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ELLERY QUEEN'S MYSTERY MAGAZINE

A MERCURY PUBLICATION

YOU BET YOUR LIFE
Hildegarde Withers on the
***GROUCHO MARX* Show**

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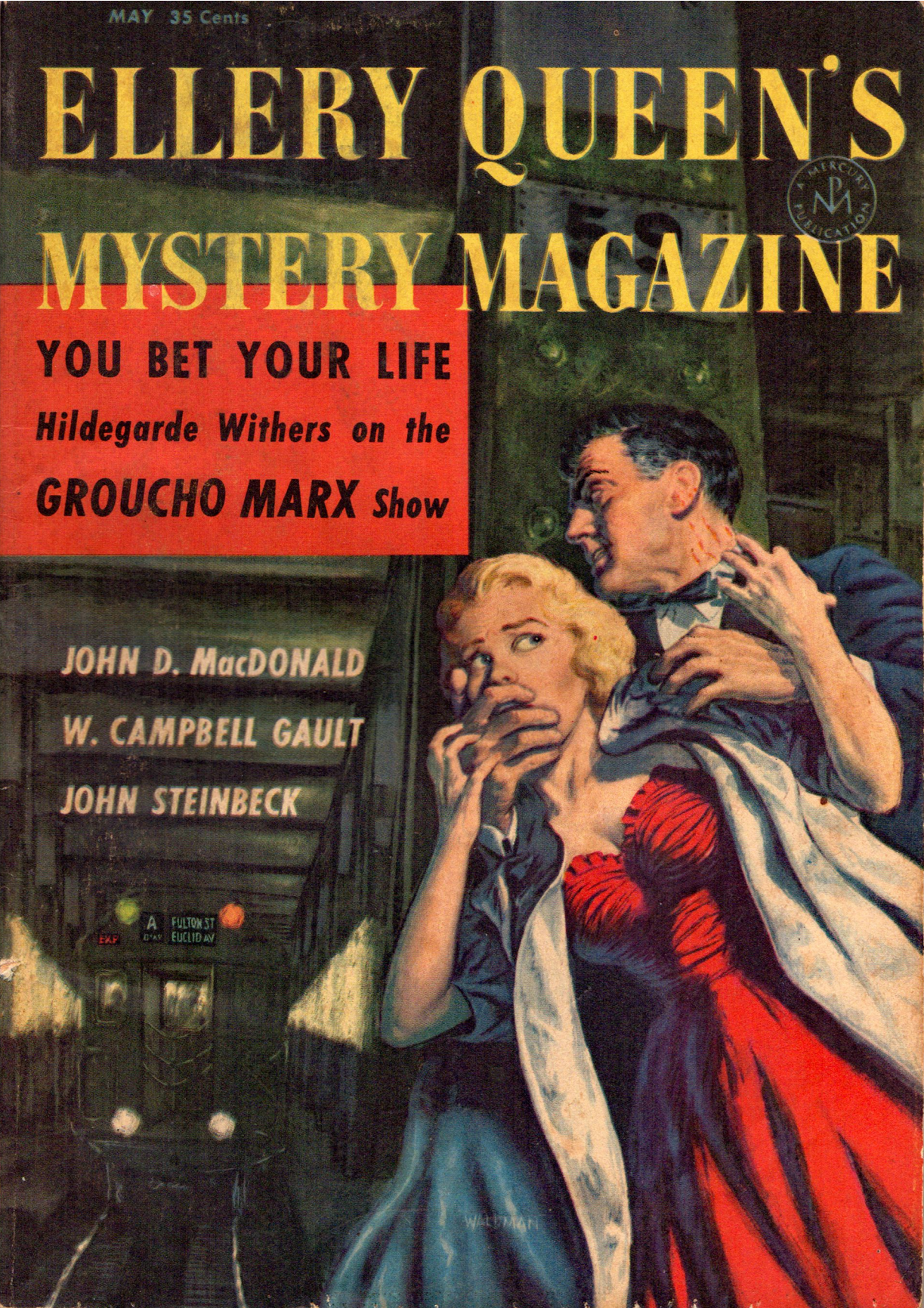

ELLERY QUEEN'S MYSTERY MAGAZINE

***including* BLACK MASK MAGAZINE**

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Groucho Marx and Hildegarde in

AUTHOR: **STUART PALMER'S**

TITLE: ***You Bet Your Life***

TYPE: Detective-Suspense Story

DETECTIVES: Hildegarde Withers and Inspector Piper

LOCALES: Los Angeles and Santa Monica, California

TIME: The Present

COMMENTS: *When Miss Withers appeared on "You Bet Your Life," the Groucho Marx show, it wasn't just a matter of a TV jackpot. As it turned out, Hildegarde was betting her very life!*

WALTER MCWALTERS LOOKED upon the imminent end of Walter McWalters with considerable calm. His voice over the phone showed just the proper blend of hurt surprise and immediate cooperation. He would be glad to come down to the District Attorney's office for the "little talk" they requested so urgently; since he was tied up today would ten o'clock tomorrow morning be all right? He hung up the instrument without the slightest trembling of his well-manicured hand. Half an hour later the prominent clubman and mining investment counselor was out of the big house in exclusive Brentwood which his late wife Claire had bought just after their marriage four years ago, taking with him only such necessities as his clothes, shaving gear, and a brief case containing $200,000, mostly in hundreds. McWalters had always liked the feel of hundred-dollar bills.

He was out of the house—and out of this world. He disappeared with less splash but more finality than a stone dropped into the sea. But even the dropping of a stone starts ripples . . .

Six months later a certain whimsical, eccentric spinster made her debut on television. Just before zero hour Miss Hildegarde Withers felt

more than a little nervous, because she was not at all sure of her lines. There was more at stake here than any jackpot prize, and she felt that she should have been better prepared for her ordeal than just the short briefing in the little backstage dressing-room and the powder the make-up man had dabbed on her weather-beaten face.

The clock ticked away, and then loud and clear came the honeyed voice of the announcer, a Mr. George Fenneman. "And now, Groucho, I have another interesting couple for you to meet—a Mr. Wilton Mulvey and a Miss Hildegarde Withers." A youthful, collar-ad face appeared around the backdrop, and a hand beckoned. "Come in, folks, and meet —*GROUCHO MARX!*"

Miss Withers and her nondescript little partner were jostled gently from behind; they took a few steps forward and then they were *on*. She was vaguely aware of the studio audience, the lights, the cameras, the orchestra—but once on stage she had eyes only for the dapper, graying man in the spectacles, the neat tan suit and bright blue bow tie, who perched behind a high desk where a bowl of asters concealed his microphone. In the flesh, Groucho looked like his filmed self only perhaps more so; his famous mustache was undeniably real, too. She had always wondered about that; Miss Withers had had a secret fondness for the zany Marx Brothers ever since *Animal Crackers* days.

"Welcome, welcome to *You Bet Your Life,*" cried Groucho cheerily. "Say the Secret Word and you'll receive an extra hundred dollars." He relighted his cigar. "Miss Withers, do you mind if I call you Hildegarde?" There were more of the usual pleasantries, with the famed comedian going into his usual routine of trying to play matchmaker for the two of them after Mr. Mulvey admitted that he was a bachelor. It also developed that Mulvey spent his life engraving things on the heads of pins, which gave Groucho an opening for some jocose remarks. Then he turned on Miss Withers, with a pixyish cock of his head. "Hildegarde, may I ask where you're from?"

"You may, Mr. Marx. I taught public school in New York City for many years. Now I live in a little white cottage in Santa Monica, by the sea. I've retired."

"How often," sighed Groucho, "I've wished all schoolteachers would retire, back in my early days. But I'll have you know that it isn't true they had to burn down the schoolhouse to get me out of the third grade. It was the *fifth!* But Hildegarde, is that all you do, just retire?"

"Of course not. My avocation is criminology."

"Face cream or dairy cream?"

"*Crim*inology, Mr. Marx."

"Oh," Groucho said. "I don't hear well, my glasses must need adjusting. So you're a criminologist. Does that mean you read murder myster-

ies and try to guess who-done-it before the author tells you in the last chapter?"

"Certainly not! I'm interested in real crimes, particularly in the offbeat sort. It occurred to me long ago that the police have a tendency to follow beaten paths, which works out well enough only when the criminal runs true to form. But—"

"So you're a sleuth, Miss Withers?" Groucho interrupted, picking an aster from the bowl and delicately sniffing at the stem end. "Have you ever actually solved a real crime?"

She shrugged modestly. "Quite a few, as it happens. Do you remember the Rowan murders in New York City, and the Ina Kell affair that wound up out here in Tijuana, and the capture of Eddie the Actor in Chicago? Those were some of my successes."

"A schoolteacher sleuth, doing the work of the police! And I suppose they're very grateful to you for your help?"

"On the contrary, Mr. Marx. Even though I've always been willing to stay in the background and let them get the credit. But—the official mind, you know!"

"Are you working on anything interesting right now, Hildegarde?" Groucho asked.

The schoolteacher steeled herself, then lunged. "Yes. I've become very interested in the McWalters case, right here in town."

Groucho managed a mammoth surprise-take. "McWalters! Isn't he the socialite who's supposed to have walked off some months ago with a suitcase full of somebody else's money—the one who did a disappearing act more famous than anything since Judge Crater's? Isn't he the man the police are looking for all over the United States, to say nothing of Canada and Mexico?" In an aside, he added, "But who am I to say nothing of Canada and Mexico, good neighbors that they are?" He paused. "And Hildegarde, do you really think you have a chance to solve the McWalters mystery, when the biggest police manhunt in recent history has failed to turn up hide or hair of the man?"

In a hotel room in Las Vegas, Jack Finn, licensed private investigator, came out of the bathroom with a highball in his hand and noticed that Sugar had the TV set on. Something caught his eye. "Migawd!" he cried. "Is this Thursday? Where went Wednesday? Look, baby, get packed—and fast! We got to get back to L. A.!" But the big, pasty-faced man himself stayed beside the set, while the ice cubes melted in his drink . . .

Over the air waves Miss Withers was saying, "I don't think, Mr. Marx. I *know*. I have the McWalters case solved."

Groucho's eyebrows went up even higher than before. "What?"

"Yes. By a combination of common sense, feminine intuition, a clinical study of what is known of

the man's habits and behavior, plus one lucky break, I know *everything,* including his approximate whereabouts. They all make one mistake, you know."

"And are you going to tell our vast unseen audience—most of whom are probably out at the refrigerator getting a can of beer at the moment—all about your discovery?"

"I'm afraid not, Mr. Marx. It's top-secret."

"Oh, I see. You're just telling the police, then?"

"No, Mr. Marx," Miss Withers replied. "I most certainly am *not* telling the police. They have been too rude to me. I'm writing it all up in an article. Of course, when it's published the police can no doubt arrest McWalters in a matter of minutes. But I mustn't say too much—"

In a little bierstube in New York's Yorkville, Inspector Oscar Piper sat frozen on his stool, his face upturned to the TV set hung above the bar. "Lady, you've said it already!" gasped the grizzled little skipper of Homicide West. Hildegarde, he feared, had lost her marbles. And he was fond of the preposterous old biddy, too. They had been friendly enemies since their first meeting above a corpse and a frightened penguin in the old Aquarium, more years ago than he cared to think. His lager slowly went flat, untasted before him.

On the TV screen Groucho Marx was saying, "So you're a writer, too?" For once in his life, Groucho was playing straightman, but he gave her a conspiratorial wink.

The schoolteacher nodded brightly. "I expect to finish my little exposé article this week, and I'm quite confident that it will be snatched up by the editor of one of the largest Sunday supplements. He used to go to school to me, so I have an *in.*"

"Well, Hildegarde, I'll watch the Sunday newspapers, and I only hope that the missing Mr. McWalters reads them too, so he can learn about his mistakes. Good luck. And it's been a lot of fun talking to you two, but now it's time to play *You Bet Your Life.*"

Miss Withers's phone buzzed like an infuriated rattlesnake just after midnight, while she was in the midst of giving her hair its requisite hundred strokes with the brush. Naturally she was on Cloud Seven at hearing the familiar voice of her old friend and sparring partner; also, and just as naturally, she hardly gave him a chance to put a word in edgewise.

"How thoughtful of you, Oscar, to call me! Didn't the show go well? Wasn't it a shame about my idiot partner doing us out of the grand prize? What did you think—?"

"Shut up and listen! Hildegarde, do you know what you've got yourself into with this insane yak-yak over the air?"

"Certainly! One of my more brilliant inspirations."

"Didn't it occur to you that McWalters might be tuned in?"

"We hoped so. Naturally, Oscar, it was a put-up job, my being a guest on the show and all. But one of the first things I learned about McWalters was that he never missed watching a quiz program and that his favorite was *You Bet Your Life*—so I thought that might be the way to trap him. And with the help of Mr. Marx and Mr. Fenneman and the writers, I baited a hook."

Oscar Piper was almost choking. "Baited with your own gizzard! You bet your *own* life . . ."

"Don't be silly, Oscar. If the man saw the broadcast of the show, or listened to the radio version, he's sure to think that I know his secret and that I'm going to publish it to the world. So naturally he'll have to come out of hiding, try to break into my house, and get a look at my manuscript . . ."

"You think McWalters is just a con-man?"

"But he *is,* Oscar! He skipped with $200,000 and there is a big reward out for him that I can well use, though I may have to split some of it. But that isn't my main interest. It's to nab one of these men who prey on defenseless women!"

"Hildegarde," the inspector said, as to a small child. "McWalters is not *just* a con-man and a thief. The grand jury out there indicted him for that, but there are other indictments pending. He's wanted in several states on suspicion of *murder*!"

"Oscar!"

"So when he comes calling on you it won't be just to sneak a look at your imaginary manuscript. It will be to silence you for keeps!" She gasped, and he continued mercilessly. "The guy's last wife *disappeared* nearly a year ago, didn't you know that?"

"But I thought she was supposed to be in a sanitarium."

"That was just one of McWalters' phony explanations to account for her absence. She's dead, all right—and so are several other ladies who got in Mr. McWalters' way. I hope you've got police protection?"

"N-n-no, Oscar. The police said if I bothered them any more about this case they'd have me locked up for observation."

"Not a bad idea. But don't tell me you're home, *alone?"*

"I have Talleyrand—and a toy pistol that nobody could tell from the real thing."

"Oh, *no!* A silly French poodle who loves everybody in the world, and a squirt gun! Hildegarde, you're absolutely out of your mind, and if I may say so it's not much of a trip at that."

Her sniff was audible three thousand miles away. "I might add that a Mr. Finn, a private detective, is having me guarded . . ."

That did it. Oscar Piper was about to let go with one of his better blasts, but the brittle voice of the long distance operator cut in on him. "But damn it, miss, where am

I going to get two dollars in change at this hour of the morning? Operator, do you know who I am?" But she ruthlessly cut him off.

Miss Withers sighed philosophically and went back to her hairbrush, but she had lost count. Oscar's warning had not really made her nervous—but she did find herself putting sunburn oil instead of wrinkle cream on her face just before she turned out the lights. Once in bed, sleep seemed miles away.

Visions flashed through her mind, bits of the incomplete picture puzzle she had been forming for weeks. She knew a little more about Walter McWalters than the police did, but not really enough. The man seemed to have had no past—except for what the Inspector had hinted about previous wives. His life had apparently begun when he drove up to the best hotel at Lake Tahoe in a foreign car, cut a wide swathe with the ladies who were vacationing there, and finally carried off her feet the prettiest, plumpest, and richest of the widows—one Claire Visscher. Everyone had said it was a truly romantic marriage, though she was in her thirties and he was on the shady side of fifty.

They had bought—presumably with her money—a $60,000 home in Brentwood and lived in it for some years, uneventfully. McWalters had joined the Jonathan Club; they had been members of half a dozen exclusive country clubs and beach clubs and bridge clubs. There had been no friction in the household, according to Mrs. Lemmon the housekeeper—who seemed, like most members of her sex, to have a soft spot in her heart for McWalters. He had been away a good deal of the time, investigating mining properties upstate and in Nevada; Claire had missed him very much and had been lonely. She played a lot of solitaire and kept a bottle of brandy in her closet behind her hats. McWalters neither smoked nor drank, was always immaculately dressed, kept himself in tip-top shape by golf and swimming, and liked to go only to the fanciest resort hotels and the finest restaurants. They had many acquaintances, but no close friends.

The housekeeper had said, "The McWalterses seemed to be a very devoted couple and she was always kissing him and fixing his tie. I heard him raise his voice to her only once—when she slipped off her diet. One morning when I came to work she was gone, with some of her clothes. He told me she'd gone away to take a cure for alcoholism and sleeping pills, and not to talk about it to anyone."

Mrs. Lemmon thought that McWalters touched up his sideburns and mustache with a dark tint, and that maybe he even wore a toupee. She had seen a denture brush in his bathroom cabinet. He was of average height and weight—about five-ten and 155 pounds—wore glasses only for reading, was fond of bridge and poker, but would always inter-

rupt the game to watch TV quiz shows.

In fact, he seemed to have been the average well-to-do man—the Man on the Street, or at least the Man on the Boulevard. But when the District Attorney's office listened to the appeals of his wife's distant but hopeful relatives and called him in to ask the whereabouts of Claire and why he had told so many conflicting stories to account for her absence, he finished looting her bank accounts and took off in their second-best car, his gray '53 Ford sedan, down The Street of No Return.

So much for the man supposed to be a multiple murderer of *women*. And Miss Withers realized with a shiver—if he was already wanted for several killings he wouldn't have any reason to hesitate at one more.

The minutes crept by, with the little house silent as a tomb except for Talley's soft snores at the foot of the bed. Everything was too still; there was not even the usual rumble of the Pacific surges against the breakwater, or even the sound of a distant auto horn or siren.

And just then she knew there was something in Oscar Piper's dire predictions—because somebody was moving softly, but not quite softly enough, through the dead eucalyptus leaves that littered the side yard. Miss Withers tried to stop breathing, for now the intruder must be just outside her thin-screened windows. No, he was going stealthily on again, toward the rear of the cottage.

She slipped out of bed, pausing only to take the flashlight and squirt gun from under her pillow. She tiptoed back into the kitchen and saw to her horror that the knob of the back door was slowly turning. Next would be a skeleton key, or celluloid strip . . .

At that moment the poodle came yawning up beside her. "Talley, *bark* or *growl* or something!" she whispered fiercely, but he only looked puzzled. Miss Withers took a deep breath. *"Gr-r-raugh!"* she snarled, in what she hoped was a reasonably accurate facsimile. Then in her own voice: "What is it, Wolf? *Down,* boy!" She spoke louder. "Who's there?"

A man's voice mumbled something that might have been "It's all right."

In a flash of sudden relief she guessed the answer. "Oh, you're from Mr. Finn's Agency?"

"Yes, Miss Withers. Just checking." The voice was discreetly hushed, but it was deep and masculine and very comforting. In another moment she would have asked him in for a cup of coffee, but now she heard the man going down the steps and away.

Weak with relief, Miss Withers went back to bed and was almost immediately asleep. What you don't know won't hurt you, they say—and they never said falser. Jack Finn had only one operative in his hole-in-the-wall agency, and that one was the blonde girl known as Sugar,

now dozing by his side as he drove across the wide Mojave desert at ninety miles an hour. He pulled up when they reached the town of Barstow, then nudged the girl awake and led her into the rear booth of an all-night café. "Java time, kid," he told her. "But drink it fast. We've got to get back to L. A. pronto, even if you have to drive, God forbid."

"You really think it will pop that soon, Jackie?" She spiked their coffee generously.

He shrugged. "The cops think McWalters is in Mexico, the D.A.'s office thinks he's in Canada. His car's been seen in half a dozen places, but as that schoolteacher dame says, it could be just a red herring. He could have laid a lot of false trails and then doubled back. And if he *did* see that broadcast—"

"You think he'll try to knock her off?"

"Likely. She did a good job on that TV pitch—almost had me believing it myself. He just might fall for it."

"You've always said that the easiest person to con is a con-man. But you don't care whether he knocks her off or not, do you?"

"Damn little," admitted Mr. Finn. "And I'm not out for a piddling piece of the reward, either. I hate that guy's guts—hiring me to look for his missing wife just to make it look good later! And after I'd wasted a month looking for a dame he'd dumped in the ocean or somewhere, paying me off with a check on an account he knew was impounded. All I want is to get to that monkey a few minutes before the cops do."

"Why the revenge stuff?"

Finn smiled. "Not that at all, Sugar. I want to make a deal, that's all. He tells me where his dough is, so I can get it and let him have half for his defense and maybe a little bribing of witnesses. He'll fall for it—all there's against him, unless they find his wife's body which they won't, is forgery of her name and misappropriation of funds. With dough he can beat that rap."

"Only my Jackie will cross him, huh? You'll lose your license."

"Who needs a license, in South America? Let's roll."

The morrow came, as morrows always seem to do. It was far from a bright day, in more ways than one. A thick, pea-soup fog drifted in from the Pacific; it was what the fly-boys call "bird-walking weather." But not dog-walking weather, as Miss Withers firmly explained to Talley as she turned him out into the little fenced backyard. From then until after dark, the schoolteacher tasted the dubious delights of being an overnight celebrity; her doorball and her phone never stopped ringing. By eight o'clock in the evening she was at her wits' end and on her fourth pot of coffee, with the phone off the hook and the doorbell disconnected and almost all the lights turned off. She felt more absolutely alone than she ever had in her life.

She froze when suddenly there came a hammering on her front door. It was repeated, louder. "Open up, it's the law!"

"You don't fool me with that one! Go away!" she cried.

Somebody laughed. Hardly daring to believe her ears, she slipped off the chain—and then Oscar Piper came in, to find himself embraced and soundly kissed.

"Oscar!" she cried, hastily putting aside the water pistol. "You've come to my rescue!"

"Well—it was just that we want this McWalters pretty bad back in New York. And I had some vacation time coming . . ."

"You look peaked. Have you eaten? Why didn't you phone me from the airport? How long can you stay? What—?"

He sat down wearily. "Relax, Hildegarde! Yes, I ate on the plane. Yes, I did try to phone, but your line was busy. I can stay—" he looked around. "Hey, something's different. Yeah, where's the pooch?"

"Poisoned, Oscar. Early this morning somebody threw some biscuits loaded with weed killer into the yard. I found him and gave him some mustard water, and the vet says he has a chance. But—"

"But somebody wanted him out of the way—to get to you."

She nodded slowly. Talley, as they both knew, was a poor excuse for a watchdog, but no stranger would know that—especially after her synthetic growls of last night. And she herself had given the intruder his cue by leaping to the conclusion that he was from the detective agency, and blurting it out! She told him about that.

The Inspector accepted a cup of coffee. "So that proves McWalters saw the broadcast and is right here in the area!"

"I've thought that all along. But I also believe the man was right here in this house today!"

He almost dropped his cup. "You mean while you were out?"

"I wasn't out. I didn't have a chance to go out, or even to make my bed and clean the dishes. But let me tell it my way."

It had begun early, with the vet's coming to take Talley away in the pet-ambulance. Everything had come thick and fast after that . . . phone calls from cranks and curiosity-seekers, but most of them hadn't bothered to phone, they had just come barging in.

"You should have charged admission," the Inspector said.

"Be quiet!" There had been the free-lance photographer who wanted to take pictures of her, but she had sent him packing. Before he had stepped off the porch there had been a Mr. Karff who claimed to be a TV talent agent and wanted to try to get her on "The $64,000 Question." A Mr. Beale had wanted to collaborate with her on a book, *Murderers I Have Known;* there had even been a swami, turban and all, who offered for a fee to go into a trance and

tell her the real whereabouts of McWalters; there had been umpteen reporters, and even a representative of a confidential-type magazine who wanted to bid for her article . . .

"You mean your imaginary article?" Oscar Piper cut in.

"It isn't *entirely* imaginary, Oscar." The schoolteacher indicated a card table set up near the window, complete with typewriter and assorted papers. "I left the bait right out in plain sight, as even you can see. But my callers were coming so thick and fast—" She shook her head. "I couldn't keep my eye on all of them. But during the day one of the carbon copies of my manuscript disappeared!"

"Wow!" gasped the Inspector. "Then—"

"Then somebody lifted fifteen pages of gibberish, because the thing made sense only on page one. My real article is here." And she touched her forehead.

He nodded. "Who else was here?"

"Dozens, but all the rest had credentials, or else were too young or too old or of the wrong sex."

"Yeah, how about that? Couldn't McWalters have come dressed like a woman?"

"No man could fool me in women's clothes—not if he spoke," said Hildegarde firmly.

"But which one fits McWalters' description?"

"They *all* do! Remember, he has a phobia against being photographed, and there's only the police artist's re-creation sketch. Remember, too, he's such an *average* man, except for superficials. If he took out his upper plate, removed his wig, shaved his mustache, stooped or started wearing elevator shoes, quit tinting his hair, got fatter by not exercising or not dieting, changed his entire manner of dress and his habits and way of life, McWalters could be an entirely different person!"

"Criminals aren't that smart," Piper objected reasonably.

"Not the ones you *catch,* you mean! But you'll admit that police usually locate missing persons by working on the old theory that a man in flight will in spite of himself revert to his original tastes and habits—if he's a gambler, look for him at the racetrack or in Las Vegas, and so on. But suppose a man were clever enough to make himself into just the *opposite* of his former self, what then?"

"Impossible. He couldn't keep up the disguise."

"That's what the man from the District Attorney's office said when he was here today. He accused me of withholding evidence, but I soon made him see I haven't any evidence —yet."

"They're surely going to give you police protection now?"

"No, Oscar. They're still positive McWalters is out of the country. Besides, I've been trusting to Mr. Finn, the private detective. He was out of town on business until today, but

he's very much in on it now. In fact, he's in that old abandoned building across the street right now, keeping an eye on me with a pair of binoculars. He set that up an hour ago . . ."

"Phooey on private detectives. Anyway, to sum it up, it looks like McWalters tried to sneak in on you last night and was scared off, either by your watchdog imitation or by news that there might be agency men around. He came right back this morning to get rid of your dog, then returned later in some disguise to steal your so-called manuscript—"

"More likely in the hopes of doing me in then and there, only there were so many people going and coming that he didn't dare."

"Looks that way. Anyway, he must be pretty close. But you forgot to tell me about the D.A.'s man, and Finn. Who else was here?"

Miss Withers was always nettled when he used the offiical tone on her. "Why—there was the postman. He delivered my mail in person just to get my autograph. And one of those old bleary men who collect old newspapers for the Welfare League, but they come this time every month. And the vet, of course, to get Talley. I guess that's all. You listening?"

He stood up. "Thinking. You say Finn is on the job right now?"

"Certainly. Behind that second floor window shade . . ."

"Then why didn't he show when he saw me barge in?" Piper snorted. "Answer me that!" But she couldn't. "Then he's either crossing you or he's drunk or asleep! I'm going over there!" He was out of the door in a second, with Miss Withers close on his heels.

By the light of the Inspector's pocket-flash they entered the building across the street—a building the wreckers had already started to demolish. Up the creaking stairs and along the hall to the front apartment they went. The door was closed; the schoolteacher was about to knock when Oscar Piper caught her wrist. Then he turned the knob quickly, and plunged in.

The room was bare as a bone—except for a folding chair set up by the window, a thermos flask half full of coffee, an empty whiskey bottle on the floor, and a pair of binoculars on the window sill. It was Miss Withers who noticed the thermos cup that had rolled into a corner —and that the few drops of coffee in it were still warm!

"He could have just stepped out for a minute," she whispered.

The Inspector was studying the scuff-marks in the dust. "And he could have been dragged out," he said, pointing. "This ties it! I bet you the body is in this building—and probably the killer too!"

"McWalters? But how could he have known—?"

"Ten to one he was already using this building to spy on you himself, and heard Finn come in. It's logical."

"You could be right," she said, shivering.

"I'm going to search this dump from top to bottom. But it's no place for you. Rush over and pack some duds and get in your car and scram to the nearest hotel, fast!"

"But Oscar—!"

"Get going," he whispered fiercely. "You're in the way!"

She went. She rushed across the street and into the cottage, finding that in her haste to leave the cottage before, she had left the door ajar. Everything looked undisturbed, but still she snatched up the toy pistol—the model of a Colt .38 that would fool anybody, the sales clerk had said—and methodically searched every inch of the place. Nobody was there. It took her no more than five minutes to fling some necessities in an overnight bag, and then she was out of the back door and running toward the garage.

"Me, running away!" she thought bitterly. And the dear Inspector alone in a dark ruin of a building with probably a corpse and a killer for company. But what must be, must be. She flung open the doors to the alley, swooped behind the wheel of her ancient coupe, and jabbed at the rusty starter.

And then, just as the motor began to cough and snort, it happened—right out of the world of nightmare. A man stepped quickly out of the shadows and slipped into the seat beside her. In the gloom she could only see that he was a medium-sized man, slightly overweight, wearing thick glasses. He also wore the cap and uniform of the Welfare League pickup detail, the trash scavengers who were always coming around for her old rags and newspapers—the hopeful, sobered-up, washed and shaved vagrants who had seen the light and were trying to reform.

"I knew it!" she thought.

"Don't bother to scream," the man said quickly, in a voice that was overpleasant, almost syrupy. But she knew it was the same voice she had heard outside her kitchen door last night, the same voice she had failed to recognize in the whine this morning, when he had come to ask for her discarded rubbish.

She felt something sharp against her side. "Just drive, please," said the man who had once been known as Walter McWalters. "And keep driving."

Something sharp entered her side an eighth of an inch, just as she was about to say "I will not!" So she put the car into gear, and started to drive. There was nothing else to do. But while she drove, being Miss Withers, she talked. She hoped that her voice was calm and normal—they said you had to humor them. "I've been looking forward to meeting you," she said. "So you *were* hiding out down on Skid Row right under the noses of the police! Very clever, Mr. McWalters."

The man beside her flicked a smile, and put one arm almost lovingly across the back of the seat be-

hind her shoulders, close to her throat. They were out on the street now. "Just keep driving," he told her.

There were a few cars passing, and a number of pedestrians. If she could twist the wheel and cause a collision . . .

"Don't try it," McWalters advised.

She must try to get him talking. "I suppose you keep your money handy in a baggage locker at Union Station, where it's safe as long as you put in a quarter every day, and where you can dig into it for spending money?"

"Bus station," he corrected. It was the first information he had volunteered, and she felt a faint flicker of hope. She was also looking and praying for the sight of a police car, but now they were going south through lonely streets in the manufacturing and lumberyard area.

"If I'm being taken for the proverbial ride, you might at least satisfy my curiosity," she pointed out reasonably. He did not answer, so she plunged blindly on. "I'd really like to know how you disposed of your wife's body so completely. It's unique in the annals of crime, you know."

"Is it now?" he said easily.

"You took all those trips up into the uranium country, I understand. I've driven through some of that, and I noticed that when anybody stakes a claim they mark one corner with a pyramid of stones, a sort of cairn several feet high. You see them all over the desert. Seems to me that would be an ideal place to hide a body. Like Poe's Purloined Letter, right out in plain sight.

"Talk away, my dear lady," he said, unruffled. But she had felt his body tense at the word "desert" and tense again at the word "cairn." So she was sure now. At least it would be a moral victory, a triumph of her intuition—even if posthumously.

"Turn left here, please," McWalters told her, still in that intimate, oozy voice. They turned, and with the turn went her last chance to sideswipe another car.

They had entered a new subdivision with vast curving, unpaved streets lined with little gimcrack houses still in construction. It was —at least, at night—as desolate a spot as anyone could find. On and on they plowed, through red mud and little pools of water.

"Stop here," McWalters said finally. She braked the car to a shuddering halt. "Last stop," he said. He reached past her and flipped the door latch. "Out," he told her, pushing gently.

"I—I won't!"

"None of that." The thing in his hand pressed hard against her. "I just want to borrow your car for my getaway . . ."

Oh, sure! And he didn't want it all blood-stained. Suddenly she jammed her bony elbow hard into his stomach and flung herself out of the car, only to take a few steps and then bog down to her ankles in

hopeless mud. She whirled to face him, as he slowly came closer, with the ice pick in his hand held low and menacing. "He actually enjoys this sort of thing!" she thought frantically. He took another step, and in spite of herself she screamed for the first and last time—a scream that echoed futilely and unheard through the raw lone streets and the gap-windowed houses. The pale moonlight showed no place for her to go, no hole for her to crawl into. And McWalters came closer, closer . . .

"Please!" she gasped, and her hand went fluttering to her bosom. Then in a flash her hand reappeared, with the water pistol aimed straight in his face. "You stand back and put up your hands!" she screamed. "Or I'll shoot!"

McWalters hesitated for a moment, a wide grin on his face. He seemed to be savoring the moment. "Miss Withers, you kill me!" he said. "I noticed that silly squirt gun of yours a little while ago, when I looked through your house. But I thought this would be more useful." He waved the ice pick—her own ice pick—in her face.

He reached for her, arms held out almost lovingly. Even a cornered kitten will bare its claws and spit in the face of an enemy. Miss Hildegarde Withers shut her eyes and pulled the trigger. And seconds later it was all over . . .

Meanwhile, Inspector Oscar Piper had been having rather a bad time of it too, back in the condemned apartment house with the corpse of Jack Finn, skull crushed in, which he had finally located stuffed into a broom closet. His trouble however was not with the corpse, but with the Santa Monica police, who took a dim view of his discovering dead bodies in their territory, New York inspector or not.

Visiting police officers are required to check in with the local authorities unless their visit to a municipality is purely social. Nor was the local sergeant, whose usual duties only included such crises as noisy beach parties, drunks, and petty theft, especially fond of being told how to conduct a murder investigation.

"I wouldn't handle that bottle if I were you, Sarge," Oscar Piper had said.

