and sneak into the Ladies' Room without being seen. He knew that the window in there opened onto the parking lot. Then they bought some chips at the wheel and began to play, and Arty smiled, as he always did whenever he figured out a trump card and then didn't have to play it.

He didn't notice them after that except that they played just about every table in the setup. Eventually, they came over and shot some craps, when Arty's table was empty. The two hard ones were both tall and underweight, and they even looked alike except that one had bad teeth, kept a cigarette in his mouth all the time, and talked around it, his lips hardly moving.

"How's business?" he asked.

"Some win and some lose. We always win."

"Yeah. The boss always wins." The other hard one chuckled.

Bad Teeth asked, "Don't I know you from somewheres?"

"Maybe. I been somewhere."

"Detroit." He emphasized the De. "That's where it was. One O'clock Club, right?"

"I might have been there," Arty admitted.

"Yeah, Detroit. That's where it was." Bad Teeth was positive now, and he nodded several times as if to confirm the fact.

Thomas, the floor boss, came over and bent down to Arty's ear. "Hackett wants to see you," he whispered.

"I'm busy," Arty answered. He didn't turn around.

"He wants to see you even if you're busy."

Arty opened his mouth, closed it, shoved the rake into Thomas's hands, and went across the room through a short hallway to a door that didn't have any knob. When he was angry he walked fast, and the hard fold of belly shook slightly as his short legs stamped on the floor. He knocked. When the buzzer sounded, something clicked in the door. He pushed it and went in.

"Siddown," Hackett said. He didn't look up from the newspaper he was reading. Arty sat. After a while, Hackett looked up and smiled. He was a small, elegant man who liked to surround himself with big men. "This won't take a minute." He leaned forward. "Hear you been dropping a little on the ponies?"

Arty drew his feet up under his chair and started to get up.

Hackett stopped smiling. "You think it's none of my business, don't you? Maybe it is. Maybe I get ner-

vous when one of my tablemen's got money troubles."

Arty fidgeted and Hackett continued, "Somebody said you're in hock to the bookies."

"Somebody talks too damn much," Arty said.

"Maybe." Hackett went back to his paper. "If anything happens to your face, stay away from work until it heals. It's bad for business if they think we got a bunch of hoods working for us."

"Yeah. We wouldn't want them to think that, would we?" Arty didn't wait for an answer. On his way back to the table he thought: It's bad enough when I think about those bookies, but when I know somebody else knows about it, that makes it all the worse.

Play was slack the rest of the evening and he left before the club closed. He drove along Route 241 leading into the city. The only traffic at that time of night was taxis bringing soldiers back to the fort. Behind him he noticed a pair of lights that didn't have the taxi light on the roof. When he turned into Cuseta Road, they swung off too. He began to wonder. He owed the book over a thousand, but had never figured they would bump a guy for a lousy grand. But deep down he knew they might — if they wanted to make an example of him.

He couldn't outrun them with his car, so he decided to play it casual. He pulled in to the drive-in a few miles farther up, where he always

had a snack before he went home. There was only one car in the lot. Arty went inside, past the counter and down the hallway of private rooms for fishfry parties. He heard a car stop outside and a few seconds later the door of the place banged. He headed for the rear door when one of the doors of the private rooms opened in front of him. The man with the bad teeth stepped out, showed a few of them on either side of his cigarette as he smiled a greeting to Arty and held out a bottle of beer.

"How about a drink?" he asked quietly.

Arty hesitated a moment, heard footsteps in the counter-room, and went into the private room. The other hard one was there and he nodded hello. Arty sat down and watched while Bad Teeth came back to the table and poured a glass of beer. The three of them sat there, not saying a word, watching the head on the glass of beer settle, listening to the footsteps come down the hallway, and stop in front of each room, one by one, first on one side, then on the other. Arty took a sip of beer.

When the door opened they all looked up. Three young punks stood in the hallway, grinning, glassy-eyed. As they walked into the little room, the first one casually put on a pair of brass knucks and said to the two men from Detroit, "Blow." He didn't look at them again — he was so confident his order would be obeyed. That was his first mistake. Arty's two companions stood up, put their ciga-

rettes out, and started to leave. The three punks came forward a little and let the two men get in back of them as they moved toward the door. That was their second mistake. Arty got ready to move.

As the punks advanced, ready to perform their chore, the two men from Detroit gave the visitors a tremendous shove from behind, and at the same time, Arty picked up the table in his arms and threw it at the punks. Caught off balance by the shove, the punks let the table crash into them and send them reeling. That was all that was needed. Instantly, Arty jumped on them with fist and foot, and the two men from Detroit joined in. In less than a minute there was no sound or movement from the young trio lying on the floor.

Arty and the two hard ones straightened out their clothing, wiped some blood off, and walked out of the drive-in. As they drove towards the city, Arty broke out the emergency bottle he always kept in the glove compartment.

"Was I glad to see you boys in that room!"

"That's all right. Couldn't let an old friend from up North get roughed up by a bunch of Rebels."

The other man made a clucking noise in his throat and said, "Some laugh, this local talent. Big and tough when they're hopped up but they got as much backbone as a bowl of grits, I never seen it to fail."

Arty couldn't figure out their angle

but he knew they had one. They would never have interfered with any local business if they didn't have a good reason. Finally they put it on the table.

Bad Teeth simply said, "You're gonna help us heist your joint." He finished the bottle and threw it out the open window.

Arty was so surprised he almost lost control of the car. "Knock off Hackett's main joint? You're drunk."

"You just listen," Bad Teeth went on. "I was down here a year ago. I heard about him. Got a finger in every pie. He's never had a smell of trouble. Must be a little careless. They all get that way. I know he brings all the receipts from the other joints over to your place so he can count it and bank it the next day. Once a week he does that. Ten guys would bollix up a job like this. Two guys could pull it off — if they had a spotter on the inside. That's you."

"It would never work, not in a million years," Arty said.

"What if it don't? What's it cost you?"

When Arty didn't answer, Bad Teeth continued, "Maybe you couldn't use the dough. Maybe those punks were after the wrong guy. You get one-fifth. You ought to be able to figure how much that would be."

"But it's crazy," Arty replied. Nevertheless he started to figure out what one-fifth of Hackett's weekly gross would come to.

Bad Teeth pointed to the intersection they were approaching. "Let us

out here." Arty pulled over to the curb, still engrossed in his arithmetic.

"I don't know about this," Arty said.

"We're at the Chambers Hotel. Ask for George Martin. Got it? — George Martin."

"Yeah, George Martin."

They crossed to the dark side of the street and walked off while Arty stayed there thinking how much he needed the money and how much weight Hackett could throw around Pearl City. Finally, he put the car in gear and drove off. He thought: I'll be forty-three this year and I sure as hell don't want to spend the rest of my life shuffling chips. But what else can I do? I don't know nothing but how to doctor a deck of cards or steer a sucker into a game — always the sharp play. And where did it ever get me?

He pulled up in front of his answer, a rattle-trap frame house near the downtown section. He went inside and turned on the kitchen light. Just as he lit a cigarette, Alice came in from the bedroom. Without any makeup she looked older than he remembered. She sat down.

"Why aren't you in bed?" he asked gently.

She shook her head. "I couldn't sleep. Maybe I ought to get some more pills, don't you think, honey?" Her face lit up as she waited for his reply.

"Maybe you oughta see a doctor instead. You know I don't go for that stuff — taking pills to sleep."

"I know, honey," she whined. "But it hurts me. I don't like this place anyway. Believe me, if I had a few hundred I'd beat it back to the coast, wouldn't we, honey?"

"I'm working on something now," Arty said. He fingered the belt of her bathrobe.

"What race?" She stood up and moved to the sink.

"Nothing like that." His voice was suddenly angry.

"You're not kidding me, are you?" she pleaded.

"I ain't decided yet, that's all. Now put up some cocoa. Maybe we can both get some sleep on that."

When they had finished, she washed the cups and Arty dried them. His hands worked fast but when he was putting one of the cups back in the cupboard he hit the door and knocked off the cup handle. Arty swore, picked up the handle, and threw it and the cup into the wastebasket.

Alice picked them out and put them on the table. "It's all right, honey. I can still use it."

"Aw, throw it away," Arty said.

"No, I don't mind."

"We'll buy a new one — a whole set."

"I don't want to put money in new dishes, honey. I don't mind cracked ones, anyway."

"Will you throw it away!" he yelled. "I don't want to see you using it!" He glared at her.

She shrugged, and dropped the two pieces in the trash. He threw the towel on the table and said, "Sorry."

"Forget it, hon. Must have been a bad day."

"Yeah."

"Let's go to bed, huh?"

"You go ahead," he said. "I'll be in soon — soon as I finish this butt." She went into the bedroom and he sat by the window in the front room. The sun was just coming up. He thought: this is the most stinking time of the whole day, watching people get up. And I been awake to see it just about every day of my life since I was a kid.

He felt like crying . . .

The next afternoon he called the Chambers Hotel and arranged to meet the two men from Detroit in a bar. When he sat down in their booth, Bad Teeth said, "You'll never be sorry you got smart."

"When's it coming off?" Arty asked.

"As soon as you say."

"Just the two of you?"

"That's the ticket. We go in quiet, we go out quiet. No fuss. Nobody gets hurt. It's going to be a quickie."

"Sunday night," said Arty. "That's when the receipts come in from his other places. When it's all there, he puts it in the safe until the banks open Monday morning. The runners have to bring it in through the club to Hackett's office and they leave right away."

"Guards?" asked Bad Teeth.

"Two of his own boys are with him in the office all night. The last runner gets there about 9 o'clock. Right after that, they count it and lock it up."

"That's when it'll have to be — after the last runner and before they finish counting it."

"You guys will have to be in the joint before then. I can tip you off when the last runner leaves. I'll keep count."

"What about his office door?"

"No knob on the outside. You have to knock and wait for him to buzz. Then it opens when you push on it. I was thinking last night. I'll knock at the door, and when they push the buzzer, you guys are right close to me and you push me in and come right in after me, like you're forcing me in."

Bad Teeth smiled. "You're doing all right, for an amateur."

"When do I get my cut?"

"We'll hole up in the hotel for a few days — to let his mugs chase each other around town looking for us. Wait till we call you and we'll set a meeting place."

Arty stood up to go. "Just don't forget to call."

"Don't worry. You've got us pegged if we don't come across, don't you?"

"Yeah, I got you pegged, all right."

Arty left and drove to work. All the way there he went over the plan a hundred times, trying to find holes in it. There didn't seem to be any.

That was Wednesday. He called George Martin the next day, and on Friday, Saturday, and Sunday. Everything remained unchanged. They ironed out a few details, fixed their signals. Arty raised a couple of hun-

dred dollars and gave it to Alice to get herself some clothes. He told her that they might have to travel in a hurry. She didn't ask why.

At 5:30 on Sunday afternoon, he left for work as usual. They had a good crowd, which would make the two men from Detroit less conspicuous. He kept track of the runners and when the last one arrived, Arty signaled Bad Teeth who was feeding quarters into a slot machine near Hackett's door.

The runner stayed a long time and Arty looked around for someone to take over his table. A girl squealed as she made her point and as he was paying her off, the door of Hackett's office opened. The last runner came out talking to Thomas. Arty signaled for Thomas to take over the table, ignored the questions Thomas asked, and walked toward the office. He looked straight ahead as he walked but he sensed the two men drift in behind him as he neared Hackett's door.

He knocked quickly.

"Yeah?" It was one of the guards, close to the door on the inside.

"It's Arty. I got to see Hackett. Tell him it's important."

There was some conversation on the inside, then a chain was unlocked and the buzzer sounded. As soon as the door started to open under Arty's hand, he felt hands on his back and he was pushed into the room with such force that he fell on the floor.

Hackett and one of the guards were sitting behind the desk, which was

covered with bundles of money. The door slammed shut and they stood up, but froze there as Bad Teeth and the other hard one advanced, their guns drawn. The guard by the door had been bowled over by the force of their entrance, and under the motions of the two guns he crept behind the desk and stayed on the floor.

Hackett was so furious he stuttered, "What is this . . . what . . ."

"Shut up!" snarled Bad Teeth. "Down on the floor, everybody." He covered them with his gun while the other man tied their hands and feet with strips of adhesive tape and clamped pieces of tape over their mouths. Then he joined Bad Teeth in throwing the bundles of money into a black satchel that was on the desk. They worked swiftly, but just as Bad Teeth closed the bag, someone knocked at the door. Bad Teeth ran behind the desk and pressed the buzzer while Number Two stepped beside the door. Thomas walked in, and just as he reacted to the scene, the man by the door brought the barrel of his heavy automatic down on Thomas's head. Thomas's mouth fell open and he dropped to the floor like a sack of flour, saliva dribbling out onto the rug. The two men checked the adhesive tape, then quickly left the room.

Hackett, his eyes bulging above the tape, started to kick his legs against the desk. Arty rolled over to him and played at getting the tape off Hackett's mouth. He knew that Bad Teeth and his partner didn't need more than

a two- or three-minute lead to lose themselves in the city and get back to their hotel. He also knew that he had to make himself look good, too. When he had counted to one hundred and twenty, slowly, he yanked the tape off and Hackett let out with a howl. He kept it up until the housemen broke down the door and came into the room.

Nobody had noticed the two bandits leave the club. In fact, nobody had even been aware that the club had been robbed. Hackett chased the customers out, closed the joint, and in a few minutes the police arrived. He sat at his desk, speaking through clenched teeth, saying the same phrases over and over again. "I'll get them. They can't get away. I'll make them wish they could die."

The chief of detectives kept reassuring Hackett that they would pick up the bandits in a matter of hours. Finally, Hackett told him to shut up and get out and start looking for them himself. The chief of detectives left, with a hurt look on his face. Hackett was too excited to ask Arty why he had wanted to see him just before the bandits broke in, but Arty didn't think it would take Hackett very long to remember.

They were all sent home shortly after. Alice had heard the news on the radio and she asked if it meant that the deal was off about making some extra money. Arty told her it was still on. As he lay in bed that night, it seemed to him that it had all gone off perfectly.

The next morning, Hackett called all the housemen to the club. The police didn't have any news and Hackett was now convinced the two men had had inside help. He talked to the men one at a time. Arty figured out that somebody may have noticed the two men from Detroit at the club before. If that were true, he didn't want to be the last one to say so. When he was called in, he explained that he had wanted to ask Hackett about a different kind of job, one that would bring him more money. Hackett seemed to accept the story, but he wasn't in a mood to talk about anything except the heist.

As he was leaving, Arty mentioned that he thought he had seen the two men before.

"Yeah," Hackett answered. "Thomas thinks so, too. He remembers seeing them here about a week ago, at your table."

"Maybe that's why I remember," Arty said.

"I guess so. Think about it. Keep your eyes open." Hackett motioned Arty out.

Bad Teeth didn't call that day. Arty knew that the town was crawling with cops and with Hackett's own boys. He thought it would have been risky for Bad Teeth to have tried to phone. On Tuesday, there was still no word from the duo at the Chambers Hotel. Arty called and left a message for Mr. Martin to call his friend from Detroit.

When he didn't hear on Wednesday, Arty slipped his old revolver into

his pocket before he left for work. He had a two-hour break for supper and instead of driving home to eat with Alice, he drove downtown and parked across the street from the Chambers Hotel.

As he was rolling up the window before locking the car, a cab pulled up across the street and honked its horn. Arty waited. Bad Teeth and his partner scurried out of the hotel doorway, each carrying a suitcase, and Bad Teeth carrying the black satchel. Arty gave him a short lead, then followed. They drove across town and got out. When the cab was out of sight, they walked two blocks farther and entered a rundown transient hotel.

Arty parked and got out. Immediately, he ducked behind the car as the Number Two man came out of the hotel and walked briskly towards a bus stop a couple of blocks down the street. Since he didn't have the satchel, Arty went into the hotel.

An old man was dozing at the desk. He didn't wake up as Arty opened the register. There were two unrecognizable scrawls and the number 14 printed in the room column. Arty closed the book and tiptoed upstairs. In the hallway, he walked close to the wall so that he wouldn't make any of the floorboards squeak. A light shone through the dusty transom over the door of Room Number 14.

Arty could hear water running inside. He was glad it was the type of flophouse where the doors wouldn't lock except from the outside. He

picked up on the handle to keep the hinges from making any noise and swung the door open swiftly. Inside, he took out his gun and shut the door. The room was empty.