"I think it rather fits the hole in the dead man's skull. Ever hear of fingerprints?" The Inspector was a very tense and worried man, or he might have been more tactful. As it was, they kept him in their little headquarters, making out and signing statements, for the next four hours. Finally they let him go, with grudging apologies, and he made a beeline for the nearest phone and started calling hotels. No Hildegarde, and nobody answering her somewhat unusual description. He tried her home, with no avail. As a last resort he tried the downtown Los Angeles station.

"We were just going to send out an all-points on you," the dispatcher

said. "Get down here fast, Inspector." And he told him why.

"Judas priest in a revolving door!" murmured Oscar Piper.

"Naturally I used full-strength ammonia in that squirt gun you were so funny about," Miss Withers told him tartly much much later. "You see, I read somewhere that postmen sometimes used that trick on unfriendly dogs."

They were having a huge and expensive lunch at Perrino's, on Wilshire Boulevard. He swallowed a bite of filet, and shook his head. "You're really one for the books," he confessed.

"Maybe I'll even write it up someday," she said. "With you, of course, as comic relief."

"Well, at least it's over." He sighed. "They say McWalters will be the first blind man to go to the death chamber at San Quentin, and even if they don't find his wife's body he's booked for the Finn job. And I hear there's no question about your getting the reward."

"My chief reward, Oscar, is the news that Talley will be all right and can come home tomorrow," she said firmly.

"Then what?"

"Well, Groucho Marx sent word that they'd all like me to do a follow-up performance on *You Bet Your Life* as soon as possible. But I think I'm more the spectator type. I was just wondering, Oscar, if when I get the reward money Talleyrand and I might not take a little trip back to New York. Somehow, after all this, I feel the need for the peace and quiet of Times Square."

The Inspector grinned. "Well, remember the Sullivan Law—and leave your pistol home."

EDITORS' FILE CARD

AUTHOR: **JOHN D. MACDONALD**

TITLE: ***Who's the Blonde?***

TYPE: Detective Story

DETECTIVE: Lieutenant Durand

LOCALE: A bank

TIME: The Present

COMMENTS: *Tom Weldon's future looked bleak. He was in desperate trouble and had no one to appeal to, not even the cops. Except, of course, his wife Helen — she got to the heart of the problem.*

IT WAS WELL AFTER 7 WHEN HE asked them again if he could call Helen. It had become an almost automatic question on Tom Weldon's part, and each time he had asked there had been neither permission nor denial—just an infuriating obtuseness, as though he had spoken in Arabic, or had been a silly child asking for the moon.

His throat felt dry as he said again, "Please, could I call my wife? She'll be worried."

At the moment there were three of them in the bank president's office, three of them looking at him with those coldly amused eyes. There was Durand, from the police; Elvinard, one of the bank examiners; and Vic Reisher, the chief teller.

This time Reisher looked at Durand. Durand nodded and gestured toward the telephone with a thick thumb. "On a night plug, isn't it? Go ahead, Weldon."

Tom reached over and pulled the telephone toward him. He heard the dial tone and dialed his home number. It rang twice before a man answered. "Who is this?" Tom said. "Who's talking?"

"Who are you, friend?"

"This is Weldon. Is this my home? I'm positive I dialed the right number."

The voice sounded amused. "Hold it, friend. I'll put your wife on."

He could tell from Helen's voice that she had been crying. "Tom? Oh, Tom, what's happened?"

"Who is that man? What's he doing there?"

"He's a policeman. A detective. There are two of them. They wouldn't let me try to phone you. Oh, Tom, I've been frantic. What's it all about?"

"It's a mistake, dear. Some kind of —a terrible mistake."

There were often mistakes when it came time to balance up at 3 o'clock. Sometimes there had been a stupid transposition of figures. There were formulas to apply which would pinpoint the error. Today had been different, very different. The guards had locked the door at 3 o'clock, standing nearby to let the last few customers out. It hadn't been a particularly tough day. There had been time, off and on, for Tom —teller number three—to kid around with Jud Fergol in the second cage at his right and Arthur Maldrick in cage four at his left.

On tough days there was the knowledge of being a working team, a fast team operating under the guidance of wry Vic Reisher. Jud Fergol was a thin-faced, quiet man about Tom's age, who handled money with an almost dazzling manual dexterity. Arthur Maldrick, on the other side of Tom, was younger, but he was one of those big, plodding, ponderous young men who seem to have been born middle-aged. Arthur's extracurricular passion was tree peonies, and his rather heavy-handed sense of humor did not extend to that topic.

This was one of those days when you knew the balancing up would be routine, and you'd be home earlier than usual. Tom had worked quickly, hoping that neither Jud Fergol nor Arthur Maldrick had made mistakes. Vic Reisher clung to the old tradition of keeping all tellers on hand until the balancing was complete and perfect.

Tom could hear the quick whip-slap of currency in Jud's agile fingers and the tone-deaf humming of Arthur. His own error was so large that he grinned at it, suspecting a simple arithmetic error. He quickly ran another tape—and another. He began to sweat. Arthur had finished and gone with Vic to the vault to lock up his drawer. Jud had finished and was waiting for Vic.

"Trouble, Tom? Find it fast. I've got a lawn to mow."

Tom nodded, and kept struggling with the figures. Vic and Jud went into the vault to lock up Jud's drawer. They came back and stood behind the wire door of Tom's cage, chatting and smoking.

"Can you hurry it up, Tom?" Vic asked.

"You better help me, Vic."

Vic raised one eyebrow and came through the wire door as Tom unlatched it on the inside. "How big is your error?"

"Uh—four thousand, Vic."

In the silence of the bank the words carried clearly. Tom heard Jud's gasp, glanced quickly at Arthur's puzzled face. He felt the ten-

sion as he stood aside and watched Vic go through the procedure with the ease of years of practice. Vic ran his tapes, then straightened up slowly. His eyes were cool. "Your cash is short an even four thousand, Tom."

He had been a part of the team, and now he was standing on the outside and they were all looking at him.

"What have you done, Tom?" Jud asked softly. "Why did you do it?"

"But I—I haven't—"

"I can't sit on this, Tom," Vic said, his voice as emotionless as a comptometer. "There's a crew of examiners in town. They've been checking Federal. I'll get in touch with them. I'm sorry, Jud, Arthur. You'll have to stay around. Better phone your homes."

"Vic, could I phone?"

"I'd rather you stand right where you are, please."

And that had been the beginning of a nightmare—to find yourself unaccountably on the wrong side of the fence from the rest of the team. Deny it until your mouth was dry and there was a rasp in your throat, but they still kept looking at you in that certain, unmistakable way . . .

His hand was damp on the telephone. "Don't worry about it, Helen. Everything will be all right."

"They—they say you took money."

"Do you believe that?"

"Of *course* not!" she said hotly. And she added, in a more uncertain tone, "They have a warrant or something, and I had to let them go through all your things."

"Just don't worry about it, please, honey. Kids okay?"

"I fed them early and put them to bed. But you know how they are. They sort of sense it when anything is wrong. And these men keep asking me all sorts of questions."

"Answer everything they ask. I don't have to tell you that. They're off on the wrong tangent. I'll explain when I see you. Don't worry if they don't let me come home."

"I'm—I'm so glad you called."

"I tried to call before. They wouldn't let me."

"I'll be waiting for you, darling. They'll have to let you come home."

Tom hung up and leaned back in the straight chair. "There are men at the house, and they've upset my wife. I resent that." He tried to summon up righteous anger, but the hours of anger and indignation had drained him.

Durand was a stocky, nervous, bright-eyed man with thick white hands that were in constant motion, plucking at his suit, ruffling his hair, pulling at his ear lobes.

"Those men," said Durand, "Harkness and Lutz. They're okay. Nothing rough about them. You want to get your wife off the hook, you tell us about the girl friend."

Tom looked dully down at his hands and said, as he had said so many times before, "I never saw the girl before in my life. Never."

"Okay," said Durand. "We take it again. Today's Wednesday—a slow day. It's a quarter after two and the bank closes at three. There you are. Window three. There's another window vacant, and you got one customer. But she comes right to your window and waits. A dish like that, people notice her. A real blondie. One of those tight-skirt, go-to-hell blondies. Fergol at Window Two hears her call you Tom, and then she talks so quiet he can't hear her. But he sees you lean forward to listen."

"I never saw her before in my life. I've told you that. I can't help what she called me. My name is on the window, you know. Thomas D. Weldon. She called me Tom, and it startled me. Then she talked so low I had to lean forward to hear her."

"Why don't you tell us what she actually said to you?"

"She said, 'Tom, if I gave you a fifty, could I get fifty nice crisp new ones?' She looked and acted funny. I had my foot on the button, ready to let the alarm go. She slid the fifty under the grille. I took a good look at it, just in case. It was okay. I gave her the fifty ones, and she jammed them into her purse and turned and went out fast."

"She went out fast because you gave her four thousand bucks, Weldon. And she was in a big hurry to get away. What does she have on you, boy?"

"I never saw her before in my life. It's the truth. I swear it."

Vic Reisher said, "Tom, damn it, this isn't going to do any good."

Tom stared at his friend. "You believe I gave her that money, don't you?"

Vic was a gaunt man with shaggy hair, deep-set eyes, and a wry smile. He shrugged, "What else can—"

"Let me try again, Mr. Reisher," Elvinard, the examiner, said. He had a face like a small, neat grave marker. His voice was metallic. "Now look, Weldon. Listen carefully. You got your drawer out of the vault this morning and you were checked out by Mr. Reisher, everything in order. You worked from 10 until 12:30 and then took an hour for lunch. When you went to lunch, you and Mr. Reisher locked your drawer with the two keys necessary. When you came back, you both unlocked it. No one had a chance to tamper with your cash on hand. At all times when the cash was—shall we say—available, you were there in your cage. Yet, when the doors closed at 3 o'clock you seemed to be having trouble balancing out. Mr. Reisher came over to you, and helped you check. And you were four thousand dollars short.

"Now, let us suppose for a moment that you are telling the truth about that young lady who spoke to you by name. We will assume that she *was* a stranger, and that you gave her fifty ones. All right, then. If she didn't get the money, Mr. Weldon, exactly how did it disappear and where did it go?"

Tom braced his elbows on his knees, the heels of his hands hard against his eyes. "I don't know," he said hopelessly.

Durand said, "We're going to find out. The more work it makes for us, the more trouble it means for you. Open up, and we'll try to give you every break in the book. Maybe we can get a recovery on the funds. Maybe you can draw a suspended sentence. Who knows? But the starting place is for you to come clean, boy." His voice turned wheedling, confidential. "A lot of nice guys get taken over the jumps by a blondie. Come on, boy. What's she got on you? Hell, we *know* you've been playing around."

Tom felt the return of dull anger. He straightened up. "I explained all that to you. I was being frank with you. I told you that I've been sort of restless lately—the last six months, I guess. Vic told you about me telling him that Helen and I were scrapping. I guess every married couple goes through times like that. It's—hard to live on the pay. It makes a strain. You know what I mean. So it gets on your nerves, with prices going up all the time and a couple of kids. I walked out a couple of times and went to a neighborhood beer joint. Tige's Grill. Just a few beers. Ask Al, the bartender. No women. No blondes. Just a few beers to take the strain off."

Durand had been out of the room several times in the past three hours. He grinned in an unpleasant way and took a notebook out of his pocket. "The bartender is Albert Kelling, and he knows you by name. He states that to the best of his recollection you were in there on a Friday night three weeks ago and that you went over to one of the booths and engaged in conversation with a woman about thirty years of age, dark hair, and a younger woman who was a blonde. Albert Kelling stated that he had never seen either of the women before, and they have not been in since. He is willing to make a formal statement to that effect, and to the effect that you left said Tige's Grill accompanied by the two women."

Tom tried to smile in a confident way. He was aware of the trembling of his hands. "That's plain silly! I knew that dark-haired girl in high school. She remembered my name, but I couldn't remember hers. Sure, I spoke to them. Who wouldn't? Her friend was younger and blonde, but she didn't look anything like the girl who came into the bank. And I walked out the door with them, yes. We talked for a couple of minutes on the sidewalk; then they went one way and I went the other."

"What was this woman's name?"

"I tell you I can't remember. I'm no good about names. I never have been."

"Where does she live?"

"She didn't say."

"And she didn't refresh your memory and give you her name?"

"You know how it is when you

can't remember a name. You try to cover up. She introduced her friend. I think it was Mary something. Or Marie, maybe."

"Can you describe the blonde friend? This Marie?"

"Well, about twenty-five. Medium height. Sort of thin, I think."

"So you picked up a blonde in a bar and got more than you bargained for."

"I—I know how it sounds to you. When I tell you, everything sounds so weak. But believe me. I've never stolen anything in my life. I've got a good record. Ask Vic."

Durand said heavily, "You *had* a good record, young man." He looked at his watch. "Go on home, Weldon. I advise you to talk it over with your wife. Harkness told me over the phone she seems like a good, sound person. Come clean with her, Weldon. I advise it. Tell her everything, and I'm sure she'll tell you to do the right thing."

Tom was startled. "I can go home?"

"Go ahead. Will you let him out, please, Mr. Reisher? Don't try to leave town, Weldon. We'll pick you up when we've got everything we need."

They went down the dark staircase to the side entrance. Vic started to unlock the door and then turned. "How could you do it, Tom? You knew that if you were in a jam, all you had to do was come to me and tell me the story."

"If you don't believe me, who else is going to? Just unlock the damn' door."

Vic stood still for a few moments, then unlocked the door. He didn't speak. Tom heard it close crisply behind him. He went back to the parking lot behind the bank and started the six-year-old sedan and drove slowly home. Twice he stopped for red lights and then didn't start up again until the cars behind him honked indignantly. He lived in the top half of a two-family house. As he turned into the narrow driveway between the house and the one next door, his headlights swept across the police cruiser parked at the curb. Oh, fine! Nice questions for the kids. "Tommy, what were the police at your house for? What's your daddy done?"

It gave him a feeling of acute helplessness. You went along thinking that if somebody ever tried to persecute you, mess up your life, kick you around, you were a citizen and you could call the cops. Get a lawyer. Get an injunction or something. But who did you yell to when it was the forces of law and order sitting on your chest, making your wife cry, ruining your hopes and your chances and your future?

None of it made sense. He had the crazy feeling that maybe he had been hypnotized somehow into thinking four thousand dollars were fifty ones. He could see the blonde, teetering hastily away from his teller's cage, hurrying out of the bank, holding that shiny blue pocketbook.

She was the kind men looked at, the kind they would remember. So all you remembered was the ripe figure and the wide, damp mouth and nothing else.

He went slowly up the stairs. The door opened off the living room and a tough-faced young man in a pale suit looked at him and said, "Weldon. Know you from your picture on the bureau. Welcome home."

Tom ignored him and went on down the hall. Helen had heard the man and she came, half running. He held her close and felt the trembling of her body. Her eyes were red and puffed, but she wasn't crying.

He kissed her. "It's okay. It's a mistake."

Over her shoulder, he saw a paunchy young man come out of the kitchen with a glass of milk in his hand. His look of relaxation, of being at home, infuriated Tom. He said, "Why don't you two get the hell out of here?"

The paunchy young man drained the glass and set it on the bookcase. He wiped his mouth with the back of his hand. "On our way, Weldon. This very minute." He came over and held his hand out to Helen. She took it shyly. He said, "Sorry we had to bother you this way, Mrs. Weldon, but you know how those things are." He gave Tom a bleak look. "You got you a good lady here, friend. Come on, Willy."

They clumped heavily down the stairs. Tom heard one of them chuckle at something the other one said as they went out the front door. He walked to the front windows and watched the car move slowly down the street.

"They've got no right," Tom said in a thick voice.

"It's something they had to do. They explained that. Darling, have you had anything at all to eat?"

"No, but I couldn't eat anything."

"You must. You look so dreadful, so tired. Scrambled eggs, maybe. Bacon?"

"I—guess so."

"Come out to the kitchen and tell me about all this while I fix it, honey. What makes them think you could do anything—crooked?"

"My furtive expression, I guess." He sat at the kitchen table and lighted a cigarette. He said, "I'll tell you the facts. It's what they're going by. In a crazy way, I don't blame them."

It didn't take long to tell her. The eggs were done and she was putting them on the plate when he finished. Frowning, she walked to the table and sat down.

"And Vic doesn't believe you?"

"No."

She said fiercely, "When they find out you didn't do it, Tom, neither one of us will ever speak to him again."

He felt the sting in his eyes, "I half expected you to wonder whether I—"

"Tom!"

"Well, I *have* been kind of mean

lately—yammering at you, going off in my little private huff."

"But I *know* you. I *know* you couldn't steal."

"And I know I *didn't*. So where did the money go? Evaporation? Hundreds and fifties. Wrapped. A little pack. Easy to hide. They had me strip, you know. And went through my locker." His voice had gone shrill, harsh.

"Please, Tom. Please. Don't do that to yourself. You have to think, you know. You didn't take the money. You didn't give it to that girl. Somebody took it. It didn't walk away."

"We went over that during my—interview. There are a lot of slick tricks. Every teller knows that. Bent pins and adhesive tape and chewing gum on the end of a cane. It gets to be second nature to be conscious of the money, to make sure it's well back from the cage opening."

"Can you remember any other strangers who came to your window?"

"We had the usual last-minute rush, from quarter of three until closing. There were several strangers. Nothing special about them. One with a traveler's check. One at the wrong window. Others, probably—I can't remember. You see, I didn't know then that it was going to be important to remember."

"And you didn't notice that the stack of bills was gone until you started to balance out for the day?"

"No, I didn't."

"When was the last time you did any housekeeping behind your window?"

"Around two thirty, I think. If the money had been gone then, I think I would have noticed it. Just noticed the physical lack of it."

"Was the whole stack gone?"

"One whole stack."

Helen and Tom sat up and went over it again and again. He was sick with emotional fatigue. Finally Helen said, "We're not making sense any more. We've got to sleep, darling."

He thought he would be unable to sleep. But sleep came over him like a black tide in flood. When he woke up it was morning, and Helen was up. He heard the kids chattering in the kitchen. He knew he should go out and speak to them, go out with a morning smile and a confident manner. But somehow he couldn't quite manage it. He waited until he heard Helen at the door with them, giving Tommy the usual morning admonition not to let his sister cross the streets without holding her hand. He heard the staccato sound of their feet on the wooden stairs, heard the front door slam lustily.

When he went out to breakfast, his high-school yearbook was beside his glass of orange juice. He frowned at it and then suddenly grinned at Helen. "You're a smart kid."

"I thought if you could find her

you could tell them her name, and then they could find out you didn't lie."

He sat there at the breakfast table and went through all the pictures. He could not find her among the graduates. Concealing his sense of dismay, acting confident for Helen's sake, he turned to the group pictures in the back, pictures that had been taken during the school year.

"Come here," he said. "This one. Right here."

"Are you absolutely certain, dear?"

"Let me see. The names are down here. Second row. Third from the left. One, two, here it is—Martha Dolvac."

He phoned police headquarters and asked for Lieutenant Durand. There was a long wait after he gave his name. "Lieutenant? This is Tom Weldon."

"Did your wife give you the right steer? Ready to talk?"

"I haven't got any confession, if that's what you mean. I want to give you a name. The dark-haired woman in the bar. Martha Dolvac. Maybe you could trace her from the Briggs High School records."

"If you didn't make up the name."

"I've got a picture of her here. Out of my yearbook. I think I remember that she was a junior when I was a senior. Will you check it?"

"Sure. And suppose it nails it a little tighter, Weldon?"

"It won't," Tom said, trying to make his voice sound confident. He hoped that it did. "Will you let me know?"

"You want to come in this morning and give us the straight story?"

"You've had the straight story, Lieutenant."

Tom hung up quickly, the palms of his hands sweaty. Even if he straightened out the distorted version of that conversation at Tige's Grill, it didn't solve the problem of how the money disappeared.

He took a sheet of white paper and a ruler and made a scale drawing of his cage, looking down at it from above. After the years he had spent in the cage, he could remember every detail of it. It was roughly six feet by five feet. On the window side, where he faced the public, it was five feet across. The wall was eight feet high, with the bronze grille set into it. There was a three-and-a-half-inch gap between the bottom of the window and the counter, but the grille could be unlatched from the inside and swung outward to permit the passage of bulky items. Inside his cubicle there was a counter on each side of him, with his cash drawer under the counter on his right. He usually stacked the bills on the counter above the cash drawer. The change machine was between the stacked currency and the barred window. The sides of his cubicle, of wire mesh in a three-quarter-inch diamond pattern, were about six feet high.

At the rear of his cage was a wire door which could only be opened

from the inside. He remembered the days when the front wall, between the windows, had been of wood. It had given the tellers too much of a closed-in feeling, so it had been changed to heavy, shatterproof plate glass.

On his detailed sketch he marked the location of the stack of bills which had disappeared. It had been, he remembered, a stack of wrapped packets, with a rubber band encircling the stack.

Helen stood beside him and examined the drawing. "We'll say the money was there at 2:30."

"I can't be sure of that. I just think it was. It could have been gone."

"Could it have been gone before the girl came in?"

"I don't think so."

"Was anybody in your cage between the time she was in and when the bank closed?"

"No, Helen. I'm positive of that."

"Jud Fergol is here, at window two. And Arthur Maldrick on the other side of you. They didn't see anything?"

"Nothing. Jud heard that girl call me Tom, but then she talked too low for him to hear what she said."

"Did she seem nervous?"

"Just kind of—odd. I thought she was maybe a little crazy."

"I—I just can't understand it, Tom."

"Neither can anyone else."

"They can't send you to prison, can they?"

"I don't know. Maybe. I think they let me go so they could follow me and see if I got in touch with that blonde, or she with me. I *know* that money didn't go through the window. I *know* that."

"And your door was not opened. There's only one other place. Over the walls. They say women aren't logical. That's the only other place it *could* go!"

"That isn't being logical. That's being simple-minded. Somebody twelve feet tall reached over and picked it up." He flushed. "Damn it, Helen, you know better than to try to tell me that."

The doorbell rang. It was Harkness and Lutz. It was two in the afternoon. They took him to Durand's office. Elvinard was there.

"I'll give you this," Durand said. "It checked out. She got married, and she lives on West Pershing. Her name is Mrs. Henry Votronic. She remembers the evening very well. She backs you up. Her friend is named Marie Gold. We questioned Marie separately. She told the same story. The guards took a look at Marie. Too thin, they say, to be our friend. Or should I say *your* friend?"

"If I wasn't lying about that—"

"It doesn't mean you couldn't have been lying about everything else. Who's the blonde?"

"I didn't give her the money. I didn't take it myself."

Durand gave him a look of disgust. He leaned back in the chair and cracked his knuckles. "You got any theories?"

Tom flushed. "My wife says if it didn't go through the window or through the door, it had to go over the wall."

"Nonsense!" Elvinard said in his sharp, metallic voice. "I've seen a lot of slickers in action. They haven't developed any methods of hoisting money over an eight-foot wall between your cage and the bank floor. You're wasting our time, Weldon."

"Maybe," said Durand slowly, "if everybody's attention was attracted some other place— I read up on one deal where an accomplice sets a sort of accidental fire in one of the wastebaskets out on the floor, and then his buddy with one of those collapsible fishing gaffs lifts a package out of a teller's window while the guy is watching the fire."

"We've been over that," Elvinard explained impatiently. "There was no incident of that sort. The only odd thing noticed in the bank yesterday afternoon was the blonde young lady. There was no—ah—diversionary attempt." He coughed in a dry way. "Weldon, this isn't a big theft. We're more interested in the money than in a successful prosecution. Produce the four thousand, or tell us where we can get it, and I can almost guarantee you a suspended sentence."

"And if I can't?"

Elvinard leaned forward. "I'll see that you get a prison sentence. And once you get out, we'll still be looking for that money, and for the blonde."

Something was nibbling at the back of Tom's mind. Some memory. Something ludicrous. He didn't answer.

"Well?" said Elvinard.

"Please shut up a minute," Tom said patiently. No diversionary attempt. Over the wall. What constituted a diversionary attempt? Something that would focus all eyes on one specific object. There had been laughter as the girl reached the door. Something had happened to make both the tellers and the customers laugh. He remembered seeing the irate face of a vice-president who glared at the unseemly sound. And Helen had said the money had to go over the wall.

He said, to Elvinard, "Go away for a while. I want to talk to the lieutenant."

"I certainly will not go—"

"Humor the guy, humor the guy," Durand said. Elvinard stalked out and shut the door. "What's on your mind?" Durand asked Tom.

"Lieutenant, that girl had high heels and a tight skirt, and she set those heels down hard. They made a lot of racket. She was hurrying. And when she was ten feet away from my window, somebody whistled. You know, one of those wolf whistles."

"So?"

Tom stood up, too nervous to stay sitting down. "It made me think. When that whistle came, everybody looked at her. I guess she was the only woman on the bank floor any-

way. And they laughed when she got to the door."

"Make sense, will you?"

"Don't you see it? That whistle did it. It made everybody look at her. Just like they'd look at a fire in a wastebasket. I don't like to say this—but I know who whistled. It came from my right. It was Jud Fergol, and I remember now thinking that it wasn't like him at all. It was a funny thing for him to do."

Durand laced his fingers at the back of his neck. "Weldon, any bank job puts the heat on the local cops, and it brings in a lot of help. The F.B.I. has been on this, you know. You've got an appointment with them a little later on. Judson Fergol, Arthur Maldrick, Victor Reisher—fine-tooth combs on all of them. Okay, so Fergol whistled. Sometimes a blonde will make a sedate-type guy forget where he is. Judson Fergol is a very sober citizen. To bed at ten. No booze. No gambling. No ladies. Does it match?"

"Not exactly. Vic told me three months ago he was worried about Jud. He said Jud always chewed mints after lunch. One day he forgot them. Vic sent him home. He was afraid one of the vice-presidents might smell Jud's breath."

Durand closed his eyes for long seconds. He was immobile. For once, the restless white hands didn't move. He opened his eyes. "You interest me strangely. Your wife said the dough had to go over the wall?"

"Yes, but I don't see—"

"Maybe she's a smart girl."

"What are you going to do?"

Durand smiled in an exceedingly unpleasant way. "Take Mr. Fergol's life apart, just for the kicks. Like we did yours. Know we vacuumed your car? Checked the ashtray? Went over your clothes? The face powder we got matched your wife's. The lipstick we got off a dirty shirt was your wife's brand. Same with lipstick on the butts in the car ashtray. A guy thinks he's smart, you know, destroying match covers, parking-lot stubs, love notes. He forgets you can identify one blonde hair, vacuum face powder, run a spectroscopic analysis of lipstick. Get the cops looking for the 'other woman,' and they're worse than any wife could ever think of being. That was the only thing about you that bothered me. Couldn't find evidence of any outside fun. Go on home. I'm going to cancel your F.B.I. appointment for now."

Sunday afternoon in the bank: shades drawn on the doors, autumn sun slanting in the high windows. Durand said, "Okay, Mr. Weldon. Go on into your cage and shut the door behind you. You watching this, Mr. Fergol?"

"I'm watching," Jud said, his face white, "but I'm afraid it doesn't mean very much to me, Lieutenant." Harkness and Lutz were there, and Vic Reisher, and several almost dapper young F.B.I. men, and some others Tom wasn't able to identify.

Durand went into the adjoining cage—Jud Fergol's cage, teller number two. The men moved to where they could see him. Durand said, "Okay, Weldon, put that package of ones where the big bills were. Fine. Right there. Now make like you're working. Fine. Now turn back and look at the bills. Look okay?"

Tom looked at the money. "Yes, I can't see—"

. "Fine. Now, Lutz, you be the blonde." Lutz put his hand on his hip and swayed up to the window. "Don't clown it!" Durand said sharply. "Weldon, act as though you're making change. Okay. Now, Lutz, turn around and walk fast toward the main doors. Set your heels down hard. Keep watching him, Tom."

Tom watched. There was a prolonged shrill whistle.

"Now," said Durand, "turn around slow and take another look at the money."

Tom turned around and gasped. *The money had completely disappeared!* It was gone. He looked at Jud Fergol. He saw the sweat beaded on the man's upper lip. Funny how you could work beside a man and never . . . "How did you do that!" Tom demanded.

Durand smiled. "Like your smart little wife said, Weldon. Over the wall. A while ago I stretched, casual-like, and when my hand was over the edge of the wire fence—and it's only six feet high in here, you know—I let some nylon monofilament fishing line fall down on your side, right where that money is. It's leader material, two-pound test, and it's camouflaged. Hell, you can hardly see it even when you know it's there. On your end was a trout hook. Nothing on my end. I just let it hang down in here.

"When Lutz was standing at your window, I stuck two fingers through the wire grille and hooked the trout hook onto the rubber band. Right after I whistled, I hoisted away. The money dropped on my side. Every man, on that day the blonde was here, was watching that tight skirt and that walk. I shoved the money out of sight, just like Fergol did."

"It's crazy!" Jud said much too loudly. "I never did that."

"The guy where you bought the leader material identified you from a picture. Your wife showed us where you keep your fishhooks. In fact, this is one of yours. When we told her about powder and lipstick that wasn't hers, she stopped kidding us and told us about you sneaking out in the middle of the night too often. So where is she, Fergol, and what's her name?"

Fergol seemed to dwindle as Tom watched him. He looked through them all, looked beyond them to some far, cold, hopeless place. "Her name is Connie Moran. Westlake Hotel Apartments. Brown hair. She used that dye that washes out. She had to have the money. She took it all—all but five hundred."

Durand gave him a wise, complacent smile. "You were followed there Friday night. She's in custody, chum. But she's a tougher apple than you are. She never would have talked."

One of the unidentified men said, "Okay to phone it in, Lieutenant?"

"Hold it, Marty. Tell your rewrite boys to give this Weldon a break. Give us the put-out, but give this Weldon an assist on the play. His wife ought to have it, but he needs it more. His kids have to think the old man was working with the cops. Okay?"

"Okay, Lieutenant."

Vic Reisher walked over to Tom, looking miserable. He put his hand out. Tom looked at the man he had considered his friend as well as his boss. He looked at the outstretched hand and knew, suddenly, that to refuse to take it would be a childish gesture.

"Tom—maybe I've been here too long. Maybe I've run too many columns of figures through the machines, totaled too many tapes. My thinking has gotten too black and white. I forgot that I ought to trust my instincts. Your cash account was short; so I had you accused, convicted, and sentenced, all in my mind. It adds up to a man who isn't—anyone I'd want to work for. I'm deeply ashamed, Tom."

"Vic, I really don't know whether I'm going to stay or not."

Vic's wry smile was oddly shy. "Wish you would. I guess it won't be exactly the same, but I wish you would."

"I'll talk it over with Helen," Tom said. He suspected that, when his outrage and anger had faded, when his bitterness was gone, he would probably decide to stay. It was work he liked, work he could do well. There would be a new man in Jud's cage. Maybe, with care, the four of them—Vic, Arthur, Tom, the unknown newcomer—could once again achieve that sense of unity, of being a quick, clever, functioning unit.

Helen was waiting. He lifted her off the floor when he kissed her. In the mysterious way children have, the kids knew that this was holiday, this was special. They clung to his legs and yelped.

He said, "Look, among other things, honey, I want to tell you there won't be any more of that storming out of here—"

She stopped his lips with her finger tips. "Hush up. Just take me along next time."

Which, he decided later, was another proof that she was probably just as smart as Durand had said she was.

The story of Tom Carney — a tale you will not soon forget

THREE TIMES LOSER

by MICHAEL GILBERT

THE CARNEY FAMILY, WHICH LIVED in a depressed part of Swansea, in the 'thirties, which was a depressed sort of epoch, managed, for the most part, to be surprisingly happy. It was a large family. The older parts of it went out and worked. The younger parts went to a desperate school in Bendy Street and learned a little about letters and a lot about life. Dilys, who was the youngest Carney but one, and Tom, were still at home. Tom, being the youngest, was thought by his mother to be delicate. It is a delusion under which mothers of all classes and in all walks of life have been prone to suffer.

In actual fact, though white-faced and small, Tom was about as tough as they come.

Nor was he an ordinary boy. Far from ordinary. As his father (now retired) was heard to remark recently, "Did I not tell you Tom would make his mark? Hardly a paper you can open now but you'll be reading his name in capital letters."

The real trouble was that no one would take Tom seriously.

There was the occasion when, at the age of six, assisted by Dilys, he decided to set fire to the house. He had gone at it with ingenuity and foresight. The seat of the fire was to be the coal shed at the back. The one commodity that was plentiful in Swansea in the 'thirties was coal. There was too much of it. And what better base for a good fire than a few hundredweight of coal?

Tom had often watched his mother lighting the fire in the parlor. She used a slab of sticky stuff, not unlike toffee, known as a Patent Safety Fire Lighter. Where the Safety came in was not absolutely clear, but they certainly lit fires. They were sold at the General Store down the street.

For *her* fires his mother used one lighter. Tom calculated that for his fire he would need about 50. There was a good deal more coal on his.

He and his sister stole the lighters in twos and threes. It took almost a month. They accompanied their mother when she went shopping and it was a matter of no great difficulty. Dilys proved better at this than Tom. She had certain natural advantages. She wore skirts.

Finally, Tom stole the matches (six boxes) and even the newspapers with which to start the fire. He could easily have borrowed these from the kitchen. But stealing seemed more fun. It was a difficult thing to stop once you had started.

Sensing that privacy might be a de-

sirable thing where arson was concerned, Tom chose a late afternoon, when his mother was out. It was true that his father might be expected home shortly, but half an hour seemed sufficient. His mother never took more than five minutes to get *her* fires going.

He was sadly deceived.

It was easy enough to set the paper on fire. The paper blazed beautifully. But as soon as you placed a dozen Fire Lighters on top of it, what happened? The fire simply went out. This was disappointing. Tom and Dilys got more paper. And more and more, until they seemed buried in paper.

Dilys then suggested petrol. There was a bottle that Mrs. Carney kept for cleaning. She offered to get it. But time had crept past unnoticed and at that moment Mr. Carney appeared in the door of the shed.

It is interesting to reflect that had he given way to his first, instinctive feelings and removed his belt and walloped both his erring children, very little harm would have been done. The severity of the punishment would have been a satisfactory measure in their eyes of the enormity of their offense.

As it was, the sight of tiny Tom, black from head to foot, his face hidden under a fearful mixture of charred paper and resinous Fire Lighter, an empty box of matches in his hand, and despair in his eyes — it was altogether too much for him.

Mr. Carney's laughter shook the tenement building.

It shook Tom, too. All his fine dreams. Nearly a month of unremitting effort. Then — ridicule.

Tom's projects seem to fall into a seven-year cycle. It was almost exactly seven years later that he decided to assassinate his headmaster.

Dilys, of course, was not in this. At the age of fourteen she was more interested in love than in assassination. But for this project Tom had a gang to help him. When Tom later achieved fame, several boys came forward and claimed to have been members of this gang which was called The Electric Five, but very few authentic records of its activities remain. Tom was its leader and founder, and it had been in existence nearly a year when Tom turned its attention to the liquidation of Mr. Hartisborne, who had oppressed them all in various ways.

There was no reason to think that they could not have achieved their object. Mr. Hartisborne was smallish and extremely shortsighted. Knock off his glasses and he was helpless. Five boys, armed with stockings full of sand and broken brick and resolutely led, might have done it.

Tom planned the coup with care. It was known that Mr. Hartisborne left his house every Thursday in the winter at half-past 8 to walk to the school for an orchestral meeting. He played the flute. His house was a villa with a small front garden, dark with laurel and elder.

In this handy cover Tom disposed his forces. Two held either end of a

rope across the top of the front steps. Their job was to jerk it tight at the proper moment. A third crouched beside them. He was charged with removing Mr. Hartisborne's glasses, if the fall itself failed to remove them. Tom and his first lieutenant, sandbags in hand, lay in the shadow of the shrubbery.

In due course the victim appeared. Unfortunately, at this point the element of the unexpected which bedevils all such schemes put in its appearance — in the shape of Mrs. Hartisborne. Unusually and unexpectedly she had decided to accompany her husband. In contrast with her husband, Mrs. Hartisborne was large, and her eyesight was keen. Moreover, she was carrying the deadliest of feminine weapons, a stout umbrella. As her husband fell she went into action. Her first thrust disabled Tom's lieutenant, and her second, a sabre-like sweep, disposed of Tom. The morale of the gang ebbed. By the time Mr. Hartisborne had recovered his glasses and telephoned for the police they had melted into the darkness.

Unfortunately for them they had not melted unseen. A member of a rival gang, who happened to be passing, had witnessed the whole distressing episode. When Tom arrived at school the next morning with sticking plaster covering the left side of his face, he realized to his horror that the gaff had been blown.

Stuck into his desk was a woman's umbrella.

No policeman with notebook. No disciplinary action. No dramatic expulsion. Only laughter — bitter, humiliating laughter.

Seven years later Tom met Evie.

Tom was now twenty. The small, white-faced boy was now a small, white-faced youth. Ahead of him lay an ugly vista known as National Service.

At the moment life was all right. There was the job in the shop. Comfortable, and good hours. He was a white-collar worker. With industry and luck he might even reach the haven of an office desk. He lived with his mother and father, and they took a little of his pay packet, but not too much. He had money in his pocket. Enough for himself and Evie. Enough for a cinema twice a week, and a dance and drinks on Saturday night.

Indeed, that did not use it all. He was even managing to save a bit.

On the day his savings reached the soaring, impossible figure of £50, he embarked on his third and most reckless plan. He decided to get married. Why not? There was no law against it. He had the money. His mother would say yes. Evie's parents could be won round. And as for Evie, did she not love him?

Nevertheless, because it was his nature to do so, he laid his plans carefully. As carefully as, more carefully than, any of his previous plans.

First, a cinema — the best seats. Then a snack in the Cinema Café. Then the Dance Hall. Then the walk

home. Then the short cut across the Gardens — they would be closed, of course, but Tom knew the trick of the gate at one end and you could squeeze through the hedge at the other.

Pray Heaven it was a fine night. There was a seat in the shelter which backed into the circle of bushes behind the wild fowl pond. Even by day it was a snug retreat.

The next person to become directly interested in the story of Tom Carney was a policeman. He was walking his beat, at 1 o'clock in the morning, along the road which bordered the northern end of the Gardens. Suddenly, muffled but unmistakable, he heard screams. They came from the darkness in the middle of the locked gardens.

Without hesitation he folded his cape across the spikes of the railings and vaulted over. Then he started to run. The screams had stopped.

Five minutes later he found Tom and Evie. The girl was lying on the ground, her head at an odd angle. Tom was looking at his hands. He made no attempt to get away.

"I asked her to marry me," he said. "That's all I did. I asked her to marry me."

The policeman was examining Evie.

"I asked her to marry me," said Tom again. "And she laughed."

He said this as if it explained everything.

"You'd better come with me," said the policeman.

The court was more crowded than ever on the last day of the trial. And the public had certainly had full value. An impossible case, had been the verdict before the trial opened. But the defense had put up a magnificent fight. No fewer than five medical witnesses had been called. Two by the Crown and three by the defense. Section by section they had taken apart the case history of Tom Carney and scrutinized it under the strong light of reason and jurisprudence.

One of the biggest puzzles in the case had been the demeanor of the accused.

As he had looked round the Court, at the lean, strong face of the famous Leader who was defending him, at the dapper doctors, at the big nose of senior Treasury Counsel, at the pile of law books — seventeen on one table alone — at the judge, throned in seclusion and robed in impartiality, from time to time a smile had been noticed on his face.

According to their temperament and bias, different observers had placed different interpretations on this smile.

Some read it as indifference. Some as a further sign of insanity. Some as a cunning artifice.

Since none of them knew the real story of Tom's life, they were all wide of the mark. For it was a smile of happiness; genuine and true. Deep down inside him the wells of contentment, long empty, were now filled and overflowing.

At last — at long last — people were taking him seriously.

EDITORS' FILE CARD

AUTHORS: **Frances and Richard LOCKRIDGE**

TITLE: ***Nobody Can Ask That***

TYPE: Detective Story

DETECTIVE: Captain Heimrich

LOCALE: Van Brunt, New York

TIME: Mid-spring

COMMENTS: *"It had been the easiest case in Captain Heimrich's very considerable experience." The Captain knew who the murderer was—in fact, the killer admitted committing the crime. And yet . . . a poignant mystery.*

IT HAD BEEN THE EASIEST CASE IN Captain Heimrich's very considerable experience. Five hours ago—five hours and a few minutes, at the most—a man had been beaten to death where a driveway joined a narrow blacktop road in the Town of Van Brunt, County of Putnam, State of New York.

The man who had killed sat across a desk from Captain Heimrich and did not deny his guilt. The man's thin and sensitive face was tormented, and his eyes were blank, but he did not deny he had killed Robert Ashton, a man in his middle thirties who had spent the previous afternoon on a golf course.

The previous afternoon had been surprisingly warm for mid-spring. Now, at a little before one on Monday morning, it was still surprisingly warm—"unseasonably warm," the Weather Bureau called it. A window of the second-floor office in the Town House, which Heimrich had borrowed, was partially open, and the air which came through it was almost like summer air. This uncharacteristically pleasant weather was one of several things which Malcolm Burns, retired cartoonist, had not counted on. For one reason and another, Captain Heimrich of the New York State Police was rather sorry for Malcolm Burns, al-

though Heimrich knows of no excuse for murder.

"I admit killing him," Burns said, and his voice was steady—painfully steady. "What more do you want?"

A statement was wanted. A statement is always wanted. It would be taken down, transcribed, and Mr. Burns would be asked to sign it. The third man in the room was a police stenographer. Mr. Burns was aware of that.

"I killed him," Burns said. "I beat him over the head with this." He touched the heavy cane which rested against the chair he sat in. "I said, 'Walked down to meet you, old man,' and he said something—I don't remember what—and started up the drive ahead of me. I hit him hard. Then I hit him a couple more times to make sure. That's a statement. I'll sign that, Captain."

Momentarily, Captain Heimrich closed the bright blue eyes set wide in a square face. He said, somewhat sadly, "Now, Mr. Burns," and added that they needed more than that. Then he said, "Because you thought he was in love with your wife?"

"Does Lydia know yet?" Malcolm Burns asked. "Has somebody told her?"

"Yes," Heimrich said. "Somebody's running her up from town."

Burns nodded, to show he had heard. Then he said, "I'd known he was in love with her for quite some time. She's—she's easy to fall in love with. But . . ." He stopped. His face worked. "She was beginning to fall in love with him," he said. "She didn't know it herself but—I could hear it in her voice. When she spoke of him."

"Only that?" Heimrich said.

"I know Lyddie," Burns said. "Don't you think I know her? Her voice—she can't hide things in her voice. She's not that kind. And . . ." Again he stopped. Heimrich waited. "She's the straightest thing in the world," Burns said, and spoke very slowly, in a very steady voice. "When —when she realized she loved him, she'd come to me and tell me. And —she'd go away. Get a divorce and . . ." Once more he stopped.

"She was all I had left," he said, and spoke as if everything were dead around him. "What more?"

"From the beginning," Heimrich said. "Start with Saturday. You'd arranged for your wife to go to New York to see her mother. You agreed to call Ashton and tell him the usual Sunday evening supper was off. You didn't call him. You gave your housekeeper Sunday off."

"She's always off Sunday," Burns said. "Most of them are, around here. She made a casserole to go into the oven for Sunday supper. I'd been out walking—walking up and down the drive—and came up to the house just as she was leaving. She told me where the casserole was and that everything was finished up, and that she'd remembered to wind the clock and set it."

"She told you that she had set the clock?"

"It runs slow," Burns said. "Every Saturday she winds it and sets it. Every Saturday she tells us she has."

"Go on," Heimrich said. "On Sunday? Before you went down the drive to meet Mr. Ashton?"

Burns did not see what difference it made now. But—if Heimrich did—he had waited until it was time. He had had breakfast. He had simply sat there and played some records. And—he had been lonely. Was that a satisfaction to Heimrich? He had been lonely. But, all he had done was to wait until it was time. Everything else had been done.

Heimrich said he had "arranged" for his wife to go to New York. That was not true; was not, at any rate, simply true. She had had her mother on her mind; had said often that she ought—really ought—to go and spend a day with her. "I encouraged her," Burns said. "That was all. Suggested she go some Saturday afternoon, stay until Monday. She picked last Saturday. But one weekend would have been as good as another. He came every Sunday, or almost. Had for, oh, about a year."

The even voice faltered, momentarily. Heimrich waited.

Malcolm Burns had fixed himself lunch. Then he had gone out onto the terrace and sat in the sun—faced the afternoon sun. From the terrace one could . . . He interrupted himself. "You've seen it."

Heimrich had seen it. He had driven up the narrow, turning driveway, bordered close by tall evergreens. He had come out into the clearing where the Burns house hugged its hilltop. He had seen the terrace, which was to the west of the house. From the terrace, one could look far across the Hudson; could look along a wide vista cut through trees; could see the river far below and the hills—tinted now with spring—beyond. The sun had just set behind the Palisades when Heimrich went to the house, and the sky flamed there.

"We cut the trees," Burns said, as if Heimrich had spoken. "Mostly by ourselves, Lyddie and I. So that we could sit on the terrace and look across the river. That was one reason we built there. So that . . ."

He stopped. He said Heimrich couldn't, he supposed, be less interested. He said he had sat on the terrace, in the sun. It was nobody's business what he had thought about. After a time he had gone back in and changed into dark clothes. After that, he had made himself a drink. "One drink," he said. "I was getting a little jumpy." He had turned the record player on again, at low volume, and listened to music and—waited. He found that time passed very slowly. "You'd think it wouldn't," he said. "But it did."

The clock struck, and he counted its striking. It struck six, and he went back to his chair and waited, listening to the soft music. He found that the music, instead of soothing, became a torment. "We listened to music a good deal, Lyddie and I,"

he said. "Especially the last couple of years." He turned the player off and merely sat, waiting. The clock struck the half hour, and then he got up and went around the house turning on lights.

"People can see the house from the road," Burns said. "At a certain point. I didn't want him to see it dark and think the plans were changed."

He put the casserole in the oven, then. He got his cane and sat in a chair near the door. The time passed so slowly that he had a sudden conviction the clock had stopped, and made himself listen intently and heard the clock ticking. "It's amazing what you can hear if you try," he said. "Too much, sometimes. A note in a voice and . . ." He did not finish. He said, across the desk to Heimrich, "What use is this to you?"

"Go on," Heimrich said. "We like to get things clear."

Finally, Burns went on, the clock struck seven. He waited until it struck the half hour, and then a few minutes more. Ashton was due at a quarter of eight. He did not want to have to wait "down there" too long. But he wanted to be in good time.

"You didn't think of the Knights?" Heimrich asked him.

"Sure I thought of them," Burns said. "I'm not a fool, Captain. I had the whole thing worked out. They'd be inside, with the lights on. You look out of a lighted room into the dark, and what do you see? Not a thing. Not even through that big window of theirs."

"That's true, naturally," Heimrich said, and remembered the wide "picture" window of John Knight's house—and the house itself not far back from the blacktop road, opposite the entrance of the Burns driveway. He remembered the terrace which ran along the front of the Knight house, and the terrace furniture the Knights had got out early this season, because it had turned so unusually warm. "You thought it would be blamed on these hoodlums who've been going around?"

"Why not?" Burns said. "It wouldn't be the first time young gangsters have killed a man. But I told you—I didn't care who you pinned it on. Or tried to pin it on. That was the beauty of it. It was so damned simple. Where would you have started? What would you have had to go on?"

"All right," Heimrich said. "Go ahead."

Burns had walked down the driveway, which was like a tunnel, walled and topped by trees. At the foot of the driveway he had had to wait only a few minutes, and then he heard Ashton's familiar steps on the road surface. "He always," Burns said, "walked as if he owned the earth." He greeted Ashton, and was greeted in return. Ashton started up the drive, and Burns brought the heavy cane up and down again.

He felt the shock of the impact through the cane and then, in the

same instant, the—it was a kind of "give"—as Ashton's skull was broken. He stooped over Ashton, lying on the graveled drive, and made sure. But to make more than sure he struck again—struck twice, flailing downward with the cane. Then he walked back up the drive to his house and, when he was there, washed the cane off under a tap in the kitchen and dried it with tissue and flushed the paper down a toilet.

"You didn't hear anything?" Heimrich asked him.

"A man shouting," Burns said. "Oh—I know. But Knight is always yelling at that dog of his."

He waited a few minutes more, and then telephoned to Ashton's house and asked the housekeeper whether Ashton was on his way—said Ashton was late, and that it wasn't like him to be late. He was told that Ashton had left some time before.

He had planned that, after waiting a little, he would walk down the driveway and find the body. But—

"Ten or fifteen minutes and you came," Burns said to Heimrich, and his face worked and it was, evidently, an effort to keep his voice steady. "You must have been close by."

"At the Old Stone Inn," Heimrich said. "They got me there a few minutes after Mr. Knight called and said what he had seen—what they'd all seen—from the terrace."

"I had quite an audience," Malcolm Burns said, and now he made no effort to keep bitterness—the bitterness of defeat—out of his voice. "The Knights and their guests. Any other—"

"Yes," Heimrich said. "Any other day than the last Sunday in April, Mr. Burns. The day we start daylight saving hereabouts. So that, when the clock struck seven, it was only six by what people call sun time. And the sun was well up—didn't set for almost an hour. It was still bright day when you killed him at a quarter of eight." He paused and looked at the twisting features of the man across from him, and at the still, blank eyes. "Your housekeeper," Captain Heimrich said, "told you she had set the clock."

"I explained about—" Burns began, and then spread his hands hopelessly. His face, with that gesture, seemed somehow to fall apart. He began groping for his cane, like an old, blind man. But he was not old. He was not over forty.

"She was my eyes," he said, and spoke in a low, dazed voice. "If she went away . . ." He did not, he could not, immediately, finish. His groping fingers found the heavy cane. "You can't ask a man to lose his eyes twice," Burns said. "Nobody can ask that."

In EQMM's Twelfth Annual Contest the $500 prize for the best "first story" was awarded to Alvin Pevehouse's "The Kachina Dolls" in which you will meet old, retired Dean Weathergay, a charming and incredibly spry octogenarian who is a born detective. The Dean's first recorded case has the fascinating background of iconography—now, don't be alarmed, you will find it delightful! For a "first story" this is an absorbing tale, written with surprising discipline and firmness, and with convincingly realistic detail.

The author tells us that writing has always been one of his "too-many interests." He received his education at Baker University, Denver University, and The Iliff School of Theology, and he has held pastorates in Congregational Churches in Central City, Colorado, and in Denver. He took a fellowship at the University of Chicago where he worked for two years on his Ph.D. While there, he held a small pastorate in Marshall, Illinois, where he met James Jones, author of FROM HERE TO ETERNITY. *They became friends, and Mr. Jones encouraged Mr. Pevehouse to write—indeed, Mr. Jones worked with the Reverend on Mr. Pevehouse's earliest writing. Mr. Pevehouse snatched as much time as he could from his studies and Church duties, but now he has given up all other work and is devoting his full time to writing.*

So undoubtedly we will be hearing from Mr. Pevehouse again—with more adventures, we hope, of his lovable old doll-fancier.

THE KACHINA DOLLS

by ALVIN PEVEHOUSE

St. George's Seminary,
Denver, Colorado

The Rt. Rev.
Horatio D. McPheeters,
Bishop of Denver,
St. Paul's Retreat House,
Palo Alto, California

Reverend Father,

I am sending this by Special Delivery, in the hope that it will intercept you along your vacation route before you have seen the newspapers' distorted reports of the incident in which the seminary has become involved.

Dean Weathergay arrived Saturday last by plane from Nogales, accompanied by a veritable mountain of luggage. You were right, Sir, he is incredibly old but incredibly spry for eighty-one; the city seemed

to faze him not at all after his ten years of seclusion at the Topolobampo Mission.

I met and brought him to the faculty apartments and have sought, as you wished, to keep my eye on his needs ever since. Although it is a great privilege to be so intimately associated with the former Dean of Presentation Cathedral, my concern for his health (as he has involved himself deeper and deeper in this unfortunate death), flying, as he has, in the face of all my urgings and advice, leads me to ask you to relieve me of this assignment.

I do not mean to imply that the Dean is not a completely charming person with whom to live. A twenty-five-year-old curate surely is not required to make an eighty-one-year-old Dean get up and go to Morning Prayer; and this I have been unable to do. And when I mentioned Matins to him, he simply said, "The Lord's already had more prayers from me than He has a right to expect," and his blue eyes bubbled like spring water as he said it. "We've come to an understanding, Struthers. I'm to sleep in." Subsequent events have caused me to value Dean Weathergay's understanding with the Lord rather highly.

It was on St. Luke's Day (that is, last Thursday) that Dean Weathergay made his first appearance as convocation preacher. He deigned to get up for that.

In the pulpit he looked more like an angel returned to set our lives straight than a Dean retired for ten years on the outskirts of civilization. After the service I tried to get him to leave the coffee hour and go to the apartment for a rest before his classes began in the afternoon, but it was useless.

"My body," the Dean said dryly to the circle of young men around him, "seems indeed to be returning to the soil." His expressive fingers indicated his gaunt physique. "If I don't die soon, there may be a question whether there is a decent amount of corporeal material left to read the service over." My dear Bishop, he thinks this humorous!

It was not until his last class was finished and a little gray-haired lady, a member of Cathedral parish when he was at Presentation, had brought him up to date on Ladies' Guild events, that I finally persuaded him to go back to the faculty building to rest and let me bring him his dinner from the refectory.

He preceded me to the apartment by about ten minutes. When I came in he was sitting at the dining area table, and before him was the master list of the kachina dolls he is using as illustrative material in his course on Mexican Iconography. Far from resting, he was busily jotting on an old-fashioned pencil tablet the Roman numerals of the cases that needed to be unpacked for next week's lectures.

I set the tray on the table and went to wash up, but found the bathroom door locked. The bath-

room had no lock on the outside and it puzzled me that it should be locked.

I said, "Father Weathergay, have you contrived to lock the bathroom door?" (I was a little irritated, Sir.)

"It is one of the simple manipulations I have managed in my time," he said, without looking up from his work.

"Sir," I said (rather sharply, I fear), "I mean, we are both out here and the door is locked from the inside."

"Glories, not halos, Struthers." He folded an enlargement of the *bas relief* on a Mexican tomb. "There is no Byzantine tradition here. I should think this would prove the San Ysidro documents at least a hundred years later than Willoughby thinks they are."

"I presume, Sir," I replied with asperity. "But how is it the bathroom door is locked?"

The Dean answered me in that imperturbable tone that must come with age. "If it is locked, why don't you call down to the janitor? Or, if he can't unlock it, we can shinny up to the window through the light well and unlock it ourselves."

I called down and the old Dean turned from his work at the arrival of the student who acted as janitor of the building. The boy explained that all we had to do was remove the knob and trip the latch to let ourselves in. We stood near the door and watched him work.

When he had the knob off he hooked the latch with his thumbnail. "You see," he said to Dean Weathergay, "there's nothing to it."

The rays of the bathroom's bright overhead light shot out into the darkening room as the door swung back and literally transfixed us with horror.

On the white tiles lay a young Mexican, his head thrown back and a silver-handled knife sticking out of his torn left breast.

We could see the slight animal movements of his legs. One hand grasped one of Dean Weathergay's ancient dolls. On the young man's waist lay one of our house towels, the crossed seminary flags imprinted on it looking sacrilegious as the bright blood climbed over them.

Dean Weathergay literally jumped to the man's side. I seemed to hear the Mexican say in a muffled voice, "Oh, has the doctor come—." Then he said something else as he feebly clutched at the Dean, his voice merely a thick whisper. But while both the janitor and I later agreed, after some discussion, about the first phrase, neither of us heard the second one clearly.

The poor man seemed to summon all his feeble strength to reach out for the Dean. Then he slumped back and what little color there had been in his face drained away. I could hardly bear to look, but I was too stunned to take my eyes away. The Dean wrapped his surprisingly strong fingers around the hilt of the knife and drew it out.

As dreadful as this scene was—finding a stranger in our bath (for he was discovered to be a stranger to the whole building), and I standing there fearing for the old man's heart—it was not all. There was more than the unfortunate presence on our bathroom floor to bring calumny on the seminary.

The Dean called the police, telling them to send an ambulance (I do not know where he gets such presence of mind), looked out the open bathroom window into the light well to see if anyone were hiding there, and sent me below to get Dr. Pfeiffer. (You will remember Dr. Pfeiffer as that ferocious Aleutians missionary who went into those distasteful details about having to pull his own teeth.) Sad to say, the young man died on his way to hospital. R.I.P.

Then the police.

They were here almost the whole night. I had feared that they would make the old man ill with their persistent questions, but as it turned out it was Inspector Carrie who almost got apoplexy.

Homicide Inspector Robert Carrie is a short, muscular, swarthy man with gray-brown hair. One of his eyeglasses is tinted purple. I must confess his guttural bass voice and his approach—I should say, rather, his attack—were so formidable that I myself must have seemed to him the murderer.

He questioned us at length about things only remotely concerned with the case. Far from relying upon our characters as clergymen, the man seems never to have heard of the Christian Church.

After some time with his assistants in the bathroom, and after questioning the janitor in his own rooms, Inspector Carrie dismissed the other police officers and let it be known that he was ready to give us his entire attention. He drew three of our chairs up to the dining table and asked the Dean and myself to sit down.

"I'm sure you gentlemen know the importance of clearing this mess up as quickly as possible," he said solemnly. "As long as it is unsolved it reflects on you and your . . . er . . . institution. Now, Reverend Struthers," he said to me, "you are certain you do not know the man you found in the bathroom?"

"I never saw him before in my life."

"Does either of you keep a considerable amount of money on the premises?"

The Dean shook his head, and I said, "No."

"Reverend Weathergay, how long were you in the apartment before Mr. Struthers arrived?"

"Perhaps five minutes," the Dean said. "I had just made a pot of coffee and set out the work things on my table when Mr. Struthers came in."

"Reverend Struthers, you're certain the bathroom door was locked when you arrived?"

"Yes, sir."

"You tried it?"

"Yes."

"Why?"

"Why does anyone . . . ?"

The Inspector cocked his head to one side and thrust his purple eyeglass toward me. "When you saw the dying man on the floor, did you rush into the bathroom?"

"No, sir. I never went past the door."

"Who went into the room?"

"The Dean."

The Inspector turned his attention to the Dean, who sat calmly smoking. It is the Inspector's method to bore with his eyes like a choirmaster trying to quiet a recalcitrant chorister during service.

Inspector Carrie pulled his chair a little closer to the Dean.

"But you deliberately pulled the knife out of the man's body?"

The old Dean picked up another cigarette and lighted it with deliberation. "We may never know whose knife it was, Inspector, but it was the young man's body to do with as he liked. He was still alive. . . ."

Inspector Carrie stood up and marched across the room. Even on the carpet his heels made a clicking noise. Suddenly he whirled on the Dean.

"And that's all he said?" he demanded.

"No," the Dean said.

"No, what?"

"There was more."

The Inspector pointed a blunt-nailed finger at me. "Did you hear him say anything else before he passed out, Mr. Struthers?"

"Both the janitor and I heard him say something," I said quickly, "but his voice had sunk so low neither of us could make it out."

"Did *you* hear what he said?" he demanded of the Dean.

The Dean nodded.

Inspector Carrie seemed pleased for the first time since the questioning had begun. He pulled his straight chair close to the Dean, sat down spread-legged, and fixed him through the purple glass—like a buzzard looking at an eagle. "Will you tell me what he said?"

"No," the Dean said.

It seemed to me I could see the hackles rise on the back of the Inspector's neck and the purple eyeglass turn a shade darker.

"You mean to say this young man said something to you with his dying breath and you won't tell me what he said?"

"That's what I mean," the Dean replied.

"Look, Reverend," the Inspector said with tense patience. "I don't want to be hard on you. But you can't withhold information from police officers. This is a murder case! Now, don't make me hold you for obstructing justice. What was it the young man said?"

The old Dean sat very straight in his chair. I must admit, Bishop McPheeters, that he looked magnificently unmoved. I am not a man of courage—that is not my forte, as

well you may be aware, Sir—but I did intercede on the Dean's behalf as best I could, pleading with the Inspector to consider the old man's age and health. Neither the Inspector nor the Dean paid the slightest attention to me.

"Why?" the gravel voice rumbled. *"Why?"*

"You forget, Inspector, that I am a clergyman. It was a privileged communication."

"I'll be the judge of that," the Inspector snapped. "Just you tell me what he said."

"To say that you will judge whether a private communication should be given to you, by being informed of its contents, is manifestly silly," the Dean muttered, looking directly at the Inspector.

Before the officer could reply, the door burst open and a uniformed hatless fellow rushed into the room. He carried by one leg the doll which had been in the bathroom, her jewelry and ornaments flapping. The Dean looked at the doll in distress.

"Chief!" the excited young man said. "Do you know what we found in this baby? Marijuana! It's stuffed with it."

He laid the doll down on the table, showing the Inspector dry and crumbling leaves protruding from a recent incision. The Inspector looked slyly from me to the Dean. He actually seemed embarrassed by the fact that he had suddenly got the upper hand.

"I believe you told me this was yours," he said to the Dean. "Exactly what are you supposed to be doing with these dolls, Mr. Weathergay?"

The Dean suddenly lost his taciturnity. It had nothing to do with the contents of the doll. It is just that the Dean is apt to become voluble with anyone who shows the slightest interest in his work, Sir. It is a habit with him, I think.

"I have fifty-seven dolls with me," the Dean said. "Since my retirement I have been in charge of the Mexican mission of Santa Ana of Topolobampo in Sonora and have spent much of my spare time studying iconography. That is the relation of art objects to history—church history in particular, you understand. Very soon after the Spanish conquest and the conversion of some of the Indians—people who had been kachina dollmakers for generations—they began to shape their dolls into icons of Christian saints and put on them the symbols and trappings of sainthood. In some of the most interesting cases, elements that reflect the local primitive religious ideas also crept in."

He picked up the doll and gently smoothed its dress and rearranged its jewelry.

"This, for example, is a Saint Lucy. The head is excellently carved with inlaid shells for the sightless eyes, for St. Lucy was blind. Now, sir, we know from examination of the wood of the head that this doll is about two hundred and fifteen years

old. This is a period for which we have no written information on the area from which it comes. But note: the dress is of Tolucan weave and the wood of the head is probably from that district also.

"The eyesockets are bits of seaworm shells from the vicinity of Mazatlán many miles away. Two eyes about the size of hens' eggs were in this little basket on her arm, but the sergeant seems to have lost them. The basket itself is made of henequen grown in Yucatan; it is unusual because only St. Lucy and the Santo Niño de Atocha, of all the saints in my collection, carry a container of any size—"

The Inspector had changed position on his chair several times during this explanation. "Then you've had occasion to take this doll apart?" he interrupted.

"Oh, yes," the Dean said. "Many of the older statues have been taken apart and carefully put back together again."

"New stuffing?"

"No. Whatever came out of the doll went back in."

"Can you explain how the stuffing of this doll was changed?"

"No. I don't even know that it was."

"In any case, Reverend Weathergay, you have been smuggling dope into the country."

"Obviously," the Dean said. "I brought the doll with me across the border last week. She is one of two excellent examples from that particular area. Or she was." He looked crossly at the police officer.

"Where are the other dolls?"

"They are in my bedroom. Fifty-six yet to be uncrated. The room is so filled with them I have to do my work on the dining table here." He waved a hand toward the litter beside him.

"Who had access to the dolls before you came across the border?"

"Why, any number of people. They have been part of a display in the old sacristy of the mission for some years. We had people going through it every day. And it took us a good three months to get them all packed."

"Was this one packed individually?"

"Yes. Each of them still is."

The Dean's voice trailed off. He gazed into the blackness beyond the window at the twinkling lights along the foothills above Denver.

"Well, we certainly have a motive now," the Inspector said. "I'm afraid we'll have to take all these dolls down to the station and see which of them contain the narcotic."

The Dean roused himself. "That will take some time. They are valuable historically. It would mean getting experts to take them carefully apart. Don't you suppose, Inspector, if there were more of the narcotic weed stuffed in the dolls, the man would have attempted to take the dolls that he knew contained it?"

The Inspector directed his violet eye to the floor. "It could be. But don't let a single one of them out

of your sight. Now, do you mind if I take a look at the crates in your bedroom?"

The Dean waved his permission.

Inspector Carrie came back rubbing the back of his neck. "There's quite a pile of boxes in there," he said. "And they all look pretty much alike, except for the numbers. But they're still neatly stacked and I don't believe any have been broken open. The broken crate with the Number Eleven on it—is that the box they took this doll from?"

The Dean pulled his chart over to him and ran his finger down the list of roman numerals. "Yes."

"I'd say the fellow knew exactly which box he was looking for. Among other things, that means we won't have to go through the other dolls for the time being."

"Do you plan to charge me for bringing this narcotic weed into the country?" the Dean asked, his voice fading. It wouldn't surprise me if some time it vanished altogether.

"Not now," the Inspector said. "But we want you where we can find you, and you had better change your mind about letting me know the boy's dying statement. . . ."

The Dean got up. "Good night, Inspector, Sergeant, Mr. Struthers." He went into his bedroom and shut the door.

That, my dear Bishop, was last Thursday night. By midday Friday the mystery had somewhat cleared up, much to my relief, for while the Dean had met his classes with admirable serenity, I could tell that he was preoccupied with the incident.

The police identified our dying visitor as Pedro Guzman, a Mexican who was in the country illegally and had just served nine months in jail for possession of narcotics. His brother, Eduardo Guzman, had been thought by the police to be equally guilty, but Pedro had taken the entire blame for the narcotics possession and, by pleading guilty, had so shortened the police investigation that it had not been brought out that he was in the country illegally.

The police theorized that in this case Pedro and his brother arranged for one of them to slip over the border and purchase the narcotic, put it in the Dean's doll, and rejoin the other in the United States. Shortly before the time the marijuana arrived at the Denver apartment, the Guzmans are known to have quarreled. The police think that this quarrel erupted again in our bathroom after they had the doll in their possession, and that Eduardo killed Pedro there. Eduardo was arrested by the police.

The Dean seemed even more agitated after this police report. When I spoke to him about it at dinner Friday evening, mentioning the rapidity with which the police had apprehended the murderer, his brows lowered upon his eyes (for all the world like Chief Justice Holmes in one of his frowning moments). "Struthers," he said judicially, "it is the only complaint I have about mod-

ern police procedure. They seem unable to comprehend that their job is not so much to arrive at a solution of a crime, as to arrive at the correct solution. Some facts will fit almost any theory. But one can hardly be said to have a case until all facts fit only one theory. They've arrested this man too soon."

"What in the world do you mean?" I asked.

"Why did these brothers choose to stuff a doll? Removing a doll and filling the box to be shipped would have been simpler than opening the body of the doll, stuffing it, and then sewing it back up again. And they could have brought five times as much marijuana into the country. Also, didn't they run quite a risk of losing track of their doll? I might have had other dolls like this kachina saint. There are almost sixty boxes there. The whole thing doesn't make sense to me."

"It's best left to the police," I said. "After all, Inspector Carrie says there was bad blood between the two brothers, and this Eduardo whom they have in jail has been arrested with his brother for possession of narcotics before."

The Dean had no more to say when we returned to our apartment from dinner. But he did not go to his manuscripts and photographs as he had done on previous evenings. For a full two hours he sat drinking coffee and smoking, staring out at the moonlit crest of Long's Peak above the city.