Bad Teeth called out from the bathroom, "Ernie?"

Arty said nothing.

Bad Teeth came out, wiping his face with a towel. He did a thorough job, finished, threw the towel on the bed, and then saw Arty. He almost jumped straight up in the air.

"What's the gun for?" He struggled to get his voice to a normal pitch. "I told you to stay away from us. It's too dangerous." He put on his shirt and went over to pull down the window shades. By the time he finished, he had recovered his composure.

Arty said, "I figured it might be dangerous if I *didn't* come around. You forgot to leave a forwarding address."

Bad Teeth tried to shrug it off. "That place was too near the center of town." His face and forehead started to sweat.

Arty growled, "Yeah."

"We were going to call you. Ernie's out now doing it." He lit a cigarette, shakily.

"He won't find me home," Arty said. "So I'll just take my cut here and now."

Bad Teeth laughed, a jerky hollow laugh. "Well, we don't exactly have it here. We took it . . ."

"I saw you come in," Arty said. "You had it exactly then."

Bad Teeth moved his shoulders re-

signedly, bent down, dragged the black satchel from under the bed, and set it on a night table. "We were going to call you today," he said.

"Open it."

Bad Teeth bit his lip and opened the bag. He started to count out some bills.

"Don't bother counting it," Arty said. "Just leave it all there."

"Don't be crazy," the other man said. "You'll never get away with it. Ernie'll be back in a minute."

"Maybe if you and the bag are gone, he'll go looking for you instead of me," Arty suggested. Bad Teeth's face wore a stupid, twitching look of hatred. As Arty reached for the satchel, Bad Teeth jumped, pushing them both over the bed. The gun clattered onto the floor and Arty's feet swept the table lamp to the floor, throwing the room into darkness.

Arty landed on top and he felt for the other man's face. Bad Teeth's arm was under his body and Arty got a grip on his throat. He tried to make his hands meet under the soft flesh. The man was gagging, trying to suck in air, trying to make noises. His arm came up from his side accompanied by a steel-clicking sound and Arty sobbed out loud as the small knife slid into his back and shoulder.

The arm drew back for another lunge but Arty found strength enough to increase the pressure on the other's throat and he leaned into his work, rocking gently back and forth until the man's legs stopped moving. It

took a long time, but finally they stopped. Arty didn't think: this man is dead, I killed him. Only: he has stopped moving; I can get up and go now.

Arty stumbled to his feet.

The only noise in the dark room was the sound of Arty breathing heavily through his mouth. He waited for the dizziness to pass but it didn't go away. His arm moved in a cautious semicircle through the air until he felt the light cord. He fumbled a moment before he got the end, then jerked it. Yellow light flooded out of the fly-specked bulb over the squalid room. As the light swung in crazy arcs at the end of the chain, the man on the floor was first in darkness, then light, darkness, then light. He was lying on his back, his legs slightly bent, his mouth open, tongue out, and his fingers were rigid sections of steel tubing, trying hard to encompass something. They would never make it.

Arty sniffed phlegm back into his nasal passages, and by blinking his eyes rapidly a few times, finally focused on the door. He kept looking at the door while he reached for the black satchel, picked it up, and walked out of the room. He didn't look back. Nobody noticed him as he went down the hall, down a flight of stairs, passed the old man still sleeping at the register desk with his mouth open, and stepped out into the night.

As he walked across the street towards his car, the street light behind him cast an exaggerated shadow that

grew bigger with every step. It resembled a gorilla carrying a trunk. Little drops of blood dripped from his fingertips, hit the pavement, and moved fractions of an inch after him, carried by the momentum of their fall, before the dust on the street absorbed them. Arty wasn't aware of this. He got in and started the motor. Then he opened the bag and fingered a few of the bundles of money on top of the pile. That was when he noticed the blood. He looked at it briefly, without interest, and put the car in motion.

At the first corner he hit a red light and stopped. A car came alongside, and out of the corner of one eye he saw on the door the shield of the Pearl City Police Department. Instantly he thought: if these dummies stop me, I'd better play drunk, and even if they take me in they probably won't search the car. He slid the bag to the floor and shoved it under the seat. When the light changed and the police car drove off, Arty sighed.

The breeze coming through the open window chilled his face, but he left it that way to keep himself awake. The last few nights he would have been glad to sleep, but they had been his nights to worry. Well, all his worries were stale beer and cigarette ashes now. He chuckled out loud at the comparison.

As he drove along now, his head cleared; but then the pain came with it. He felt as though a drug were wearing off. The seat was very bloody. Maybe two pints — at, say, \$100,000

a pint. But Bad Teeth had given up all his nice living breath and poor Ernie would have to hightail it back to Detroit with empty pockets. He'd never know whether Hackett's boys had caught up with Bad Teeth or if some mugger was looking for a fast fifty and unexpectedly hit a jackpot.

In the midst of these speculations Arty had to force himself to think what to do. He couldn't travel far with his wound. And if he didn't get to a doctor soon, he'd be through. Worse still, if he went to a doctor it was a sure thing that either the cops or Hackett's boys would get word of it within a few hours.

At the next avenue he turned and headed for the outskirts of town. He drove fast and a few miles from the club, he drove off the highway.

With his good arm he slowly divided the money into two equal piles. He threw one pile in the bag and the other into the back seat. He carefully got into the back himself and slowly stuffed the bundles of money down under the seat. It meant he would have to tear the seat apart later to get the money out, but he wouldn't mind then. When he made sure there were no signs of what he had done, he got back in front and drove to the club. His wound had clotted by now, but he felt very weak and giddy.

He parked in the lot, locked the car, and carried the bag inside. He walked straight toward Hackett's office and he heard gasps from the crowd as he walked. He was afraid

that if he took his eyes off the door to Hackett's office he would fall down. The houseman ran over to him, but he ignored them, and when he got to the door he began to kick at it. Thomas opened it a crack and when he saw Arty he flung the door open and let him in.

Arty barely made it to a chair and sat down. He felt the wound opening up from his exertions. While Thomas gaped, Hackett came around the desk and shoed the crowd out. When he turned around again, Arty held up the satchel weakly. Hackett jumped at it and dumped the contents on his desk.

"What happened to you?" he asked.

"Went out to eat and saw those two muggs — couldn't reach you — followed them to a hotel — tried to hold them up — they jumped me . . . Already split the dough — I got one — other got away with his half — I don't know where." Arty felt himself getting weaker as he talked, but he had to make his big play before he passed out.

"I'll make it up to you," Hackett said. "Believe me, Arty, I will."

Arty motioned him closer. "He said he'd get the boys — from Detroit — come down to teach me a lesson . . . You got to help me — help me get away. That's the main thing — soon as I can travel. Me and Allie . . ."

Hackett gathered the bills together in his arms and picked up the phone. He looked solemnly at Arty and said, "For what you did for me, nothing but the best. I'll set you up any place you want to go." He spoke into the phone, "Get the hospital, doll, and fast!"

He looked at Arty and repeated, "Any place you say." He looked at the blood on the bills and shook his head sadly.

Arty sighed and relaxed in the chair. "The West coast is nice," he said. Then he wondered what would happen if Ernie ever did bring back some boys from Detroit. He guessed there was some way Hackett could handle it.

Just before he passed out, three words ran crazily through his head, over and over . . .

Half a loaf . . . half a loaf . . . half . . .



DEPARTMENT OF "FIRST STORIES"

and another original for our **Black Mask** section

Tom Karsell's "Young Man in a Hurry" is one of the twenty-two "first stories" which won special awards in EQMM's Eleventh Annual Contest. It is the tale of a young "tough" — conceited, vain, a real "pretty boy" and "big shot." The author is undoubtedly a sharp observer, and he has projected not only an acute characterization of his "hero" but also a convincing general background.

Mr. Karsell was born in Bloomington, Indiana, and he studied in Indianapolis and Colorado Springs to become an editorial cartoonist. Instead, as fate manipulated it, he went to work for the famous Hodding Carter as a reporter on the Greenville, Mississippi "Delta Democrat-Times." Later he became City Editor of that renowned Southern newspaper, and at the time he wrote his first fiction piece he was up the ladder to Managing Editor. Also at the time he wrote "Young Man in a Hurry," Mr. Karsell was 34 years old, married, the father of two "small terrors," and enjoying a Nieman Fellowship at Harvard, awarded to only twelve journalists each year.

Your Editors especially liked the closing sentence in Mr. Karsell's letter: he wrote, "Of course, like my boss, Hodding Carter, I'm an old EQMM fan." Do you feel us glow?

YOUNG MAN IN A HURRY

by TOM KARSELL

RICK PATTED HIS LEFT SIDE A FEW inches below his armpit and turned toward the mirror. He frowned, his black eyebrows merging over the bridge of his nose. When he caught sight of his face, the frown left — he was so pleased with his appearance while frowning that he could not maintain the expression. Rick went

back to his business — that of assessing the bulge under his left arm. His face became serious again, preoccupied with his image in the mirror.

He didn't really like what he saw but he knew he'd have to be satisfied with it until he could have a suit specially tailored with extra room on the left side. Lots of guys had

them made that way, and he could too some day.

The trouble was, Rick liked his suits to fit "snug," as he called it. This brown suit was over two years old and wasn't purchased for what he had in mind now. The wide chalk stripes accented the increased dimensions of his left side because more stripes showed on that side than on the right. Moreover, the top button of the double-breasted coat pulled, forming arrows of fold in the coat front.

The hell with it, he told himself. Even if it wasn't exactly what he wanted it would do the job.

He inspected the rest of himself.

Not quite tall enough, he felt, but still, five feet eight was okay. His face was fine, he knew. He was aware of being handsome because everyone said he was. A lot of people who didn't know his name called him "Pretty Boy" or "Lover," and some less flattering names as well, but he didn't mind as long as they conceded his good looks.

His body was rather thicker than he liked. His broad shoulders seemed to establish the bulk of him since his waist was only slightly narrower and he had no hips at all; they tapered into his middle. Like an ape, he often told himself, but not wholly in disapproval.

Rick was proud of his small feet, which he encased in expensive shoes. When it came to buying footwear, Rick went wild. Sometimes he spent as much as eight dollars a pair. The

shoes he had on were off-brown, toward yellow, with a lot of fancy work on the toes: little holes and jagged-edged overlaps, where the leather was joined. Rick kept them so polished that they were dazzling. And to show them off, he habitually wore loud socks and had his trousers cut a full inch above his shoe tops.

Now he carefully rearranged his short, wide tie so that the flare at the bottom covered a small stain on his solid brown shirt. The tie was a brilliant red satin number with a hand-painted flower. It was his favorite. In fact, he was wearing all his favorite clothes today.

Except for the excessive bulge, he liked what the mirror told him.

Rick slid into his overcoat and spread a handkerchief in the breast pocket so that half of it showed and all four points were displayed. He fitted a broad-brimmed black hat onto his head and studied himself once more before turning the rear brim down. He liked the dangerous look it gave him.

From a littered desk Rick took a wallet which he stuffed into his trousers and then he left the room, dropping his key into his overcoat pocket. He strode purposefully down the hall and around the corner to the ancient elevator, which he rode downstairs. Metal heel-plates on his shoes clicked against the hotel's tile floor and when the man behind the desk heard the regular clink, clink, clink, he showed recognition before even looking up.

"Hey, Palermo," he called out.

Rick stopped and without turning his body looked at the gnome-like bald man behind the counter. "Yeah, watcha need, friend?"

"You bust that lamp in your room?" the desk clerk asked.

"Lamp? Who said anything about a lamp bein' busted?"

"The maid found it in your dresser drawer when she was cleaning up." The clerk looked tiredly at Rick.

"What she doin' in my drawer anyway? Ain't a guy got a right to some privacy in this place?"

"It'll be three bucks, Palermo," the bald man said evenly. "Three bucks — I'll put it on your bill."

"Turn blue, buster!" Rick spat at the man, feeling his stomach muscles tighten. Involuntarily his hand went to his left side. He stroked the lump under his arm tenderly but without another word he pushed through the double doors of the Hotel Meeker onto the sidewalk.

Lucky to be still standing there behind the counter, alive and kicking, after messing around with Rick Palermo, he told himself. He forgave himself for not having got really tough with the desk man. Next time, he thought — yeah, the very next time. He wouldn't allow himself to think beyond the decision that the next time was to be the last time he would put up with the desk man's insults.

Rick bent against the wind as he clanked down the sidewalk, taking overlarge steps. At a newsstand he bought a late city edition of the

Tribune. He had asked for the "Trib" in a clipped way he felt befitted a man in a hurry who also needed to know what was going on. As he left the newsstand, Rick scarcely glanced at the headlines before he folded the paper twice and slid it into his coat pocket. He liked the way newspapers looked when they were carried in overcoat pockets — not just any overcoat pockets, but the kind that were flat across the top. He would never have carried a paper in his other coat because it had slash pockets, and somehow it looked wrong with a newspaper jutting angularly from the pocket.

Although he had the next twenty-four hours to himself, he walked rapidly. He was a man in a hurry. He felt it looked idle and unimportant to walk slowly, or even leisurely, so he always walked fast, bringing his heels down hard against the pavement.

Several times he thought he noticed girls looking at him as they scurried through the lunch hour. Rick looked away from them so that they could stare at him without feeling self-conscious. But he stared at a well-built young woman swinging down the sidewalk in front of him and he was momentarily tempted to slow his pace in order to stay behind her longer and enjoy the feeling of warmth she brought him merely by walking ahead of him. He discarded the idea when several other girls came toward them, for it seemed necessary that he maintain his swift gait to stay

in character. So he passed the woman ahead of him and glanced sideways at her when he walked by. He saw that she had protruding teeth, framed by a crimson circle of heavily painted lips.

What a dog, he told himself, what a real dog! And without actually thinking it through, he somehow got the impression that her handsomely constructed body didn't go with her plain face — the reverse of himself. Then he shuddered in disgust without quite understanding why.

Busy with these meditations, Rick was surprised to look up and see Ted's Place directly in front of him. His pace had carried him to his destination faster than he would have believed possible. He shoved the door open and went inside. Rick stood a moment in the foyer until his eyes grew accustomed to the dimness; then he walked to the bar, where he took a stool at the far end so that he could keep his eyes on the entranceway.

"Hi ya, Pretty Boy! What you havin'?" asked the bartender.

Rick made his face frown and raised his left arm to look at the watch on his wrist. He made a ritual of pushing back the sleeve of his coat, to expose the complicated-looking timepiece. Then he concentrated a moment before he spoke. "Gimme a shot of rye — and a beer for a chaser." He made his voice low.

The bartender nodded and left to fill the order. Rick saw a blonde woman across the bar glance at him, so he reached for his paper and unfolded it before him. He didn't

bother with the front page, but turned directly to the sports page. Although he tried hard to read a story about a baseball game, it was useless. He couldn't keep his interest going past the first paragraph. He then tried to read another story, this one about a horse race; but all he got from it was that the winner's name was Landslide and that he had been a long shot.

Rick wanted to go on reading the page for the benefit of the blonde but he found it impossible to stare at a bunch of words in which he had no interest; so he turned one page, hoping for something better, and hit the comics. He shifted the paper so that none of the other patrons would see which page it was and began reading Dick Tracy. He had just got through the second panel when the bartender returned with his drinks. Rick hastily closed the paper, laying it on the bar while he fished for a dollar bill.

"You make anything on Landslide?" Rick asked, knowing the bartender played the horses.

"Hell, no!" The bartender grimaced. "A guy told me that Landslide wouldn't even place, so I laid down heavy on Randy Ann." He looked at Rick with new interest. "You bet on Landslide?"

"Yeah, a little." He spun one of the coins the bartender had given him in change. "I got some advance dope though. I'd have probably laid on Randy Ann too except for the tip." He used the bartender's word "laid"

— he had never heard it used that way before.

“Well, that’s the way it goes,” the man behind the bar intoned mournfully, adding with half hope, “Get any more hot ones, how’s about letting me in on ’em?”

“Sure, glad to — keep it in mind.” Rick spoke with what he hoped was convincing modesty.

Rick picked up the jigger of rye and turned it between his thumb and forefinger a moment before tossing it down. The blonde, he noticed, was watching. He drew his lips away from his teeth, as he had often seen straight drinkers do, and shook his head. Then he swallowed a gulp of beer, glad that the burning sensation had passed.