At nine o'clock he knocked on my bedroom door and asked me if I had retired. I told him that I had not and he asked me to go over to the seminary and get the cathedral carryall to take him to see the arrested man's wife. I pointed out that it was not a matter in which he should become involved. But he said, "According to the papers, she's only a child . . . and the way that Inspector will come at her . . ."

Needless to say, we went.

The house of Mrs. Guzman (I almost said "the widow Guzman," for the case against her husband is overwhelming) was most humble. One of those metal army houses built like a split, oversized oil drum.

Eduardo's wife was very young indeed. Distress filled her deep Spanish eyes. She held a small child in her arms, and I would venture to say that it will not be her last.

The old Dean had worn his Anglican house-cassock. If the poor woman expected help from heaven, I am sure the Dean left her in no doubt it was coming.

The two conversed in Spanish so rapidly that I could not follow after I heard that the Eduardo Guzmans were penniless.

The Dean was alarmingly tense. He even forbore to smoke. While they talked I examined a shelf of cheap religious statuary in the room, but all of it was from that section of Chicago which the seminarians vulgarly call "Bloody Alley." Nothing remotely resembled the Santa Lucia

doll in the possession of the police.

We did not leave the Guzman house until ten o'clock, and the Dean peremptorily asked me to take him to the county jail in Civic Center. His manner was so remote I could hardly bring myself to remonstrate with him. However, I did say that I didn't think he could get into the jail at ten o'clock in the evening.

"Do you realize, Struthers, that neither of those brothers can speak a word of English?"

Though I didn't see what this had to do with getting into the jail, I said no more. One look at those blazing eyes, at the cassock that looked as if he might have been born in it, and that purposeful face above the old-fashioned pontifical collar told me that, somehow, the Dean would get in to see his man.

They would not let me go up to the murderer's cell. The Dean, however, was with the man over an hour, but he had nothing to say to me until we got into the car.

"The case is very bad against him," he said. "Eduardo not only freely admits complicity with his brother Pedro in the sale of the marijuana last year, and tells me that Pedro took the blame because he was unmarried and didn't have Eduardo's responsibilities, but he also admits quarreling with Pedro. What is worse, he *was* in Mexico this summer.

"He works for a Mr. Ghardelli as a house boy and he went on a hunting trip with this Mr. Ghardelli some two months ago in the hills beyond Guyamas. Eduardo's employer has given a statement that the boy was not away from his house-trailer long enough to go to Topolobampo.

"Now the thing that worries me most is this: while Ghardelli is quite well-to-do, he has been before the courts on several felony charges of gambling. You see, if he is Eduardo Guzman's alibi for not being in Topolobampo, it will be easy to cast suspicion on his testimony."

"But perhaps Ghardelli will furnish the money to help defend Eduardo, since he is wealthy," I said to the Dean, seeking to give him a ray of hope.

"Indeed, he has already offered to. He seems genuinely fond of the boy. As a matter of fact, he had offered to employ Eduardo's brother, but Pedro had decided to return to Mexico when he was released from jail. The two brothers quarreled over that.

"You know, Struthers, I'm inclined to believe this boy. When he told me that Mr. Ghardelli had signed a statement saying that he couldn't possibly have got to Topolobampo, he looked me straight in the eye—and Struthers, I am not easily lied to—and said, 'I could have, Father, but I didn't.'"

The Dean lapsed into thought after this, filling the carryall so full of evil smoke that I was faced with the dilemma of lowering a window and giving him a cold or allowing all that bad air to go into his lungs.

When we finally reached our apartment he asked me if he could presume upon my Saturday's time to drive him about. I told him I could do it, and he went to his room.

The next morning, when I came down from my bath (which I have been taking in Canon Milligan's room on the second floor), I found what appeared to be an old Mexican peon—dirty pajama-like clothes, you know, wide hat in hand, and huaraches—standing at our windows. When he turned I was shocked to see that it was the Dean!

"Struthers? Let's get going. Will it take you long to dress?"

I could hardly find my tongue, Sir. That venerable old man dressed like a south-of-the-border tramp! "Where," I managed to say, "where are we going?"

"You can drop me on Larimer Street at the Café Quince de Septiembre, and then in about an hour pick me up in front of the Windsor Hotel."

My dear Bishop McPheeters, do you know that territory? It's horrible! Tumbledown hotels, drunks, panhandlers, cutthroats. Why, we don't even have a mission down there!

"I won't do it," I said.

"Now, Struthers," the Dean said gently, "this is not tomfoolery. It is a completely necessary trip, I assure you."

"No, Sir. I shall not do it. If something is left undone in this investigation, we'll summon the police. You've exercised yourself enough over it. You'll get hurt going down there, and you won't help the murderer."

The Dean gave me a look of great concern.

"Mr. Struthers, I can't summon the police because they already think I am a fool playing with dolls and upon them the recent advancements in gerontology have been won in vain. As for getting hurt, that's impossible. A fairly good blow of any kind would knock the life out of me, but it wouldn't hurt me. As for helping a murderer—that boy's no more the murderer of his brother than you are.

"Doesn't it seem strange to you, Struthers, that a man would kill his brother for marijuana and then leave the stuff behind?" He looked me straight in the eye. "I've been moved to do this, Struthers."

I did not give in.

The Dean threw his hat on the couch, sat down, and began to smoke. When I saw he'd resigned himself, I was afraid to say more, so I went into my bedroom to dress without even urging him to go to the refectory for his breakfast.

How foolish! When I came out of the bedroom, the Dean and his hat were gone. You cannot imagine my agony. I rushed downstairs fastening my dickie as I went. Our all-seeing manageress had spied the old man getting into a cab and speeding away.

Immediately I called the Rector.

He was, if possible, even more alarmed than myself. But fortunately he is a true man of action, a perfect match for the Dean. Or so I thought.

He had me call Inspector Carrie as soon as I reached his office in the seminary building and ask the Inspector to intercept the Dean on Denver's skid row. He himself telephoned the dormitory and asked the Resident Master to send every man on the place to his office. In less than a half hour some fifteen of them crowded into the Rector's study. The Rector immediately dispatched them to check various parts of the campus where Dean Weathergay might have gone, the hospitals in case an accident might befall him, and even the police. The Rector's command of the situation was magnificent, and we sat in his office and waited to hear that the Dean had been found.

But our first call was from Inspector Carrie. "Mr. Struthers," he said lightly over the telephone, "about your missing Dean. I don't think he made it to the district on Larimer Street you mentioned. We've checked."

"Possibly not," I said, relief flooding my mind. "Particularly if he thought I might try to interfere with his plans."

"No. As a matter of fact the only strange character around those Mexican joints this morning was an old wetback trying to sell a bartender some marijuana." The officer laughed. "That certainly couldn't have been your Dean."

I hope, Sir, I was not guilty of lying by hiding the truth, but when I hung up I simply told the Reverend Rector that the police hadn't found him down there. The Rector smiled and said, "I was certain, Mr. Struthers, that he could not have been foolish enough to go down to that pesthole in those clothes. I believe he might have gone to the jail to comfort that boy again, and worn those clothes to keep from upsetting the young man."

I could not reply to this. We sat for three hours, without word and without lunch, and at two o'clock the telephone rang. A seminarian said, "He has just telephoned a reservation for a room at the Posada Grande. That's a little Spanish hotel under the Colfax Viaduct."

"Mercy," I said to the Rector. "You don't suppose I have offended him so much by refusing to drive him this morning that he's moving out! What will the Bishop say?"

"No," the Rector said calmly. "I think it's all a part of his childish plan to help that boy."

The next call sounded worse than it was. Two of the seminary students were at Denver General Hospital. They hastened to assure me that the Dean was not there. But the early edition of the *Denver Post* had just been delivered and they had spotted a peculiar advertisement in the classified personals.

"Listen, Sir," the young man said. *"Party interested in right Mexican kachina doll may have same. Call*

Room 16, Posada Grande, today. $500. Is the old Dean dotty?"

"There is nothing wrong with Dean Weathergay, Mr. Hagstrom. Our concern is merely for his safety. Thank you for your information."

The Rector tried to write a letter and I tried my best to read vespers while I sat there. We both automatically stopped what we were doing as two young seminarians crossed the quadrangle on foot, hurrying toward the seminary building. They bounded up the steps and burst into the Rector's office.

"We've found him," one said jubilantly. "He's sitting in the Phipps Room of the Science Library reading a botany journal. We left Roberts to keep an eye on him."

The Rector looked at me, then thrust his hands into the wide cincture of his cassock, a sure sign that he had come to a decision. "All right, Struthers," he said. "It's our duty to go over there and see what he's up to."

When we arrived at the Science Library, we saw the third seminarian sitting alone on the couch.

"Where is he?" the Rector said sternly.

"He's gone," young Roberts said nervously. "He gave me this note for you, Father Struthers, and asked me to wait until you got here to give it to you."

"Probably so the boy wouldn't follow him," the Rector muttered in my ear. "Let's see the note." He collapsed into an ample chair, his cassock folding like a fallen sail around him.

"Struthers," it read. "You're not playing the game. Please tell Henry" (that's what he called the Reverend Rector, Sir) "to get those boys out from under my feet. Then call Inspector Carrie for me and give him this message: *If Inspector Carrie will come to the Posada Grande, Room 16, at 6:30 p.m.*—not in any circumstances before—*I will tell him what Pedro Guzman said to me before he died.*"

What was there to do, Sir, but obey him?

This I did, but the Rector asked me to tell Inspector Carrie that we too would be on hand at the Posada Grande to reclaim our Dean.

We arrived at the shoddy second-story hotel (there is a tortilla factory on the ground floor) a little before seven o'clock. We were passed on by various silent policemen until we arrived at Room 16. There we found four or five police officers and a silent Inspector Carrie. A dashingly dressed man stood handcuffed to a bedpost.

The Dean sat behind a nook-table covered with checkered oil cloth upon which a good deal of money was spread around one of his dolls. A sergeant brought him a cup of coffee as we entered. The Dean nodded to the Rector and me, but said nothing to us.

Inspector Carrie roused himself as we sat down and motioned for one of the men to take the prisoner away.

Then he turned to the Dean and asked, "What made you suspect that Eduardo Guzman did not kill his brother? How did you get yourself involved in this thing?"

The Dean took a sip of coffee.

"It seemed to me a most heinous crime for a brother to commit upon a brother for two liters of marijuana. Particularly brothers who had been in trouble together, for common trouble more often produces love than hatred.

"This morning I went to Larimer Street, posing as a narcotics seller, and confirmed my suspicions about the value of the marijuana weed in the doll. The amount in the Santa Lucia doll would have brought $75.00 at the most, and I have learned that it was of very poor quality, filled with sticks, stems, and seeds. Divided between the two brothers, it simply was not worth the risk. In all probability they would not have received $25.00 apiece from their efforts. The marijuana, then, was incidental. One of the dolls, I concluded, had something more valuable in it."

"So you advertised in the *Denver Post* that you had the doll the smuggler wanted?" The Inspector could not keep the admiration out of his voice.

"Yes. And I rented this room to allay his suspicions. He would never have come to the seminary for the doll."

The Dean finished his cup of coffee and lighted one of his oppressive cigarettes. "I knew some mistake had been made when Guzman's wife insisted neither her husband nor his dead brother could speak English. And even though she was *enceinte,* they were in poverty such as one seldom finds, I suspect, among dope salesmen.

"Not only did these facts make me believe Pedro Guzman innocent, but I realized he could not have said, 'Oh, has the doctor come?'—because, as I said, he couldn't speak English. Therefore I cast about for a Spanish equivalent we might have mistaken for English words. I believe he tried to tell me what they really came for. He must have said something like *ojos de otra cubo*—'the eyes in the other bucket.'

"Now, gentlemen, there was only one Santa Lucia in my collection, and few saints have as their attribute a container of any sort. But the Santo Niño de Atocha does. He carries a little bucket full of seeds on his arm. My Santo Niño was in a box marked with the Roman numeral IX. This was the box they wanted. The box in which the Santa Lucia came was numbered XI. Turn the roman numeral XI upside down, and it becomes IX. The box must have been upside down, and Pedro unwittingly took the wrong doll.

"This all occurred to me during the early hours of this morning." The Dean blushed. It was the first time I had seen him blush. "I was handicapped, however, by being ignorant of what I was looking for."

"And what was it?" I asked.

"Heroin—Inspector Carrie says nearly ten thousand dollars' worth. Mr. Ghardelli had hired the brothers, not in spite of their narcotics conviction but because of it, hoping to use them in a dope-smuggling scheme of his own.

"I realized that even though Ghardelli insisted Eduardo had no opportunity to go into Topolobampo, Eduardo was probably telling the truth when he said he did have opportunity but didn't go, since his statement would serve only to condemn him. If Eduardo had opportunity, so did Ghardelli, and gambling income being the variable thing it must be, Mr. Ghardelli entered my mind as a possible suspect. I was not too surprised when he walked into my trap today to claim the narcotic I had unwittingly brought into the country for him."

"Father Weathergay," the Rector said, "why in the name of Goodness didn't you tell all this to the police?"

"Because they had already made an arrest and the finding of the narcotic was as much evidence against Eduardo as against a third party."

The Inspector cleared his throat, pulled off his glasses and polished them. "How do you reconstruct what happened in your bathroom, then, Reverend?"

"I think Eduardo had tried to persuade Pedro to stay in the States and work for Mr. Ghardelli, but that, because of his jail experience here, Pedro had been anxious to return to Mexico. It was over this the two brothers had quarreled. Instead, Pedro accepted a quick job from Mr. Ghardelli for quick money to go home on. Eduardo was ignorant of this because he was no longer on speaking terms with his brother.

"Ghardelli must have come to the mission in Sonora with the usual group of tourists. I probably saw him and he saw me. When no one was looking he stuffed the heroin into the basket of the Santo Niño de Atocha as the Santo lay open to public view in the box in which he was to be shipped to the seminary. Then he followed me and the dolls here. He brought Pedro along to seminary to do the actual stealing because he was afraid he might run into me and I might recognize him.

"Pedro took the doll from the box numbered as Ghardelli had told him. But the box and number were upside down, so he got the wrong doll. When Ghardelli looked for his smuggled goods, he was understandably furious. He threw caution to the winds and went after the doll himself, taking Pedro with him on an off-chance the boy had discovered the smuggled goods and rehidden it for himself.

"As soon as they were in the apartment, they heard me coming. I had returned to the apartment during the dinner hour because Mr. Struthers had offered to bring me a tray. The two men ran into the bathroom with the wrong doll. Pedro probably made some outcry or attempted to open the bathroom door

to flee. Ghardelli stabbed him and escaped through the light well."

"But why," I could not help asking, "did you go to the Botanical Library?"

"Why?" the Dean turned to me. "The doll we found in the bathroom was undoubtedly stuffed with the refuse of rope-making—Indian hemp—the marijuana plant, which is used both as a narcotic and a hemp producer. I couldn't wait to find an ecological map that would tell me in which possible areas of Mexico the doll had been stuffed."

The Inspector put his hand tentatively on the Dean's arm. "There is one thing you haven't told *me*. What did the dying man say to you personally?"

"Oh, that. That was the thing that set me off in the first place. He said *'Padre, mi hermanito, el niño, es cupable'*—'Father, my little brother, the boy, is the guilty one.' You see, Inspector, why I couldn't reveal it: Pedro meant it was in the little saint, El Niño de Atocha, that I would find the drugs. But you would have thought he was accusing his brother Eduardo."

The Dean inclined his head in the way he has of indicating a lecture is finished, and floated out of the room. I followed quickly, certain he hadn't eaten a bite since morning.

Your obedient servant,
Matthew Struthers, Curate
St. Margaret's Chapel
All Soul's Day

Surely you remember one of the "first stories" in our Ninth Annual Contest—the tale of philosopher detective Socrates by a then-new writer who signed herself as Brèni James. We have published two of Brèni James's reconstructions of the past, and both were distinguished by their remarkable authenticity—of background, characters, tone, thought, language, even of the historical nature of the crimes. (A little bird has told us that Brèni James has written enough tales of Socrates-as-a-sleuth to make up a book of short stories; we can only hope that she finds a sympathetic, if not an enthusiastic, publisher—what a companion volume to Lillian de la Torre's DR. SAM: JOHNSON, DETECTOR *the Brèni James book would be!).*

Well, history has repeated itself; literary lightning has struck twice in the same household. For who do you think Brèni James really is? None other than Mrs. Alvin Pevehouse! Three years ago we published Mrs. Pevehouse's first story; in this issue we have

included Mr. Pevehouse's first story— and to make it a never-to-be-forgotten occasion for the Pevehouse family, we now give you stories, back to back, by both husband and wife!

Mrs. Pevehouse's new story is more than 2000 years removed from Socrates and his time. True, her new story also has an unusual background—rare, if not actually unique, for a detective story; but it is a modern, not an ancient, background, and the story is brightly and briskly told—one might almost say, wickedly told. So, meet, if you please, Señor Maria de Jesus Rubí, whose vocational pursuit is that of Catering Manager, and learn what happens at the Darling Debut Dinner (Darling Cosmetics, Inc.) in the Gold Room of the Hotel Junipero Serra in San Francisco.

Our congratulations to the Pevehouses—and, come to think of it, could two stories written by husband and wife be more different in every way? It's amazing!

SO REFRESHING!

by BRÈNI PEVEHOUSE

MRS. HARRY T. BRUMMER WAS ON the portly side of fifty. She smiled the way matrons will when they know they're known, waved a couple of large-economy-size diamonds in my general direction, and swept past me to the boss's desk.

Actually, it's not a desk, but a long, wide, extremely smart table which Señor Rubí himself designed to keep the patrons at bay. This did not bother Mrs. Brummer. She picked up his name plate and waved it archly in his face. It was quite a slat, accommodating *Sr. Maria de Jesus Rubí, Catering Manager, Hotel Junipero Serra.* If it also read San Francisco, she'd have poked his eye out.

"You promised me, Señor Rubí, you wouldn't change anything from last year's arrangements!"

He spread his slender hands and remained silent until she put the outsized dog tag back on the table. "We follow everyt'ing of the old contract, Madame. Please to sit yourself."

I pushed a chair behind her. Mrs. Brummer plopped into it, stiff-backed. "The Darling Debut Dinner is a momentous occasion, Señor Rubí, in the history of Darling Cosmetics. It's not just an ordinary banquet, a mere fashion show. Why, when our graduates from the Darling School of Elegance make their debut, it's a . . ." She cast her eyes dreamily

upward . . . "a momentous occasion."

"*Si,* I am very aware," Señor Rubí nodded gravely.

"Then why, may I ask, are there *seven* places at the head table?"

I coughed. "Señor Rubí, I added the extra place because . . ."

"Miss Willie," he glowered. My name is Wilhemina Wren, and this is what I get for saying, to this polylingual malaprop, six years ago, just call me Willie. "Miss Willie, if you please to tell the house man to take it away the extra chair."

I scowled and sailed out of the office, running into a dress shirt and snicking my nose on a rose-point stud. I was beamed upon, furtively pinched, apologized to, and Mr. Harry Brummer marched into the Catering Office with scarcely a break in pace.

I turned around and tagged after him. Señor Rubí tried to shoo me out the door again with a flick of his eyebrows.

"Gladys, why aren't you dressing?" Mr. Brummer picked up his wife's gloves from the carpet and stood holding them with a show of husbandly resignation. "They'll start coming in an hour, and you're not even . . ."

"They've set the head table wrong, Harry."

Brummer laughed. "Oh, that. Kent decided to come after all, so I called the girl here to have him put next to you."

"I know Kent will be here," Mrs. Brummer sneered. "I asked him to come. He's to sit at my place."

"And where will you sit?"

She fumbled with the clasp on her handbag, snapping it open and shut, open and shut. "I'll sit with the models."

Harry Brummer grabbed his wife's furs as they slid down her back and draped them elegantly across her shoulders. "We'll not argue, Gladys. You'll sit at the head table where you belong."

"I will *not* sit with that woman." She said it in a voice that was almost choked with tears, and then pulled a lacy handkerchief out of her purse. She spanked it open. It smelled of perfume that must have been Attar of Blighted Eucalyptus.

"Gladys!"

Mrs. Brummer kept her head bent, touching the handkerchief to her eyes and sniffling.

Brummer pulled her gently from the chair and led her to the door. "I'm sorry, Mr. Rubí. Fix it any way you want."

"For six," wailed Mrs. Brummer, tottering out on his arm.

I waited.

Señor Rubí doubled a fist and slashed it downward, not quite hitting the table. I winced as though it had.

"Miss Willie," he whispered.

"But Mr. Brummer said . . . seven places."

"Meeses say six. Six! Come sit down. I already have called to have the extra chair remove."

When the phone rang I took it at my desk.

"Catering? This is Harry Brummer again. Will you have the bar send up a pitcher of martinis?"

"Surely, Mr. Brummer."

"Fine. And say, set that table for six, will you?"

I turned to look at the boss. He daintily laid his own phone down and blinked at me. When Señor Rubí blinks he means, You're a nice girl, Miss Willie—not bright, but nice.

I wondered who the woman was —the one Gladys Brummer wouldn't sit at the table with. I kept wondering until twenty minutes before the dinner was scheduled to begin. Then Miss Arlyn Martin glided into the office, and I didn't wonder any more.

She wore a shell-pink bouffant gown, very demure from the waist down. Her hair was pink, shadowed with fuchsia. It looked wonderfully plausible.

It was her bright green eyes that seemed artificially, inexpertly dyed. She turned them on Señor Rubí and he rose, bowing her into a chair.

"Señor," she crooned, "I am Arlyn Martin. I am in charge of the Darling Debut Dinner tonight, and I have a small favor to ask."

"Enchanted," said the boss, lighting a sacrificial fire under her cigarette.

She pointed a delicate wrist, swathed in twenty-button French kid, toward the doorway. "My man brought some souvenirs for the guests. Can you have them placed at each setting?"

"*Creo que sí,*" he nodded. "Any otter t'ing?"

A vexed sigh. "A hand mike at the head table, between Mr. Brummer and myself. A raised walk for the models to promenade. And . . ."

Señor Rubí pulled out his turnip watch. "They are all arrange for by Mrs. Brummer. She has follow her plan of last year to the letter T."

Miss Martin rose, coloring. "Then I suppose she didn't forget to order Mr. Brummer's special appetizer, the fruit cocktail."

"Fresh Fruit *Suprème au Kirsch.*" He beamed and described a sphere with his hands. "Serve in a basket of grapefruit, with handle decorate in white satin bow. And for the rest of the guests, *Suprème of Crabsmeat,* serve in . . ."

"Thank you," she said. "I think I'll go in and look around."

He guided her to the door. "Wait, Señorita, wait until dinner is announce, please."

"Well, I . . ."

"It will be serve *lo mas perfectamente posible,* I promise."

"Well, thanks. And . . . *merci beaucoup, señor.*"

She floated toward the bar across the foyer, pausing only to readjust her smile in a passing reflection.

Señor Rubí drew his shoulders up in two nervous jerks, like a stir-crazy parakeet. "Ten minutes, Miss Willie, to put the favors. So don't tilly-tally around."

Favors indeed. Like a demented Queen of the May I strewed bottles of Darling Cosmetics' newest astringent—*So Refreshing!*—and finished off at the head table with two minutes and two bottles to spare. I pocketed one and tossed the other to Max, the waiter, because, like me, he was a sample sampler. He had just laid the Fresh Fruit *Suprème au Kirsch,* rampant on grapefruit, at Mr. Brummer's place; the Darling Debut Dinner could now begin.

In the lobby, the pink bouffant flounced through the crowd, welcoming guests with hysterical charm. "Doctor Kent!" She twinkled. "How perfectly exquisite of you to come out of your laboratory to join our little get-together."

The man she called Doctor Kent snorted unpleasantly. "Up your necktie," he said. He ran chemical-stained fingers through a shock of iron-gray hair and turned to check his hat and coat. Miss Martin stared after him, her green eyes dulled with loathing.

Harry Brummer steered an uncertain course from the elevator toward the Gold Room, a martini pitcher, still sloshing dregs, listing on his starboard hip. When he came astern of the pink-haired Miss Martin, a bright grin washed over his greenish pallor and he tilted the pitcher toward her back.

If Harry intended to pour the bilge over those pale and lovely shoulders, his joke was scuttled by the sudden, silently furious arrival of his wife. She jerked the pitcher from her husband's hands and glared at him.

"*And,*" she said, as if she were finishing a verbal lashing, "unless you plan to balance it on your nose, you'd better give me the glass, too."

He groped inside his jacket, drew out and presented the glass loftily. Miss Martin, smiling at the wall just beyond Mrs. Brummer's shoulder, took protective custody of Harry's right arm; Harry waved like a politician to the Lovely People and led the constituency into the Gold Room.

I took the pitcher and glass from Mrs. Brummer. She handed them to me reluctantly, as if they had become the forlorn trophies of a costly and pointless conquest. Then, without a glance at the crowding banqueters, she marched into the Annex adjoining the Gold Room.

I snagged a boy to take the bar cargo and followed Mrs. Brummer. The ten Darling models were clustered about her, complaining, twittering about the dim light and the absence of mirrors. I distracted them long enough to point out the two carts on either side of the service doorway, and warned them that the busboys would be charging in to stack the first course dishes on them.

The archway that led into the Gold Room was fronted by a screen, beyond which we could hear the scrape of chairs, the clank of some wiseacre's spoon against his water glass, and a general falling off of conversation. The meal was in progress.

Someone in the Gold Room went

Shush! into the hand mike at the guest table, and Gladys Brummer went *Shhh!* to the girls in the Annex.

It was no surprise to me that the first voice on the program turned out to be that of Miss Arlyn Martin: "Later this evening we will present with pride the debut of our Darlings, each and every one of whom has completed the Darling Silver Medal Course with flying colors . . ."

Someone lit a cigarette and someone else said, "It's hot in here," and Mrs. Brummer went *Shhh!* again.

". . . take great pleasure at this moment in introducing our honor guests. On my right, Mr. Howard Clinton, Head Fashion Consultant of our Darling School. Stand up, Mr. Clinton."

An orchidaceous sort of man took a bow.

There was applause, and Mrs. Brummer snorted. "What's she doing! First she's supposed to let Harry welcome everybody, and then . . ."

But Miss Arlyn Martin was still going strong:

"Miss Natalie Garfinkle, winner of our annual 'You Are My Darling Because' contest." (Applause) "Doctor Jerome Kent, Chief Chemist and Cosmetog—Cos-me-ti-logical Adviser." (Applause and another snort from Mrs. Brummer.) "Madame Bricôt, from our Paris . . ."

"One simple little welcoming speech," Gladys Brummer muttered. "Can't she get anything straight?"

"And now may I . . ."

Arlyn stopped abruptly. She was whispering, barely in range of the microphone. "You think you should try, Harry? But . . . well . . ." Then, in her Darling voice, "And now on my left, the producer and creator of Darling Cosmetics, the founder of the Darling School of Elegance—Mr. Harry T. Brummer."

Applause. A chair scraped. The mike rattled. Heavy breathing. Arlyn whispered again, "Well, are you . . . ?"

Mr. Brummer's voice, overloud, "I will, I just can't . . ."

The mike overturned, thumping amplified thunder.

"Dead," a man's voice said. I thought he meant the mike, but then I realized that his voice had come through it.

Mrs. Brummer let out an ineffectual yip, like a lady trying to hail a cab, and pushed ahead of me into the dining room. She ran interference right to the head table, stopping so suddenly that she bumped against the dais.

Harry Brummer lay under the table, almost at our eye level. He was curled up like a sleeping infant, legs pulled to chin, arms wrapped about his knees. Even his mouth, slack and drooling, was childlike. But his eyes were glazed with death.

Gladys began to cry in soft, high-pitched whimpers. She laid a hand on his patent leather shoe, shaking it gently. "Harry? Harry?"

Then Doctor Kent was at her elbow. "He's dead, Gladys. I'm sorry."

"But . . . so suddenly? Doctor Kent, what happened? What is it?"

"I'm sorry," he said again. "He was poisoned, Gladys. He complained of stomach pains and I tried to get him to lie down, but . . ." He shrugged.

I asked him, "Was it, by any chance, food poisoning?"

"Botulism? No, that would have taken longer. Anyway, I smelled phenol over the alcohol." He hesitated, as though caught between pity for Mrs. Brummer and the candor of his profession. Then he added, "It was probably deliberate poisoning."

Gladys screamed. I pulled her taut body around. "Come, Mrs. Brummer. Come sit down in the office."

Señor Rubí had pushed through the crowd to my elbow. "I take the Meeses. You call the police up." He shuddered. "Poison in my dining room! Get Lieutenant Oliveres, if you can."

The main doors were already bottlenecked. Guests were trying to shove their way out like playgoers in a burning theater, and others scurried back toward the head table with bright, openly curious faces. One brocaded lady daintily polished off her fish while her escort fidgeted.

I went along the models' runway to the screen, around it and into the Gold Annex. It was dark and empty now. I stopped at the carts piled with the first course dishes. It was easy to find the single grapefruit with its satin bow amid the stemmed supreme glassware.

The scarcely eaten fruit smelled of Kirschwasser, but mostly of Attar of Blighted Eucalyptus.

After I phoned Lieutenant Oliveres at Homicide, I called Señor Rubí on the house phone and told him about the grapefruit and the widow's handkerchief on which I had first smelled Attar of Blighted Eucalyptus.

"My secretary is not here, for which I am sorry. Thank you madame and goodby."

"Señor, it's me!"

But he had hung up with a bang.

The catering office doorway was barred by the considerable bulk of Donlevy, whose sinecure as house detective at the Junipero Serra had never, in its twelve years, empowered him so grandly as tonight.

"You can't go in there," he rumbled around his cigar, and I said, "Don't be silly," and walked in.

The five honor guests and Mrs. Brummer were all in the office. The beauteous Miss Garfinkle sat rigidly on the arm of a chair in which Madame Bricôt slumped. The ancient Parisienne wore enough Darling facial insulation to thwart a blizzard, but it had failed to discourage the sprout of bristles on her upper lip. She glared out from hooded eyes like a vulture with dyspepsia.

Arlyn Martin lounged near Señor Rubí's desk. The widow had been given a chair beside the corner filing cabinet, and Doctor Kent stood over her solicitously. Mr. Clinton was

draped fashionably at my desk and made no move to get up for me.

As if the room were not crowded enough, the boss had called in Max, the waiter, who stood by the door with sentinel impassivity. I propped myself up beside him.

Señor Rubí sat unmindful of us all, scribbling and erasing on a pad of blank function sheets. He made the soft little birdlike sounds which give his arithmetic continuity, so I knew that, come murder or mayhem, he was figuring out the waiters' pay for their evening stint.

The others had turned an apprehensive stare to the door as I opened it, and then, seeing that it was not yet the police, resumed their pose as total strangers who had all boarded the wrong train.

It was Arlyn Martin who first wanted to talk about it. She turned her emerald-cut eyes toward Doctor Kent, the cosmetologist, and said in a placid tone, though not with Darling elegance:

"I really didn't think you were that jealous of Harry. I mean, even if what people are saying is true it just . . ."

"Jealous? Me, jealous of Harry?" the doctor laughed sharply, thrusting his chin up in a gesture of defiance. "Harry and I started Darling products thirty years ago with a box of cornstarch and a seventy-five-cent ad in the hometown paper. Believe me, Miss Martin, I've made too much money since then to worry about which of us got the carpeted office and the fashion mag interviews!"

She smiled cunningly. "Why, Doctor Kent. I wasn't even talking about that."

Kent pulled a mashed cigarette from the inside pocket of his jacket, groped for a match, and then, before Clinton could thrust a lighter toward him, threw the cigarette to the floor. "All right," he said, glaring now at the pink-haired girl. "What does everybody say?"

But it was Madame Bricôt, from the Paris branch, who answered. Her vulture's eyes shot one surprising glance at the doctor. "You dislike Mad'moiselle Arlyn so," she rasped, "one naturally supposes you find her . . . too attractive?" She nodded to herself, the bristles on her lip twitching vigorously. "It is the way men act when they are still children."

Doctor Kent's stare had not wavered. "I might be horribly fascinated by a woman who uses poison, Madame. But not attracted, no."

The accusation left Arlyn Martin as untouched as the steel in a sword-swallower's throat.

"You're the one, Doctor Kent, who knows all about poisons. Why were you so anxious to come out of your laboratory tonight?"

He glanced over at Mrs. Brummer and smiled grimly. "Your subtlety, Miss Martin, is exceeded only by your understanding."

The widow put her hand up as though to silence him. Her voice

was low and tired: "If you must know I asked Doctor Kent to come."

"Forgive me for suggesting it, but did you also ask him to poison Harry?"

Señor Rubí looked up, eying the pink-haired girl with a shocked look on his face.

"I wanted him to keep an eye on you, Arlyn Martin." Mrs. Brummer sat up stiffly. "I know my husband had told you he was sick of your cheap, shameless chasing after him and I was afraid you'd do what you did even with Doctor Kent trying to watch out."

"That's not true. That's just not true!"

The two women snapped and backbit and I stood there wondering how Mrs. Brummer had got to the Fruit *Suprème* before Harry ate it.

Then Miss Martin was shrilling: "He was going to leave you, Gladys." Her Darling nose was shiny.

Miss Garfinkle, winner of the 'You Are My Darling Because' contest, brightened. "Mr. Brummer was going to divorce . . . uh . . . Mrs. Brummer. However, I think . . ." She looked around the room, blushingly appalled at her boldness. Madame Bricôt's mustache twitched disapproval.

Señor Rubí smiled at Miss Garfinkle. "What is it you think, Miss?"

The contest winner began in a strangled voice, "I think his fruit cup was poisoned by somebody in the kitchen of the hotel. Nobody from Darling's would . . ." She withered again, this time under the glassy stare of Señor Rubí.

Max cleared his throat. "The fruit was okay when it went on the table, Mr. Rubí."

"How do you know this?"

"I . . . I sampled it while I was . . ."

"Sampled it! You have dare to . . . Oh, you miserable wretch! For this you are fire."

"Just a couple of hunks of pineapple, Mr. Rubí. But I ain't dead, so it was okay, see? Sir?"

"S'okay, maybe." The boss eyed me as if I were a confederate, but I marched triumphantly to his desk and put the astringent sample on it.

"Remember," I asked, "what I phoned you about?"

He did. He opened the bottle of *So Refreshing!*, sniffed, and held it under my nose. Eucalyptus again.

I turned to Doctor Kent. "Does *So Refreshing!* contain anything lethal?"

"Phenol. But it isn't meant to be drunk. This is an astringent, not a dyspepsia cure."

Rubí's phone rang. "I don't . . . ah, my fren! You're looking well." He smiled cordially into the receiver. "So my work is no longer drum-drum, eh? *Si, si. La comedia de la muerta.* I come out and spoke at you . . . *si,* you wait."

He hung up and moved toward the door. He stopped, tapped Clinton's shoulder, and said, "Please, my secretory must have herself at her desk in case of the telephone."

He blinked at me and went out to the lobby to greet Lieutenant Oliveres.

Clinton, Head Fashion Consultant of the Darling School, stood up, leaned against the wall, and muttered vaguely. I sat down and promptly kicked off my shoes under the desk.

With a phenolic preparation in the party favors, it was anybody's game —at least, anyone who had sat next to Harry Brummer, which meant Arlyn Martin and Doctor Kent. But Kent could have been Mrs. Brummer's accomplice, the accessory before the fact.

And, since I was the one who had put the samples of *So Refreshing!* on the table, they could slap the same charge on me.

By the time Señor Rubí returned, I had mentally defended myself, wept for the jury, smiled bravely at the sentence, and got ten years off for good behavior.

The boss settled again at his desk and announced, "Lieutenant from the police have arrived and is looking now at the site of the crime. Then he comes in to question."

He leaned back in his chair. "The question is a big rigamaroo. If the party who has made this crime says a confession, we save a lot of time."

This optimistic suggestion was met by everyone's silence and no one's glance. The boss struck his temple with an index finger, his face glowing. "I think and think all this over and—Hold and Below! I know everyt'ing. So please to greet the Lieutenant with one big confession."

"Señor," Arlyn said with the cool detachment of a Univac, "You can get sued for saying things like that."

For answer, he picked up the bottle of *So Refreshing!* "Doctor Kent, you cook this formula? Put you an example: this bottle is pour on your food. You would eat?"

"Eat it? I'd bury it!"

"Also: when Meester die, you could smell he had eat this odor?"

Doctor Kent watched him keenly. "A distinctive odor, Señor Rubí, of phenol."

Rubí slammed the bottle on the table. "Fruit *Suprème au Kirsch* for Meester was poisoned with this smelly *Refreshment.* But please to see, Miss Garfungle, you have it reversed around. It was not poisoned in the kitchen, nor on the table, or my waiter Max, who like to sample —" Señor Rubí glared at poor Max "—he would drop dead, too. So when? So *after* the busboy is taken it to the Gold Room Annex—where Meeses Brummer waits!"

Gladys Brummer started to protest, but Clinton pulled himself out of his reverie and laughed. "It won't do, my good man. Either Doctor Kent or Miss Martin could have framed her that way."

"Doctor Kent has come never before to this function. How does he know about where we put first course *Suprème* dishes?"

"And Miss Martin? Why not her?"

Señor Rubí spread his hands.

"Same difference. This young lady arrive in my office twenty minutes before dinner is serve. Put down runway, she says. Put mike phone. Prepare *Suprème au Kirsch*. Sir, this thing you cannot do on so short notice. Mad'moiselle has misconviction how Catering Office is run. You think *she* knows where dishes go? Not on my life! Only Meeses Brummer out of these people knows. So it is Meeses Brummer who waits in the Gold Annex for the first course grapefruit dishes to be brought there from the tables."

Everybody looked at Mrs. Brummer. Mrs. Brummer stared back.

"I don't get it," Clinton persisted. "How could Mrs. Brummer possibly have poisoned Harry by putting the stuff in the fruit *after it left the table?*"

"Aha," Señor Rubí said. "To put the poison in the fruit after it left the table is not for to poison anybody. It is only for to make us think he was poisoned at the banquet—downstairs. Not so, Meeses Brummer?"

Gladys Brummer glared at us. "The man is out of his mind."

But Señor Rubí merely looked sad. "And to want to make us think Meester Brummer is poison by the fruit downstairs is surely because he is poison by something else upstairs? For example, the pitcher of martinis Meester order sent to his room before you come down to the banquet? And that Meester hold on to all the way downstairs so Meeses cannot get rid of the evidence? The pitcher of martinis that *you* take from *him* and Mees Willie take from you and give to a busboy? Not so, Meeses Brummer?"

The woman sprang across the room. She leaned over the desk toward the boss and shouted, "Talk, talk, talk! Where's your proof? If there's any phenol in that pitcher of martinis—*if*, I say!—it's all been poured down one of your filthy drains long ago!"

Señor Rubí moved his name plate cautiously out of her reach. "I must make you apology, Meeses." He averted his eyes. "With big excitements tonight, the staff are not so coefficient like they should be. The pitcher it is already in the hands of Lieutenant Oliveres."

EDITORS' FILE CARD

AUTHOR: **ARTHUR GORDON**

TITLE: ***The Mischief-Maker***

TYPE: Bedtime Story

LOCALE: A university town

TIME: The Present

COMMENTS: *The big, strong dog was an intruder that came between the Professor and his pretty wife; so the Professor took big, strong measures. But it is difficult to exorcize an ancient god.*

PROFESSOR STEPHEN BLAGDEN looked exactly what he was: an intellectual and sensitive man in his early thirties, handsome in a high-strung way. Some of his colleagues thought him a bit too high-strung for his own good. But they admired the intensity with which he worked. "Blagden's a useful type to have around," the Dean always said, making his little joke. "He's a man with a cast-iron conscience and a pretty wife."

One winter afternoon Professor Blagden sat at his desk watching this pretty wife of his. There was a mirror above the mantelpiece; she was doing something unnecessary and final to her hair. Firelight gilded her throat and made pools of shadow under her eyes. She was wearing a flaring black skirt and a white silk blouse. He said, mildly, "You're pretty dressed up for a faculty tea."

She laughed. "You don't want me to look like the other faculty wives, do you?"

"My emotions are mixed, I guess." He put down his red pencil and pushed aside the pile of themes. "I want you to look as beautiful as possible, but I don't want those old cats whispering about you any more than is necessary."

She gave a little shrug. "If I went around dressed like a nun, they'd still whisper. A once-divorced woman is a fallen woman in their eyes, you know."

"I know."

She turned from the mirror and picked up her coat. "I'll be back in an

hour or so. Sure you won't need the car?"

He indicated the pile of themes and shook his head.

His wife slipped her arms into the heavy fur coat. "Let Loki out after a while, will you, darling? He needs some exercise — you might let him chase a rabbit down by the lake, or something."

At the sound of his name the big dog in the corner got up, stretched his heavy body, and moved to the door. He sat down, looking back expectantly.

"Not now, boy," his mistress said. "Not with me. The Dean's wife wouldn't approve. Besides, you'd be dreadfully bored." She came over to where her husband was sitting and put her face down to be kissed. When she straightened up, she was frowning. "You used to do better than that."

"I know," he said. "I'm sorry."

"What is it, Steve? Have I done something wrong?"

"No." He stood up. "I just get — well, fed up this time of year."

She touched his cheek. "Spring will take care of that. It's not far off, now." She looked at her watch. "Heavens, I'll be late! Another black mark for Professor Blagden's wife." She knelt beside the dog, scratched behind the fringed ears. "Behave yourself, now, Loki." She closed her eyes and let the warm tongue caress her cheek and ear. The dog whined softly, and shivered.

The man watched them, his face tight and expressionless.

His wife stood up quickly. "Be good, you two." A blast of cold air swept in, then the door closed and she was gone.

Stephen Blagden sat motionless, watching the dog. Loki looked back at him steadily. There was no expression in the yellow eyes, no interest, no affection, nothing. They were empty, and when a dog's eyes are empty it is easy to imagine that they are full of contempt.

This was Linda's dog, not Stephen's. It had been given to her by her first husband, not long before the divorce. Given and then withdrawn. "It was all quite civilized," she had told Stephen, "except for Loki. You might have thought he was a child, the way we fought over him."

It was a battle, apparently, that Linda had lost. But one day, soon after Stephen brought her back from their honeymoon, Loki arrived. No message came with him — he just arrived. From Paul Shipley to Mrs. Stephen Blagden. Express, prepaid.

Paul Shipley. Stephen had never met him; he hoped he never would. Linda dismissed her first husband with astonishing casualness. "It was just one of those things," she said. "We were both too young to know what we were doing. He was the out-door type — good-looking, but oh so stupid! Just a big, strong, handsome animal."

Stephen had never forgotten that phrase. Every time he looked at Loki he remembered it.

It was absurd, he told himself a

thousand times, to be so sensitive, to let himself be tormented by an imagination that was much too vivid. Paul. Linda and Paul. It was past, it was over, it was done with. But the dog brought it to life again. Loki, the mischief-maker, the sower of discord among the gods: whoever chose that name had been wiser than he knew.

The dog came back to the fire and sat down. He yawned, letting his tongue curl up and forward, the tongue that had touched the hollow of Linda's throat, her cheek, her ear. Stephen knotted his fist slowly. Then he picked up his red pencil and turned back to the themes.

Almost at once he raised his head. Loki had dropped down in his corner. He never lay down quietly, this dog; he collapsed with a kind of muffled thud. It should have been a comfortable sound. It was not. For the man at the desk it awoke memories that were barely tolerable. The first night after Loki's arrival, for example . . .

They had gone up to their bedroom fairly early, the ardor and magic of their honeymoon still upon them. But almost at once he had heard it — the harsh, imperative scratching at the door. He had opened it, had felt the quick stroke of fur against his knees. Loki was in the room.

"Hi," he called to Linda. "The dog's come upstairs."

She came out of the bathroom in her nightdress. "That's all right." She sounded unconcerned. "He always slept beside my bed."

"I don't want him in here!" Stephen felt as if the words had been jolted out of him.

"Why not?" Linda kicked off her slippers. "He's well behaved. He doesn't snore, or anything."

Stephen said carefully, "I'd rather he stayed outside."

Linda flung back the covers and lay down on the bed. She let her hand trail over the edge; Loki went up and nuzzled it. "Don't be silly, darling — it's only an animal." She switched off the light.

Stephen made himself move forward and take his place beside her. Her shoulder touched his, warm in the darkness. Then he heard Loki lie down with that same thick, wadded sound, and something in him froze up tight and stayed that way . . .

The next night nothing was said, but the dog was excluded. When he came into the bedroom, Linda took him by the collar, led him out, and closed the door. But there were no other concessions. Loki slept each night just outside the bedroom door. Stephen found himself listening for that soft, boneless thump across the threshold, and sometimes, although the door was stout and well-fitting, he imagined he could hear the dog's heavy breathing.

When they went for afternoon walks — their chief diversion that iron-cold winter — Loki went with them. He fled across the crusted snow, nose down, alert for rabbits which he ferreted out and sometimes killed. Linda praised him for these

efforts and threw sticks for him to retrieve. He always brought them back to her, never to Stephen.

They discussed the dog just once. It was after one of those walks when Loki tracked wet snow across the carpet. He did it disdainfully, almost as if he despised the place and was glad to damage it. He shook himself, and a muddy spray spattered Stephen's big leather chair.

In the mirror Linda saw her husband's face. "You don't like Loki, do you?"

"No," he said, relieved to be saying it. "I don't."

"Why not? He's our dog, isn't he?"

"No," he said, "he's not ours."

"It's only because you won't let him be," she said sharply. "Why won't you?"

"You should know," he told her. *Oh, can't you see,* the anguished voice inside of him was crying silently, *can't you see why he was sent back? To be an intruder here, to torment us both, to destroy our happiness — if he can!* But he said none of this. He could not bring himself to mention Paul Shipley's name.

"All I know," Linda said coldly, "is that I'm not going to give in to unreasonableness. I like Loki, and he likes me. I'm going to keep him."

After that they spoke no more of Loki, but he was always there. Whenever he was left alone with Stephen, the dog always grew restless. This happened now. Loki got up, made an uneasy circuit of the room, and finally went upstairs. Stephen heard his claws scratch on the uncarpeted floor of the hall. Then all was quiet.

The man bent over the pile of themes, but seconds later a faint sound from overhead made him glance up. He spread his hands flat on the desk, listening. Then he went up the stairs two at a time. He was not mistaken. Loki was on the bed. He was lying on the side where Stephen slept, his head thrust forward onto Linda's pillow. His ears twitched when the man came in, but he did not move.

"Get off!" Stephen said in a whisper. He said it louder, "Get off of there!"

Still Loki did not move.

Stephen found himself shaking with a fine rapid tremor that seemed to come from outside of himself. He made himself stand still until it stopped. He went downstairs, found the dog's leash, took it back, and showed it to the springer. "Come on, Loki." His voice sounded hoarse, unnatural. "Let's go for a walk."

The dog raised his head, as if considering. Then he rolled over lazily, dropped to the floor, shook himself . . .

Outside, the late afternoon was dying. The light was a steely gray, the temperature was close to freezing. Stephen began to plod down the incline that led to the lake. He kept his head down, his hands jammed into his overcoat pockets. Once he stooped and picked up a short stick. As Loki swept by, he sent it skittering along the snow.

The dog stopped, surprised. This had never happened before. He hesitated, but the retrieving instinct was too strong. He charged the stick and brought it back. Twice more Stephen threw the stick; twice more it was returned.

By now they were at the edge of the lake. The light was fading; the naked trees were black against the greenish sky. Stephen stepped out onto the frozen surface; the ice supported him easily. He flung the stick, and again the dog retrieved it, a swift silhouette against the dead-white plane of the lake.

Stephen began to walk quickly along the shore. Loki followed close, snapping at the stick. He was excited; his tongue lolled, his yellow eyes gleamed. They came to the bridge that crossed a small dam. Here, when the sluiceways were open, a strong current swept into the lake under the ice. The ice often looked black and solid, but even in the coldest weather a semi-circle of red flags warned skaters away.

The sluiceways were open. Stephen stood still, listening to the hissing of the water. Then he flung the stick.

Loki bolted after it. Almost at once he realized his mistake and tried to stop, but his initial rush carried him thirty yards from shore. Legs braced, he skidded crazily. Then the black skim parted and the dog went in.

He was a powerful animal; he fought for several minutes in utter silence. Twice he got his forepaws on the ice, but he was too heavy; it kept breaking. In the end, the current triumphed. His head went under once and came back up. The second time it did not reappear.

Stephen realized suddenly that his hands and feet were numb. He turned and climbed the hill slowly; he felt drained, exhausted. But when he came to the house, a savage triumph took possession of him. He went inside; the room was peaceful, quiet. He took off his hat and overcoat, threw a log on the fire. The mirror over the mantel reflected his face in the flickering light. It looked normal, unchanged. He sat down at his desk, pulled the themes toward him, and began to correct them, his red pencil making quick, accurate marks. He kept his mind rigidly on the task in hand . . .

In 30 minutes he heard a car drive up. A moment later his wife came in. "Hi, darling."

He stood up slowly, smiling at her. "Have a good time?"

"Terrible, but I tried not to show it." She looked around. "Where's Loki? Out?"

He felt the fierce elation stir in him again. "Yes, he's out!" He crossed the room quickly and stood in front of her. He put his hands inside her coat; the silk blouse was soft and warm. He bent her head back and kissed her. The fire muttered in the quiet room. After a while he let her go.

"Why, Steve!" She looked pleased, excited. "That's like old times!"

He raised his head suddenly, eyes wide, nostrils flaring.

His wife stepped back a pace, startled. "Steve, what is it?"

He whirled around. In three strides he was at the door. He wrenched it open. Nothing — only the violet twilight with a few snowflakes eddying down. Nerves, he thought; it must have been a branch I heard, a branch scratching somewhere. But then it seemed to him that he felt a swift stroke of fur along his knees . . .

"Steve!" Linda's voice was sharp with anxiety. "What's the matter? What's wrong?"

He made a wild gesture commanding silence. "Listen!"

They stood there, tense, motionless.

"I don't hear anything," Linda said.

But *he* heard it: the wet, boneless thump in the corner, the soft, maddening, collapsing thud. Deep inside of him the laughter began to bubble, the laughter that would be wild and maniacal if he let it out. But he held it back, listening, *listening*, and at last he heard it: the heavy, rhythmical, animal breathing.

Then the laughter did burst from him like a black torrent, shriek upon shriek of it, shrill and inhuman. He did not hear his wife's frantic voice pleading with the telephone operator to summon a doctor. He did not even hear his own laughter. He only heard the hoarse heavy breathing, filling the quiet room, flooding the whole house, going on and on and on through the endless afternoon.

EDITORS' FILE CARD

AUTHOR: **FREDERICK NEBEL**

TITLE: ***That's Just Too Bad***

TYPE: Detective Story

DETECTIVE: Lieutenant Adler

LOCALE: A big city in the United States

TIME: The Present

COMMENTS: *One of Mr. Nebel's finest police stories—terse, emotional, tautly plotted—the* **Black Mask** *tradition in high gear, and always a wonderful change of pace.*

TWO YEARS MADE A LOT OF DIFFERence. "Like old times," Van Wert said ironically.

Remnants of sleep clung persistently to Malcolm Grove and he said, "Oh, sure—oh, sure," in a derisive voice. Two years ago he had been a bright young special prosecutor, investigating charges of corruption in the District Attorney's office, and with a great future before him. Now he was a run-of-the-mine attorney struggling to make a living.

"Well, maybe not exactly like old times," Van Wert said. "This time I'm asking the questions. Is it all right if we come in?"

Grove looked past the District Attorney at the two detectives standing in the corridor. One of them he recognized as Lieutenant Adler. "Hello, Lieutenant," he said and turned away from the door.

"Hate to wake you up like this," Van Wert said dryly.

Grove sat down and made no reply. He watched the two detectives wander into the bedroom, look in the bathroom, in the closet, under the bed. They returned to the living room, looked behind a sofa, then in the pantry. Adler, a blocky man with a swart, glum face, seemed embarrassed.

"All right, boys," Van Wert said. "You can wait downstairs."

Adler stood in the center of the floor and rubbed his jaw slowly.

"Downstairs," Van Wert said.

Adler gave him a blank stare, irritating in its length, then said, "Sorry to bother you, Mr. Grove," and took his time about joining his companion in the corridor.

Van Wert's eyes had been scouring the dark green carpet and now he bent down, picked up a piece of lint and deposited it in an ashtray. He was a tall man, thin and straight, with a stiff neck and sharp, satiric eyes. He was far different from the drawn, desperate District Attorney whom Malcolm Grove had known two years before.

"I suppose you're wondering," Van Wert said, "what I'm looking for." He sat down and opened a fresh pack of cigarettes, peeling off the cellophane, crumpling it into a shiny little ball which he dropped carefully into the waste-basket.

"Naturally," Grove said.

Van Wert held up the pack. "Smoke?"

Grove shook his head.

Van Wert lit a cigarette. "I'm looking for Julia Gifford," he said.

For the first time Grove gave him a direct look.

"Seen her recently?" Van Wert asked.

"All depends on what you mean by recently?"

"Oh, tonight. Yesterday."

"No."

"When last?"

"Probably a month ago."

Van Wert considered his cigarette. "Seen her ex-husband recently?"

"No."

"Did you know he was back in town?"

"No."

"Well, he is," Van Wert said, and drew on his cigarette. He let the smoke drift languidly from his thin nostrils. "In fact," he said, "he's dead."

Grove looked at him directly for the second time, and Van Wert was smiling coolly, the smoke drifting up past his bright, watchful eyes. Once, two years ago, Wesley Gifford had been dismissed from Grove's staff for drunkenness and incompetence.

"Always the little run-around first," Grove said.

"A man likes to break bad news gently."

"It's not bad news to me, Mr. District Attorney."

"Isn't it?" Van Wert asked in his bloodless, patient way. "I think it is. It ought to be. He was found dead in Julia Gifford's apartment."

Grove sat back, taking a deep slow breath, then holding it. He put his hands against his thighs, pressing a little, and felt his throat dry up. The shock showed on his big face only as a momentary flicker in his eyes—a flash of light gone instantly.

"What made you think she was here?" he said.

"She ran to you a couple of years ago one night, didn't she?"

Grove looked straight at him, unpleasantly. "Try keeping it clean, sweetheart," he said.

Van Wert was unperturbed. "You asked me something, didn't you?"

"Just keep it clean, is all."

Van Wert chuckled. "All right, counsellor. Anyhow"—he reached over and ground out his cigarette in the ashtray—"Wes Gifford was found dead in her apartment about two hours ago—about eleven thirty. An ice pick was sticking in his heart. People in the apartment upstairs heard a crash at eleven—it turned out to be dishes—but it took them twenty minutes to make up their minds that something might be wrong. They woke up the janitor and he found Gifford in the kitchenette. Adler and Petregalla went over and Adler phoned me at my place. One of the tenants on his way in around eleven bumped into Julia Gifford as she was going out. Everything clear now?"

Grove looked at him, then looked out the window, scowling. He could feel his heart thumping in his breast, high up, almost at his throat.

"Downstairs at the desk," Van Wert was saying, "they told me you came in at a quarter to eleven; so that lets you out. Do you know where Julia Gifford might be?"

Grove shook his head but did not turn his face from the window.

"Well, we'll pick her up in time," Van Wert said, and rose, buttoning his coat. He moved slowly, thoughtfully, to the door and opened it. "Better keep out of this," he said. "That little lady caused you one big headache. Better keep out of this."

Grove stood up, wheeling around. His face was dark, ugly.

Van Wert's voice was level: "I mean it. Shove your nose in something that doesn't concern you and you'll get bounced around. You tried to smear me once. That's something to remember."

He went out, slamming the door.

Half an hour later Grove walked into a diner, saw that it was ten past two by the clock above the counter, and ordered a cup of coffee. He drank it black, without sugar, his head lowered, his eyes fixed blankly on the white counter. Then he entered a telephone booth in the rear, closed the door, and tried to phone Julia's brother Eddie. When he could get no answer, he dialed another number.

His voice was laconic: "Grace, is Julia there?"

"Julia? Why, no. Who is this?"

"Mal."

"Why, no, Mal. How are you?"

"Look, Grace. Again—is Julia there?"

"Of course not. I said—"

"I know what you said. It's all right to speak. This is from a booth."

"Mal, I told you—I just said—"

"I'm coming out," he said and hung up.

The counterman said, "Stays cold, don't it?"

"It stays cold, all right," Grove replied.

He found a taxicab at the corner.

The ride, which carried him westward through the city, lasted as long as it took him to smoke three cigarettes. He got out in front of a two-storied brick house in which lights glowed, climbed broad steps to a large veranda, and rang the bell.

Grace Preston opened the door and he could tell by the look on her face that he had guessed right.

"Where is she?" he said.

"Mal, she—she didn't want me to tell you she was here."

"Where is she?"

She was in the living room, sitting in a wing chair beside a bridge lamp. Her face was white, it was entirely without color anywhere, and her eyes, after staring emptily at him for a moment, wandered away. Her skin looked translucent and seemed to reveal the shadowy bone structure of her face. Her hair, dark red, looked as if a gust of wind had struck it, blown it on one side and left it there, disheveled. Her hands lay quite still on the arms of the chair.

There was no haste about him, no panic, no breathless rush of words. He stood in the middle of the room, his hat still on, his hands lying heavily in his overcoat pockets. His face was a little drawn, but he was so preoccupied now with essentials that emotion found no surface in him. After a moment he stirred, took off his hat and overcoat and sat down.

Grace Preston was Julia's sister, older by several years. Her voice was hardly above a whisper when she said, "How—how did you find out?"

"Van Wert," Malcolm Grove's lips barely moved.

Julia, making no sound, covered her face with her hands.

Grace Preston sat down slowly, quietly, as if she were afraid of disturbing someone. "What did he say?"

Grove said, "A tenant saw Julia running out of the building about the time Wes was killed." He stood up, crossed the room, then braced an arm on the back of the chair Julia sat in. "Julia," he said.

She stared straight before her. "You shouldn't have come here, Mal. Stay out of this. I caused you enough grief once. Please go away."

"Listen, Julia."

"I don't want to. I don't want to talk about it. Oh, please," she said bleakly, "go away!"

The hopelessness of her voice shook him. He thought, "If you'd married me, if you'd buried the conviction that you ruined my career, all this would never have happened." Aloud he said, "There's no use talking like that, Julia. I won't go. That's a fact. Whatever he got, he deserved it."

He brought over a chair, placed it in front of her, and sat down. He took hold of her hands, pressing them reassuringly in his own. There was a calm, warm urgency in his eyes; and seeing it, feeling it envelop her, she pressed backward in her chair. A bitter smile twisted her lips.

"They'll come here," he said quietly, intimately. "You've got to ex-

pect that. But don't worry." He paused for a minute, then said, "Julia, did you let him in?"

She dropped her eyes and shook her head.

"How did he get in?"

"He must have had a key—from when we lived there."

"That's unlawful entry. What did he do, try to attack you?"

Her jaw shook, and with sudden terror in her eyes she jumped up and ran across the room. Grace stopped her, holding on grimly.

"Julia, please, please!" she begged.

"Let me go!" Julia cried. "I won't talk about it! I can't talk about it! Don't you see I *can't* talk about it?" She turned her wide, stricken gaze on Malcolm Grove. "Mal, please do what I asked you. Please don't get mixed up in this. It won't do any good. It can't do any good. I'm all right. I'll be all right. It was self-defense. He had no right to be there. He—"

Grove took her away from Grace, placing his hands on her shoulders. Then he put his arms around her and all at once she clung to him and he could feel the awful pounding of her heart and it melted him and he held her tightly, kissing the top of her head. Her breathless voice kept saying over and over again, in a hoarse whisper, "Oh, darling. Oh, darling . . ."

The ringing of the doorbell made Grove lift his eyes and at the same time he felt Julia draw away from him. Her wide stare struck across his face and then was fixed rigidly toward the front of the house. He reached out and took hold of her hand.

"Get it, Grace," he said.

Lieutenant Adler came into the room, a brown Homburg in his hand, his eyes grave and his broad, dark face half hidden by the upturned collar of his overcoat. He glanced at Grove without any change of expression, then addressed Julia:

"Mrs. Gifford?"

She was biting into her lower lip. She nodded.

"They want you over at police headquarters for questioning."

"I—I'll get my coat."

"Yes, ma'am."

Grove said, "Just for questioning, Lieutenant?"

"Just for questioning, Mr. Grove. We picked up her brother and he confessed he killed Gifford."

Grace Preston turned away, sobbing.

But Julia's eyes flashed. "He's a fool! He lied! *I* killed him! He broke into my apartment and *I* killed him!"

Adler stared gravely at her. "Did you black his eye first, Mrs. Gifford? Did you leave marks of blows on his jaw and on his cheek, Mrs. Gifford?" He walked over slowly, took her hands and gazed down moodily at them. "Not with these hands, Mrs. Gifford," he said.

She pulled her hands away violently and glared at Adler as though she were about to leap upon him.

"A reporter at the trial two years ago remembered your brother threatening to kill Gifford. Some memories some people have."

Her whole body trembled. "You'll see," she said grimly. "I know what I did."

"Sure, ma'am," Adler said understandingly. "The movie at that neighborhood picture theatre let out at exactly five *past* eleven, and the manager saw you go out then. The crash in your apartment was at eleven. It takes five minutes, about, to walk from the picture house to where you live. Will you get your coat, Mrs. Gifford?"

Grove took Julia into the library, to get her coat. She was dazed, bewildered.

"What happened?" he muttered.

"Ed came over to my place to use my typewriter for a thesis he was working on, so I went to the movies. When I came back"—she ran her hand slowly across the top of her head—"Wes was lying on the pantry floor, his eyes staring. Ed had gone. I ran out and tried to phone him. There was no answer." She turned and gripped Grove's arm. "Mal, I'd stand a better chance than he would, wouldn't I?"

"So that's what you thought?"

Adler led Malcolm Grove into a warm, dark brown office and said, "We can wait in here till the D.A. gets finished questioning her. Have a seat."

Grove sat down. He was deeply immersed in thought and reacted slowly to anything that did not bear a relation to what he was thinking about. "Thanks," he said, after a few moments.

The lieutenant removed his hat and overcoat and hung them up. From his pocket he took a scarred, big-bowled pipe and a tin of tobacco and while he loaded the pipe he glanced from time to time at Malcolm Grove. He lit up slowly, sat down in an oaken armchair and leaned back, his short thick bulk filling the chair. He puffed slowly, after the manner of a man savoring his smoke, and his small brown eyes seemed to find only two points of interest in the room—his pipe and Grove. At length he said:

"I was away two years ago when that trouble happened. Me and the missus. I came down with the flu, damned near died, and they gave me a furlough. Me and the missus went to Florida for two months. Nice place, Florida. Ever been there?"

Grove shook his head.

"The missus was kind of sorry when you got kicked out as special prosecutor. She never did have any use for the District Attorney's office, on account of she says we do all the work and they get all the credit. Women are funny. Take the young lady, for instance—trying to shield her brother. Of course, she ain't got a chance."

Grove stirred.

Adler held up his pipe and gazed at it. "Of course, the missus never

did think you and her were guilty of what—well, of what they said happened. I guess a lot of people wondered about that. Even about that picture."

Grove said, "There was nothing faked about the picture, but it didn't mean what it seemed to. You can tell Mrs. Adler that much, Lieutenant."

"I'll tell her what you said. What did happen, Mr. Grove? I think the missus would like to hear your angle."

"The missus or you, Lieutenant?"

Adler gazed at his pipe, then put it back in his mouth, turned to his desk and began reading a newspaper. Grove got up, crossed to the desk and leaned on it.

"I didn't mean it the way it sounded," he said.

Adler continued to concentrate on the newspaper.

Suddenly Grove struck the desk with his fist and said, "But for that —this business tonight wouldn't have happened! But for a dirty, jealous, rotten husband—"

"Take it easy, Mr. Grove."

"Take it easy!" Grove snarled. "He was a rat, I tell you. He questioned everything she did. Locked her out when he felt like it. Humiliated her constantly and made her life a hell. And you sit there and tell me to take it easy! He locked her out the night she came to my place and she came in the rain and was soaked to the skin and that's why she was found in pajamas and dressing gown. My sister's things, you understand, Lieutenant. My sister was living with me then and when Julia Gifford came over she came because she thought my sister was there, not me. I hardly knew her. But that night my sister was out to the theatre and a night club, and I told Julia Gifford to stay anyhow; my sister wouldn't be late. I left her in the living room and went back to bed. Later she woke me up tapping on the bedroom door and said someone was trying to get in the apartment. I woke up slowly, and I got up and went plowing into the living room in my pajamas and just then they got the door open. Julia Gifford was beside me—in a dressing gown. They had a flash camera."

"Some picture," Adler said, without levity. "And your sister wasn't back?"

"Not yet. Gifford, after he'd locked Julia out, went out himself, on the town. She'd told him where she was going—a thing he denied later. Anyhow, he happened to drop into the night club where my sister was having supper with friends. He saw her there, and got the idea. It was enough—the picture and the witnesses—to get him a divorce and to damned near break her heart with shame!"

Adler said, "And to cook your goose."

"Yes, and to cook my goose," Grove said. "A special prosecutor investigating charges of corruption in the District Attorney's office makes

a pretty picture when seen in pajamas beside another man's wife dressed the same way."

Adler nodded. "I remember they said you stood a good chance of being senator some day." He sighed and knocked out his pipe. "Too bad, too bad."

"It was only afterwards," Grove said, "that I got to know her, really." And he thought, "To love her, really." He stood up straight. "It certainly saved Van Wert's skin!" he said harshly.

Adler had no comment to make on that. "Well," he said, "I'll go see what's doing."

Julia's brother stood up when Grove entered the cell and said in a tired voice, "Hello, Mal."

"Hello, Eddie. I've got just ten minutes to talk to you. Sit down."

"How is Julia?"

"She's had a session with Van Wert. She's all right. They won't let her see you yet, though. I'm here as counsel."

"Thanks, Mal." Eddie sat down on the cot and put his elbows on his knees. He was a lanky youth and now he crouched over, his head hanging wearily between his shoulders. "What did Julia tell them?"

Grove sat down beside him, offered him a cigarette, and when he shook his head, lit one himself. "She decided not to say anything. First off, she said she did it."

"They told me she did it and they couldn't find her."

"They found her later. She'd run over to Grace's."

"They came to where I live and got me out of bed. They were looking for her. They said she did it."

Grove nodded. "Naturally, when she wasn't home, and when somebody saw her leave the building shortly after Gifford was killed. What did you say in the confession you made?"

"I don't remember. I guess I described how I did it. I remember they showed me the ice pick and I said, yes, that was it. Gifford came in and I told him to get out before Julia came back and he wouldn't. We fought and then I got hold of the ice pick and stabbed him. Then I got scared and ran out and walked all the way home, three miles. I guess it was something like that."

"Did he force his way in or did you let him in?"

"I—I let him in. Well, he knocked and I opened the door and there he was." Eddie rubbed his hand across his eyes. "Tell Julia not to worry. You mustn't let them hound her, Mal. I did it because he deserved it—tell them that. Don't let them try to hang it on her."

Grove said, "They gave that up, Eddie. There's evidence that she couldn't have done it, because at the time of the crime she was in the neighborhood movie theatre. That's why. What's the matter, Eddie?"