Rick left the stool after again consulting his watch with much ceremony. He walked to the coat rack where he hung his overcoat. Making certain that the blonde was still watching him, Rick patted his left side, squeezing the lump so that its outline was visible to anyone watching. He tried to make the gesture seem spontaneous. He then returned to the stool, where he sipped his beer slowly, glancing at the blonde.

When he finished the beer, he let a half dollar clang on the bar and the bartender walked over to him. “I guess I could use another beer,” Rick announced. The barman nodded and turned to get the beer. “See if the lady over there will have something, Mac.” The bartender looked at Rick and followed his eyes across the bar to the blonde.

“Yeah, she’ll have somethin’ okay. She wants a bourbon on the rocks and she’ll drink as many as you can buy.”

Rick felt his face redden in anger. He was just about to tell the man off when the bartender left. Rick was still sore when he saw him put a drink down in front of the blonde, say something to her, then jerk his thumb over his shoulder toward Rick. The blonde nodded toward Rick, half smiling, and lifted her glass toward him before she swallowed a healthy slug. Rick allowed himself to grin at her and he left his bar stool again, this time taking his beer with him.

He didn’t want to walk right over to where she was sitting. He felt that would be too obvious, so he walked around the corner of the bar to where the juke box stood and contracted with the machine for a quarter’s worth of music. Only when strains of *Moonglow* started blaring from the big red machine did Rick approach the woman.

“Thanks for the drink, Mister,” she said as Rick took a stool beside her.

“Yeah,” he answered. “Glad to — real glad to.” Rick stared at the blonde’s profile. It wasn’t bad, Rick thought, not bad at all. She wore an awful lot of paint, he decided, but he rather liked that: it made her look artificial and exciting. Rick liked artificial women. They were usually more sophisticated and he worshipped sophistication. She was an older woman too — maybe thirty, he figured by the lines in the corners of her

eyes and the pebbly texture underneath them. She wasn't fat at all, but she was plump — just the way Rick liked them. He studied the way her arm joined her body. It was full and while not muscular, it seemed firm. Her breasts were full too — they pushed against the tight material of her shiny black blouse. Below, she was obviously girdled — her flat belly fitted her upper torso with a roll at her waist.

"You live around here somewhere?" he asked.

"Uh huh," she replied, languidly. She turned toward him and smiled so that dimples showed at the corners of her mouth. "I got a room in the Gilbert, over on Wabash. How about you?"

"Yeah, I live at the Roberts," he lied. While the Roberts wasn't the best hotel in town, it was several cuts above the Meeker, and Rick didn't feel that naming his real address would improve his stature in her eyes. "My name's Rick," he told her, "Rick Palermo." Rick liked the way his name sounded and brought it into conversation as often as he could. He never liked his real name, Amedeo; so he had adopted "Rick" a couple of years earlier, when he had left home.

"Rick," she said, almost to herself. "That's a nice name — a real nice name. My name's Geraldine. Geraldine Hamner, only my friends call me Jerry."

"Hi ya, Jerry." Rick made it sound light and casual. He gulped the rest of his beer and ordered two more drinks, stalling for time until he could think

of something more to say to her. Finally, but only after a painful silence, he came up with something. "You work around here?"

"Yeah, I'm a beauty operator. I work up on Union." She bolted what remained of her old drink before starting on the new one. "What do you do?"

"Me? Oh, I mostly make out, you might say. You know, horses a little and stuff like that." Again, he tried to sound convincingly modest, but he didn't want to overdo it and spoil the effect he hoped he was creating. "Yeah, I make out pretty good."

She warmed up some and Rick decided she was going to make a play for him. He didn't kid himself about why: gamblers were known to be heavy spenders. Well, he could be a spender too — anyway, that night he could; and afterward could take care of itself.

"How do you make a living, anyway? I don't get it how you can always be sure you're betting on the right horse." Rick felt her interest was genuine. He basked in the implied admiration.

"Oh, I get tips. It ain't exactly my own brains, I gotta admit. But there are plenty of guys who don't mind throwing a good thing Rick Palermo's way."

"I bet not." She smiled at him again, glancing down at his coat where the lump showed. Her face became serious. "I couldn't help see you when you took off your overcoat." For emphasis she nodded toward Rick's left

side and patted below her own left armpit.

Rick had intended her to notice the bulge but he hadn't expected her to speak of it. He didn't quite know what to say, so for a meaningful minute he said nothing. The silence appalled him. Then he guessed that his silence was more effective than any words he might have thought of; the woman smiled her approval broadly, nodding her head up and down as though he had confirmed her supposition.

Rick called out for another refill although he still had half a glass of beer in front of him and the blonde had scarcely begun on her second drink.

"Hey, Mister . . . I mean Rick, where's the fire at? You trying to get me loaded?" She giggled. The sound of her giggle reminded Rick of the creaking elevator at the Meeker, just before it stopped on the way down.

"I ain't trying to load you, honey, but there ain't no use in wasting time." He grinned broadly, well satisfied with his witty response. The blonde giggled again . . .

Several drinks later Rick was grateful to discover that they had become more at ease with each other and that it was no longer difficult for him to keep the conversation going. He felt an electric contact each time her hand brushed against him, which was often, and she didn't seem to mind when he surreptitiously patted her arm. He was just beginning to wrestle with the problem of what to

do next when he became aware of a commotion at the other end of the bar.

It was so dim that Rick couldn't see very clearly, but he did notice that people were leaving their bar stools and standing against the wall. Even the patrons on the other side of the bar had come around to the side where he and the blonde sat. The place became suddenly quiet, except for the juke box, which Rick had kept feeding.

"Okay, let's get movin'," Rick heard someone say, and then: "You! Cough it up!"

Rick heard the cash register clang open, but he couldn't seem to understand just what was going on through the fog of the beer and the normal dimness of the place. But he had a vague sensation of danger and excitement. The blonde grabbed his arm and swore, looking down the bar. Rick followed her glance, still trying to understand exactly what was happening. When he couldn't, he got up and started walking toward the two men who appeared to be moving about, while the rest of the people stood motionless against the wall. Rick heard a voice call out: "You! Get over there!" It reminded him somehow of the desk clerk at the Meeker, so he decided to show the man that he was talking to Rick Palermo. His hand went inside his tight coat, feeling for the lump.

Something big and soft hit Rick's chest, and without remembering how he got that way, he found himself

lying on the floor. It occurred to him that he had picked a hell of a time to pass out, just when he was making time with the blonde. Then he wondered where he was. After that, voices came in.

"When you call downtown, better tell them to send the meat wagon in a hurry."

Rick tried hard to think where he was, but now he was sleepy and couldn't seem to make his mind work. He made another try at figuring things out when suddenly he felt hands on his chest, unbuttoning his coat. Then he knew he must have passed out — why else would he still be wearing his clothes?

"Who is this kid anyway?" a voice asked.

"He's a busboy down at the Star-

lite, on Thirty-Eighth. I've seen him there," another voice said.

Rick was angry that he had been recognized, wherever he was.

Then he heard the first voice again. "What the hell?" It sounded puzzled. "He's wearing a shoulder holster and it's got a face towel in it. A face towel! Yeah, here it is: Hotel Meeker, it says. Must be where he lives."

Rick waited for a long pause in the man's voice. Then, with amusement ringing through it, the voice spoke again. "Well, I'll be damned!"

Rick was mortified. He didn't want to open his eyes to see who was talking. He felt sleepy again and the urge to get himself out of the place was so powerful that he stopped resisting sleep and felt himself relax into a deep and welcome darkness.



NEXT MONTH . . .

A superior hardboiled original —

WILLIAM LINDSAY GRESHAM'S

Don't Believe a Word She Says

AUTHOR: **FREDRIC BROWN**

TITLE: ***The Cream of the Jest***

TYPE: Crime Story

CHARACTER: Sir Charles Hanover Gresham

LOCALE: New York City

TIME: The Present

COMMENTS: *An extremely clever story about an actor who was a very paragon of blackmailers — “a has-been who never really was and who certainly never will be” . . .*

THE BAR IN FRONT OF HIM WAS WET and sloppy. Sir Charles Hanover Gresham carefully rested his forearms on the raised dry rim of it and held the folded copy of *Stagecraft* that he was reading up out of the puddles. His forearms, not his elbows; when you have but one suit and it is getting threadbare you remember not to rest your elbows on a bar or a table. Just as, when you sit, you always pull up the trouser legs an inch or two to keep the knees from becoming baggy. When you are an actor you remember those things. Even if you're a has-been who never really was and who certainly never will be, living — barely — off blackmail, drinking beer

in a Bowery bar, hung-over and miserable, at two o'clock on a cool fall afternoon, you remember.

But you always read *Stagecraft*.

He was reading it now. “Gambler Angels Meller,” a one-column headline told him; he read even that, casually. Then he came to a name in the second paragraph, the name of the playwright. One of his eyebrows rose a full millimeter at that name. Wayne Campbell, his *patron*, had written another play. The first in three full years. Not that that mattered to Wayne, for his last play and his second last had both sold to Hollywood for very substantial sums. New plays or no, Wayne Campbell would keep on

eating caviar and drinking champagne. And new plays or no, he, Sir Charles Hanover Gresham, would keep on eating hamburger sandwiches and drinking beer. It was the only thing he was ashamed of — not the hamburgers and the beer, but the means by which he was forced to obtain them. Blackmail is a nasty word; he hated it.

But now, possibly, just possibly —

Even that chance was worth celebrating. He looked at the bar in front of him; fifteen cents lay there. He took his last dollar bill from his pocket and put it down on the one dry spot on the bar.

"Mac!" he said.

Mac, the bartender, who had been gazing into space through the wall, came over. He asked, "The same, Charlie?"

"Not the same, Mac. This time the amber fluid."

"You mean whiskey?"

"I do indeed. One for you and one for me. *Ah, with the Grape my fading life provide . . .*"

Mac poured two shots and refilled Sir Charles's beer glass. "Chaser's on me."

Sir Charles raised his shot glass and looked past it, not at Mac the bartender but at his own reflection in the smeary backbar mirror. A quite distinguished-looking gentleman stared back at him. They smiled at one another; then they both looked at Mac, one of them from the front, the other from the back.

"To your excellent health, Mac,"

they said — Sir Charles aloud and his reflection silently. The raw, cheap whiskey burned a warm and grateful path.

Mac looked over and said, "You're a screwy guy, Charlie, but I like you. Sometimes I think you really *are* a knight; I dunno."

"*A Hair perhaps divides the False and True,*" said Sir Charles. "Do you by any chance know Omar, Mac?"

"Omar who?"

"The tentmaker. A great old boy, Mac; he's got me down to a T. Listen to this:

*"After a momentary silence spake
Some Vessel of a more ungainly*

Make:

*'They sneer at me from leaning all
awry:*

*What! did the Hand then of the
Potter shake?' "*

Mac said, "I don't get it."

Sir Charles sighed. "Am I all awry, Mac? Seriously, I'm going to phone and make an important appointment, maybe. Do I look all right or am I leaning all awry? Oh, Lord, Mac, I just thought what that would make me. Ham awry."

"You look all right, Charlie."

"But, Mac, you missed that horrible pun. Ham awry. Ham on rye."

"You mean you want a sandwich?"

Sir Charles smiled gently. He said, "I'll change my mind, Mac; I'm not hungry after all. But perhaps the exchequer will stand another drink."

It stood another drink. Mac went to another customer.

The haze was coming, the gentle haze. The figure in the backbar mirror smiled at him as though they had a secret in common. And they had, but the drinks were helping them to forget it — at least to shove it to the back of the mind. Now, through the gentle haze that was not really drunkenness, that figure in the mirror did not say, "You're a fraud and a failure, Sir Charles, living on blackmail," as it so often and so accusingly had said. No, now it said, "You're a fine fellow, Sir Charles; a little down on your luck for these last few — let us not say how many — years. Things are going to change. You'll walk the boards again; once more you'll hold audiences in the palm of your hand. You're an *actor*, man."

He downed his second shot and then, sipping his beer slowly, he reread the article in *Stagecraft* headlined "Gambler Angels Meller."

There wasn't much detail, but there was enough. The name of the melodrama was *The Perfect Crime*, which didn't matter; the author was Wayne Campbell, which did matter. Wayne could try to get him into the cast; Wayne would try. And not because of threat of blackmail; quite the converse.

And, although this didn't matter either, the play was being backed by Nick Corianos. Maybe, come to think of it, that did matter. Nick Corianos was a plunger, a real big-shot. *The Perfect Crime* wouldn't lack for funds, not if Nick was backing it. You've heard of Nick Corianos. Legend has it that

he once dropped half a million dollars in a single 40-hour session of poker, and laughed about it. Legend says many unpleasant things about him, too, but the police have never proved them.

Sir Charles smiled at the thought: Nick Corianos getting away with *The Perfect Crime*. He wondered if that thought had come to Corianos, if it was part of his reason for backing this particular play. One of life's little pleasures, thinking such things. Posing, posturing, knowing you were ridiculous, knowing you were a cheat and a failure, you lived on the little pleasures — and the big dreams.

Still smiling gently, he went into the phone booth at the front of the tavern near the door. He dialed Wayne Campbell's number. He said, "Wayne? This is Charles Gresham."
"Yes?"

"May I see you — at your office?"

"Now listen, Gresham, if it's more money, no. You've got some coming in three days and you agreed, definitely agreed, that if I gave you that amount regularly, you'd —"

"Wayne, it's not money. The opposite, my dear boy. I can save you money."

"How?" He was cold, suspicious.

"You'll be casting for your new play. Oh, I know you don't do the actual casting yourself, but a word from you, Wayne, would get me a part. Even a walk-on, Wayne, anything, and I won't bother you again."

"While the play runs, you mean?"

Sir Charles cleared his throat. He

said, regretfully, "Of course, while the play runs. But if it's a play of yours, Wayne, it may run a long time."

"You'd get drunk and get fired before it was out of rehearsal."

"No. I don't drink when I'm working, Wayne. What have you to lose? I won't disgrace you. You know I can act. Don't you?"

"Yes." It was grudging, but it was a yes. "All right — you've got a point if it'll save me money. And it's a cast of fourteen; I suppose I could —"

"I'll be right over, Wayne. And thanks, thanks a lot."

He left the booth and went outside, quickly, into the cool, crisp air, before he'd be tempted to take another drink to celebrate the fact that he would be on the boards again. *Might be*, he corrected himself quickly. Even with help from Wayne Campbell, it was no certainty.

He shivered a little, walking to the subway. He'd have to buy himself a coat out of his next — allowance. It was turning colder; he shivered more as he walked from the subway to Wayne's office. But Wayne's office was warm, if Wayne wasn't. Wayne sat there staring at him.

Finally he said, "You don't look the part, Gresham. Damn it all, you don't look it. And that's funny."

Sir Charles said, "I don't know why it's funny, Wayne. But looking the part means nothing. There is such a thing as make-up, such a thing as acting. A true actor can look any part."

Surprisingly, Wayne was chuckling with amusement.

He said, "You don't know it's funny, Gresham, but it is. I've got two possibilities you can try for. One of them is practically a walk-on; you'd get three short speeches. The other —"

"Yes?"

"It is funny, Gresham. There's a blackmailer in my play. And damn it all, you are one; you've been living off me for five years now."

Sir Charles said, "Very reasonably, Wayne. You must admit my demands are modest, and that I've never increased them."

"You are a very paragon of blackmailers, Gresham. I assure you it's a pleasure — practically. But the cream of the jest would be letting you play the blackmailer in my play so that for the duration of it I wouldn't be paying you blackmail. And it's a fairly strong supporting role; it'd pay you a lot more than you have been asking from me. But —"

"But what?"

"Damned if you look it! I don't think you'd be convincing as a blackmailer. You're always so apologetic and ashamed about it — and yes, I know, you wouldn't be doing it if you could earn your eats — and drinks — any other way. But the blackmailer in my play is a fairly hardboiled mug. Has to be. People wouldn't believe in anybody like you, Gresham."

"Give me a chance at it, Wayne. Let me read the part."

"I think we'd better settle for the smaller role. You said you'd settle for a walk-on, and this other part is little better than that. But you're just not a heavy, Gresham."

"At least let me read it."