The boy's mouth hung open and he stared wild-eyed and unbelieving at Malcolm Grove.

"Eddie, what's wrong? What's the matter?"

"She—she *didn't* do it?"

"No, of course she didn't."

"Mal!" Eddie gripped him by the wrist. "Look, Mal. You're *sure* they said that? Mal, what did Julia tell you? You, I mean—not them."

"She didn't do it."

Eddie's jaw locked hard and his face was chalk-white. He stared fiercely at the wall of the cell and began shaking his head. "Mal, I didn't do it. I thought Julia—they said—"

"How did you skin your knuckles?"

Eddie looked at his knuckles. "They asked that too. On the walk home. I slipped on some ice and fell. My knee's skinned too. I did walk home, all right. I often do, nights when I use Julia's typewriter. With all the studying I do, it's the only exercise I get and—" He stood up abruptly. "That confession I made." He wheeled around. "Can they use it?"

"Yes, they can use it. Did they take pictures of your hands—your knuckles, I mean?"

Eddie nodded dumbly.

"Did anybody see you walking home?"

"Nobody I know. It was cold and I had my coat collar up. I didn't meet anyone or talk with anyone."

"What time did you leave Julia's?"

"Half-past ten. And I got home to my room at half-past eleven. I don't know what time it was when they woke me up and took me with them."

"Before two, anyhow, because I phoned you about that time and there was no answer."

Eddie said hollowly, "If it wasn't Julia and it wasn't me—" His voice caught in his throat and he turned slowly and looked at Malcolm Grove.

Grove was leaning back against the wall, his cigarette hanging motionless from his lips, his eyes drowsing behind half-open lids.

Eddie sat down beside him, laid a hand on his knee. "Mal."

"Yes?"

"Was it—was it?—"

"Me, Eddie?"

Eddie looked away.

Grove slapped him on the back and stood up. "Better get some sleep. I'll see you tomorrow."

Julia was waiting for him in the corridor. Without saying a word, he took her arm and they went outside and walked up the block to a taxi stand. Inside the cab, as it drove off, Grove closed both hands over one of Julia's.

"Yes, darling?" she said.

"He didn't kill Wes."

"Malcolm!"

"Sh! He didn't. You didn't. And I have an alibi."

She turned toward him in the darkness, taking her hand from between his and instantly gripping one of his hands between her own.

He shook his head. "No, don't think that. That's what Eddie thought. No, my alibi is sound because I didn't kill him."

Her body relaxed against his, her head on his shoulder. "Don't say things in a way to frighten me."

"I didn't mean to, Julia. But listen. After Wes divorced you, he went downhill faster than he'd gone before. He drank heavily, and you remember how he used to phone you and get maudlin. Before the year was out he was broke and he'd been thrown out of any number of places for drunkenness. Then he went away. Then he came back. He was away for a year, in all, as far as we know. At any rate, Adler said they found out that he checked into the Belvedere Hotel the day before yesterday. Listen. *You* didn't kill him. *I* didn't kill him. *Eddie* didn't kill him. When he did that rotten thing two years ago, all of us suffered. But one man didn't. One man gained. One man was saved from public disgrace."

"Van Wert."

He nodded.

"But no, Mal. It couldn't be. Oh, Mal, it couldn't—"

"It's been in the back of my mind these two years," he said grimly. "Where did Wes get the money to hit the primrose path the way he did after your divorce? Why did he go away for a year? Why did he come back to your place?"

She shook her head and held on to him. "No, no, Mal. You're letting your imagination run away with you. You forget that whatever Eddie told you, or whatever we believe, he's in jail. He made a confession to the police. He has no alibi."

Grove was silent. He put his arm around her and pulled her head down against his shoulder. He looked out the window and watched the street lights march by and knew he had no answer, no real answer, that might comfort her. He hoped that just holding her that way might help a little.

When he walked into the lobby of his hotel an hour later, two old men in overalls were mopping the tile floor. Lieutenant Adler was watching them with a glum, vacant expression.

"Hello, Mr. Grove," he said. "I thought you might be along."

"You get around, don't you, Lieutenant?"

"Oh, I get around all right. I just checked again with the clerk there about when you came in. The elevator boy too. Your alibi's okay."

"Thanks for reassuring me. Come up and have a drink."

Adler peered at him curiously for a moment, then said, "Well, sure. Wait till I make a phone call, will you? There's a booth right here. Excuse me."

Grove waited in front of the elevator and when Adler reappeared they went up to Grove's apartment. The lieutenant removed his hat and overcoat, saying placidly, "Keep your things on indoors and when you go out you get cold." Malcolm Grove brought out a bottle, a siphon, ice, and two glasses from the pantry.

"You saw the boy, all right?" Adler said.

"Yes."

"Fine looking boy."

"Pour your own, Lieutenant. This fizz all right?"

"Just the whiskey with a couple cubes of ice. Fizz gives me gas. Soon as I laid eyes on that young lady, I says to myself, 'No, sir, Henry, that young lady's no tramp.' Henry's my first name. Three cubes, thanks, that's enough."

Grove gave him a covert, measuring glance, then poured himself a drink and shot in some seltzer. "Do you take much stock in first impressions, Lieutenant?"

"A lot."

"What do you think of her brother?"

"Like I said, a fine looking boy. Lots of pride. Polite. Good, natural control. No black streak of anger in him—like there is in you, for instance. Offhand, just looking at him, I'd say he was the last person in the world to strike anybody, let alone kill him."

"Not like me, you mean."

Adler shrugged. "Oh, you'd kill a man, all right, if you got mad enough."

"I guess I could have got mad enough at Gifford, couldn't I?"

"All things considered, I'd say yes."

"Look," said Grove, an edge suddenly on his voice, "cut out the ring-around-the-rosy, Lieutenant. I asked you up here for a drink, not to horse around."

"See? Right away you get mad."

"All right, damn it, I get mad! I've been up all night and people I think a lot of are in trouble and I don't have to sit around here and listen to a lot of poppycock! Damn it to hell, if you're still playing around with the idea that I killed Gifford, get a warrant for my arrest, toss me in the clink, and then try to get me indicted. I repeat, *try* to get me indicted! And do you know what, Lieutenant?" he demanded. "Do you know why you're horsing around here? I'll tell you. Because you've found that there's a flaw somewhere in the case against the boy."

Adler scratched his chin. "That's no news to me, Mr. Grove. I never did think, now you bring it up, that he was guilty. He was too blamed anxious to write out that confession."

The door buzzer sounded and Adler said, "Probably the D.A."

"Van Wert? What's he want here?"

"I phoned him downstairs to stop by on his way home."

For a moment Grove's face looked almost malevolent. "You're cute, Lieutenant," he said ironically, and opened the door.

"Well," Van Wert said, coming in, "a little get-together. Been riding him, Adler?"

"We've been kind of discussing things," Adler said. "You know—off the record."

"That's nice, that's very nice," Van Wert said dryly. As he entered the

room, his eyes scanned the dark green carpet. He bent over, picked up a small particle that shone beneath the lights, said, "H'm, I was wondering where I'd broken my fingernail. Must have been when I was here before. It fits, see?" He carried the broken fragment across the room and placed it carefully in an ashtray.

"That's just too bad," said Adler.

"Ever since I was a boy," Van Wert explained, "I could never enter a room without looking for stray bits of lint, or paper, or whatever, and picking them up. Practically an obsession. What did you say, Lieutenant?"

"That's just too bad, I said, Mr. Van Wert."

"What's just too bad?"

"You said that was part of your fingernail, didn't you?"

Van Wert stared coldly at him. "You heard me, didn't you?"

"I wanted to be sure. Because I found that piece of broken fingernail in the kitchen in Mrs. Gifford's apartment and put it in the back of my watch case. Then when you came around there after I phoned you I noticed the way you got down on your hands and knees and swept up the floor with a dust brush, looking. You always keep your nails so nice, longer than most men, I couldn't help noticing later, at headquarters, that one of them was busted."

Van Wert wore a malicious grin as he extended his hands, palms down. "With these hands, I suppose, I blackened Gifford's eyes and put those other marks on his face!"

"No, I wouldn't say that. Because I had some X-rays made at the Morgue of his head. The dents in his forehead and on his jawbone were made by something sharper than knuckles. The head of the ice pick, I'd say. It fits the dents."

The grin faded slowly from Van Wert's lips and while he stood there, with the color draining from his face, Adler picked up the fragment of fingernail from the ashtray and said, "I dropped it on the rug here when me and Mr. Grove came up for a drink, counting on the way you look for specks on a carpet whenever you come in a room." He put the sliver of fingernail in the back of his watch case. "Well, Mr. Van Wert, I guess we might as well go back to headquarters."

Van Wert got control of his voice. "I never knew your imagination had such range, Lieutenant."

"I got no imagination, none at all. If you want to phone the fingerprint bureau, Mr. Van Wert, and ask whose fingerprints are on the face of Gifford's wrist watch, you can."

Van Wert's lips broke from their thin, satiric line, and his eyes shimmered. He walked slowly to the window, put his hands behind his back, and stared out. After a minute's silence he said in his bloodless voice:

"Will it be all right, Lieutenant, if I go home? You understand what I mean, of course."

"I understand. With me it'd be okay, Mr. Van Wert. But you forget there's a third party in the room."

Grove said, "He can go home, all right, if he first sits down at that desk and writes out what happened."

"Very well," said Van Wert, and he sat down at the desk and picked up a pen. As he wrote, he said, "Gifford came back for more money and I was unable to give him any. He threatened to tell his ex-wife what happened about two years ago. He went, I followed him, and nobody was home. He opened the door with a key he had kept and I found him in the apartment, waiting for her. You know what happened. When you fired Gifford from your staff two years ago, Grove, he came to my office looking for a job, saying that he knew you well and that, considering his wife and your sister were good friends, he had access to the apartment where you lived at that time. I engaged him—off the record, of course—and paid him out of my own pocket. One night he phoned me and I met him at a street corner and he said he knew for certain that his wife was alone in your apartment with you and how much would I pay, cash, if he got a couple of private cops, a camera, and broke in. You had me with my back against the wall, Grove. I offered him ten thousand. He wanted fifteen. I gave him fifteen."

He continued writing, the pen scratching swiftly across the paper. There was no other sound in the room. Then, abruptly, the scratching stopped, and Van Wert said, "Read it." He sat back, his arms out straight on the desk. He noticed a stray piece of thread on the sleeve of his overcoat, and pinching it between thumb and forefinger, he rolled it up and dropped it carefully into an ashtray.

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edited by ROBERT P. MILLS

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AB: *Anthony Boucher in the New York Times;* CC: *Curtis Casewit in the Denver Post;* SC: *Sergeant Cuff in The Saturday Review;* H-M: *Brett Halliday and Helen McCloy in the Fairfield County Fair;* LGO: *Lenore Glen Offord in the San Francisco Chronicle;* AdV: *Avis de Voto in the Boston Globe*

De Forbes's "So I Can Forget" is one of the twenty-three "first stories" which won special awards in EQMM's Twelfth Annual Contest. It is the sensitive probing into the mind of a sick child—a sad, imaginative, and in its own way, a poetic story . . . Perhaps you have already seen the author's name in other magazines. The explanation is simple: Mrs. De Forbes sold other stories after EQMM purchased her first, and those later stories were published before our Twelfth Contest was even closed. But "So I Can Forget" was the first story Mrs. De Forbes ever wrote—it was actually begun in her early teens when she first started writing.

Mrs. De Forbes is "over 21" (her own phrase), married nine "good years" (again her own phrase), has two children, and her husband is in advertising with the Boston "Herald Traveler." She wrote for the school newspaper in Wichita, Kansas, and after attending Oklahoma A. & M. for one year, she went to work for newspapers "all over the country." Her life is an extremely active one—homemaking, care of the children, Wellesley Players (little theater), Wellesley Community Chorus, and in spare time (hah!) she is a contract bridge fiend. And now may we quote one more sentence from the author's letter? "Even if no one thought I could write," she said, "I would go right on trying—I'm a very stubborn woman." Cheers!

SO I CAN FORGET

by DE FORBES

IT WAS TERRY WHO TRIED TO SET fire to the house, but it was Kevin who was blamed for it. Aunt Sally was distraught and after the excitement was over she called Doctor Foster to look at Kevin. Doctor Foster was kind and twinkly with Kevin. But he was solemn with Aunt Sally and afterward they all moved to a summer house by the sea.

It was a small, old house full of sunshine. Kevin liked the gleam of the polished pine walls and broad beam floors. Terry didn't care for it at all.

"It's a stinky old place," he told Kevin as they built improbable castles in the white sand. "I'd rather watch the cars and the people going down the streets. Here all you see is

sky and ocean"—he picked up a handful of sand and threw it at Kevin— "and wet soggy sand."

"But Doctor Foster says the seashore will make me strong."

Terry put a fist in Kevin's largest castle, reducing it to a shapeless mound. "If you had to be my twin I don't see why you couldn't be strong and tough. If you want to know the truth, you make me sick everytime you get that scared-to-death look. Like when I say . . . Van Reardon."

Kevin got up and went out on the rocks where he could see all the water there was to see. Terry was unkind to mention Van Reardon. Terry knew that Kevin was afraid of Van Reardon and when he was in his blacker moods he was careful to bring him up on the slightest pretext.

Kevin looked back but Terry had disappeared and so he carefully walked way out on the rocks, far out where the sand slid down to form a cliff and the foamy water pounded against bigger rocks at the bottom. It was fascinating to watch the pulse of the sea, beating, beating, beating like his own heart.

Suddenly he was afraid and without looking he knew that Terry was creeping up behind him, intent on sending him down into the strong surf where he would lie quietly while the sea moved him to and fro. He stood still, waiting for the push from behind, knowing as always that he was no match for Terry.

But a shout came over the rocks. It was his Uncle Bob. When Kevin looked around, Terry had escaped again and he stood alone on the craggy jetty.

"Kevin, come back! Come back at once." His Uncle Bob was trying to appear calm, but he was hurrying so that the sand seemed to be pulling him back. Kevin suddenly felt very weak. He got to his hands and knees and retraced his steps. When he reached the beach his Uncle helped him to his feet.

"You've been warned time and time again about going out on the jetty, Kevin. Why won't you listen to us?"

His Uncle's voice was cross but he was holding him tenderly. Kevin wanted to tell him about Terry and he knew he couldn't. It wasn't right to tell on someone else, even if the other person was to blame. It wasn't right to tell on anybody, Kevin knew that. So he merely put his head against Uncle Bob's chest and whispered that he was sorry, that he wouldn't go again.

He wished he could tell someone though. It was terrible to live with Terry and be afraid of him. But there was nothing he could do, nothing at all. He had to live with Terry. And as for retaliation, that was impossible. He had tried but Terry somehow anticipated every move and turned it against him.

After the episode on the rocks Terry appeared to have lost interest in him. Kevin was free to fish by

himself in the cove—catching nothing but enjoying himself just the same—and to read on the white sands with the sun sliding off the beach umbrella like hair from a head.

Aunt Sally was pleased. "Kevin, I do believe you've got some color in your cheeks. And you've gained a pound or two. Doctor Foster was right, Bob. The boy's beginning to bloom. A change of scene was just the thing he needed."

Uncle Bob looked him over. "You look fine, Kevin. Strong and fit. Do you feel strong enough to come out with me in the boat? We'll do some real fishing."

"Oh, Uncle Bob! I'll go get my reel." He upset his milk glass in his haste to be off. Aunt Sally put out an arm to stop him.

"Not so fast, young man. Do you think it's wise, Bob? Granted, he looks well, but he's still a weak boy. Suppose something should happen?"

Uncle Bob laughed. "Sally, you'll keep the boy an invalid forever. What could possibly happen? I'm a good sailor and the weather is ideal. Kevin knows enough to keep from tumbling over the side, don't you, Kevin?" He ruffled Kevin's hair affectionately.

"Yes, sir. Please, Aunt Sally. I'll be very careful."

She smiled. "All right. Run along and get your things."

He felt very confident. Terry wasn't going, he was sure. There had been no mention of it and Terry had gone off alone that morning, intent on some mysterious mission of his own. Without Terry along, Kevin knew he could manage to make Uncle Bob proud. Perhaps he'd even catch a fish!

But at the tool shed where the fishing tackle was kept, Terry sat before the door whittling on a piece of driftwood.

"Where are you going in such a rush?" Terry asked idly without looking up from the push, gouge, push, gouge, push of the knife on the wood.

Kevin stopped abruptly. Terry looked uninterested, polite. And yet the tool shed door was behind him. Kevin had to go past Terry to get his rod and reel.

"I'm going with Uncle Bob." He kept his voice quiet, ordinary.

Terry kept on whittling. "On the boat?"

"Yes, on the boat. You weren't invited." He was alarmed as soon as he'd said it. To tell Terry he wasn't invited almost amounted to a challenge. But still Terry didn't look up.

"Who said I wanted to go?" he asked mildly.

"I want to get my tackle out of the tool shed."

"Go ahead." Terry didn't move but he looked up now, his blue eyes wide and innocent, hiding something that lived far down inside.

Another test, thought Kevin. Another dare. He was tired of fighting things out with Terry, over and over again. But the peace of the past

weeks had given him courage. He moved toward Terry and the door. Terry watched him without expression.

They were almost toe to toe when Kevin stopped. "Move over and let me in."

Terry put down the piece of wood and carefully closed the knife, putting it in his pocket. "Make me," he said, and Kevin felt a cold flash of fear.

He took a step forward and then they were fighting, rolling in the sand. In the past it had only been a matter of minutes before Kevin had been beaten, but perhaps he was getting stronger. He felt a savage joy whenever his flailing fists came into contact with his adversary.

Terry seemed to sense a difference in him. He rolled away from Kevin and lay looking at him with impassive eyes. Kevin stood up, his fists clenched for a moment, then went into the tool shed and got his equipment. When he came out Terry had gone and Uncle Bob was coming down the steps to the shed.

"Ready, boy?" called Uncle Bob.

"Yes, sir!" he shouted, and bounded out to meet him.

The water was a beautiful blue and the cabin cruiser rode a gentle swell, its engine making motor music and leaving a V of white behind them. The sun had never been so bright nor so pleasingly warm. Kevin baited his hook and sent the line out into the water far behind the boat.

They went fishless in the deeper waters, but Uncle Bob put into a cosy cove where Kevin caught two flounders and was speechless with pleasure. They had lunch from the lunch basket and he ate every bite of his portion, a fact which seemed to delight his Uncle even more than the fish lying in their quiet pool of water, staring at them with two cold eyes on the upper sides of their flat heads.

Kevin even napped briefly in the afternoon, lulled by the soothing rhythm of the boat. On the way home he sang a sea song to the flying gulls—a chanty he had fashioned from the satisfying day. When he reached the dock and Uncle Bob was in the boat house, Terry appeared from behind the pilings.

"Van Reardon is here," he said and his eyes somehow reminded Kevin of the flounders'. "I sent for him." He scampered up the beach toward the house, doing little dance steps on the top of each dune.

Kevin put the fish, wrapped now in newspaper, on the wharf and wondered where to go. He couldn't see Van Reardon, wouldn't see Van Reardon. He should have known when he fought Terry that Terry would have his revenge. He had nearly forgotten Van Reardon, and Terry, choosing his sharpest barb, had brought him here.

Kevin heard Uncle Bob locking the boat house door. He must run now. He had only seconds, but he couldn't think where to go and he

stood, staring at an empty green bottle caught below, pushed by the tide against the rocks.

Uncle Bob picked up the fish and started up the path. "Come on, Kevin," he called over his shoulder. "Let's show off your catch." Kevin climbed off the wharf and threw the bottle out to sea.

"What's the matter, boy?"

"I can't go." He knew his voice sounded funny. He was afraid he was going to cry and he was much too big for that. Besides, Terry would know as soon as he saw him and nothing goaded Terry like tears. "I can't go. Let's go back out in the boat, Uncle Bob." He grabbed at his hand. "Please!"

"Kevin, we've got to go in. It's getting dark—it's almost dinner time and Aunt Sally will be getting worried. Come on. We'll go again."

He was looking at him hopefully. Kevin could read, under the concerned expression, the fear that Kevin was about to be ill again. Suddenly he saw how he loved them and that he must face Van Reardon for them—even though he knew from the beginning it was no use. He took his Uncle's hand.

"I'll come, Uncle Bob," and the words quivered. Together they went up through the sand to the house, Kevin's feet reluctantly taking the steps.

The lamps were lit and glowing through the windows. He couldn't see him yet, but he knew he was there. Terry had said so.

They went in through the kitchen, Uncle Bob still holding the package of fish. Kevin thought how strange they must look, standing still in their positions like a game of statues.

Aunt Sally's mouth smiled, but her fingers worried a button on her sweater. Doctor Foster was sitting in the wing chair. He was smiling, but the light on his glasses made his eyes look funny. Terry was half hidden behind the bookcase, smiling serenely like the minister when he came to tea. Kevin and Uncle Bob stood together, caught in their faded summer pants and slight sunburns, his Uncle holding the package of fish. And near the door in the shadows was Van Reardon. A ghost . . . becoming a man.

Everyone began to talk at once. Van Reardon's hands moved forward in a jerky gesture as though he expected Kevin to come to him. Kevin wanted to hide behind Uncle Bob, but Terry was watching his every move. Kevin stood his ground.

"Kevin," said Van Reardon as he came toward him, and his voice was sad. "I'm glad to see you. Aren't you glad to see me?"

He was almost up to Kevin now, looming larger and more real in the light of the lamps. The face Kevin remembered so well, the deep blue eyes, the dark hair with touches of white that had never been there before. And the hands lifted to him—the big strong hands with little curls of dark hair on the backs. Then Kevin could stand still no longer and

he retreated behind the sofa. He heard Terry laugh as Van Reardon stopped.

"It won't work," Van Reardon said hopelessly and went to look out the windows toward the black sea.

"Kevin," Doctor Foster moved from the wing chair to talk to him, "He's come back. Back for good. They found out that he was innocent, so he has come back. Can't you find it in your heart to forgive him?"

But all Kevin could find in his heart was, "No! No, never! I don't ever want to see him again."

Aunt Sally tried next. They were all against him.

"Darling, we know how upset you've been. That it made you ill. Things like that make even a grown-up person ill, it's too terrible for any of us. But we have to forget it and go on the best we can. Please, Kevin. You loved him once—remember?"

"No! I don't love him. I hate him."

Uncle Bob came forward and now they all stood looking at him and the very walls of the room were closing in.

"You warned me," said Van Reardon, "but I couldn't believe it. We were so close, the two of us. Kevin, why do you feel this way?"

Doctor Foster sighed. "Perhaps we're rushing it. Sally called and said he was so improved that I felt we could give it a try. But there's something . . ." He stopped in the middle of his sentence. "Kevin, is there something still bothering you? Something that you haven't told us? What is it? You can tell me."

Kevin was vaguely aware of Terry putting his finger to his lips.

"I can't tell you," said Kevin stubbornly. He couldn't accept this man as a friend or anything else. But he couldn't betray him either.

Van Reardon was speaking again.

"Kevin, you understand what being found innocent means? That means in the eyes of the law I didn't do it. Maybe you don't believe the law. Maybe you still think I killed her. I swear to you, Kevin, I didn't kill her. I swear to you."

The answering words came out before he knew it.

"But you did! I know you did! *I saw you kill my mother!*"

All of them, except Terry, looked elsewhere—as though they couldn't face him. Terry shook a fist and his eyes were ice. But Van Reardon looked back at Kevin quickly and his face was no longer defeated. There was hope there.

"You thought you saw me kill her —and yet you never told a soul? Kevin, oh, Kevin. What a burden for a child to carry. No wonder you couldn't stand it."

"I saw you." He was telling then and as the memory returned in its awful clarity, the sentences ran together until they were almost incoherent . . . His mother coming in from a party, a little unsteady on her feet. Van Reardon, half supporting her, leading her to the stairs. Van Reardon and his mother argu-

ing, their voices rising as they went up the stairway . . . Kevin had stood just inside the living room, watching and listening. With that terrible sadness growing inside him —hurting his chest, his throat, his head . . .

Then they were out of sight on the top landing, but the words came running down the stairs. She was screaming, "I know you've been unfaithful to me. I see you looking at them everytime we go out. The women—any woman!"

Then Van Reardon said, "Leora, you know that's a lie. You always imagine the worst."

"Imagine, do I? I imagine that you'd give anything to have me out of the way. Don't think for a minute it would be so easy. There's the kid, you know. You'd miss him, wouldn't you? If I took him where you'd never see him again, maybe you'd think twice about getting rid of a tiresome woman."

"Leora, keep your voice down, He'll hear you."

"Oh, sure—Leora is loud, Leora is demanding, Leora has no manners. Leora can't do anything right."

"My God, are you on that theme again? I've told you a thousand times that your inferiority complex is pure nonsense. Now go on to bed. We can fight this out some other time."

"Take your patronizing hands off me! And that look off your face! You're so sanctimonious you make me sick."

"All right, I make you sick." Kevin knew they were almost through. He had heard the arguments so often. He recognized the pattern.

"Go to bed, please. We'll iron our problems out tomorrow."

"Stop babying me! And I told you to get that smug look off your face. Get it off or I'll slap it off for you!" There were a few rapid footsteps and Van Reardon called her name in anger. To Kevin, listening below, it was all mixed up with the scream and the sight of his mother's body falling, hitting a step, bouncing, and falling again, until she lay at last quite still at the bottom, her beautiful hair hiding her face.

Kevin had run then and hidden in the cellar where they found him hours later. It was a long time before he remembered anything other than a shriek and a body falling . . .

Van Reardon had turned his face back to Kevin.

"Kevin, I swear to you that I didn't push her. She was upset—terribly upset—and she fell. All those things she said . . . none of them were true. She was an unhappy woman, Kevin. You're too young to understand but things had not turned out for her as she had hoped they would. She had to take her disappointment out on somebody and it happened to be me. She rushed toward me and instinctively I moved aside. Then she fell. As God is my judge, she fell." He sat down, heavily, and covered his face with his hands. Aunt Sally was crying and

Uncle Bob crossed over and put his hand briefly on Van Reardon's shoulder. Then he said, "Kevin, she was my sister, but I swear everything he says is true."

"Kevin," said Aunt Sally, "above everything else in this world he wants you to understand. He loves you."

Kevin looked at Terry who had retreated into the darkness. He could see only his dim form and the angry glitter of his eyes. He doesn't want me to believe them, thought Kevin.

He wants me to hate—forever. Then he'll be able to make me do as he likes—forever. But I want to believe. I must believe, so I can get well, so I can forget.

And suddenly he was across the room, down on his knees before Van Reardon, his head in his lap, crying, "Father, Father!"

His father reached down and patted his head, then picked him up and held him as though he were a baby. After a while Kevin looked for Terry. He was gone—forever.

EDITORS' FILE CARD

AUTHOR: **CYRIL HARE**

TITLE: ***The Unluckiest Murderer***

TYPE: Crime Story

LOCALE: London

TIME: The Present

COMMENTS: *Join a criminologist, an official of Scotland Yard, and assorted guests in the smoking-room of an exclusive London club, and hear the strange tale of a murderer's strange luck . . .*

EVERYBODY WHO KNOWS LONDON knows the Progress Club. It is one of the most impressive buildings in Pall Mall, and every line of its architecture proclaims that for the best people Progress stopped in 1850 or thereabouts. I am not a member, but my friend Prothero is, and I was his guest there at dinner recently.

Prothero likes to call himself a "criminologist." Murder is his hobby, and I have long since lost count of the famous crimes which he has "written up." I was not surprised, therefore, that among the friends of his who joined us in the smoking-room after dinner was a rather exalted official at Scotland Yard, by the name of Wrestall.

Over our coffee and liqueurs Wrestall happened to ask me whether I had been in the club before.

"Yes," I told him, "but not for several years. I remember that the last time I was here the member who entertained me was Sylvester Kemball."

It was not a very tactful remark, seeing that Kemball had quite recently been hanged for murdering his wife. But my companions took it in good part.

"I have always thought," said Prothero, rather pontifically, "that the Kemball case was one of the most successful examples of modern detective methods. It was a great triumph for our police organization —and for you personally, Wrestall."

"If you say so," said Wrestall modestly. "But, as a matter of fact, it was only by the merest stroke of luck that we obtained the evidence to bring it home to him."

"Luck!" said Prothero. "When you come to think of it, it is astonishing how often the most astute and careful criminal is defeated by some quite unforeseen accident—often by an extravagantly unlikely event which he could not possibly have guarded against. Take the Abertillery murder, for example..."

But we never took the Abertillery murder. A man in the far corner of our group interrupted without ceremony. "The unluckiest murderer within my recollection," he said, "was Anthony Edward Fitzpatrick Pugh."

Everybody turned to look at him. He was not much to look at—a small, insignificant fellow with a disagreeably complacent expression. I recollected that his name was Hobson and that, like myself, he was present as the guest of a member.

"Pugh?" Prothero easily contrived to make the name sound insulting. "I think I am tolerably well acquainted with every crime of any significance during the last century and a half, and I have never come across the name before. Wrestall, are you familiar with the case of the homicidal Mr. Pugh?"

Wrestall shook his head.

"You see, Mr. Hobson," Prothero went on. "You appear to be the possessor of knowledge unknown even to Scotland Yard. I hesitate to make the suggestion, but are you quite sure of your facts?"

"Perfectly. Would you care to hear them?"

"We are all ears." Prothero settled himself in his chair with an indulgent smile.

"It's a very simple story, really," said Hobson, "and I only mention it because whenever the subject of bad luck comes up, it always brings Pugh to my mind. Mind you, he deserved his bad luck, as people generally do.

"He was a disagreeable type, selfish and greedy as they make them. His bad luck began when he entrusted practically the whole of the fortune he had inherited from his parents to a get-rich-quick schemer in the City. He should have known better, of course, but there it was. He lost the lot. Then he brought an action to recover his money. He secured a judgment quite easily. Ten thousand pounds and costs. But it's one thing to get a decision from the courts and quite another to make it effective, as Pugh found out.

"His lawyers went through the usual motions, of course, which added quite a tidy figure to the costs Pugh eventually had to pay. It was no good. Their man went gracefully and artistically bankrupt. Pugh could whistle for his money—it simply wasn't there.

"What made things still more aggravating for him, destitution didn't seem to make the slightest difference

to the debtor's style of living. He lived on his comfortable estate in Sussex. He continued to travel up to London every day with a reserved seat in a first-class smoker, and the porters touched their caps to him. Poor Pugh lived in the same neighborhood and caught the same train, traveling third-class nonsmoker, thinking about his ten thousand pounds every mile of the way.

"The secret of the happy bankrupt's prosperity, of course, was that he, personally, never owned anything. Every stick and stone of the Sussex mansion, the pedigreed Jerseys in the park, the racehorses in the stables, the money that paid the servants' wages and the butcher's bills and the first-class fares to London was the sole, separate property of his wife—who was, incidentally, a very attractive, good-natured woman, and much too good for her scamp of a husband.

"That daily encounter on the railway station platform made Pugh feel positively murderous. One could hardly have blamed him if one fine morning he slaughtered the man out of hand. But Pugh wasn't that sort. Money was what he cared about—not revenge. Killing his debtor wouldn't have got his ten thousand back. What he wanted was to find some means of putting money into his debtor's pocket, where Pugh could then get at it.

"He thought the matter over in his cold-blooded way, and hit upon a very simple, logical solution. The fellow had made his property over to his wife. Pugh proposed to reverse the process. He could be fairly certain that in such a set-up the lady would have made a will leaving everything to her husband. He had only to put her out of the way, and there would be more than enough money in the husband's hands to satisfy his just claim. That was his calculation, and, as it turned out, he was dead right.

"Once having made up his mind to commit the murder, he carried it out with great simplicity and ease. He discovered by observation that his intended victim was in the habit of driving herself into Worthing every day. To get to the main road she had to go through a gate across the drive which was kept shut on account of the cows.

"Pugh concealed himself behind a hedge at that point, waited till she came along, and then shot her through the head at close range as she got out of the car to open the gate. He used an old German pistol he had picked up years before. Then he walked quietly away, leaving the pistol. He saw no reason why anyone should connect him with a woman to whom he had never even spoken in his life. And, indeed, there was none."

"Then how was he convicted?" asked Prothero.

"He wasn't," Hobson replied. "I never said that he was. I merely said that he was the unluckiest murderer within my recollection, and that was

strictly true. You see, although he had been absolutely right in his calculations and completely successful in his crime, he never got his ten thousand pounds.

"Pugh had been so careful to avoid being suspected himself that it had never occurred to him to wonder who would be likely to be accused of the crime in his place. But of course when a rich woman with a penniless husband is murdered, there is one obvious person for the police to pick on, if you don't mind my putting it that way, Mr. Wrestall. If Pugh had thought the matter out a little more carefully, he would have seen that this was also the one person he couldn't afford to have convicted.

"When the authorities began to look into the case against the husband, Pugh's bad luck started to operate in earnest. It turned out that the couple had had a flaming row that very morning and that the wife was actually on her way to see her lawyer about making a new will at the very moment she was killed.

"It turned out, further, that the pistol Pugh used was the dead spit of one owned by the accused and—so he said—lost by him only a week or two before. That made quite a sizable case against him, but the crucial piece of evidence arose from the unlikeliest stroke of luck you could imagine.

"A witness was found to prove that the husband was near the scene of the crime within ten minutes or so of the critical moment. He was the prisoner's gardener, and he had no business to be there at all at that hour. His presence was due solely to the fact that his wife had scalded herself by upsetting a kettle and he was on his way to telephone for the doctor. Result: The alibi which the defense tried to set up was blown to bits, and the husband was hanged.

"His conviction, of course, deprived him of all rights in the deceased's estate and he died as penniless as he had lived. You may say, then, that Pugh lost ten thousand pounds just because a gardener's wife was a bit clumsy taking a kettle off the hob. Oh, he was unlucky all right! So, when you come to think of it, was the chap who was convicted."

There was a long pause, and then Hobson's host said, "Where is Pugh now? I've an idea our friend Wrestall might be interested in a little talk with him."

"Oh, he's past all that," Hobson said. "Pugh killed himself six months after the unfortunate ending of the trial. Not from any remorse, you understand. The thought that now he never *could* get his ten thousand pounds drove him to desperation."

"By the way," Prothero said, "what was the husband's name? I don't think you mentioned it."

Hobson didn't seem to hear the question. He was looking at his

watch. "Heavens! I'd no idea it was so late!" he exclaimed. "I've a train to catch at Victoria. Do you mind if I rush away now, old man?"

His departure broke up the party and as I am not fond of late hours, I took the opportunity to thank Prothero for a pleasant evening and made my way out. As I went, I caught sight of Wrestall, looking, it seemed to me, distinctly thoughtful.

I found Hobson just outside the club, hunting for a taxi. As I may have indicated, I had not taken to the man very much, but I had my car round the corner and Victoria Station was on my way home, so it seemed only decent to offer him a lift.

"I suppose the husband in your story was Sylvester Kemball?" I asked, as we took the corner by Marlborough House.

"Oh, yes," said Hobson complacently.

"And his execution was a complete miscarriage of justice! How horrible!"

"Oh, you needn't waste any pity on *him*. He deserved all he got. His treatment of his wife alone merited hanging."

"You seem to know a lot about him," I observed.

"Well, she was my aunt. The only relation I had in the world."

I said no more until we were passing Buckingham Palace.

"When did you come to learn the truth?"

"About halfway through Kemball's trial," said Hobson calmly. "I knew Pugh fairly well, and I used to discuss the evidence with him. One evening we were dining together and he got a bit tight. He let something slip out that he hadn't meant to say, and I broke him down. He told me the whole story."

"What on earth did you do?"

"Nothing at all. I looked at it this way: Kemball was every bit as bad as a murderer. I think he would probably have killed my aunt anyway, if Pugh hadn't got in first. And hanging Pugh wouldn't have done her any good. Besides, I couldn't afford to see him hanged."

"What do you mean?" Thank heaven, Victoria was just ahead. I could hardly bear the man's presence any longer.

"Well, I was a poor man and I was my aunt's next of kin. If Kemball was acquitted, it meant that her will leaving everything to him would stand. But if he was convicted, I scooped the pool. I am sure my dear aunt would have preferred to have it that way."

I stopped the car with a quite unnecessary jerk. Hobson got out.

"Thanks for the lift," he said. "Perhaps I shall see you again some day. I'm putting up for election to the Progress, by the way."

I wondered, as I drove home, whether I ought to warn Prothero about this candidate for his club. I decided not to do so. After all, I am not a member.

EDITORS' FILE CARD

AUTHOR: **JOHN STEINBECK**

TITLE: ***The Crapshooter***

TYPE: Gambling Story

PROTAGONIST: G.I. Eddie

LOCALE: Somewhere in the Pacific

TIME: During World War II

COMMENTS: *One of America's greatest living authors tells the story of a G.I. crapshooter who was particularly hot on Sundays—with the whole ship's money on the line!*

THIS IS ONE OF MULLIGAN'S LIES and it concerns a personality named Eddie. Mulligan has soldiered with Eddie and knows him well. Gradually it becomes apparent that Mulligan has soldiered with nearly everyone of importance.

At any rate, this Eddie was a crapshooter, but of such a saintly character that his integrity in the use of the dice was never questioned. Eddie was just lucky, so lucky that he could flop the dice against the wall and bounce them halfway across the barracks floor on a Sunday and still make a natural.

From performances like this the suspicion grew that Eddie had the ear of some force a little more than human. Eddie, over a period of a year or two, became a rich and happy man, not so lucky in love, but you can't have everything. It was Eddie's contention that the dice could get him a woman any time, but he never saw a woman who could make him roll naturals. Sour grapes though this may have been, Eddie abided by it.

Came the time finally when Eddie and his regiment were put on board a ship and started off for X. It wasn't a very large ship, and it was very crowded. Decks and staterooms and alleys, all crowded. And it just happened that the ship sailed within reasonable time of pay day.

That first day there were at least

200 crap games on the deck, and while Eddie got into one, he did it listlessly, just to keep his hand in, and not to tire himself, because he knew that the important stuff was coming later. Between the chicken games Eddie moped about and did a good deed or two to get himself into a state of grace he knew was necessary later. He helped to carry a "B" bag for a slightly tipsy G.I. and reluctantly accepted a pint of bourbon, which canceled out the good deed to Eddie's way of thinking. He wrote a letter to his wife, whom he hadn't seen for twelve years, and would have posted it if he could ever have found a stamp.

Occasionally he drifted back to the deck and got into a small game to keep his wrist limber and his head clear, but he didn't have to. Eddie had a roll. He didn't have to build up a bank in the preliminaries. He steered clear of spectacular play for two reasons. First, it was a waste of time. It was just as well to let the money get into a few hands before he exerted himself, and second, Eddie, at a time like this, preferred a kind of obscurity and anonymity. There was another reason too. The ship sailed on Tuesday and Eddie was waiting for Sunday, because he was particularly hot on Sundays, a fact he attributed to a clean and disinterested way of life. Once on a Sunday—and, understand, this is Mulligan's story—Eddie had won a small steam roller from a road gang in New Mexico, and on another Sunday Eddie had cleaned out a whole camp meeting, and in humility had devoted ten per cent of his winnings to charity.

As the week went on, the games began to fade out. There were fewer games and the stakes were larger. On Saturday there were only four good ones going, and at this time Eddie began to take interest. He played listlessly Saturday morning, but in the afternoon became more active and wiped out two of the games because his time was getting short and he didn't want too many games going the next day.

At ten o'clock the next day Eddie appeared on the deck clean and combed and modest and bulging at the pockets of his field jacket. The game was going, but there were only three players in it. Eddie said innocently, "Mind if I get in for a pass or two?" The three players scrutinized him cynically. A Pole with one blue eye and one brown eye spoke roughly to him, "Froggy skins it takes, soldier," he said, "not is playing peanuts."

Eddie delicately exposed the butt end of a bank that looked like a rolled roast for a large supper. The Pole sighed with happiness, and the other two, who were remarkable and successful for no other reason than that they could disappear in a crowd, rubbed their hands involuntarily, as though to keep their fingers warm. Eddie concealed his poke as modestly as a young woman adjusts the straps of an evening gown that has

no straps. He kneeled down beside the blanket and said, "What about is the tariff?" A wall of spectators closed behind him.

Eddie faded thirty of a hundred. The Pole rolled and won and let it lie, and Eddie took a hundred of the two hundred and the Pole shot a six and made it. Behind the dense circle of spectators running feet could be heard. This was to be a game. The ship took a slight list as G.I.'s ran from all over just to be near a game like this, even if they couldn't see it.

The four hundred lay on the blanket like a large salad. The two disappearing men looked at Eddie, and Eddie went into his roll and undid four hundred in small bills and laid them timidly out. This Pole glared at him with his brown eye, and smiled at him with his blue eye, a trick which served him very well in poker, but had little effect on a crap game. He breathed on the dice and didn't speak to them. He rolled an eight and smiled with both his eyes. Again he breathed on the dice and cast them back-handed to show how easy that point was, and a four and a three looked up at him.

Eddie, breathing easily, relaxed and sure, pulled the big green salad gently to his side of the blanket. He unrolled two hundred more from his roll like toilet tissue, and laid them down. "One grand," he said, "all or part."

The Pole took half and the two anonymous men split up the rest, and Eddie rolled a rocking chair natural, a six and a five. "Leaving it lay," he said softly.

Only the Pole listened to him. He picked up the dice and looked them over carefully to be sure they were the ones he had put in himself. And then, scowling with both eyes, he covered Eddie. The pile of money was ten inches high now, and spilling down like a loose haycock.

Eddie hummed a little to himself as he rolled and a seven settled firmly. The Pole snorted. Eddie said, "And leaving that lay, all or part, anybody." Breathing had stopped on the ship, only the engines went on. Mouths were open. Figures were frozen in the dense crowd about the blanket.

Scowling at Eddie, the Pole scraped bottom. A whole week of very tiring play for the Pole lay on the blanket, and the pot was set. Eddie was magnificent. He moved easily. He did not shake or rattle the dice or speak to them or beseech them. He simply rolled them out with childlike faith. For a long moment he stared uncomprehendingly at the snake eyes that stared back at him. And then his expression changed to one of horror. "No," he said, "somepins wrong. I win on Sunday, always win on Sunday."

A sergeant shuffled his feet uneasily. "Mister," he said, "Mister, you see, it ain't Sunday. We've went and crossed the date line. We lost Sunday."

Anyway, it's one of Mulligan's lies.

EDITORS' FILE CARD

AUTHOR: **WILLIAM CAMPBELL GAULT**

TITLE: ***Don't Crowd Your Luck***

TYPE: Private Eye—à la **Black Mask**

DETECTIVE: Joe Puma

LOCALE: Beverly Hills, California

TIME: The Present

COMMENTS: *All we are going to do editorially about this story is to ask you one question: What can trouble a man who has just married an attractive widow worth $82,000,000?*

HE LOOKED LIKE AN HONEST man. His tailoring didn't match his face; the tailoring looked expensive. His face matched one I'd seen in the public prints quite often, I was sure, but my memory wouldn't bring up the name.

He said, "What am I? A fair-to-middling mechanic and a first-rate lube man and all right on the drive, too. But this new life, frankly, has me beat, Mr. Puma."

"New life?" I asked.

"That's right. Don't you know who I am?"

"Your face is familiar," I admitted, "but I've been trying to remember why, Mr. Hogue. Do you have another name?"

He shook his head. "The face should be familiar; it's the same face Randall Crowther had forty years ago."

"That's it," I said. "Hell, yes." And then it hit me. Hogue, Hogue, . . . I said, "You married his widow."

"Crowther left her eighty-two million. Wouldn't you marry her?"

I smiled. "You beat me to it, Mr. Hogue. Now tell me what can trouble a man who has just married an attractive widow with eighty-two million dollars."

"Her friends," he said. "And she's not as attractive as she was in the old days."

In the old days she'd been a child star. She would be about 40 now, and Crowther had been 76 when he died. Hogue had run a service station near one of their mountain re-

treats, I now remembered. The papers hadn't played up the resemblance; this new marriage was supposed to have been love, love, love . . .

I said, "You're not considering divorce, Mr. Hogue? I don't handle divorce work."

He looked at me bleakly. "Divorce? Seventeen years I pumped gas and salted away twelve hundred bucks. Now I marry a woman with millions. Divorce?"

"I guess I wasn't very bright. Why are you here?"

"Because I heard you were an honest man. That's not a real standard thing in your trade, is it?"

"Not at my level. But the big agencies are fairly honest."

"I tried one," he said. "They looked too smooth and slick for me. I'm a plain man, Mr. Puma."

"I see. Who recommended me?"

"Art Morley. He works in that auto-body shop on Lincoln Boulevard."

"Oh, yes. And why do you need a private investigator?"

He looked at the top of my desk. "Maybe I don't. Some things have happened, but they could be just gags. Maybe it's just a—well, a feeling I have."

"Mmm-hmm. Could it be a feeling of insecurity? I mean, you never had quite this much to lose before, did you?"

"I never had anything to lose. No, it's got nothing to do with that. Matter of fact, here's a sample of what's been happening." He reached into an inner jacket pocket and brought out an envelope. He threw it on my desk.

It was a Beverly Hills postmark four days old. There was a typed note inside. I read:

Rube:
Why don't you get out while you're still in one piece? Don't crowd your luck.

The note was unsigned. I said, "Have you shown this to the police?"

He shook his head. "I don't want no publicity. We've had too much already."

"At your new level," I suggested, "the police can be very discreet."

He shook his head and said nothing.

I asked, "Does anyone you know call you 'Rube'?"

"Not to my face. And here's something else: we got a post office box and an unlisted phone number. How'd this character know where to send that letter?"

"There are people," I told him, "who specialize in unlisted phone numbers and addresses. Did you get any threats by phone?"

"Two. Sounded like a man's voice, but I couldn't even be sure of that."

"And you want me to investigate?"

"How could you? A one-man office—where would you begin? No,

I figured you ought to move in with us. Not as a private eye, of course. You could be an old buddy, a guy I went to high school with back in Eau Claire."

"I see," I said, though I didn't. "Would your wife approve of that, do you think?"

He looked at me steadily. "I wear the pants in the house."

Well, a bodyguard. . . . Behind me, a shade flapped gently in the afternoon breeze from the ocean. A service station operator who'd looked like a former husband and the widow had fallen for him. Luckily, she was a *rich* widow. But I liked this George Hogue; he was a plain man, like I am.

"What are you thinking about?" he asked. "You afraid my credit's no good?" He smiled.

I smiled, too. "No, I was trying to look honest, as though I was trying to arrive at a fair price. But I'll probably soak you."

"No, you won't," he said. "Art told me you were a straight guy. He thinks a lot of you, Mr. Puma."

"I kept him out of jail. Well, all right, Mr. Hogue. Seventy-two dollars a day should handle it."

"That's a pretty good hourly rate," he said.

"Not for twenty-four hours. And not in Beverly Hills."

He chuckled. "I guess you're right at that. They sure put it on around here, don't they?"

"Without even knowing it," I said. "I'll go home and get some clothes."

It wasn't too big a house for this little village—about five or six bathrooms and as many bedrooms, and a living-room not much larger than the Coliseum. George had introduced me under my real name as his old deer-hunting buddy from Eau Claire and the maid had shown me to my room, which flanked the bridal chambers.

Linda Hogue was obviously beyond her child-star days, but a very attractive woman for all that. The late and apparently unlamented Randall Crowther had been from Texas and in oil. There was a possibility he had been as rough a diamond as her current master and that might explain the warmth of her reception for that old deer-hunting buddy, Joe Puma.

I have never been to Eau Claire, but a hell of a lot of rubes come out of Texas.

I was sitting near the window, estimating the acreage below, when there was a knock at the door.

I said, "Come in," and Linda Hogue came in.

She was smiling as she said, "You're not from Eau Claire."

"I could easily be."

She nodded. "But you're not. You've done some work for Anthony Ellers, haven't you?"

Anthony Ellers was a lawyer who got a lot of the carriage trade. I said nothing.

Linda Hogue came over to sit in a chair nearby. "What's bothering George?"

"I'm not sure. It could be the eighty-two million dollars."

She sighed. "That was a newspaper figure, a *Los Angeles* newspaper figure. There's about three million in the whole estate—if it's properly disposed of."

I still said nothing.

She said, "I love him. I love him very much. He's a sincere and honest man. Why are you here?"

"I'd prefer that you asked your husband that."

"I will. I suppose, to maintain the illusion, I had better call you 'Joe'."

"I suppose," I said. "That's the name on my birth certificate."

A silence, and then she said, "You don't really tell much, do you?"

"I'm lost in the magic of your calling me 'Joe'," I told her. "Very few people who make more than eighty a week would be that democratic."

She rose. "Insolent, too, aren't you?" She looked down at me patronizingly. "Puma—is that an Italian name?"

"Yes'm," I said. "There are three Italian families in Eau Claire. We were the wealthiest."

She continued to stare at me and then the smile came back. "We can be friends, can't we, Joe?"

I nodded and returned her smile. "Any friend of George's is a friend of mine, Ma'am."

She stalked out.

I sat where I was and finally estimated the lawns and patio and tennis courts and swimming pool should add up to about seven and a half acres. That's a good-sized lot, even in Beverly Hills.

In a few minutes George came in and said, "How about a session in the pool? Got lots of trunks, all sizes."

"I brought a pair," I told him. "I'll meet you down there."

It wasn't a bad way to earn seventy-two dollars a day. It was a hundred-foot pool with both high and low boards. But George confessed to me it wasn't up to the stone quarry where he had learned to swim.

Around five o'clock some of Linda's friends came for cocktails. Unless they were new friends, her former husband must have favored younger people. Because most of this gang seemed to be in their middle thirties.

George had always worked for a living; it was hard to tell how old he was. But he was no butterfly and this kind of people was alien to him.

We showered, dressed, then joined them. A few martinis made us all brothers and sisters. Gin is the stuff for eroding veneer. By dinnertime we were one big happy family.

After dinner some more people drifted in and one of them was Anthony Ellers. He was the attorney Mrs. Hogue had mentioned, the one I'd done some work for.

He cornered me at the bar next to the patio about an hour after he'd arrived. He asked, "What's going on, Joe?"

"A party. What do you mean?"

"What are you doing here?"

"Eating and drinking. I wish somebody would suggest dancing —I've got a yen for that imitation red-head."

He looked insufferably patient. "You're being cute, Joe. You're here professionally, aren't you?"

I lied with a shake of the head. "I'm a friend of George's. We're both from Eau Claire."

He took an audible breath. "You can trust me, Joe. I'm a confidant of the family."

I smiled at him. "That's good. Then they can tell you what I'm doing here."

His face became stiff with controlled annoyance. He said carefully, "I wouldn't want to think that George Hogue might be planning something tricky. Mrs. Crowther married him against my advice, you understand? Through some trick of her emotions, she believed marrying a man who resembled Randall Crowther might bring back the happiness she knew with Crowther. I intend to protect her even against her emotions."

"She looks happy," I remarked. "And one question, Tony—"

He glared. "Ask it."

"Would you worry just as much about her if she were poor?"

He sipped his drink. "I wouldn't have had any reason to meet her if she'd been poor." He turned his back on me.

Well, well . . . The man could be emotionally involved himself, and I didn't blame him. I remembered George telling me in my office that his wife wasn't as attractive as she had been in her younger days. He was wrong about that; it was the one thing I was sure both Ellers and I would agree on.

George might not be enough of a connoisseur to appreciate the superior flavor of ripe fruit.

Twenty minutes later somebody suggested dancing and I forgot George and Ellers and Mrs. Hogue. I danced with the red-head and learned there was nothing imitation about her. She showed me how the red ran true to the scalp line and explained that her hair was the kind of red the imitation red-heads favored. That's why my snap judgment had been wrong.

Her name was Mary Brennan and she worked for a custom furniture wholesaler and she was a friend of Linda Crowther Hogue's. She was single.

"Who brought you here?" I asked.

She had come with a married couple, the Pattersons.

We made a complete and graceful circuit of the patio, and she asked, "Who did you come with?"

"Alone," I said. "Somehow I sensed you'd be here."

We made another half-circuit, and she said, "That should have been 'whom', shouldn't it? I should have asked with *whom* you came?"

"I guess." Her fragrance was clean and cool.

"I'm illiterate, more or less," she went on musingly. "And poor. Are you poor, too?"

"Does it matter on a night like this? We don't get many nights like this."

She sighed. "The poor ones always favor me. Linda and Beth always attracted the wealthy boys."

"Who's Beth?" I asked.

"Linda's sister, her younger sister. Beth and I were friends at school."

"What school?"

"North Hollywood High. Why did you have to ask that? Couldn't you have assumed it meant college, and preferably some swank eastern female college? Won't you leave me even my implied superiority?"

"I will. Tonight we will maintain an illusion. You went to some swank eastern school and I just bought the controlling interest in General Motors. Did you know Mr. Crowther very well?"

"Fairly well. He looked like an older edition of George."

"This was his first marriage, was it?"

"That's right. He used to tell Linda he'd been waiting all his life for her. He was past fifty when they met. Why do you want to talk about him?"

"He intrigues me. He had a reputation for being a very interesting character. Linda must have loved him, to marry his twin."

"She must have. Are you pumping me?"

"Not intentionally. Would you like another drink?"

She said she would, and I went over to the bar for a pair of them. The Hogues were there, talking to Ellers, and George winked at me.

"Making out all right, buddy?" he asked.

"Fine. It's a wonderful party, George. We never had it like this in Eau Claire, did we?"

He laughed. "Never."

Mrs. Hogue and Ellers didn't seem to think that was very funny. Their smiles were no more than polite.

It wasn't too important; Mary Brennan was waiting for her drink, and *her* smile was warm.

At two o'clock there was a general exodus. At two thirty George came into the living-room where I was having a final end-of-the-day jolt of his expensive booze.

He plopped down on the sofa next to me and sighed happily. He yawned and said, "People are mostly okay if you get some liquor into 'em, aren't they?"

"Some people. How long did you live in Eau Claire, George?"

"About ten years. My ten happy years. Why?"

"I just wondered. Where were you born?"

"Phoenix. My mother died there. My dad died there, in a mine cave-in two months before I was born. When my mother died, I was eight. My aunt in Eau Claire sent for me then. Wonderful woman." He stretched. "What's on your mind, Joe?"

"A pattern," I said. "I wondered why my life didn't lead me to a home like this."

He chuckled. "You got to get married, first. And not to that red-head. She's a working girl."

He rose, stretched again. "Well, I'll see you in the morning. How about a dip before breakfast?"

"If breakfast is late enough," I told him.

I went to bed thinking about George Hogue and fell asleep to dream about Mary Brennan.

Breakfast was pool-side, as they say, in the morning. Neither of the Hogues looked as hungover as I felt; Mrs. Hogue looked particularly bright-eyed and healthy. She told us she had planned some shopping for today; we would have to entertain ourselves.

George asked, "How about some golf, Joe? You play it?"

"Not well, but often," I assured him. "Could we rest for a few hours, first?"

"You can rest on the course," he said. "We'll get one of those electric carts."

We went to the Canyon Country Club, which is no place for dubs. The entire course is within the confines of the canyon and there is a barranca threading through it at the most inopportune places.

I do love to belt them off the tees, and on the public courses I usually played this was no handicap. At Canyon the straight shot was the sane shot.

We had a combination bet of a dollar Nassau and two bits a hole on top of that. At the twelfth tee George was already into me for two dollars and a half. On the wages he was paying me I figured I could afford that much.

The twelfth is a straightaway fairway with the barranca just in front of the green. I figured it for a good belt off the tee and perhaps a number eight iron over the barranca. With only seven holes left, I thought it was time to play a little more strategically.

"Take the honors," he said. "Maybe it will change your luck."

I went to the back of the cart for my driver—and suddenly bark and splinters stung my face from a eucalyptus tree near the cart. George yelped and reached for his shoulder as the sound of the shot came from the rim of the canyon above.

Silence, as George stared at me, and then he said, "It's just a nick. He missed."

"Duck behind the cart," I said. "I'm going up there."

"You're not armed. Don't be crazy—"

"It's my job," I said. "Damn it, George, get behind that cart!"

He ducked as I started up the slope through the chaparral. Above me I could see a man running out from behind some brush, a rifle in his hand. He was heading for an empty lot between two houses.

He wasn't in sight when I reached the rim. From the street beyond, I

heard the sound of a motor starting and I ran that way. I got to the curb just in time to see a green and white car turn out of sight at the next intersection.

On the front lawn next door a girl about seven had set up a lemonade stand. I asked her, "Did you see that man who got into the car?"

She nodded. "He was carrying a gun." Her blue eyes were wide.

"What'd he look like, honey?"

"Mean," she said. "Would you like a five cent glass or a two cent glass?"

George was now coming through the empty lot. I said, "I'd like a five cent glass. Do you think your mommy would let me use the phone?"

She nodded. "Aren't you going to buy a glass for your friend?"

I gave her a dime and went up to the house. From the phone there, I told Sergeant Pascal that we'd meet him at the Canyon clubhouse. He's from the west side station and this would be his baby.

The bullet had scarcely broken the skin as it nicked George and gone on into the tree. But the lady of the house insisted on putting a Band-Aid on it.

She said, "One of those boys with a .22 rifle, I'll bet. It's not the first time they've shot down into that canyon." She shook her head sadly. "Today's children—"

This had been no .22; they don't make as much noise as I'd heard from the canyon top. George and I went down again to the twelfth tee and then back to the clubhouse.

Pascal was already there. His thin and sour bloodhound face showed nothing as I related the entire story, including the anonymous threatening letter and the phone calls.

When I'd finished, he looked at George. "You've told the Beverly Hills police about these threats, of course."

George shook his head. "I figured I had enough publicity already. Linda and I don't need any more ink."

"I see. You assumed a private operative would be better than professional men, is that it?"

"Not necessarily better," George answered. "Quieter."

Pascal looked between us in his impersonal way and then said, "We're digging out the bullet now. Then I'm going up to see that little girl who was selling lemonade. I'll be back and we'll go to the station together. Wait here."

He went out toward the first tee.

George sighed. "Cops—aren't they the big ones?"

"He was right, George. You should have gone to the Beverly Hills police after the first threat."

"Maybe. Look, he said to wait, but he didn't say we had to wait dry. Let's have a drink."

"Fine," I said. "You don't seem very nervous, George."

"Maybe I don't show it, but I'm nervous all right. Who the hell do you think it could be, Joe?"

I shrugged and asked, "Is there something you should have told me and didn't when you came looking

for a bodyguard? Is there someone you've wronged, somewhere? Or even someone who might think you wronged them?"

He frowned. "I sure as hell can't think of anybody—at least, anybody I made mad enough to want to murder me."

I said softly, "George, this is a community property state."

He stared at me.

I plowed on. "Do you own half of your wife's property?"

He shook his head. "Dead or alive, I don't own a nickel of Crowther's money. And if Linda wanted to get rid of me, all she'd have to do is divorce me."

"She'd need cause."

He shook his head again. "We agreed that both of us are free as birds." The waiter brought our drinks and George waited until he was out of hearing. Then he said smilingly, "Don't misjudge my wife. If she wanted to get rid of me, she'd do it openly and with witnesses."

"Somebody," I said, "shot at you. It was a man, but he could have been hired."

"He wasn't hired by my wife—I'll guarantee you that." He lifted his drink. "C'mon, relax."

We were on our second drink when Pascal came back. He said, "No need to go to the station. We'll get a statement from you boys here if you want, and then Puma can come in and see me tomorrow."

They let us use the office of the pro shop for the statements we dictated to one of the uniformed men. And before he left, Sergeant Pascal told us, "It was a 30-30 slug. Could have been a deer rifle. You got any deer-hunting enemies, Mr. Hogue?"

George smiled. "Not in this state, Sergeant. And none that would miss from that distance."

Pascal nodded solemnly. "Of course, we can't be sure the man was shooting at you, Mr. Hogue." He looked at me. "You got any feuds going on with your hoodlum friends?"

"I haven't any hoodlum friends, Sergeant," I said evenly. And added, "Outside of the Department."

His smile was humorless. "Well, I'll see you tomorrow, Puma. About ten."

He left and George made a face. "Cops—"

"They're overworked and underpaid and generally disliked," I said. "They haven't much reason to be happy."

"Maybe. One more and then we'll go home and have a swim. You owe me two and a half bucks."

We didn't talk much on the drive home. I had a feeling George wasn't telling me all he knew. Murder needs a motive, and that had looked like premeditated murder back there in the canyon. Well, he wasn't hiring me to find a killer, only to prevent him from getting killed. And he was paying me well for that.

The vagrant thought came that the whole incident could have been staged, that George could be

playing me for a patsy. But why? The remark of the sergeant's came back to me, the suggestion that the man might have been shooting at me.

What if George had been playing with his wife? And she'd been shot? He could claim the killer had been aiming at him and had killed her by mistake. He'd have the letter and the phone calls to document his theory.

And now he'd have an official record of having been shot at.

George didn't take his eyes from the traffic as he asked, "Why so quiet? The man wasn't shooting at you."

"I was thinking," I said, "that when a man gets too cute in planning a murder, he usually winds up making a serious mistake. The complicated capers are the easiest kind to solve."

We went the rest of the way without further dialogue. At home the maid told us there had been a call from Sergeant Pascal and he wanted me to call back.

He told me, "A green and white four-door hardtop didn't quite make the curve at the top of Chautauqua. It was a stolen car. It rolled to the bottom, and the driver was killed. There was a 30-30 rifle in the rear seat."

"Has the driver been identified?" I asked.

"Not positively. One of the officers out there is sure it's a St. Louis hood named Frankie Lewt, but that's unofficial yet. Do you know Frankie, Puma?"

"I never heard of him until this minute, Sergeant."

"Does Hogue know him?"

"I'll put him on," I said, "and you can ask him."

I handed George the receiver, and he said "No" twice, and handed the phone back to me.

Pascal said, "This Lewt, if it's him, is just a gun for hire. He was probably brought here for the job and has no other connection with the planner. Has Hogue told you anything you haven't told us?"

"Not a thing, Sergeant."

"Well, you know you're working with us or you're out of business, don't you?"

"Yes."

"Keep it in mind." He rang off.

George asked, "Who is this Lewt? Is he somebody they picked up?"

I told him about the car accident and the rifle.

"So now," George said, "they find out who hired this Lewt and we know who's out for me and they put him in jail and you can go back to working for a living, right?"

"I'm working now," I said. "Let's get our swimming trunks on."

As we went through the entry hall toward the stairs, George walked over to pick up the mail that was on the floor near the door. He rifled through it casually and then stopped to hold one letter aloft. "I haven't heard from her in a long time."

"Girl friend?"

"No, an old girl who knew my mother, back in Phoenix. She used to write to me once a month. But this is the first letter since I've been married." He turned it over. "It's been forwarded from my old address."

The maid came in then and I thought she looked startled. "The mail's early today, Mr. Hogue."

George frowned and I stared at the maid. I thought she blushed. An idea flickered briefly in my thick skull, then went out again. I said to the maid, "Is it illegal for the mail to be early?"

"Of course not, sir."

"Is it embarrassing?"

"I don't understand you, sir."

"I don't even understand myself," I told her. "Did you know your employer was shot at this morning?"

She stared between us. "Mrs. Hogue was shot at?"

"Mr. Hogue."

"*Mrs.* Hogue is my employer, sir. Would there be anything else?"

George asked, "What in hell is going on around here?"

"I'm not sure," I told him. "If I was, you'd never get me at these coolie wages."

"C'mon," he said impatiently. "You don't have to put on the Sherlock Holmes act to stay employed. It's too hot."

We went up the stairs. Something was wrong, something that required the attention of one of these English-type detectives who could go poking around after clues. Something was as wrong as a three-dollar bill and unfortunately I was more physical than mental. Well, I could stay with him and try to see that he stayed alive. That was really all he was paying me for.

But just the same, I called a hoodlum friend of mine as soon as I got to my room. I caught him at home and asked, "Have you ever heard of a gent named Farnkie Lewt?"

"Real sharpshooter, Joe. Why do you ask?"

"Who would be his connection out here?"

"Anybody who wants a job done. Frankie has no permanent connection. He calls St. Louis home. Is he out here now?"

"He's out here, on a slab at the morgue."

"You're kidding. Who could get to Frankie?"

"A curve on Chautauqua. Could you find out who brought him here?"

"Not for free, I couldn't. What have you ever done for me?"

"I kept your sister out of jail."

"That was no favor. Now, *I've* got to support her. Try again, Joe."

"To hell with you," I said. "I've got a memory."

"Fifty," he suggested. "What's fifty to you, the kind of clients you get?"

There was a knock at the door and I said "Come in," and George came in. I asked him, "Would you spend fifty dollars to find out who hired Frankie Lewt to shoot you?"

"Natch," he said.

I told my friend, "Okay. Fifty dollars." I gave him the phone number of my office-answering service and told him to leave the message there.

I hung up, and said, "Where are your trunks?"

He shook his head. "I have to go somewhere."

"I or *we?*"

"I'd better go alone," George said. "She said it was personal."

"You mean you're going to Phoenix?"

He nodded.

I said, "The police won't want you to leave town right now. Tell me about it, George."

"There's nothing to tell. This woman, this Mrs. Rydell, says there is something she should have told me a long time ago, but she never realized it was important until lately. She said I had better come to see her."

"I'm going along," I said.

He shook his head. "Why? You take care of this end. Maybe, between us, we'll get a story that'll clear everything up. Nobody knows I'm going—I'll be safe."

"Don't be foolish, George. Unless you give me a direct order not to, I'm going with you to Phoenix."

He smiled and said clearly, "I'm giving you a direct order to work for me at this end. I'll be back tomorrow, Joe. I'm taking the Jag."

"All right. Keep it under a hundred. And be sure you don't tell anybody where you're going."

"I won't. Will you be staying here?"

I shook my head. "I think I'll sleep at home tonight. Let me know as soon as you get back."

He promised he would.

I was going down Sunset, toward my office, when his Jaguar went drumming past. He waved cheerfully and I wondered again if he was playing me for a patsy. He should have been more scared.

At the office there were some bills and a few ads, but no checks. I opened a window to air the place out and then sat in front of my desk, thinking.

My phone rang, and it was the hoodlum. He said, "Couldn't learn anything except that Lewt rented an apartment for a month over on San Vicente. That would mean he wasn't brought to town just for one kill, wouldn't it?"

"Not necessarily. You don't figure that's worth fifty dollars, do you? I could have got that from the police."

"I figured it was worth something. But I guess not. You get the address from the police, then. So long, Joe."

"Wait," I said. "Maybe they won't want to give it to me."

"Maybe not. They wouldn't give it to the reporters."

"All right," I said. "Five bucks."

"Ten."

"Okay, ten."

He gave me the address and I wrote it down. I put a ten spot in an envelope, addressed it to him, and went out to the jalopy.

It was a three-story apartment building of redwood and maroon stucco, set back on a beautifully manicured lawn. Bougainvillea ran wild along the fence bordering the San Vicente side. There was a Police Department car in front.

As I parked, I saw Officer Mayo, a side-kick of Pascal's, come out from the entrance and walk toward the car. I waited until he had pulled away.

The first door off the lobby had a sign on it and the sign held a gilded *Manager*. I rang the bell.

A bleached blonde with skin like leather opened the door, looked at me suspiciously, and said, "Well—?"