Wayne Campbell shrugged. He pointed to a bound manuscript on a corner of his desk, nearer to Sir Charles than to him. He said, "Okay, the role is Richter. Your biggest scene, your longest and most dramatic speech, is about two pages back of the first-act curtain. Go ahead and read it to me."

Sir Charles's fingers trembled just slightly with eagerness as he found the first-act curtain and thumbed back. He said, "Let me read it to myself first, Wayne, to get the sense of it." It was a longish speech, but he read it rapidly twice and he had it; memorizing had always been easy for him. He put down the manuscript and thought an instant to put himself in the mood.

His face grew cold and hard, his eyes hooded. He stood up and leaned his hands on the desk, caught Wayne's eyes with his own, and poured on the speech, his voice cold and precise and deadly.

And it was balm to his actor's soul that Wayne's eyes widened as he listened to it. He said, "I'll be damned. You *can* act. Okay, I'll try to get you the role. I didn't think you had it in you, but you have. Only if you cross me up by drinking —"

"I won't." Sir Charles sat down; he had been calm and cold during the speech. Now he was trembling again

and he didn't want it to show. Wayne might think it was drink or poor health, and not know that it was eagerness and excitement. This might be the start of it, the come-back he'd hoped for — he hated to think how long it had been that he'd been hoping. But one good supporting role, and in a Wayne Campbell play that might have a long run, and he'd be on his way. Producers would notice him and there'd be another and slightly better role when this play ended, and a better one after that.

He knew he was kidding himself, but the excitement, the *hope* was there. It went to his head like stronger drink than any tavern served.

Maybe he'd even have a chance to play again in a Shakespeare revival, and there are always Shakespeare revivals. He knew most of every major Shakespearean role, although he'd played only minor ones. Macbeth, that great speech of Macbeth's —

He said, "I wish you were Shakespeare, Wayne. I wish you were just writing Macbeth. Beautiful stuff in there, Wayne. Listen:

*"Tomorrow, and tomorrow, and tomorrow,
Creeps in this petty pace from day to day,
To the last syllable of recorded time;
And all of our yesterdays have lighted fools
The way to dusty death. Out, out —"*

"Brief candle, and so on. Sure, it's beautiful and I wish, too, that I were

Shakespeare, Gresham. But I haven't got all day to listen."

Sir Charles sighed and stood up. Macbeth had stood him in good stead; he wasn't trembling any more. He said, "Nobody ever has time to listen. Well, Wayne, thanks tremendously."

"Wait a minute. You sound as though I'm doing the casting and have already signed you. I'm only the first hurdle. We're going to let the director do the actual casting, with Corianos's and my advice and consent, but we haven't hired a director yet. I think it's going to be Dixon, but it isn't 100 per cent sure yet."

"Shall I go talk to him? I know him slightly."

"Ummm — not till it's definite. If I send you to him, he'll be sure we are hiring him, and maybe he'll want more money. Not that it won't take plenty to get him anyway. But you can talk to Nick; he's putting up the money and he'll have a say in the casting."

"Sure, I'll do that, Wayne."

Wayne reached for his wallet. "Here's twenty bucks," he said. "Straighten out a little; get a shave and a haircut and a clean shirt. Your suit's all right. Maybe you should have it pressed. And listen —"

"Yes?"

"That twenty's no gift. It comes out of your next."

"More than fair. How shall I handle Corianos? Sell him on the idea that I can handle the part, as I did you?"

Wayne Campbell grinned. He said, "*Speak the speech, I pray you, as you*

have pronounced it to me, trippingly on the tongue; but if you mouth it, as many of your players do, I had as lief the town-crier spoke my lines. Nor do not saw the air — I can recite Shakespeare, too."

"We'll not mention how." Sir Charles smiled. "Thanks a million, Wayne. Goodbye."

He got the haircut, which he needed, and the shave, which he didn't really need — he had shaved that morning. He bought a new white shirt and had his shoes shined and his suit pressed. He had his soul lifted with three Manhattans in a respectable bar; three, sipped slowly, and no more. And he ate — the three cherries from the Manhattans.

The backbar mirror wasn't smeary. It was blue glass, though, and it made him look sinister. He smiled a sinister smile at his reflection. He thought, *Blackmailer. The role; play it to the hilt, throw yourself into it. And some day you'll play Macbeth.*

Should he try it on the bartender? No. He had tried it on bartenders before.

The blue reflection in the backbar mirror smiled at him. He looked from it to the front windows and the front windows, too, were faintly blue with dusk. And that meant it was time. Corianos might be in the office above his club by now.

He went out into the blue dusk. He took a cab. Not for practical reasons; it was only ten blocks and he could easily have walked. But, psychologically, a cab was important. As im-

portant as was an oversize tip to the driver.

The Blue Flamingo, Nick Corianos's current club, was still closed, of course, but the service entrance was open. Sir Charles went in. One waiter was working, putting cloths on tables. Sir Charles asked, "Will you direct me to Mr. Corianos's office, please?"

"Third floor. There's a self-service elevator over there." He pointed, and, looking again at Sir Charles, he added, "Sir."

"Thank you," said Sir Charles.

He took the elevator to the third floor. It let him off in a dimly lighted corridor, from which opened several doors. Only one door had a light behind it showing through the ground glass. It was marked *Private*. He tapped on it gently; a voice called out, "Come in." He went in. Two big men were playing gin rummy across a desk.

One of them asked him, "Yeah?"

"Is either of you Mr. Corianos?"

"What do you want to see him about?"

"My card, sir." Sir Charles handed it to the one who had spoken; he felt sure by looking at them that neither one was Nick Corianos. "Will you tell Mr. Corianos that I wish to speak to him about a matter in connection with the play he is backing?"

The man who had spoken looked at the card. He said, "Okay," put down his hand of cards, walked to the door of an inner office and through it. After a moment he appeared at the door again; he said, "Okay." Sir Charles went in.

Nick Corianos looked up from the card lying on the ornate mahogany desk before him. He asked, "Is it a gag?"

"Is what a gag?"

"Sit down. Is it a gag, or are you really Sir Charles Hanover Gresham? I mean, are you really a — that would be a knight, wouldn't it?"

Sir Charles smiled. "I have never yet admitted, in so many words, that I am not. Would it not be foolish to start now? At any rate, it gets me in to see people much more easily."

Nick Corianos laughed. He said, "I see what you mean. And I'm beginning to guess what you want. You're a ham, aren't you?"

"I am an actor. I have been informed that you are backing a play; in fact, I have seen a script of the play. I am interested in playing the role of Richter."

Nick Corianos frowned. "Richter — that's the name of the blackmailer in the play?"

"It is." Sir Charles held up a hand. "Please do not tell me offhand that I do not look the part. A true actor can look, and can be, anything. I can be a blackmailer."

Nick Corianos said, "Possibly. But I'm not handling the casting."

Sir Charles smiled, and then let the smile fade. He stood up and leaned forward, his hands resting on Nick's mahogany desk. He smiled again, but the smile was different. His voice was cold, precise. He said, "*Listen pal, you can't shove me off. I know too much. Maybe I can't prove it myself, but the*

police can, once I tell them where to look. Walter Donovan. Does that name mean anything to you, pal? Or the date September first? Or a spot a hundred yards off the road to Bridgeport, halfway between Stamford and there. Do you think you can —”

“That’s enough,” Nick said. There was an ugly black automatic in his right hand. His left was pushing a buzzer on his desk.

Sir Charles Hanover Gresham stared at the automatic, and he saw it; not only the automatic, but everything. He saw death, and for just a second, there was panic.

And then all the panic was gone, and there was left a vast amusement.

It had been perfect, all down the line. *The Perfect Crime* — advertised as such, and he hadn’t guessed it. He hadn’t even suspected it.

And yet, he thought, why wouldn’t — why shouldn’t — Wayne Campbell be tired enough of a blackmailer who had bled him, however mildly, for so many years? And why wouldn’t one of the best playwrights in the world be clever enough to do it this way?

So clever, and so simple, however Wayne had come across the information against Nick Corianos which he had written on a special page, especially inserted in his copy of the script. *Speak the speech, I pray you* —

And he had even known that he, Charles, wouldn’t give him away. Even now, before the trigger was pulled, he could blurt: “Wayne Campbell knows this, too. He did it, not I!”

But even to say that now couldn’t save him, for that black automatic had turned fiction into fact, and although he might manage Campbell’s death along with his own, it wouldn’t save his own life. Wayne had even known him well enough to know, to be sure, that he wouldn’t do that — at no advantage to himself.

He stood up straight, taking his hands off the desk but carefully keeping them at his sides, as the two big men came through the wide doorway that led to the outer office.

Nick said, “Pete, get that canvas mail-sack out of the drawer. And is the car in front of the service entrance?”

“Sure, chief.” One of the men ducked back through the door.

Nick hadn’t taken his eyes — or the cold muzzle of the gun — off Sir Charles.

Sir Charles smiled at him. He said, “May I ask a boon?”

“What?”

“A favor. Besides the one you already intend to do for me. I ask thirty-five seconds.”

“Huh?”

“I’ve timed it; it should take that long. Most actors do it in thirty — they push the pace. I refer, of course, to the immortal lines from Macbeth. Have I your permission to die thirty-five seconds from now, rather than at this exact instant?”

Nick’s eyes got even narrower. He said, “I don’t get it, but what’s thirty-five seconds, if you really keep your hands in sight?”

Sir Charles said, "*Tomorrow, and tomorrow, and tomorrow —*"

One of the big men was back in the doorway, something made of canvas rolled up under his arm. He asked, "Is the guy screwy?"

"Shut up," Nick said.

And then no one was interrupting him.

No one was even impatient. And thirty-five seconds were ample.

... Out, out, brief candle!

Life's but a walking shadow, a poor player

That struts and frets his hour upon the stage

And then is heard no more; it is a tale

Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury,

Signifying nothing."

He paused, and the quiet pause lengthened.

He bowed slightly and straightened so the audience would know that there was no more. And then Nick's finger tightened on the trigger.

The applause was deafening.



NEXT MONTH . . .

A 'tec tour de force —

NEDRA TYRE's *Tour de couleur*

A tale of Oriental riddling with all the flavor and ingenuity of Arabian Nights' Entertainments . . . by one of the world's greatest historical novelists, author of perhaps the most famous "cloak and sword" romance, THE THREE MUSKETEERS, and one of the enduring classics of adventure and intrigue, THE COUNT OF MONTE CRISTO.

THE MAN OF THE KNIFE

by ALEXANDRE DUMAS

THERE DWELLS IN FERDJ' OUAH A Sheik named Bou Akas ben Achour. It is one of the most ancient names in the country, so we find it in the history of the dynasties of the Arabs and Berbers of Ibu Khaldoun.

Bou Akas is 49 years of age. He dresses like the Kabyles; that is, in a gandoura of wool girt with a leathern belt, and fastened around the head with a slender cord. He carries a pair of pistols in his shoulder-belt, at his left side the Kabyle flissa, and, hanging from his neck, a little black knife. Before him walks a Negro, carrying his gun, and at his side bounds a large greyhound.

When a tribe in the vicinity of the twelve tribes over which he rules occasions him any loss, he deigns not to march against it, but is satisfied with sending his Negro to the principal village, where the Negro shows the gun of Bou Akas, and the injury is repaired.

There are in his pay two or three tolbas who read the Koran to the people. Every person passing by his dwelling on a pilgrimage to Mecca receives

three francs and at The Sheik's expense remains in Ferdj' Ouah as long as he pleases. But should Bou Akas learn that he has had to do with a false pilgrim, he sends emissaries to overtake the man wherever he may be, and they, on the spot, turn him over on his face, and give him twenty blows of the bastinado on the soles of his feet.

Bou Akas sometimes dines 300 persons, but instead of partaking of the repast, he walks around among his guests with a stick in his hand, marshalling his domestics; then, if there is anything left, he eats, but the very last.

When the Governor of Constantina, the only man whose supremacy he acknowledges, sends him a traveler, according to whether the traveler is a man of note, or the recommendation is pressing, Bou Akas presents him with his gun, his dog, or his knife. If he presents his gun, the traveler shoulders it; if his dog, the traveler holds it in leash; if his knife, the traveler suspends it from his neck. With one or

another of these talismans, each of which bears with it the degree of honor to be rendered, the traveler passes through the twelve tribes without incurring the slightest danger. Everywhere he is fed and lodged for nothing, for he is the guest of Bou Akas. When he leaves Ferdj' Ouah, it is sufficient for him to deliver the knife, the dog, or the gun to the first Arab that he meets. The Arab, if hunting, stops; if tilling the ground, he quits his plough; if in the bosom of his family, he departs; and taking the knife, the dog, or the gun, returns it to Bou Akas.

In fact, the little black-handled knife is very well known; so well known, that it has given its name to Bou Akas — Bou d'Jenoui, or The Man of the Knife. It is with this knife that Bou Akas cuts off people's heads when, for the sake of prompt justice, he thinks fit to decapitate with his own hand.

When Bou Akas succeeded to his possessions, there were a great number of thieves in the country. He found means to exterminate them. He dressed himself like a simple merchant, then dropped a douro, taking care not to lose sight of it. A lost douro does not remain long on the ground. If he who picked it up pocketed it, Bou Akas made a sign to his chiaous, disguised like himself, to arrest the culprit. The chiaous, knowing the Sheik's intention in regard to the culprit, beheaded him without more ado. The effect of this rigor is such that there is a saying among the Arabs

that a child of twelve years of age wearing a golden crown could pass through the tribes of Bou Akas without a finger's being raised to steal it.

One day Bou Akas heard mentioned that the Cadi of one of his twelve tribes rendered judgments worthy of King Solomon. Like another Haroun al Raschid, he wished to decide for himself the truth of the stories which were told him. Consequently, he set out in the guise of an ordinary horseman, without the arms which usually distinguished him, without any emblem of rank, nor any followers, and mounted on a blood-horse about which nothing betrayed that it belonged to so great a Chief.

It so chanced that, on the day of his arrival at the thrice-happy city where the Cadi sat in judgment, there was a Fair, and, in consequence of that, the Court was in session. It so chanced also — Mahomet watches over his servants in all things — that at the gate of the city Bou Akas met a cripple, who, hanging upon his burnoose, as the poor man hung upon the cloak of St. Martin, asked him for alms. Bou Akas gave the alms, as behooves an honest Musselman to do, but the cripple continued to cling to him.

"What do you want?" asked Bou Akas. "You have solicited alms, and I bestowed them on you."

"Yes," replied the cripple; "but the Law does not say only, 'Thou shalt bestow alms on thy brother,' but, in addition, 'Thou shalt do for thy brother all in thy power.'"

"Well, what can I do for you?" inquired Bou Akas.

"You can save me, poor wretch that I am, from being crushed under the feet of the men, the mules, and the camels, which will not fail to happen if I risk myself in the city."

"And how can I prevent that?"

"By taking me up behind you, and carrying me to the market-place, where I have business."

"Be it so," said Bou Akas, and lifting up the cripple, he helped him to mount behind. The operation was accomplished with some difficulty, but it was at last done. The two men on the single horse traversed the city, not without exciting general curiosity. They arrived at the market-place.

"Is it here that you wished to go?" inquired Bou Akas of the cripple.

"Yes."

"Then dismount," said the Sheik.

"Dismount yourself."

"To help you down, very well!"

"No, to let me have the horse."

"Why? Wherefore should I let you have the horse?" said the astonished Sheik.

"Because the horse is mine."

"Ah, indeed! We shall soon see about that!"

"Listen, and consider," said the cripple.

"I am listening, and I will consider afterward."

"We are in the city of the just Cadi."

"I know it," assented the Sheik.

"You intend to prosecute me before him?"

"It is extremely probable."

"Now, do you think that when he sees us two — you with your sturdy legs, which God has destined for walking and fatigue, me with my broken legs — think you, I say, that he will not decide that the horse belongs to the one of the two travelers who has the greater need of it?"

"If he say so," replied Bou Akas, "he will no longer be the just Cadi, for his decision will be wrong."

"They call him the just Cadi," rejoined the cripple, laughing, "but they do not call him the infallible Cadi."

"Upon my word!" said Bou Akas to himself, "here is a fine chance for me to judge the Judge." Then he said aloud, "Come on, let us go before the Cadi."

Bou Akas made his way through the throng, leading his horse, on whose back the cripple clung like an ape; and presented himself before the tribunal where the Judge, according to the custom in the East, publicly dispensed justice.