"I was supposed to meet Officer Mayo here," I explained. "Has he arrived yet?"

"He's come and gone," she said, and started to close the door.

"One moment, please," I said, in my best official voice. "There are a few questions I'd like to ask."

"Ask him," she said. "I didn't have any answers for him, either. I'm not running a credit bureau. They pay their rent and keep quiet, I don't bother 'em. Get your foot out of the doorway."

"Maybe you'd rather come down to the station and answer the questions," I threatened.

A moment's silence, then she said, "Okay, let's see the badge."

"I have a photostat of my license here," I explained, "and I'd certainly appreciate—"

Scorn came to her leather face. "License—? A *private* peeper? And impersonating an officer, too, weren't you? Oh, wait until they hear about this."

"I am an officer," I said, "licensed by the State."

"Beat it," she said. "Run, before I get some law here to take you away."

I took my foot out of the doorway just before she slammed the door. I went over to the board which held the names of the tenants and saw no *Frankie Lewt*. But of course he wouldn't have rented the place under his real name.

Then the name *Mary Brennan* popped out at me from the board. It couldn't be; there were a lot of Mary Brennans in this town. It couldn't be my Mary, not that sweet and candid red-head.

But maybe it could. Although she had assured me she was poor, this was no apartment for the poor. Maybe she had meant she was poor by the standards of her friend, Linda Crowther Hogue.

She probably wouldn't be home for another hour, so I went over to Santa Monica to eat. While I ate I thought back on everything that had happened from the moment George Hogue had walked into my office. A pattern was trying to break through, but I couldn't force it into the light. Something obvious, obvious . . .

What was obvious? The motivation was, but why couldn't I grasp it?

I lingered over my coffee and then drove slowly back to San Vicente. Her apartment was in the rear, on the second floor, and I heard footsteps almost immediately after my ring.

Would it be my Mary Brennan?

It was. She wore a linen suit in pale green and her gray-green eyes considered me speculatively. "The oversize Gower Champion—What brings you to my humble door?"

"Love. Am I welcome?"

"You are. Come in but leave the love outside. I'm just about to broil a steak."

It was a well-furnished apartment, overlooking the pool. It wasn't the apartment of a poor girl. I said, "You were conning me, eh?"

She was putting on an apron. "About what?"

"About being poor. I wish I was poor enough to afford an igloo like this."

The gray-green eyes were mocking. "Maybe I'm not paying for it. I'd have to stretch the steak to make it do for two. Could I fix you an egg?"

"No, thanks. I just finished dinner. Did you know that one of your neighbors died this afternoon?"

She paused on the way to the kitchen. "I don't know the neighbors very well. Is that why you're here—was he a friend of yours?" She paused. "Or *she?*"

"He was no friend of mine," I said. "His name was Frankie Lewt."

"Never heard of him." She continued toward the kitchen, and I followed.

It was a good-sized kitchen for an apartment, with an upholstered breakfast nook at the far end. Between the breakfast nook and the kitchen's working space there was a small counter.

Mary Brennan pointed toward the shelves under the counter and said, "The booze is there. Mix us a pair of martinis."

I took out the gin and the vermouth and asked, "How dry?"

"Five to one for me," she said. "Olives and onions in the refrigerator. Tell me, Puma, is this purely a social call?"

"So far," I answered. "Until I've had the free martini."

She sighed. "I might have known. I thought some romantic whimsy had brought you, but it's business, no doubt. Well, I don't know the neighbors very well."

Light touch, but it couldn't be coincidence that a friend of George Hogue's wife just happened to live in the same building with the hood who'd shot at George.

As I stirred the drink, I said, "This Frankie Lewt may have been registered under another name. He's a professional killer from St. Louis."

"Ouch! Living here? Say, why are you interested? Are you a policeman?"

"Not quite. Though I'm professionally interested in Frankie Lewt." I poured the drinks. "He tried to kill George Hogue this afternoon."

I turned with the drinks to find her staring at me, her poise unmistakably shaken. "Joe, what did he look like?"

"I don't know. I only saw him from a distance. He took a shot at George over at the Canyon Country Club and then in getting away he rolled the car he was driving over the cliff on Chautauqua."

I held her drink out to her and she took it with a trembling hand. She went over to sit in the breakfast nook. I sat down across from her.

I sipped my drink and waited for her to sip hers. She did, nodding in approbation. Her voice was low. "As soon as I finish this, I'm going down to see the manager."

"Why?"

"For reasons of my own. Don't ask me any questions until I get back."

"All right, Mary. What kind of day was today?"

"Hungover. We certainly drank enough last night, didn't we?" She put the cool glass to her forehead. "Are you a policeman, Joe?"

"I'm a private investigator. By the looks of this place I should have got into the custom furniture business."

"Was that a crack?"

"An envious remark. How long have you known George Hogue?"

"Only since he married Linda. She came back from a vacation in the mountains and brought him with her, as a husband. I am—not exactly a George Hogue fan, if you're interested."

"Why not?"

"He seems a—well, a little too calculating for my taste. Every time he looks around the room I get a feeling that he's making an inventory."

"He has nothing but his allowance," I said. "They signed one of those prenuptial agreements. You know, like the movie stars."

"I've heard of them," she said. "Who do you think would want to kill George?"

"I've no idea. What do you want to talk to the manager about?"

"About a tenant. I want to find out if a certain man was this gunman."

"A tenant you brought here?"

"A tenant who came here right after I told another man there was a vacancy."

"And who was this other man?"

"I may tell you when I come back from the manager's apartment, and I may not. Could I have a little more of this?"

There was more and I gave it to her. I wondered if the man whose name she was withholding was paying the rent for this place. That wasn't a nice thought and I tried to drive it from my mind.

"Moody," she said, "aren't you? I noticed that last night."

"I'm easily confused," I said, "and when I am I've got to shut up until I get my bearings. Was that a joke about your not paying for this apartment?"

"Why? Are you interested in my —character, Joe Puma?"

"I guess. That's silly, isn't it?"

"It's comforting," she said. "Well, I'll go down and see old straw-hair now, though it's nothing I look forward to."

Her poise had returned. In her crowd, a poor girl with rich friends, poise was probably very important. She left and I went over to see if there was a dribble of alcohol in the melted ice.

I sat there and finally the obvious broke through. The resemblance, that was the key. *The resemblance . . .*

Mary Brennan came back looking pale. She said, "The man who was killed rented the apartment under the name of Alan Frank. He was the man who moved in after my friend asked about the vacancy. That doesn't mean there's a connection, does it?"

"I guess not. Why don't you want to tell me the name of your friend? Is it a name I know?"

She hesitated, studying me doubtfully. Then she said, "My friend's name is Nicholas Allis. Is that a name you know?"

"Big Nick? Hell, yes. Dope and women, and originally from St. Louis, isn't he?"

"I don't know. Are you sure about the dope and the women? Are you sure he isn't a legitimate businessman?"

"He could be now," I said. "A lot of them end up that way. Where did you meet him?"

"His decorator brought him in for some furniture. He seemed very nice, and he's always been gentle and thoughtful around me."

"Honey," I explained, "you can take one of those big boys and give him a haircut and a shave. You can put him in a three-hundred-dollar suit and douse him with the right kind of toilet water and he can almost pass for a human being. But underneath, he is still a murdering slob, and never forget it."

She walked shakily back to the breakfast nook to sit down again. She said softly, "I—had no idea—I mean—Oh, God, what do I mean?"

I said, "It's always tough to be poor. But it's toughest when you have rich friends, isn't it?"

She flushed.

I asked quietly, "Is Big Nick paying for all this?"

She glared at me as her flush deepened.

I said, "Who is Nick's lawyer?"

"Anthony Ellers. As a matter of fact, I introduced Tony to Linda when she was still married to Crowther."

"Did you get a commission for that from Ellers?"

"That's enough," she said. "You've gone too far, Puma. Get out."

"May I use your phone first? I want to call Ellers."

She glared, then put her head down on the breakfast nook table. She began to sob.

I used her phone to call Ellers' office. His secretary told me he was

unavailable and wouldn't be back until tomorrow.

"Where'd he go?" I asked. "Out of town?"

"I am not in possession of that information," she said coolly.

"Like hell you aren't," I said. "Did he leave right after Mrs. Hogue phoned him?"

"I have no record here of a call from Mrs. Hogue," she said, even more coolly.

"Sister," I said, "you are forgetting there are jails for women, too." I hung up sharply.

Then I dialed long distance. The second Mrs. Rydell I reached was the right one.

I told her, "If you value your life, you had better phone the police for protection right now or hop the quickest plane to Los Angeles."

"Who is this talking?" she asked.

"One of George Hogue's few friends," I said. "If you had told him in the letter what you planned to tell him when he gets there, he wouldn't be on his way to see you right now. He'd be safe. You had better alert the Arizona police that he's on the way now. I'll try to take care of this end. Believe me, Mrs. Rydell, this is no joke—George was shot at by a hired hoodlum this morning."

"I believe you," she said. "I'll get right to work here and then take the first plane."

I gave her my office and home addresses and my phone numbers and then called Pascal. I told him, "Pick up Nick Allis and send a man over to keep an eye on Mrs. Hogue. Or maybe the Beverly Hills boys could watch her. Big Nick could be the boy who brought Frankie Lewt to town. And I'm sure he brought him in to work for Anthony Ellers. Ellers is probably on his way to Arizona right now."

"We can't pick up Allis on some whim of yours, Puma. This man is no longer a hoodlum; he's got connections."

"Damn it, Sergeant, this is no whim. And I want the State Police alerted to pick up George Hogue, who is driving to Arizona. He's driving a Jaguar—you can get the license number from Mrs. Hogue."

"Slow down," he said. "Who the hell do you think you are, handing out orders?"

"Sergeant," I said evenly, "you've been warned. If George Hogue dies, his blood will be on your hands."

"Where are you?" he asked.

I gave him the address and asked, "What difference does it make?"

"I want to see if you're sober."

There was the sound of door chimes, and Mary Brennan came through the doorway from the kitchen. She looked at the door and at me. She said, "That's probably Mr. Allis now."

From the phone Pascal said, "Puma, you still there? What's going on?"

"A hundred things you're too stupid to understand, Sergeant," I told him gently. And I hung up.

Mary Brennan still stood indecisively.

I said, "Open the door."

I was sitting on the sofa, leafing through a copy of *Life* when she opened the door to Nicholas Allis.

He was big and broad and meticulously tailored. He had curly silver-gray hair and his virile, masculine face was burnished in a Florida tan.

His voice was resonant, but with just a faint rasp in it. He said easily, "Well, well, Joseph Puma. The last time I saw you was in Las Vegas."

I nodded. "You looked more at home there, Nick. How are all the little rackets running?"

His face stiffened, and he looked at Mary. He said, "You've been crying. Why?"

She didn't answer. She gazed doubtfully between us, then started toward the kitchen.

Nick said, "Wait, Mary. I want to know what the trouble is. Why is this man here?"

"I don't know," she whispered. She began to cry again.

He looked at me and his eyes were stone. "You had better explain yourself and fast. Or you'll be in more trouble than you can handle."

"Sit down, Nick," I said. "Don't threaten me. You haven't enough friends or enough pounds to frighten me. I came here to check on that hoodlum buddy of yours, Frank Lewt. I ran into Mary while I was here and dropped in for a drink. I'm not in nearly as much trouble as you are."

He stood there like a rock.

I asked, "Did you know Randall Crowther very well, Nick?"

He shook his head. "I've heard of him, that's all."

"Did his wife ever tell you that he lived in Arizona as a young man?"

He shook his head.

I said, "You know Frankie's dead, don't you? Died in a stolen car on a curve he didn't quite make. Were you going to pay him for the kill or was that Ellers' idea?"

"I don't know what you're talking about," he said. "I'll give you ten seconds to leave quietly, Puma. Or I'll throw you out."

From the kitchen came Mary's sobs again. I said, "You can't force me to leave. It's *her* apartment."

"Is it? I can force you to leave if I'm big enough. And I'm big enough."

I smiled at him and shook my head. "Not big enough or strong enough or fast enough or gutsy enough." I stood up.

We stood quietly, eyeing each other. I was sure he hated me at the moment, but not nearly as much as I hated him. Because of Mary Brennan. Because of all the Mary Brennans who take cultivated tastes and small purses out into a man's world.

I was praying that he would have guts enough to come for me. I wanted him to give me an excuse to do to him physically what he had done to her spiritually. And to how many others?

My trouble is I'm Italian, and more emotional than intellectual. I wanted him to come for me emotionally, though the rational speck still operating in my brain assured me he might be more than I could handle. He had grown up among tough boys. But I too had grown up among tough boys.

I said, "Come on, gutless, you can't be *all* yellow."

He came for me. Not like a hoodlum, clawing and kneeing. He came for me like a man with experience, feinting a left, a right—and throwing the left.

And a very good one, catching me in the neck below the chin and numbing the whole right side of my face. He had just missed the button.

Then I also missed the button, but broke a canine on the right side of his face. I tried one for his belly where I figured he should be soft, these days.

He wasn't. When they leave their hard and scrambling days behind, they have handball and tennis and golf and masseurs and stuff like that. My fist bounced off his belly and his forehead came into my nose.

Blood spurted from my nose and ran down my throat inside and I forgot all the things Slugger Donovan had tried so patiently to teach me and became just a tough kid fighting his neighborhood enemies in the hot sun of a Fresno summer.

He caught me on the temple and the floor began to swing and tilt. He got a thumb in my eye and I brought a knee up sharply and it jackknifed him enough to bring his nose into the top of my waiting head.

Then I had his throat in my big left hand, and I swung and swung my right hand into his face.

He went down and I was on top, his soft throat still in my left hand and my right beginning to bleed as all the skin left the knuckles. He began to moan.

And I was still hitting him, unconscious though he was, thinking of Mary Brennan, thinking of all the Mary Brennans . . .

They told me later I was still hitting him and cursing like a maniac when Pascal and Mayo came in to drag me off of him. That's my trouble; I'm too damned emotional.

In the drab office, Pascal said, "Who the hell do you think you are, the avenger? He may live—just *may*."

"Does it matter?" I asked. "Better men die every day."

"Don't get smart, Puma."

"Smart, huh? Does the obvious still escape that lamebrain of yours?"

His jaw was a sharp, tight line. "I'd listen to your version of it."

"All right," I said. "George Hogue is the living image of a dead man. Is that maybe half of a clue?"

"You tell me."

"Many sons look like their fathers," I said. "Even sons who are products of common law marriages."

He stared. "You think Hogue is Crowther's son by a previous marriage?"

"By a previous common law marriage. How else could George be a threat to the Crowther estate, *except by inheritance?* They wanted him where they could keep an eye on him and possibly put him away when the opportunity seemed ripe."

"You're crazy," he said. "Common law marriages aren't recognized in this state. And that would eliminate any claim of Hogue's."

"Sergeant," I asked smugly, "have you ever heard the legal term 'comity'?"

"So?"

"It means this state respects the legal status of citizens who were partners in a common law marriage in states where common law marriage *is* recognized. Arizona is one of those states."

"So?"

"So Randall Crowther had no legal right to marry Linda. He wasn't a free man. And she is not, therefore, his legal wife."

"This is all from left field," Pascal said. "You're guessing at all this. We haven't heard from that Mrs. Rydell yet. You don't *know* this is true."

"Look," I said patiently. "Add it up. When I walk into the Hogue home, why does Mrs. Hogue tell me Ellers has mentioned my name? Why would he mention my name unless he knew George had gone to me and it worried him? They must be working together, Mrs. Hogue and Ellers, right?"

"Possibly. What does that prove?"

"That there's a *legal* reason, or she wouldn't need Ellers—a legal reason why George mustn't get too nosey. And then he tells me he hasn't heard from Mrs. Rydell since he's been married. Why not?"

"You tell me—you've got all the answers."

"Because his wife or the maid intercepted the letters. I could get that from the maid's embarrassment when George got to the mail first. And then Ellers leaves town. Who told him George had gone to Arizona?"

"Maybe nobody. We don't even know that Ellers left for Arizona. We've got a man checking the airport reservations right now, and we'll see how true that part of your story is. What makes you think it was a common law marriage?"

"Sergeant, if your mother told you your dad had died in a mine cave-in before you were born, wouldn't you be suspicious?"

"No. I believe my mother."

"Look. I'll bet you'll find that Hogue was her maiden name or the name of a previous husband."

"Puma, do you realize what you're saying? What if it's all hogwash? Nick Allis making a fight for his life over at St. John's—the Beverly Hills boys holding one of their biggest citizens—the State Police trying to find her husband and one of this town's most influential attorneys. Do you realize where you'll be sitting if it's as crazy as it sounds?"

I smiled at him. "You listened to

me on the phone. You took my advice."

"Keep talking," he said. "It might be your last chance, before you get into the gas chamber."

"So," I went on placidly, "we will dwell on Anthony Ellers, that influential attorney. It is possible he is back-dooring George, but even if he isn't, Ellers can be worth enough to Mrs. Hogue to make him a desirable third husband. But he doesn't know enough local hoods to get a local killer, and they're not too reliable anyway. So he goes to a client, Big Nick Allis, and asks casually if there are any St. Louis boys reliable enough to earn a king-size fee. And Nick gives him a name, though that wouldn't implicate him, would it?"

Pascal frowned. "Why should you worry if Nick's implicated? Maybe you had another reason for beating him up, huh? Maybe he's got something on you."

I shook my head. "And you're the man who tried to tell me you believed in people."

"I didn't say *people*. I said my mother."

"I don't give a tinker's damn what you do to Nick Allis."

"Oh?" He grinned. "The red-head, maybe?"

"She's the one who put me wise to Big Nick and his association with Ellers. If you try to implicate her, I'll tell the Commission you refused to give George Hogue protection."

He grinned again. "Tell 'em what you damned well please. I'd like to point out that George Hogue lived in Beverly Hills, and that is *not* Los Angeles."

"Okay. I'll think of something else."

His stare held more wonder than belligerence. "Take it easy, man. What is she to you?"

"A symbol," I said. "One of the errant lambs, and they are my particular charge."

He shook his head. "You sloppy bleeding heart. Puma, you fool—"

A detective came in and said, "Ellers didn't go by commercial airline. He flies his own plane, and he took that. I've sent out the call to the CAP."

Pascal nodded, and the man left. Pascal looked at me and there was some fear in his eyes.

I said, "Those Jags are fast, but not as fast as a plane."

"It's crazy," he said. "It's right out of one of those old Pearl White serials."

"It's from hunger, from desperation," I said. "Since Lewt missed that shot, time became very important. And when George got the letter, there just wasn't any time left. And we're dealing in million-dollar thinking, don't forget that."

Pascal wiped his brow, then wiped his hand on a handkerchief. He went over to look out the window.

I said, "On the desert that Jag will stand out. There can't be too many of them. Ellers can land at any of a dozen towns in front of the Jaguar and wait for it to come tearing

along. He can flag George down—"

Pascal turned from the window. "Shut up, damn you!"

The phone rang and he picked up the receiver. He said, "Hell, yes, I'll talk to Arizona. It's about time."

I didn't get any of it except Sergeant Pascal's occasional grunts and monosyllabic answers. I waited patiently, a vision in my mind of a Jaguar and a light plane racing across that bleak desert in the dusk.

Pascal hung up finally, and said, "So after all these years this Phoenix dame reveals she knew all along Hogue was Crowther's son. So why does she keep it a secret?"

"For George's sake. It would be better for him to pump gas and think his father was an honorable man than to be a rich and illegitimate son, wouldn't it?"

"Those were almost her words. How did you know?"

"Logic. But once she realized from reading the papers that George had married Crowther's widow, she began to worry. So she wrote him."

Pascal nodded. "And the letters were intercepted. So where the hell are Hogue and Ellers now?"

It was another hour before we got the news. Hogue was found in the Jaguar, two miles south of Wickenberg, most of his head blown off by a shotgun.

And Ellers didn't quite have the gas to get back. His plane crashed into a peak near Prescott, as he tried to glide down. They found a shotgun in the plane—the right shotgun.

"What the hell is it?" Pascal said. "I mean—Lewt tries to shoot Hogue, and dies. Ellers makes it, and he dies. What the hell is it?"

"Your guess is as good as mine," I said. "Mary Brennan is in the clear, isn't she? Let me know now—I want to phone her."

"She's in the clear," he said wearily. "I guess I owe you something."

"Thanks," I told him, and went to phone her. Maybe we could stretch that steak, now.

NEXT MONTH . . .

CHARLOTTE ARMSTRONG's	*And Already Lost . . .*
ROBERT BLOCH's	*Dig That Crazy Grave!*
ANDREW GARVE's	*The Downshire Terror*
CLIFFORD KNIGHT's	*Never Kill a Cop*
MIGNON G. EBERHART's	*The Hound of the Wellingtons*

EDITORS' FILE CARD

AUTHOR: **HENRY SLESAR**

TITLE: ***Symbol of Authority***

TYPE: Crime Story

LOCALE: New York City

TIME: The Present

COMMENTS: *Mr. Whitten discovered a tremendous secret. It drew him into one of the strangest adventures ever recorded. Who says the average New Yorker—one of teeming millions—leads a dull, commonplace life?*

THE TURNING POINT IN ARTHUR Whitten's life came one Saturday afternoon when he suffered severe abdominal cramps. It was typical of him to wait until Thursday, his day off from the printing company, before he visited a doctor, and the sober young man with the hairy upper lip said something about colitis. He gave Arthur a little white card, which would introduce him to an internist named Collins, whose office was just off Fifth Avenue on Thirty-Seventh Street.

It was a remarkably plush office, and Arthur was forced to share a Chippendale love seat with a plump matron who radiated wealth and breeding. He sat partly on the seat and partly on her trailing mink coat, until the pretty young nurse selected him from the waiting crowd and ushered him into the presence of Dr. Collins. He experienced what he had always thought of as "butterflies in the stomach," and wondered if this would affect the doctor's examination.

He was prodded and questioned, then given a scrawled prescription and a mimeographed diet. He lost the prescription on the subway home, but was so grateful to be out of the doctor's overpowering office that he didn't care. And oddly enough, he felt better.

Two months later his abdominal pains returned, accompanied by a few other unpleasant symptoms. His wife, a thin, retiring woman who

had developed into a sergeant-like creature in the fourth year of their marriage, commanded him to return to Doctor Collins's office.

That was when he entered New York General Hospital and discovered what a wonderful thing it was to be a doctor.

He shared a cozy room with an elderly gentleman with ulcers, and they spent many dreamy hours discussing the state of their insides. Interruptions were frequent the first two days, but the hospital routine soon made itself plain, and Arthur adapted to it with the same natural ease he had brought to the Army and his job.

To his surprise, Dr. Collins himself appeared at his bedside, wearing civilian clothes and a stethoscope clamped around his shirt collar. Arthur was tremendously impressed—even more than he had been in the doctor's own office. The doctor was not a physically outstanding man. He was short, his clothes fit badly, and he was going bald in a most unattractive manner. But his air of authority and kindliness more than made up for any shortcomings. His attitude transcended mere fatherliness; he seemed to blend the auras of the medical profession, the Army, the clergy, and the upper echelons of big business.

There were several other "civilian" doctors who called, and each one of them, inevitably appendaged with a stethoscope, elicited an inordinate amount of admiration—almost reverence—from the bedridden Arthur.

On the fourth day of his confinement Arthur was allowed to walk the hallways. He did so somewhat diffidently, owing to the shabby state of his bathrobe. It was then he discovered another facet of his admiration for doctors: the unfailing respect a physician received from the white-uniformed members of a hospital staff. A doctor's presence transformed the corridors into the passageways of a castle, where homage was paid to the passing of His Royal Majesty, with the dangling Symbol of State clamped around his neck.

When Arthur was discharged from New York General, he was inclined to reminisce more about the doctors than the medical efforts that had been made, successfully, in his behalf.

Several months later, on his way to work, he was struck by a familiar sight in the window of a pawnshop. It was a stethoscope, probably once the prized property of some medical student, and its price, less a dollar or so, was exactly the amount in Arthur Whitten's wallet.

Without thinking too much about it at the time, Arthur walked into the shop, and, clearing his throat in the brisk manner of Dr. Collins, bought the instrument.

He kept it hidden in the inner pocket of his overcoat while he was working, but he returned early from lunch and took it into the men's room. He tried it on in front of the

mirror. He was pleased with what he saw.

That night, in a moment of exuberance following a funny television program, he mentioned the purchase to his wife.

She said, "You bought a *what*?"

"A stethoscope. Want to see it?"

"Yes," she said unbelievingly. "Let's see it."

He hurried to his overcoat and returned with the stethoscope already in place, fiddling with the little round funnel professionally.

"Boy," she said, shaking her head. "Boy."

"You like it?"

She asked him the price and he told her. He chuckled, then tried to place the funnel on her rather flat chest. She shrieked and batted the thing away, with such force that it flew upward and struck the end of Arthur's nose.

"Honey," he said plaintively.

"Don't speak to me until you take that stupid thing back." She folded her arms and turned back to the television screen.

Actually, his wife forgot the incident quickly, and Arthur kept his stethoscope.

The idea didn't occur to him all at once. It built rather slowly, between bites of noontime sandwiches and in the intermissions between work and television programs. The thought both thrilled and frightened him.

One Thursday morning in early April he arose early and made his own breakfast. This surprised his wife, as did his announced intention of taking a morning walk. Usually his day off consisted of sleeping until ten thirty, padding about the house in slippers, sitting in front of the small TV screen, or working on crossword puzzles. Early morning walks had never been on his agenda.

The balmy weather was just the incentive he needed to carry out his plan. He took a subway at upper Broadway, rode downtown, then walked from the station to the doors of New York Medical on Eleventh Street. He took a deep breath and pushed open the doors, striding briskly across the pink marble floor to the elevators. There was a small crowd waiting, and he regarded them with a paternal smile. His hand was in his pocket, the thumb sliding across the smooth surface of the stethoscope folded within.

Arthur moved to the back of the elevator as they entered, and casually placed the instrument in position around his neck.

The nurse on the third floor smiled quizzically at him, but asked no questions. He returned the smile timidly, his fingers toying with the little funnel, and walked past her desk and down the hallway. It seemed to be a private floor, with louvered doors leading to each room. He had top and bottom views of their interiors—the feet of beds, chairs, and visitors; the white ceilings and the occasional top of a tall man's head.

He walked to the end of the floor, wheeled about, and returned to the elevators. He asked the operator for the fourth floor, and found that it was semi-private. He made the same meaningless tour of inspection, the smile becoming fixed on his face. Then he tried the fifth floor. It was more of a challenge, because it was an open ward. He locked his hands behind his back and strode heavily down the center aisle, the stethoscope bobbing against his chest. The patients paid little attention to him. He was glad of that. After all, it was only his first day.

Arthur returned home at four o'clock, feeling at peace with everything and everyone. He had only one regret: that he couldn't extend his newly found personality to his wife.

The next Thursday he did the same thing. This time, however, he spent more time in the wards. On the third Thursday he familiarized himself with some of the patients, pausing to chat briefly with them about their problems, and assuring them that they had nothing to worry about.

After a few months had passed, he became a familiar figure at New York Medical, and began to exchange pleasantries with the duty nurses and elevator men and other hospital personnel.

Things even reached a point where, one Thursday following a week when a bad case of sniffles had kept him in bed, the nurse at the main desk was solicitous about his absence the Thursday before.

"Oh, just a little cold," he told her cheerfully. "Doctors get sick too, you know."

It made his day.

Actually, the end of his career as a physician began on a normal Thursday—that is, a day in which he confined his activities to chatting with the patients in one of the wards. A young intern, named Morrison, suddenly took an interest in him and deferentially asked his opinion concerning a phlebitis case. It was to Arthur's credit that he refused to panic; he merely smiled ingratiatingly and modestly claimed ignorance of the subject. The intern accepted the explanation without comment.

It was next week's visit that did all the damage. There seemed to be a particular amount of respect paid to him that day; he felt very much the way he imagined Dr. Collins felt as he marched down the halls of New York General. Thus emboldened, he went up the private floor, and even poked his head into various rooms with cheerful words of sympathy and encouragement.

In front of a room marked 310, two white-coated young men were speaking, rather loudly, and one of them mentioned colitis. The word brought Arthur's eyebrows up, and he paused to listen.

"Oh. Hello, there," one of the young men smiled. "You remember me, Doctor? Morrison?"

"Oh, yes," Arthur said, with only a hint of presentiment. "Did I hear you mention colitis?"

"Yes. An interesting case. Ulcerative colitis in a woman of sixty-three."

"Ah, yes," Arthur said. "I know something about colitis." He spoke in all honesty.

"Are you an internist?"

"No." The hint of peril became stronger, and Arthur decided to avoid the immediate danger. "No, as a matter of fact. I'm a—a surgeon."

"I see." Morrison blinked at him with pale eyelashes. "Are you connected with this hospital, Doctor?"

"No. No," Arthur said, fingering the little rubber funnel. "I practice out of town. I was just—visiting for the day."

"For the day?"

"For several days," Arthur corrected. "I have a friend here—" Despite all his efforts he was becoming flustered. "Another doctor."

"And who would that be?"

"Why, Doctor—" He paused, and the motions he was making with the end of the stethoscope worked the instrument loose. It clattered to the floor. He stopped to pick it up, saying, "I really must go now."

He hurried off, conscious that he had not handled the challenge at all well.

He was just leaving the elevator at the main floor and heading for the exit when a brawny young man with frizzy blond hair stopped him. "Would you mind waiting a moment, Doctor?"

"Waiting? What for?"

"It'll be just for a moment."

A nurse, of immense circumference, joined them. "This the man?" she said, in a deep voice.

"I'm Doctor Whitten. What's the trouble here?"

"Do you have any identification, Doctor?"

"Identification?" Arthur slapped the breast of his coat. "No, as a matter of fact, I don't have anything with me."

He caught a glimpse of Morrison coming out of the front elevator, and he began to tremble visibly.

"Look," the blond intern said softly, "would you mind coming with us into the office? It won't take very long. I think we can straighten this matter out without too much trouble. All right?"

Arthur nodded. "I really don't understand this."

"That's our problem, too," the nurse frowned. "Come along, Doctor."

They allowed him to smoke a cigarette as they all waited in the narrow office at the end of the main floor corridor. He removed the stethoscope and placed it in his pocket. The others refrained from questioning him further, and he didn't dare ask what they were waiting for.

He found out shortly. A tall man, with broad, well-padded shoulders, came into the room. His face was ruggedly carved, the nose strong

and bony, the mouth a thin, grim line. He seated himself casually on the end of the desk, flipped his gray felt hat two inches back from his forehead, and lit a cigarette with an easy motion. He blew a gust of smoke at the middle button of Arthur's jacket, and reached into his coat for a bulky wallet.

Arthur gasped when the man flipped it open, revealing the heavy silver badge. "Morgan," he said. "Police. What's this all about, buster?"

Arthur stuttered the explanation. His professional manner was shucked like a bathrobe. His voice ranged up and down in tremors of emotion, and his hands gestured expressively. He had meant no harm, of course. He had refrained from giving anything which might be construed to be professional advice. He had merely enjoyed the feeling of prestige and authority, without in any way upsetting the routine or medical standing of the hospital.

"You sure that's all, buster?" the tall man said.

Arthur assured him it was. He swore, nervously, that the entire affair had been innocence itself. He promised, fervidly, never to repeat his performance in this or any other medical institution. He had, he said dramatically, learned his lesson, he had indeed.

"What do you think?" the detective said to the nurse.

"Bughouse," the woman frowned.

"Aw, let him go," Morrison said. The blond intern nodded agreement.

"Okay, buster," the detective told Arthur. "You can beat it. But if we ever catch you at this sort of thing again—" He drew a finger across his throat and made a slitting noise.

"Thanks," Arthur gulped hard. "Thanks very much."

He left the hospital at a trot, and maintained the pace all the way up to the shopping district of lower New York.

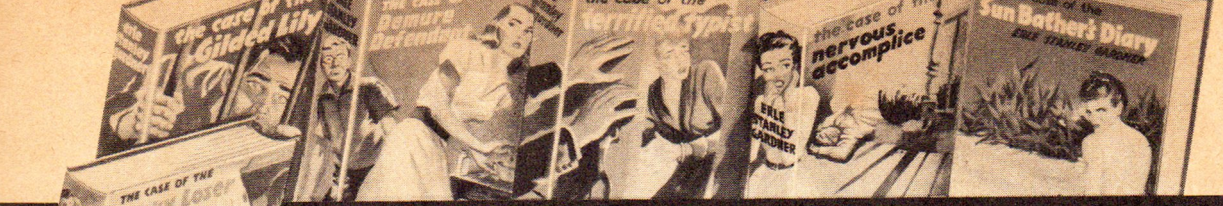
At Fourteenth Street, winded, he slowed down and shoved his hands deep into his trouser pockets. It was only then that he realized he had left the stethoscope behind; but he decided that the loss was nothing to worry about.

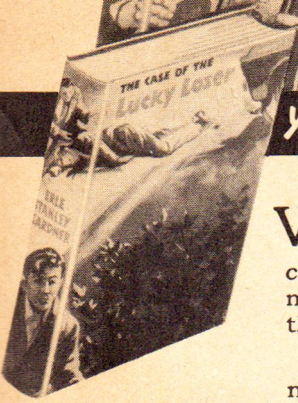
Moodily, he strolled down the crowded street. It was just after five, and people were leaving work. Their blind movement toward the subways and busses was alarming; he ducked into a doorway, out of their path.

It was the entrance to a toy shop, its display windows a wild conglomeration of dolls and packaged games and plastic replicas. He examined a lower shelf more closely, and breathed sharply when his eyes caught the glittering object marked: *Look, kids! Just like the real thing!*

He went into the store and leaned one elbow on the glass countertop. The little man who ran the shop blinked and smiled.

Arthur said, "Let's have a look at that badge, buster."





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