Two cases were before the Court, and of course took precedence. Bou Akas obtained a place among the audience, and listened. The first case was a suit between a taleb and a peasant — that is to say, a savant and a laborer. The point in question was in reference to the savant's wife, with whom the peasant had eloped, and whom he maintained to be his, in opposition to the savant, who claimed her. The woman would not acknowledge either of the men to be her hus-

band, or rather she acknowledged both; which circumstance rendered the affair embarrassing to the last degree. The Judge heard both parties, reflected an instant, and said:

“Leave the woman with me, and return tomorrow.”

The savant and the laborer each bowed and withdrew.

The second case now came on. This was a suit between a butcher and an oil merchant. The oil merchant was covered with oil, and the butcher was besmeared with blood. The following was the butcher's story:

“I went to buy oil at this man's house. In paying for the oil, with which he had filled my bottle, I took from my purse a handful of money. This money tempted him. He seized me by the wrist. I cried thief, but he would not let go of me, and we came together before you — I clasping my money in my hand, he grasping my wrist. Now, I swear by Mahomet that this man is a liar when he says that I stole his money, for in truth the money is mine.”

The following was the oil merchant's story:

“This man came to buy a bottle of oil at my house. When the bottle was full, he said to me, ‘Have you change for a gold piece?’ I then felt in my pocket, drew out my hand full of money, and put the money down on the sill of my shop. He snatched it up, and was about to go with both it and my oil, when I caught him by the wrist, and cried thief. In spite of my cries, he would not return my money,

and I have brought him here, that you may decide between us. Now, I swear by Mahomet that this man is a liar when he says that I stole his money, for in truth the money is mine.”

The Judge made each of the men, complainant and defendant, repeat his charge. Neither varied. Then the Judge pondered a moment and said:

“Leave the money with me and return tomorrow.”

The butcher deposited in a fold of the Judge's robe the money of which he had never relinquished his hold; whereupon the two men bowed, and each went his way.

It was now the turn of Bou Akas and the cripple.

“My lord Cadi,” said Bou Akas, “I have just come from a distant city, with the intention of buying goods at this mart. At the gate of the city I met this cripple, who at first asked me for alms, and finally begged me to allow him to mount behind me; telling me that, if he risked himself in the streets, he, poor wretch, feared he should be crushed under the feet of the men, the mules, and the camels. Thereupon, I gave him alms, and mounted him behind me. Having arrived at the market-place, he would not alight, saying that the horse which I rode belonged to him; and when I threatened him with the law, ‘Bah!’ he replied. ‘The Cadi is too sensible a man not to know that the horse is the property of that one of us who cannot travel without a horse!’ This is the affair, in all sincerity, my lord Cadi, I swear it by Mahomet.”

"My Lord Cadi," responded the cripple, "I was going on business to the market of the city, and mounted on this horse, which is mine, when I saw, seated by the wayside, this man, who seemed about to expire. I approached him, and inquired whether he had met with any accident. 'No accident has befallen me,' he replied, 'but I am overcome with fatigue, and if you are charitable, you will convey me to the city, where I have business. After reaching the market-place, I will dismount, praying Mahomet to bestow upon him who aided me all that he could desire.' I did as this man requested, but my astonishment was great, when, having arrived at the market-place, he bade me dismount, telling me that the horse was his. At this strange threat, I brought him before you, that you might judge between us. This is the matter, in all sincerity, I swear by Mahomet."

The Cadi made each repeat his deposition, then having reflected an instant, he said:

"Leave the horse with me, and return tomorrow."

The horse was delivered to the Cadi, and Bou Akas and the cripple retired.

The next day, not only the parties immediately interested, but also a great number of the curious, were present in Court.

The Cadi followed the order of precedence observed the first day. The taleb and the peasant were summoned.

"Here," said the Cadi to the taleb, "here is your wife; take her away, she is really yours." Then turning toward

his chiaouses, and pointing out the peasant, he said: "Give that man fifty strokes of the bastinado on the soles of his feet."

The case of the oil merchant and the butcher was then called up.

"Here," said the Cadi to the butcher, "here is your money; you did really take it out of your pocket, and it never belonged to that man." Then turning toward his chiaouses, and pointing out the oil merchant, he said: "Give that man fifty strokes of the bastinado on the soles of his feet."

The third case was now called, and Bou Akas and the cripple approached.

"Could you recognize your horse among twenty horses?" inquired the Judge of Bou Akas.

"Yes, my lord Judge," replied Bou Akas and the cripple with one accord.

"Then come with me," said the Judge to Bou Akas, and they went out.

Bou Akas recognized his horse among twenty horses.

"Very well!" said the Judge. "Go and wait in Court, and send me your opponent."

Bou Akas returned to the Court, and awaited the Cadi's return.

The cripple repaired to the stable as quickly as his bad legs would allow him to go. As his eyes were good, he went straight up to the horse, and pointed it out.

"Very well!" said the Judge. "Rejoin me in Court."

The Cadi resumed his seat on his mat, and everyone waited impatiently for the cripple, who in the course of five minutes returned out of breath.

"The horse is yours," said the Cadi to Bou Akas. "Go take it from the stable." Then addressing his chiaouses and pointing out the cripple, he said: "Give that man fifty strokes of the bastinado on the back."

On returning home, the Cadi found Bou Akas waiting for him.

"Are you dissatisfied?" he inquired.

"No, the very reverse," answered the Sheik; "but I wished to see you, to ask by what inspiration you render justice, for I doubt not that your two other decisions were as correct as the one in my case."

"It is very simple, my lord," said the Judge. "You observed that I kept for one night the woman, the money, and the horse. At midnight I had the woman awakened and brought to me, and I said to her, 'Replenish my inkstand.' Then she, like a woman who had performed the same office a hundred times in her life, took my ink-glass, washed it, replaced it in the stand, and poured fresh ink into it. I said to myself immediately, 'If you were the wife of the peasant, you would not know how to clean an inkstand; therefore you are the taleb's wife.'"

"Be it so," said Bou Akas. "So much for the woman, but what about the money?"

"The money; that is another thing," replied the Judge. "Did you notice that the merchant was covered with oil, and his hands were greasy?"

"Yes, certainly."

"Very well! I took the money and placed it in a vase full of water. This

morning I looked at the water. Not a particle of oil had risen to the surface. I therefore said to myself, 'This money is the butcher's, not the oil merchant's. If it had been the oil merchant's, it would have been greasy, and the oil would have risen to the surface of the water.'"

Bou Akas again inclined his head. "Good," said he; "so much for the money, but what about my horse?"

"Ah! that is another thing, and until this morning, I was puzzled."

"Then the cripple was not able to recognize the horse?" suggested Bou Akas.

"Oh, yes indeed, he recognized it."

"Well?"

EDITORS' NOTE: *You now have two examples of the Cadi's perspicacity. Can you guess how the Cadi knew the horse belonged to the Sheik?*

"By conducting each of you in turn to the stable, I did not wish to ascertain which one would recognize the horse, but *which one the horse would recognize!* Now, when you approached the horse, it neighed; when the cripple approached the horse, it kicked. Then I said to myself, 'The horse belongs to him who has the good legs, and not to the cripple.' And I delivered it to you."

Bou Akas pondered for a moment, and then said: "The Lord is with you; it is you who should be in my place. I am sure, at least, that you are worthy to be Sheik, but I am not so sure that I am fit to be Cadi."

AUTHOR: **JIM THOMPSON**

TITLE: ***The Flaw in the System***

TYPE: Off-Trail "Crime" Story

LOCALE: Any city

TIME: Any time

COMMENTS: *He was the friendliest, kindest looking man you ever laid eyes on, and he conned only the toughest, hardest, most foolproof installment houses in the business. That was the mystery. But how can anyone explain the unexplainable?*

I WATCHED HIM AS HE CAME UP the mezzanine steps to the Credit Department, studying his worn suit, his frayed necktie, his scuffed shoes. Knowing, even as I waved him to a new-account booth — with the very first question I asked him — that he was strictly on the sour side. And feeling a kind of surly happiness in the knowledge.

For an installment house — a dollar-down-dollar-the-rest-of-your-life outfit — we didn't catch many sour ones. They knew they couldn't beat us — how can you fast-talk a machine? — so they left us alone. But here was this guy, an n.g. from the word go, with a hundred and seventy-five bucks in sales slips! I wondered what the hell was wrong with our clerks, why they

hadn't sent him up for an okay in the beginning instead of wasting their time on him.

I looked up from the slips, sharply, all set to read him off. I looked into his eyes — the warmest, friendliest eyes I had ever seen, in the kindest face I had ever seen. And all I could think of was that somehow, in some way acceptable to the home office, I had to let him have the stuff. I spoke to him, asked a question, in a tone that was almost pleading and apologetic. He shook his head.

"No," he said pleasantly. "I cannot make a 50 per cent down payment. The fact of the matter is, I cannot make any down payment at all."

"Well," I said regretfully, "I'm awfully sorry, sir, but I don't think—"

I broke off, unable to tell him, however politely, that the deal was no soap. I had a feeling that if the friendly warmth in those eyes died out, something very necessary to me would die with it.

So I filled out a sales contract — just writing down the answers he gave me without comment or further discussion. When I was through, I made a few telephone calls and then I took the contract in to Dan Murrow's office. Dan was our credit manager.

He scanned the contract swiftly, mumbling to himself: "One seventy-five with no d.p. Unemployed. N.G. from credit bureau. N.G. from two other accounts. No property. Hotel resident — no permanent address. No — *GET OUTTA HERE!*" Dan yelled suddenly. "What are you bothering me with this for?"

"I'm sorry," I said. "Handle it for me, will you, Dan?"

"What the hell's there to handle?" he snarled. "What's wrong with you?" But he snatched up the contract and headed outside. I stayed where I was, listening.

I heard Dan say, "Now, look, Mister. I don't know what you're trying to pull, see, but —" And then his voice changed. Suddenly it became the same way mine had been, soft and humble and apologetic. Begging for the good will of a man who was not only a total stranger, but an out-and-out deadbeat to boot.

Well . . .

The guy left. Dan came back into

his office, gave me a thousand-watt glare, and jerked his thumb toward the door. He didn't say anything. It didn't look like a good time for me to say anything, so I went back to my desk and made out a duplicate on the contract.

All our records were made in duplicate, the dupes going to the home-office store and to Mr. Dorrance, the head credit manager. Mr. Dorrance trusted no one. He left nothing to chance. As long as you did exactly as you were instructed to do, you were all right. If you didn't — well, however sharp and tough you were, Dorrance was a lot sharper and a lot tougher. He had his eye on you all the time, and he made sure you knew it.

It was a good system. You might get sore at the whole blasted world, or you might get to where you just didn't give a damn, or you might even quit. But the system rocked right along, permitting no errors, working perfectly.

At least, it always had worked perfectly until now.

Dan Murrow didn't speak to me for the rest of the afternoon. But by quitting time he had straightened out a little, and we went to a place for a few beers. He was still kind of on the belligerent side. Sheepishly belligerent. He knew the account was sour — that it just couldn't be anything else — but he tried to pretend it wasn't.

"Ahundredandseventy-fivebucks," he said. "With our mark-up, that's around ninety dollars profit. What kind of credit manager would I be

if I chased away that kind of dough?"

"Yeah," I said. "I guess that's right."

"So maybe he's a toughie," Murrow went on. "We got a legal department, ain't we? We've got collectors — boys that know how to make the tough ones soft. Sooner or later we'll catch that cookie on a job, and when we do . . ."

His voice trailed away. He looked at me, his eyes strangely bewildered.

Obviously we weren't going to catch the guy on a job. We weren't going to catch him with any attachable assets. This would be the way he made his living — by gypping stores and hocking or selling the merchandise. And there wasn't a thing we could do about it.

It wasn't fraud, because there'd been no misrepresentation. He was a dead-beat but, legally speaking, he wasn't a crook.

His first payment fell due on the following Saturday. Naturally he didn't meet it, so Murrow put a collector onto him. The collector reported back that the guy had skipped town. Whether he was lying or not, I don't know. Murrow had an idea that he was, but he couldn't see that it mattered much.

"If we could collect," he said, "*if* — which we can't — it wouldn't help us any with Dorrance. We broke the rules, see? Like drawing to an inside straight, only ten times worse. Maybe a miracle might happen, and we'd fill the straight. But it's still all wrong. We could pay this account ourselves

but Dorrance wouldn't like it one jot better."

We sweated out the weekend, wondering what Dorrance would do and knowing that whatever it was, it wouldn't be nice. Late Monday afternoon Murrow came to the door of his office and motioned for me to come inside. He looked a little pale. His hand shook as he closed the door behind me.

"Dorrance?" I said.

"Yeah. His secretary, I mean." Murrow grinned sickishly, trying to make his voice sound satirical. "Mr. Dorrance wants a full report on that very peculiar account," he recited. "A detailed report, setting forth any reasons we have — *if* we have any — for opening such an account."

"Yeah?" I said. "Well . . ."

"We got to think of something, Joe." He leaned across the desk, desperately. "Some way we got to get ourselves off the hook. It means our jobs if we don't. It might mean even more than that. Yeah," he nodded, as I looked at him startled. "We had no good reason to okay that guy, so could be we had a bad one. But then again maybe we were in cahoots with him, splitting the take."

"Well . . ." I spread my hands helplessly.

"Let's start at the beginning," Murrow said. "Why did you do what you did, anyway? Why didn't you just turn this character down yourself instead of passing him onto me?"

"I — well, I just didn't want to," I said. "It wasn't as if he was com-

elling me, or hypnotizing me, or anything like that. And it wasn't because I felt sorry for him. It was just — well, it doesn't make any sense — it sounds crazy now. But — but —

"I know," Murrow murmured. And then he brought himself up sharp. "Go on and spill it! Maybe we can come up with something."

"Well," I hesitated. "It was like I had to do it to prove something. That I was a person — a human being, not just part of a system. That there wasn't any system big enough to keep me from making a mistake, just like there wasn't any big enough to keep me from doing the right thing. So — well, I guess that's why I did it. Because it was the only way, it seemed, that this guy would go on liking me. And I was afraid that if he ever stopped liking me, I — I just wouldn't be any more. I'd have moved off into a world I could never come back from."

Murrow looked at me silently. After a moment he let out a scornful grunt — rather, he tried to. "Brother!" he snorted. "Are you a big help!"

"How about you?" I said. "Why didn't you give him a turn-down?"

"Never mind about me!" he snapped. "Because I'm stupid, that's why. Because I got so many dumb clucks working for me, I'm getting dumb myself . . . Well, you got anything else to say?"

I shook my head. "Nothing that would make any sense."

"Let's have it," Murrow said wear-

ily. "You haven't *been* making any sense, so why should you begin now?"

"I was just wondering," I said. "I mean, I wasn't wondering exactly, but — He stuck two other stores in town besides ours. He could have made a clean sweep, yet he only took two. But those two are the same kind of outfits we are."

"So?" Murrow frowned. "So he plays the installment houses. What about it?"

"Not just installment houses. A certain *type* of installment house," I said. "The hardboiled kind. The iron-clad system houses. Places where every contingency is provided for by the system, where the human element is ruled out . . . The system says no sales to the unemployed. No sales to transients. It says that if a risk looks very bad, we must insist on a down payment which practically covers the wholesale cost of the merchandise. It allows for *no* exceptions under *any* circumstances. It doesn't allow us to think or to feel — to do anything but apply our own special yardstick and throw out anyone who doesn't measure up to each and every one of the rules. Why, one of the saints themselves could walk in here and if he didn't —"

"Chop it off," Murrow said. "Get to the point."

"I've already got to it," I said. "This guy knows exactly how we operate — yet he chooses us. He deliberately makes things tough on himself. Why did he do it? — if he was just after the merchandise. If,

I mean, he was doing it just for himself instead of — uh —”

“Yeah?” Murrow said grimly. “Yeah?”

“Nothing.” I turned toward the door. “I guess I’d better be getting back to work.”

I had just sat down at my desk when Murrow came out. He asked me for a description of the guy, adding roughly that at least I could help him that much.

“Well” — I tried to remember. “He seemed awfully friendly. Really friendly and kind, you know. The way he smiled at me, it was like he’d known me for a long time — as if he knew me better than I knew myself.”

“Nuts!” Murrow yelled. “Do you or don’t you remember what he looked like?”

“What about you?” I said. “You talked to him longer than I did.”

Murrow wheeled around, stamped into his office, and slammed the door behind him.

Naturally he didn’t send any report to Dorrance — how could he? There was nothing to report. And there was nothing we could do but wait until Dorrance called again . . . demanding an explanation for the unexplainable.

But Dorrance didn’t call.

A week passed.

Two weeks.

And there wasn’t a single peep from the home store.

I suggested to Murrow hopefully that maybe there had been a slip-up, that the matter had got buried some-

where and was now in the process of being forgotten. But Murrow said there wasn’t a chance — not with our system.

“That’s what they want us to think — that we got away with something. We think that, see, so maybe we’ll try something else. And when we do . . .”

“But we aren’t going to! We haven’t tried anything yet, have we? We made this one mistake — kind of a mistake — but from now on —”

“I’ll tell you what,” Murrow said. “If you’ve borrowed anything against your petty cash, you’d better pay it back. Check the collectors — make sure they don’t hold dough over from one day to the next. Keep your accounts posted right up to the minute. Have everything in perfect order, understand? Because if it isn’t — if there’s anything wrong at all — we’ll be in the soup. A hell of a lot deeper than we are right now.”

I did what he told me to.

Four days later Dorrance showed up.

It was on a Saturday, a few minutes before closing time. He lingered near the entrance until the last of the customers had left; then he came up the stairs, a big man with a flabby face and eyes that were like two chunks of ice.

He answered our nervous greetings with the merest of nods. He cleared off a desk — waving me away when I started to help him — and started laying out the contents of two heavy briefcases.

"All right," he said, spreading out his records — picking one contract, *the* contract, from among them, and placing it deliberately to one side. "You know why I'm here. If I want to know anything I'll ask you. If I want you to do anything I'll tell you. Got that? Good. Now open up the safe, unlock the cash drawer, and bring your account files over here."

It was almost midnight when he finished checking us. Almost five hours — with Murrow and me hanging around red-faced and embarrassed. Feeling unaccountably guilty, and looking a hell of a lot guiltier. Hardly speaking unless we were spoken to, or moving unless we were ordered to.

Five solid hours of waiting and watching — while Dorrance did his damndest to spot something crooked.

Then, at last, he was through. He leaned back in his chair, massaged his eyes briefly with a thumb and forefinger, and gave us another of those infinitesimal nods.

"That does it," he said. "You boys are okay."

Something inside of me snapped. Before I could stop myself I blurted out an angry, "Thanks. I'll bet that disappoints you, doesn't it?"

"Now, now," Murrow said quickly. "Mr. Dorrance is just doing his job."

"Then it's one hell of a job!" I said. "He comes in here late at night and —"

"Yes," said Dorrance quietly. "Yes,

it's one hell of a job, son. I'll be glad to see the day when it isn't necessary — which, unfortunately, it seems to be at present. This is the tenth store I've hit in the past three weeks. Four of them didn't check."

"Well," I said. "I didn't mean to say that — that —"

"It gave me quite a start," Dorrance went on. "Of course, there's always bound to be a little gypping — one-shot, off-and-on stuff. But these birds had been doing it regularly. They'd invented a system for beating our system . . . I wonder" — he hesitated, then his eyes strayed to that laid-aside contract. "I've been wondering why I didn't foresee that it would happen. We've discouraged individuality, anything in the way of original thinking. All decisions were made at the top, and passed down. Honesty, loyalty — we didn't feel that we had to worry about those things. The system would take care of them. The way the system worked — supposedly — a man simply *had* to be loyal and honest.

"Well, obviously, we were all wet: we found those four stores I mentioned, and God knows how many others there are like them. And about all I can say is we were asking for it. If you won't let a man think for you, he'll think against you. If you don't have any feeling for *him*, you can't expect him to have any for *you*."

He paused, picked up that lone contract, and glanced at us questioningly. Murrow and I didn't say anything. Dorrance shrugged.

"Now let's face it," he said. "This man has stuck store after store in our chain. He's hit us for thousands of dollars. How he got away with it, we don't know. None of our men have been able to explain. But there *is* an explanation — several of 'em, in fact . . . Perhaps he worked for an outfit like ours at one time. He knew you people had been pushed to the top of the arc in one direction, and that you were all set to swing the other way — out of resentment, frustration, anger. The desire to do something for once that *didn't* make any sense. All he had to do was catch you at the right time, and you'd let him walk off with the store.

"Or it could be that he's simply a damn clever con man operating in a new field. A good con man would know that the easiest people to take are those who've never been taken — people who supposedly know all the angles, who are so sure that no one would even try to beat them that they're a cinch for the first man who does." Dorrance paused, then went on.

"He's a very dangerous man. He did us a good turn, indirectly, by starting this investigation, but that doesn't change the situation. He's a menace — as dangerous as they come — and if we ever spot him again he's got to be treated as one. Just grab him, understand? Latch onto him, and we'll figure out a legal charge later. Why, a man like that — he could wreck us if he took a notion to! He could wreck our entire economy!"

Murrow glanced uneasily at the

contract, wondering, as I did, what Dorrance intended to do about it. And about us. Then Murrow said nervously that he didn't imagine the guy would be back. "Do you, Mr. Dorrance?"

"Why not?" Dorrance snapped. "Why don't you think he'll be back?"

"Well" — Murrow looked at me uncomfortably. "I'm not sure, of course. It was just an idea. But —"

"Dan means that it wouldn't be smart for him to come back," I said. "He'd know that we'd be on the lookout for him."

"Oh," said Dorrance. After a long moment he pushed himself up from his chair and reached for his coat. "That wraps it up, I guess. Now let's get out of here. You boys have to work tomorrow, and I have to travel. As for that contract, throw it in your p-and-l's. Can't collect on it, so it may as well go into profit-and-loss."

Murrow and I didn't move; we just weren't up to moving yet. And we couldn't think of anything to say either. But there was an unspoken question in the air. Dorrance answered it snappishly, as he packed his briefcases.

"What's the matter with you?" he said, not looking at us. "You can't put two and two together? Do I have to draw you a diagram? That fellow hit the home store too — hit us the hardest of all. I personally okayed him for four hundred dollars . . ."

He sounded sore, but he didn't look it. Somehow he looked kind of happy.

AUTHOR: **ELLERY QUEEN**

TITLE: ***Snowball in July***

TYPE: Detective Story

DETECTIVES: Ellery Queen, mystery writer, and his father, Inspector Queen

LOCALE: Upstate New York

COMMENTS: *Underworld moll Lizbet was the star witness. Grady, a magician in the art of holdup and murder, wanted her to disappear. So he pulled the vanishing act of the decade . . .*

AT PLAYFUL MOMENTS DIAMOND JIM Grady liked to refer to himself as a magician, a claim no one disputed — least of all the police. Grady's specialty was jewel robbery at gunpoint, a branch of felonious vaudeville which he had elevated to an art form. His heists were miracles of advance information, timing, teamwork, and deception. And once he got his hands on the loot it vanished with the speed of light, to be seen no more in the shape the manufacturing jeweler had wrought.

Grady's most spectacular trick was keeping himself and his fellow artists out of jail. He would drill his small company without mercy in the wisdom of keeping their mugs covered,

their mitts gloved, and their traps shut while on stage. There was rarely a slip in his performances; when one occurred, the slipping assistant disappeared. As Diamond Jim reasonably pointed out, "What witness can identify a slob that ain't here?"

Grady might have gone on forever collecting other people's pretties and driving the law and insurance companies mad, but he pulled one trick too many.

In explanation it is necessary to peep into Diamond Jim's love life. Lizbet had been his big moment for two years and ten months — a slim eye-stopper as golden and glittery as any choice piece in his collection. Now, in underworld society a roman-

tic attachment of almost three years' duration is equivalent to an epic passion, and Lizbet may be forgiven the folly of having developed delusions of permanence. Unfortunately, that was not all she developed; include an appetite for pizza pies and French ice cream, and along with it her figure. So one night, when Grady's bloated eye cased the dainty anatomy of Maybellene, pivot girl of the Club Swahili line, that was all for Lizbet.

One of Grady's staff, a lovelorn lapidary who could grind an ax as well as a diamond, tipped Lizbet the bad news from a phone booth in the Swahili men's room even as Diamond Jim prepared toothily to escort Maybellene home.

Lizbet was revolted at the perfidy of man. She also realized that unless she lammed with great rapidity her life was not worth the crummiest bangle on the junk counter of the nearest Five-and-Dime. She knew far, far too many of Diamond Jim's professional secrets; she even knew where a couple of bodies — of ex-slobs — were buried.

So Lizbet took barely the time to grab an old summer mink and a fistful of unaltered mementos from Grady's latest personal appearance before she did an impromptu vanishing act of her own.

Immediately Lizbet became the most popular girl in town. Everybody wanted her, especially the police and Grady. The smart money, doping past performances strictly, was on

Grady, but this time the smart money took a pratfall. Lizbet was not in town at all. She was in Canada, where — according to every Royal Northwest movie Lizbet had ever seen — the Mounties were large and incorruptible and a girl could think without worrying about stopping a shiv in her back. Having thought, Lizbet slung the summer mink about her plump shoulders, taxied to the nearest police station, and demanded protection and immunity in exchange for a pledge to take the witness stand back home and talk herself, if need be, into lockjaw.

And she insisted on being ushered into a cell while Montreal got in touch with New York.

The long distance negotiations took twenty-four hours — just long enough for the news to leak out and inundate the front pages of the New York newspapers.

"So now Grady knows where she is," fumed Inspector Queen. He was on special assignment in charge of the case. "He'll go for her sure. She told Piggott and Hesse when they flew up to Montreal that she can even drape a first-degree murder rap around Grady's fat neck."

"Me," said Sergeant Velie gloomily, "I wouldn't give a plugged horse car token for that dame's chances of getting back to New York with a whole hide."

"What is he, a jet pilot?" asked Ellery. "Fly her down."

"She won't fly — has a fear of heights," snapped his father. "It's on the level, Ellery. Lizbet's the only

girl friend Grady ever had who turned down a penthouse."

"Train or car, then," said Ellery. "What's the hassle?"

"A train he'd make hash out of," said Sergeant Velie, "and a car he'd hijack some truck to run off the road into a nice thousand-foot hole."

"You're romancing."

"Maestro, you don't know Grady!"

"Then you're tackling this hind end to," said Ellery negligently. "Dad, have Grady and his gang picked up on some charge and locked in a cell. By the time they're sprung this woman can be safe on ice somewhere in Manhattan."

"On ice is where she'll wind up," said Sergeant Velie.

When Ellery found that Diamond Jim had anticipated interference and disappeared with his entire company, including Maybellene, a more respectful glint came into his eye.

"Let's pull a trick or two of our own. Grady will assume that you'll get Lizbet to New York as quickly as possible. He knows she won't fly and that you wouldn't risk the long car trip. So he'll figure she'll be brought down by rail. Since the fastest way by rail is a through express, it's the crack Montreal train he'll be gunning for. Does he know Piggott and Hesse by sight?"

"Let's say he does," said Inspector Queen, perking up notwithstanding the heat, "and I see what you mean. I'll fly Johnson and Goldberg up there along with a policewoman of Lizbet's build and general appearance. Piggott

and Hesse take the policewoman onto the Special, heavily veiled, while Goldie and Johnson hustle Lizbet onto a slow train —"

"You think this Houdini plays with potsies?" demanded Sergeant Velie. "You got to do better than that, my masters."

"Oh, come, Sergeant, he's only flesh and blood," said Ellery soothingly. "Anyway, we're going to do better than that. To befuddle him completely, somewhere along the route we'll have her taken off and complete the trip by automobile. In fact, Dad, we'll take her off ourselves — the three of us. Feel better, Velie?"

But the Sergeant shook his head. "You don't know Grady."

So Detectives Goldberg and Johnson and an ex-chorus girl named Policewoman Bruusgaard flew to Montreal, and at the zero hour Detectives Piggott and Hesse ostentatiously spirited Policewoman Bruusgaard — veiled and sweltering in Lizbet's own mink — into a drawing room on the Canadian Limited. Thirty minutes after the Limited rolled out of the terminal Detectives Johnson and Goldberg, attired as North Country backwoodsmen and lugging battered suitcases, swaggered behind Lizbet into the smoking car of a sooty, suffocating all-coach local-express entitled laughingly in the timetables The Snowball. Lizbet was in dowdy clothes, her coiffure was now blue-black, and her streaming face, scrubbed clean of heavy makeup, seemed a sucker's bet to fool even

Grady — so many wrinkles and crow's-feet showed.

And the game was en route.

For on a sizzling hot morning in July two unmarked squad cars set out from Center Street, Manhattan, for upstate New York. In one rode the Queens and Sergeant Velie, in the other six large detectives.

The Sergeant drove lugubriously. "It won't work," he predicted. "He operates practically by radar. And he can spot and grease an itchy palm from nine miles up. I tell you Grady's got this up his sleeve right now."

"You croak like a witch doctor with bellyache," remarked Inspector Queen, squirming in his damp clothes. "Just remember, Velie, if we don't get to Wapaug with time to spare —"

Wapaug was a whistle stop on the C. & N. Y. Railroad. It consisted of several simmering coal piles, a straggly single street, and a roasted-looking cubby of a station. The two cars drove up to the brown little building and the Inspector and Ellery went inside. No one was in the hotbox of a waiting room but an elderly man wearing sleeve garters and an eyeshade who was poking viciously at the innards of a paralyzed electric fan.

"What's with The Snowball?"

"Number 113? On time, mister."

"And she's due —?"

"10:18."

"Three minutes," said Ellery. "Let's go."

The cars had drawn up close, one at each end of the platform. Two of the six detectives were leaning exhausted-

ly against an empty handtruck. Otherwise, the baked platform was deserted.

They all squinted north.

10:18 came. 10:18 went.

At 10:20 they were still squinting north.

The stationmaster was in the doorway now, also squinting north.

"Hey!" rasped Inspector Queen, swatting a mosquito. "Where was that train on time last?"

"At Grove Junction." The stationmaster peered up the tracks, which looked as if they had just come out of a blast furnace. "Where the yards and roundhouse are. It's the all-train stop two stations north."

"Train 113 stops at the next station north, too, doesn't she? Marmion? Did you get a report on her from Marmion?"

"I was just gonna check, mister."

They followed him back into the hotbox and the elderly man put on his slippery headphones and got busy with the telegraph key. "Marmion stationmaster says she pulled in and out on time. Left Marmion 10:12."

"On time at Marmion," said Ellery, "and it's only a six-minute run from Marmion to Wapaug —" He wiped his neck.

"Funny," fretted his father. It was now 10:22. "How could she lose four minutes on a six-minute run? Even on this railroad?"

"Somethin's wrong," said the stationmaster, blowing the sweat off his eyeshade band. He turned suddenly to his key.

The Queens went back to the platform to stare up the local track toward Marmion. After a moment Ellery hurried back into the waiting room.

"Stationmaster, could she have switched to the express track at Marmion and gone right through Wapaug without stopping?" He knew the answer in advance, since they had driven along the railroad for miles in their approach to Wapaug; but his brains were frying.

"Nothin's gone through south-bound on these tracks since 7:38 this mornin'."

Ellery hurried out again, fingering his collar. His father was sprinting up the platform toward the squad car. The two detectives had already rejoined their mates in the other car and it was roaring up the highway, headed north.

"Come on!" shouted Inspector Queen. Ellery barely made it before Sergeant Velie sent the car rocketing toward the road. "Somehow Grady got onto the trick — a smear, a leak! He's waylaid The Snowball between here and Marmion!"

They kept watching the ties. The automobile road paralleled the railroad at a distance of barely twenty feet, with nothing between but gravel.

And there was no sign of a passenger train, in motion or standing still, wrecked or whole. Or of a freight, or even a handcar. Headed south — or, for that matter, headed north.

They almost shot through Marmion

before they realized that they had covered the entire distance between the two stations. The other car was parked below the weathered eaves of an even smaller shed than the one at Wapaug. As they twisted back in reverse, four of the detectives burst out of the little station.

"She left Marmion at 10:12, all right, Inspector!" yelled one. "Stationmaster says we're crazy. We must have missed it!"

The two cars raced back toward Wapaug.

Inspector Queen glared at the rails flashing alongside. "Missed it? A whole passenger train? Velie, slow down!"

"That Grady," moaned Sergeant Velie.

Ellery almost devoured a knuckle, saying nothing. He kept staring at the glittering rails. They winked back, jeering. It was remarkable how straight this stretch of track between Marmion and Wapaug was, how uncluttered by scenery. Not a tree or building beside the right of way. No water anywhere — not so much as a rain puddle. No curves, no grades; no siding, spur line, tunnel, bridge. Not a gully, gorge, or ravine. And no sign of wreckage. . . . The rails stretched, perfect and unburdened, along the floor of the valley. For all the concealment or trickery possible, they might have been a series of parallel lines drawn with a ruler on a sheet of blank paper.

And there was Wapaug's roasted little station again.

And no Snowball.

The Inspector's voice cracked. "She pulls into Grove Junction on time. She gets to Marmion on time. She pulls out of Marmion on time. But she doesn't show up at Wapaug. Then she's got to be between Marmion and Wapaug! What's wrong with that?" He challenged them, hopefully, to find something wrong with it.

Sergeant Velie accepted. "Only one thing," he said in a hollow voice. "She ain't."

That did it. "I suppose Grady's palmed it!" screamed his superior. "That train's between Marmion and Wapaug somewhere, and I'm going to find it or — or buy me a ouija board!"

So back they went to Marmion, driving along the railroad at ten miles per hour. And then they turned around and crept Wapaugward again, to shuffle into the waiting room and look piteously at the stationmaster. But that railroad man was sitting in his private oven mopping his chafed forehead and blinking at the shimmering valley through his north window.

No one said a word for some time.

When the word came, everyone leaped. "Stationmaster!" said Ellery. "Get your Marmion man on the key again. Find out if, after leaving Marmion at 10:12, *The Snowball didn't turn back.*"

"Back?" The elderly man brightened. "Sure!" He seized his telegraph key.

"That's it, Ellery!" cried Inspector Queen. "She left Marmion south-

bound all right, but then she backed up north *past* Marmion again for a repair, and I'll bet she's in the Grove Junction yards or roundhouse right now!"

"Grove Junction says," whispered the stationmaster, "that she ain't in their yards or roundhouse and never was — just went through on time. And Marmion says 113 pulled out southbound and didn't come back."

All were silent once more.

Then the Inspector slapped at a dive-bombing squadron of bluebottle flies, hopping on one foot and howling, "But how can a whole train disappear? Snowball! Snowball in July! What did Grady do, melt her down for ice water?"

"And drank her," said Sergeant Velie, licking his lips.

"Wait," said Ellery. "Wait . . . I know where *The Snowball* is!" He scuttled toward the door. "And if I'm right we'd better hurry — or kiss Lizbet goodbye!"

"But *where?*" implored Inspector Queen as the two cars flashed north again, toward Marmion.

"Down Grady's gullet," shouted the Sergeant, wrestling his wheel.

"That's what he wanted us to think," shouted Ellery in reply. "Faster, Sergeant! Train leaves Marmion and never shows up at the next station south, where we're waiting to take Lizbet off. Vanishes without a trace. Between Marmion and Wapaug there's nothing at all to explain what could have happened to her — no

bridge to fall from, no water or ravine to fall into, no tunnel to hide in, no anything — just a straight line on flat bare country. Marvelous illusion. Only the same facts that give it the appearance of magic also explain it. . . . No, Velie, don't slow down," Ellery yelled as the dreary little Marmion station came into view. "Keep going north — *past* Marmion!"

"North past Marmion?" said his father, bewildered. "But the train came *through* Marmion, Ellery, then headed south . . ."

"The Snowball's nowhere south of Marmion, is it? And from the facts it's a physical impossibility for her to be anywhere south of Marmion. So she *isn't* south of Marmion, Dad. *She never went through Marmion at all.*"

"But the Marmion stationmaster said —"

"What Grady bribed him to say! It was all a trick to keep us running around in circles between Marmion and Wapaug, while Grady and his gang held up the train *between Marmion and Grove Junction!* Isn't that gunfire up ahead? We're still in time!"

And there, four miles north of Marmion, where the valley entered the foothills, cowered The Snowball, frozen to the spot. A huge trailer-truck dumped athwart the local tracks had

stopped her, and judging from the gun flashes the train was under bombardment of half a dozen bandits hidden in the woods nearby.

Two figures, one lying still and the other crawling toward the woods dragging a leg, told them that the battle was not one-sided. From two of the shattered windows of a railroad car a stream of bullets poured into the woods. What Grady & Co. had not known was that Northwoodsmen Goldberg and Johnson had carried in their battered suitcases two sub-machine guns and a large supply of ammunition.

When the careful of New York detectives broke out their arsenal and cut loose, the Grady gang dropped their weapons and trudged out with their arms held high . . .

Ellery and Inspector Queen found Lizbet on the floor of the smoking car with assorted recumbent passengers, in a litter of hot cartridge shells, while Detectives Johnson and Goldberg prepared rather shakily to enjoy a couple of king-size cigarettes.

"You all right, young woman?" asked the Inspector anxiously. "Anything I can get you?"

Lizbet looked up out of a mess of dyed hair, gunsmoke, sweat, and tears. "You said it, pop — that witness chair!"



WINNER OF A SECOND PRIZE

Dion Henderson's "From the Mouse to the Hawk" is one of the nine Second Prize stories in EQMM's Eleventh Annual Contest. Like Mr. Henderson's only previous tale in EQMM — "Payment in Full" in our October 1954 issue — this new story fairly bursts with a sense of power . . . and with the sound of the wind and the river and the sweeping riffle, and with the smell of spruce and pine, and with the taste of wild blackberries.

The two city men came to LaCroix for what the woodsman had taken from the cold mountain streams for more than twenty years; but old LaCroix was more man than the pair of them. Then, too, he was a member of a wild community and he knew the law of the wilderness — the law which has both justice and honor in its inexorable code . . .

When we published Dion Henderson's earlier story, we knew nothing whatever about him. Now we can pass on a few details. Mr. Henderson is in his middle thirties and was educated largely, he tells us, in his grandfather's library. He is a staff writer for the Associated Press which carries more than 50,000 words a year of his outdoors and natural science stories. He is married, has two daughters and a son, and is the third-generation breeder in his family of distinguished sporting dogs.

His new tale has a quality and impact all its own . . .

FROM THE MOUSE TO THE HAWK

by DION HENDERSON

WHEN HE SAW THAT THE BEAR trap was gone from the shed where he kept the furs and the gear, LaCroix knew they intended to kill him. Previously he had thought they would try to rob him and then leave. After all, one of them was his nephew, the son of his sister who had gone long ago to the city. The son of that sister, yes. LaCroix grinned wryly. Maybe it was not so unusual. Still, he

had not expected it. And they had taken the bear trap. That affronted him. In the world of nature where LaCroix had grown old it was not unusual for the one which has not, to kill the one which has, in order to acquire the difference between them. Yes, and in turn be killed, LaCroix added in his mind, thinking of the endless links of life that lead from the mouse to the hawk to the fox to

the wolf. And, at the end, the worm again. He did not think about its being wrong or right.

But that they should select the bear trap, that was an affront. Even when you trap the bear, you take him quickly. You do not leave him in the forest, chained, for smaller mouths to gnaw on before he is dead. They had talked of the traps, and especially of the bear trap, and then they had taken the trap and set it for him. LaCroix was positive now that he saw the trap was missing, and it made him angry.

When they first arrived, LaCroix was pleased. He did not have much company. The chipmunks that dwelt in his fireplace came forth in the evening to barter with him for cherry pits, and the long-tailed deer mouse sometimes came very close along the rafters when he was lying motionless in his bunk. But the chipmunks were absent, sleeping, during the whole time of the big cold, and the deer mouse came only intermittently, being occupied at intervals with problems of maternity. The big wild — the foxes and the coyotes and the deer and bears — they were not tinged with any quality of friendship. They shared the wilderness with him, as neighbors share the city.

When he heard the sound of the airplane he thought at first it might be a party of fishermen directed to him by the ranger. The ranger was the only man he saw with regularity, and like the chipmunks the ranger did not show himself in the time of

the big cold. As the aircraft with the belly of a boat came over the piney hills and slanted down the late June sunshine to his lake, LaCroix hastened from his cabin down to the wharf. It was the aircraft that regularly brought him fishermen and later returned for them. And there was fishing tackle with the luggage on the wharf.

But the two men were not fishermen. One was LaCroix's nephew and the other was the man his nephew called Al, a soft-looking man with hard-looking eyes who spoke to the nephew as you speak to a backward child or a forward dog. This man wore a black straw hat with a white band and he did not take off the hat until he went to bed.

They had not brought any food with them. LaCroix made griddle cakes, and syrup from melted brown sugar, and he fried thick slices of side pork. But neither his nephew nor the man called Al ate very much.

"In the morning we will catch some eating fish," LaCroix said apologetically. "We will take the boat and go far up the lake to where the big lake fish lie in the cold water."

"No," the man called Al said. "You go."

LaCroix was puzzled.

His nephew said, "What Al means, we ain't so experienced in that kind of fishing. We like the kind in the river."

"But the tackle," LaCroix said. "You have purchased lake tackle, even the trolling gear."

"So you take the tackle," Al said.

LaCroix did not know what to say to them. They sat around the table LaCroix had made from slabs of logs polished smooth. The man called Al looked about the big room with the furs hanging on its walls — the slender ermine and the big round blankets of prime beaver and the deep pile of winter fox — as though he were memorizing them.

"Worth a lot of dough," he said finally. "Don't you sell them?"

"Only sometimes, a skin or two," LaCroix said. "To a fisherman who wants a gift to take home. I do not need the money."

They misunderstood him. LaCroix's nephew said eagerly to Al, "See, Uncle doesn't need money. There is gold in the streams when he needs money. All these years, he takes the gold he needs from the streams and keeps the furs for himself."

Al looked at him, his eyes suddenly bright.

"Been taking the gold a long time, eh? Saving it up for something?"

All right, LaCroix thought, let it be that way.

"It is not difficult," he said. "All you need is a frying pan and twenty or thirty years."

They left it then, but LaCroix had the beginning of knowledge. When he took the pail and went down the path to the spring, they would confer. Well, let them confer; they could not force him to tell them of the gold. Even at his age he was more man than the two of them together. They

could not kill him, either, for if he were dead he could not tell them about the gold.

He went back into the house with the water and they were sitting as before, in the chairs made of antlers tied cleverly together with thongs. But LaCroix noticed — without appearing to notice — that the hammer of the carbine on the mantel was drawn back to full cock. So they had taken it down and levered the shells out of it and put it back.

They felt better now, his nephew and Al. LaCroix felt all right, too. He was pleased to have someone to talk to, and wished to make the most of it because he might not have them for long. He felt, also, a rising excitement. To match wits with the beasts was one thing, but not wholly fair. For any hunter the best game of all is man himself.

So LaCroix built the fire up as the coolness rose from the surface of the lake, and he stirred the wild honey thickly into his coffee and told them stories of the gold and the furs and the traps. He told of the nugget as big as his fist which he had found in the riffle ahead of a trout pool, and of the bear whose seven-foot-long pelt was stretched in front of the hearth. This was the bear that had carried the trap a day and a night's journey before LaCroix caught up with him.

"Couldn't he get out?" asked LaCroix's nephew.

"Not from a good catch, above the point," LaCroix said. "Not a bear, nor a man either. Eighty pounds, the

trap and the chain, not counting the drag log. My own drag log is oak," LaCroix said, "and is weighted with forty pounds of metal."

"A man couldn't carry that very far," the man called Al said.

"Nor a bear, usually," LaCroix said. "Though it is not the weight that bothers the bear. The log catches in the brush and between trees and holds him, unless he can tear loose."

"I didn't know you could tear loose," LaCroix's nephew said.

"If you are fortunate, the trap will take the bone," LaCroix said. "Sometimes a bear that is very strong and very determined will then tear his own flesh until he is free."

The nephew looked a little pale, LaCroix noted. Al did not look any different.

LaCroix said, "Once I knew a man of the Chippewa nation who was caught above the ankle in a bear trap. Even though the bone was not broken cleanly, he tied his belt around the leg to stifle the bleeding and cut himself free with his knife."

LaCroix's nephew was even paler now.

"The Chippewas were very brave," LaCroix said. "Also very practical. If he had not cut himself free, in two days time the foot would have gone bad, and without water he would fail in the head. Then the insects would crawl over him, and soon with the smell of bad meat in the air the little ones would come."

Afterward he added in explanation,

"Those with the sharp teeth. It is better to be brave early."

The man Al and LaCroix's nephew did not have much to say. LaCroix showed them where to sleep and went to bed himself.

In the morning he left them sleeping in the cabin and took the boat up the lake. It occurred to him that he might keep going. They would probably starve before the ranger or the man with the aircraft found them. But a nephew constitutes family, and LaCroix had no other family except his sister.

So before noon he was back in the cabin with four jackfish, the big pike with the white meat that flaked off, sweet and boneless. He washed the fish carefully, then cleaned them and wrapped them in moss.

No one else was in the cabin. LaCroix looked in the bedroom and the kitchen, and he went out to the shed where he kept the traps and extra furs. It was then he saw that the bear trap was missing, and after that he was angry. He went through the cabin quickly, but they had not missed anything, his nephew and Al. No ammunition, no weapons were left.

LaCroix went out of the cabin and took the high trail through the spruce. A mile up on the shoulder of the first hill, the country that was his country — in the way that a city man's yard is his country — was spread out around him. There was the lake, rising in the marsh where the springs opened gaping holes in the

earth faults and poured the torrents of icy water out, the lake itself piling up in deep cold water where the hills held it, except for the notch where the long plume of spray marked the outlet that became the river. Then there was the river itself, looping out and back on itself in an enormous horseshoe, with a wide stretch of blackberry bushes inside the horseshoe like a waving green sea, growing thickly on the ground of an old burn where a forest fire had been stopped by the river. Below the shoulder of the hill several rivulets converged and made a stream that flowed between steep banks to join the river. It was a small stream now, in late June. In the time of melting snows it ran bank-full of angry water, deeper than a man is tall, and no man could stand against it.

From the high path LaCroix could see all this, and beyond the berry grounds to the place where the river came back on itself and where he kept the canoe. It was safe there beneath the rapids, and when he returned from the settlement it was quicker and easier to beach the canoe there and walk the mile to his cabin — across the berry grounds and the ravine and the shoulder of the hill — than it was to pole a canoe against the white water.

While he watched, the men who were his nephew and the man called Al came from the place of the canoe, walking slowly and wearily. So, LaCroix thought. It was a long walk. And a heavy burden.

The anger was now in him all the time. He was not angry often. When you are a member of the wild community, you do not set up the rules. You let the others who share the wild community show you their rules, and you play thus and so. The rules differ. For the chipmunks there is one rule, the small sociable dealers in cherry pits and peach stones and tomato seeds. For the deer mice there is another, very similar. For the wolf there is still another, and this one is pitiless and without quarter, but there is justice to it, and honor. And now there was a rule for men. Their rule. Just so, LaCroix thought. Thus it shall be.

He went back to the cabin and built a huge cooking fire. The chimney became so hot that the chipmunks came out of the chinks to sit panting indignantly on the high stones and chatter at him. By the time his nephew and the other man arrived, LaCroix had one of the big pike split and broiling on a plank, potatoes roasting, and a blackberry pie baking in the reflector oven.

Also, he was very jovial. His nephew and Al were not jovial. They were wearing the brand-new clothes they had brought with them, the flannel shirts and the rubber-lined duck pants, and they had sweated the shirts dark, and they had sweated inside the airless pants.

"You are not in condition," LaCroix said. "If you took such a walk every morning you would soon be in condition."

"If I took such a walk every morning," the man called Al said bitterly, "I would be dead tomorrow."

"You must not worry," LaCroix said. "Maybe you will be dead tomorrow, anyway."

Al stopped with a forkful of pie halfway to his mouth.

"What do you mean by that?" His eyes were hard and cold.

"He don't mean nothin'," LaCroix's nephew said. "Just gabbing, ain't you, Uncle?"

"No," LaCroix said.

"I don't like this," Al said. "I don't like none of this."

He reached into the hip pocket of his new pants and took out a small, evil-looking pistol.

"So maybe I will be nice," LaCroix said with a huge laugh. "How would you like to know where the gold is?"

"Now we're getting somewhere," Al said.

"Maybe you would like instead to know the way strychnine tastes when mixed with blackberries."

The man pointed the little gun straight at LaCroix's belt buckle.

"Don't shoot him yet," LaCroix's nephew said. "Then we'll never know."

"On the other hand," LaCroix said, "if you knew the answers to both those questions, you would not be any farther ahead than you are now. So learning is not everything, eh?"

He walked from the table to the fireplace and poked at the ashes. The gun in Al's hand followed him.

"The hell with this," Al said suddenly. "I'm going to shoot him now and then we'll take the place apart and find the gold."

"Yes," LaCroix's nephew said. "And then the ranger will come and find the old man with a bullet in him and the gold will not take us far enough so we can spend any of it."

For a moment the hard eyes of the man called Al shifted to the younger man. LaCroix bent casually over the fire with a skillet and as Al looked back toward him he tossed the skillet of red-hot embers full in Al's face and in the same turning motion went out the door. The little gun spoke sharply as he went and he felt the pain in his arm. It was not much of a pain. The little gun did not amount to much in LaCroix's opinion. It was a gun to shoot people in bed.

He ran through the clearing, waiting for the gun to speak again, but it did not. The hot ashes had done their work well. He reached the edge of the new forest and dropped down onto the river trail before he heard from the shouting that they were outside the cabin. It would be too bad, he thought, if the cabin should be burned. But the floor was stone, and there was not much chance of that.

LaCroix went very quickly along the trail. He did not know exactly what he would do, except that he would not run away. There was a kind of challenge to it and he had the two feelings full and strong in him now, the anger and the excitement. Most of the advantages he had in the

beginning were now gone. But now there was room for achievement.

Once he stopped in the shade to look at his arm. He was surprised at the blood. It had soaked his shirt clear to the cuff, and his hand was red. When he lifted the arm it did not go very high. He was astonished. The pain was there, of course, but the pain was always there with a wound. LaCroix tore off the sleeve and bandaged the wound. When he had a moment he would take his knife and dig the bullet out. It was not good for the bullets to stay in the flesh, although it was not so serious a thing as it once was.

He had come a half mile from the cabin. Occasionally he heard shouts, but they did not yet know which way he had gone. Off the trail, he lay for a moment in the tall growth beside the river. He was upstream from the big pool, where the river was forced into the first curve of the horseshoe and the force of it ground out a sweeping riffle that was almost a rapids.

LaCroix was upstream from the riffle, but the wind blew easily toward him from it. He could not see because of the bend in the river. His nose wrinkled at a scent. He put his head close to the water, let the breath go out of him, and all empty and relaxed he let the river speak to him and the wind bring him its sounds. While he lay there listening, the no-see-ums made a cloud around his head. Some men have said the tiny flies could drive you mad. LaCroix did not pay any attention to

them. They are like silence, and pain and death. When you can not avoid, you endure.

Presently he was sure of what he heard and smelled. He left the river and, keeping in the growth of the young forest, angled toward the watercourse in the ravine. The breeze was very light now, but LaCroix was careful to keep it on the side of his face, even in the heavy cover. Finally he came to the ravine and risked showing himself long enough to roll easily over the edge, landing on his feet in a few inches of water and not falling because he had expected it that way. The banks were very steep, higher than a man's head. He stayed in the trickle of water, walking safely upright.

At the beginning of the spruce he left the ravine. He was at the head of the little burned-over plateau, where the blackberry bushes made their smooth and shallow jungle. LaCroix kept low and moved quietly along the game trails. Occasionally he paused to listen, and munched on the big purplish berries that were almost like flesh. They were ripening early this year. There was no fresh deer sign, and only an occasional hare in full summer brown coat lifted big ears to look at him.

He did not hear the voices any more. Doubtless they were searching along the lake, thinking he had gone the shortest distance to escape.

Escape, LaCroix thought. It depends on who is the hunter, a matter no longer agreed on.

Halfway through the berry ground, the breeze moved again, and LaCroix's nose wrinkled. A moment later he saw the bear cub.

The size of a bulky little dog, but more like a child than a dog, it sat on its haunches before a blackberry bush and held a cane with a paw while it licked off berries expertly, like a man eating a sparse ear of corn. The cub saw LaCroix and let out a startled "Whuff-f!" — the cub's big ears coming to attention, round and ludicrous.

LaCroix crouched very still, wondering how far that "Whuff-f" carried in the quartering wind. But nothing happened, and after a while the bear cub went back to the berry canes.

LaCroix picked a few berries, too. The cub looked at him again, running his slim tongue out and up over the end of his nose. But he did not snort again, and soon LaCroix and the cub picked berries together.

Then LaCroix began moving toward the river — not toward the loop where the ravine came out and the pooled shallows lay, but across the horseshoe toward the place where the canoe was beached.

The little bear swung up his ears again to watch him. LaCroix put a handful of berries on the trail and moved away. Presently the cub followed, sniffing. The cub did not like the smell on the berries, but they tasted fine. He moved along cautiously after LaCroix, ears up, tongue out, moving with the rump-high, awkward-smooth bear gait.

LaCroix stopped and picked more

berries. The little bear waited, openly hopeful. LaCroix moved more toward the river, leaving the berries. The little bear followed. LaCroix chuckled.

"It is a payment in advance I make to thee," LaCroix said softly in the old language. "For what may occur between us hereafter."

The little bear sat up straight and whuffed again, but only a little, at the strange sound of the man's voice. Then he came on to another small mound of berries. After getting used to the smell, the sound of man was nothing. LaCroix's nose wrinkled. It was a mutual thing. Even a little bear does not smell of roses.

LaCroix and the cub were quite close together when he saw the two men at last, his nephew and the man called Al, still looking for him. They were on the high trail where he had been in the morning, but standing clear against the sky. Hunters of men! LaCroix snorted in such disgust that he almost frightened the bear. If only he had the carbine. But he did not. He did not have anything but a sore arm and a history of many encounters in which death had stood very close to him.

Now he rose, and the men on the ridge looked toward him very hard, and he moved deliberately, so that his red shirt flared in the late sun among the greens and browns of the berry patch. One of them shouted and when LaCroix was sure they shouted at seeing him, he ducked down beneath the chest-high bushes once again.

Still he could see them, running downhill from the high trail, glaringly in the stiff new pants, one man cutting straight toward him across the bend of the river, the other going wider to cut him off from the forest.

Hunters of men, LaCroix thought again in disgust.

But was not a time for criticism. The first man was committed to the flatland now, he was running toward the ravine; in a little while he was between LaCroix and the pool, and the ravine was in between. LaCroix stood up again to measure with his eye, and the man stopped and a puff of smoke came from his hand — not smoke but the haze of gunshot — and a moment later he heard the sound. This, then, was the one called Al. And he was wholly within the area that lay between LaCroix and the pool at the curve of the river.

LaCroix put his right hand on his left arm, which was very stiff now, and the sleeve stiff with the blood, and he looked at the little bear. The cub was sitting up, ears high and mouth full of blackberries, observing.

"Bear," LaCroix addressed the cub formally, "Bear, that thou shouldst remember in thy maturity that I did not do this to thee in thy infancy for mere sport, nor without a just payment."

The cub looked hard at him, sensing a sudden change. LaCroix leaped forward and bowled the little bear over, and the bear squawled piercingly in pain and grief. Now LaCroix kicked it hard on the rump. The bear

squawled again, a ringing lament. Then it scrambled humpingly away through the bushes.

LaCroix lay very still under the berry bushes. He could hear the receding sound of the cub in flight, he could hear more distantly the sound of the men running and their shouts, and then suddenly he could hear the sound of a great rage, a water-splattering, boulder-spewing, turf-tearing rage.

He stood up now without design; it no longer mattered. He could see the cub humping toward the ravine and the pool beyond, and the man called Al in the little bear's path, and behind the man the goal of the little bear's flight, the great rage itself, his mother.

The she-bear came erupting out of the river and paused only an instant with her four feet close together, in the movement of bears that is best called a kind of clumsy, deadly grace; then her head swung from side to side until her nose and ears located the general area of her wrath and focused it into a burning pinpoint of rage that left no room for wisdom, caution, or fear, but only the rage brought finely and critically down on the man between her and her cub that had been hurt.

LaCroix watched intently. Old, he thought, and big, perhaps 450 pounds. His curiosity was professional. It is very rare to see a bear charge a man. It is even rare for the same man to see a bear charge him more than once.

The bear ran beautifully, in the

way that a great engine runs. LaCroix remembered the first locomotive he had seen, when the logging trains came to the country in his youth — the way it huffed and strained, a little ungainly at the start; but then the drive rods had moved with a terrible power that would not be denied, and suddenly it was in motion, smooth and beautiful, going faster and faster down the long shoulder of the Hill of the White Horse; and then at the bottom, he remembered, it did not turn to follow the tracks, it did not even pause, but went straight on into the trees, mowing a path through the timber, parts flying from it as it struck the pines — but the pines going down anyway — until finally there was an enormous blast and a cloud of steam and then nothing was left that you could say belonged here, or there.

That was the most beautiful thing LaCroix could remember, for in the wilderness death is a form of beauty and seldom was death so vast as that of the train.

Next to the train, though, he would place the she-bear in her rage. She came on through the brush straight as the locomotive had come, and the brush was mowed in a path, and the man called Al stood at last on the edge of the ravine and he was shooting at her but it did not make any difference; she came on and on irresistibly, and at the last moment the man called Al turned and tried to jump the ravine but in midair the bear came to him without pause, just

as the train had left the tracks, and engulfed him in the air, and they fell together into the ravine.

LaCroix let out his breath slowly. It had happened within the space of time in which he could hold his breath. Then he heard his nephew shouting. His nephew had crossed the ravine farther up and was running wildly, blindly now, through the tearing edges of the blackberries, his face very white, his mouth wide with terror.

“Make haste,” LaCroix said. “The she-bear comes now for you.”

The running man shrieked again, louder, and LaCroix said, “Behind you now, she comes.”

The running man fell and cried out and when he rose again he was bleeding from the blackberry thorns, but that was not what made him cry out.

LaCroix moved back the little space between himself and the river, where the canoe was beached. He moved very carefully now. They had picked a very good place to set the bear trap for him. Where they had placed it, a man could not approach the canoe to turn it over, nor to slide it into the water, without stepping where the trap was concealed.

Concealed, LaCroix thought. Hunters of men, indeed. They had covered it with the long grass, pulling up the grass to put upon the jaws and the pan of the trap, and after a full day in the hot sun the dead grass had withered in a pattern that outlined the trap as clearly as a sign on a post.

His face wry with disgust, and the anger in him again, LaCroix walked into the river and came to the beach from the water side, turning the canoe with his good arm and pulling it from the slick mud slide into the shallows. He held the canoe awkwardly while he sat down in the stern, then swung his legs inboard safely. He unlashed the paddle and, bracing it against the bottom like a pole, he backed the canoe offshore.

"Wait, Uncle," his nephew cried out frantically from the edge of the berry patch. "Wait for me!"

LaCroix backed the canoe a little farther, waiting. The younger man tore loose from the last of the thorns and, stumbling with fright and exhaustion, plunged toward the beach.

"Wait," he gasped.

"But only a little," LaCroix said, and he poled the canoe into a new position, a position carefully selected.

His nephew's face went slack with a great relief. He slid down the incline to the beach, hands reaching outward for the canoe. His foot caught on a root. He slipped again on the smooth glassy mud and fell forward, his hands outstretched, squarely into the patch of drying grass. The jaws of the great trap struck upward out of the grass like a live thing and caught him by his two arms, just below the elbows.

He screamed once, like a woman.

"So," LaCroix said from the canoe six feet away. "In the end he is a helpful and devoted nephew, for he has found my lost bear trap."

His nephew did not say anything.

"Unfortunately," LaCroix said, "he did not find the device to open it. The device has been lost much longer than the trap."

His nephew lay in the strange sprawled position. It appeared that he was clinging tightly to the trap. His hands dangled limply.

"It is possible for two men with a log to open such a trap without the device," LaCroix said. "But not when one of them is clasped in it, and the other has but one useful arm."

His nephew was silent.

"It is good to be quiet," LaCroix said. "If you are very quiet, perhaps the bear will remember that she truly is afraid of men and she will not come to you. Or not very close."

"I did not want to hurt you," his nephew said. "It was the money. All my life I have heard of how you lived here alone with the gold."

"Of course," LaCroix said. "And behold now what a devoted uncle I am, for I leave you with all the gold."

"Yes," the young man said. But his voice was bitter.

"It is a true thing," LaCroix said. "In the drag log. It is weighted with forty pounds of metal, as I told you — forty pounds of pure gold. You may have it until I return. The gold, and the trap."

"You aren't going to leave me here?" There was new terror on the young man's face.

"I have no choice," LaCroix said. "That is a true thing, too. I am very

tender-hearted, my dear nephew. I cannot get you out of the trap, and I cannot sit here and watch you die slowly by the edge of the river."

"Don't leave me." The younger man began to sob.

"Furthermore, there are the regulations," LaCroix said. "It is required to report all hunting accidents, such as men shooting at bears with little pistols. The ranger is very strict."

"Please," his nephew said, weeping. "I do not want the gold."

"It is good of you to say so," LaCroix said. "But I can see that you are very much attached to it just

now." He paused. "I will be back the day after tomorrow," LaCroix went on, "or perhaps the next day. It will be difficult to reach the settlement quickly with only one good arm. Meanwhile you will learn some new stories to tell me of men caught in bear traps."

He lifted the paddle.

"No," the young man screamed.

"No, no!"

"Yes," LaCroix said. "Yes, yes."

He stroked with the paddle and the canoe shot out into the current. Behind him the young man was suddenly quiet.



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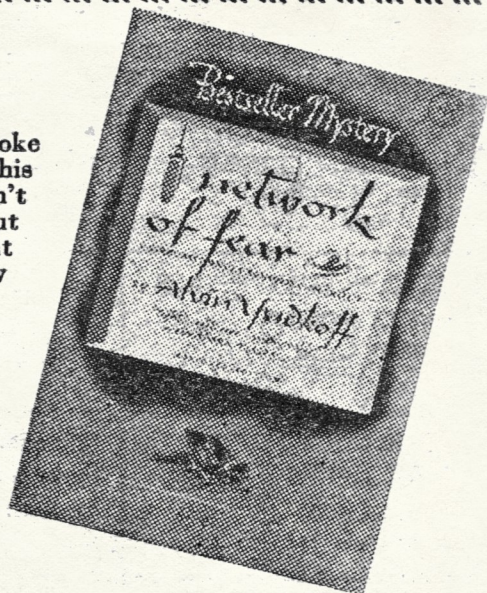
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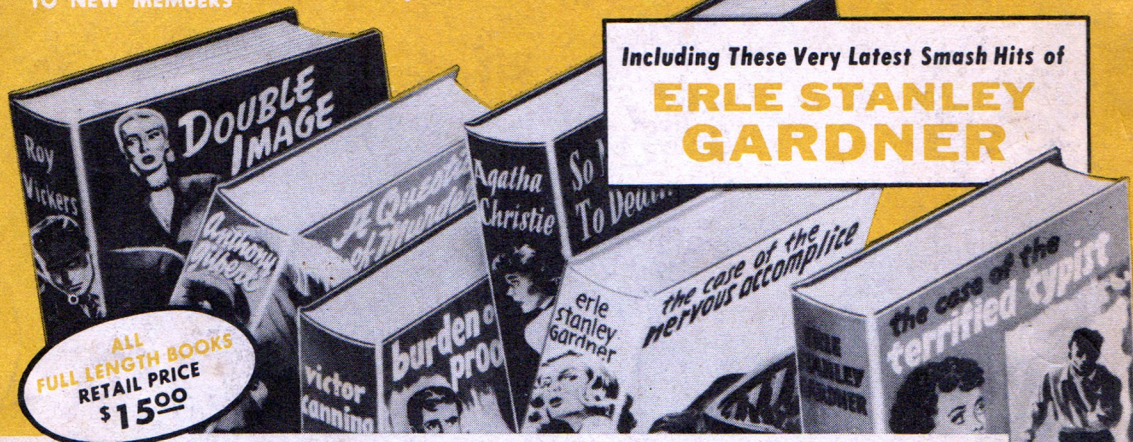
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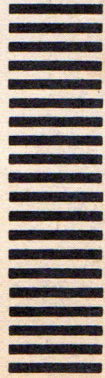
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