The World's Leading Mystery Magazine

SEPTEMBER 35¢

ELLERY QUEEN'S Mystery Magazine

New Stories by

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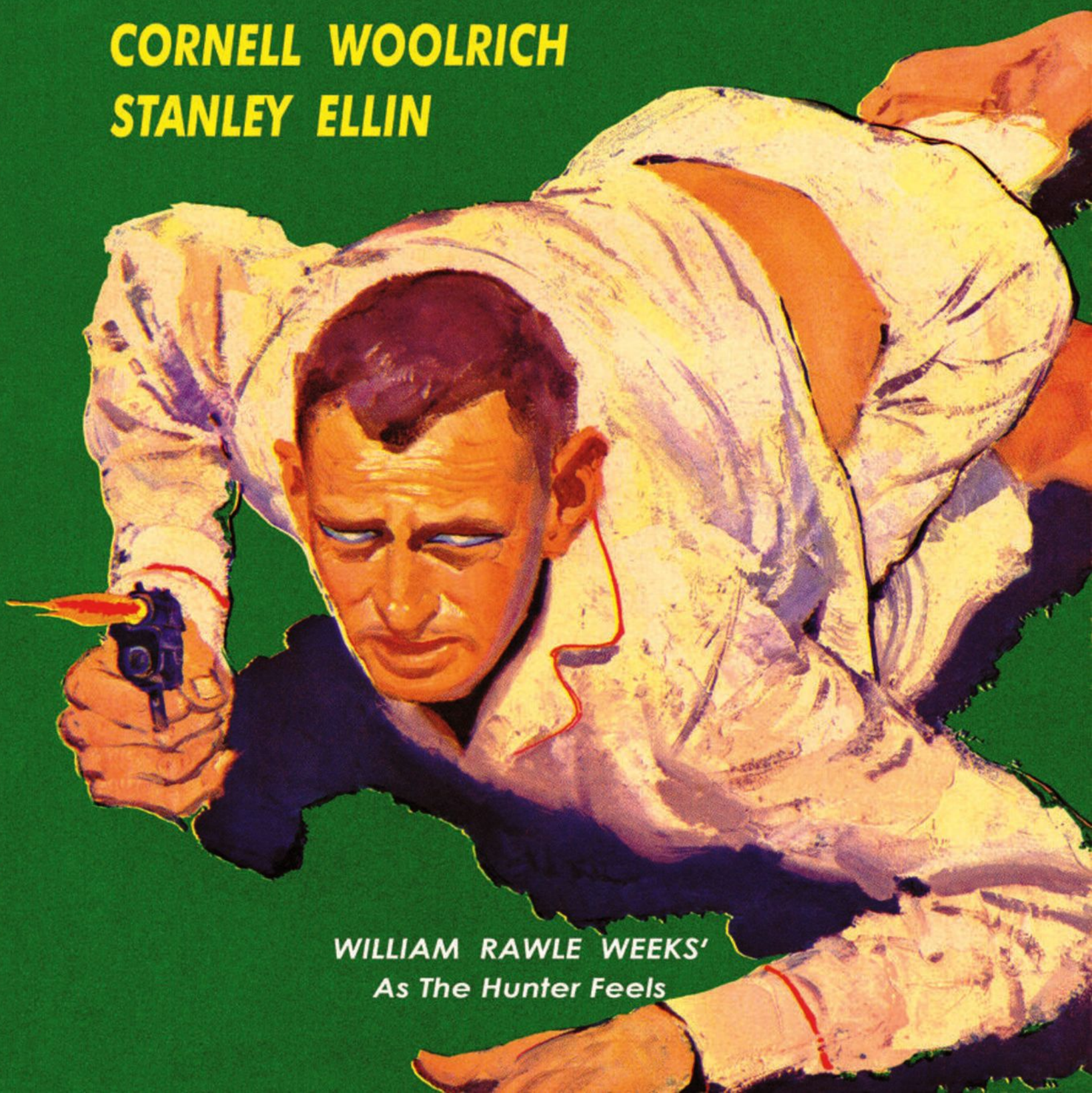

WILLIAM RAWLE WEEKS'
As The Hunter Feels

The World's Leading Mystery Magazine

ELLERY QUEEN'S
Mystery Magazine

***including* BLACK MASK MAGAZINE**

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EQMM SPECIAL

A New Kind of Publishing Event

This month, August 1958, Random House is bringing out Cornell Woolrich's first non-mystery book in more than twenty years. It is titled HOTEL ROOM, *and the publishers describe it as a tour de force.*

The room of the book's title is Number 923 in the "Hotel Anselm," which opened its doors in midtown New York in 1896 (resplendently new and high-class) and closed its doors in 1957 (seedy and down-at-the-heels). The fabric of the book is a series of seven episodes about transient guests who stayed in Room 923 on those dates when history was being made — the entry of the United States in World War I, Armistice Day, the stock market crash, the eve of Pearl Harbor . . .

Now, Mr. Woolrich's original manuscript contained eight *episodes about Room 923, and since one of those episodes had no specific historical tie-in, the author and his publishers decided to omit it from the book version. But that omitted episode is a complete story that in its own offbeat way is of particular interest to mystery fans — and it is that omitted story we now give to you! This is perhaps the first time in publishing history that a magazine is offering, simultaneously with the appearance of a new book, a story from that book which is not included in the book!*

As for the story itself, the chief character is a pulp mystery writer who is assigned a rush order—to write a cover story about a girl in disheveled evening dress desperately fleeing from a wild-eyed, menacing pursuer. The writer holes up in Room 923 . . . and that is all we are going to tell you!

THE PENNY-A-WORDER

by CORNELL WOOLRICH

THE DESK CLERK RECEIVED A CALL early that afternoon, asking if there was a "nice, quiet" room available for about six o'clock that evening. The call was evidently from a business office, for the caller was a young woman who, it developed, wished the intended reservation made in a man's name, whether her employer or one of

the firm's clients she did not specify. Told there was a room available, she requested, "Well, will you please hold it for Mr. Edgar Danville Moody, for about six o'clock?" And twice more she reiterated her emphasis on the noiselessness. "It's got to be quiet, though. Make sure it's quiet. He mustn't be disturbed while he's in it."

The desk man assured her with a touch of dryness, "We run a quiet hotel altogether."

"Good," she said warmly. "Because we don't want him to be distracted. It's important that he have complete privacy."

"We can promise that," said the desk clerk.

"Thank you," said the young woman briskly.

"Thank you," answered the desk man.

The designated registrant arrived considerably after six, but not late enough for the reservation to have been voided. He was young—if not under thirty in actuality, still well under it in appearance. He had tried to camouflage his youthful appearance by coaxing a very slim, sandy mustache out along his upper lip. It failed completely in its desired effect. It was like a make-believe mustache ochred on a child's face.

He was a tall lean young man. His attire was eye-catching — it stopped just short of being theatrically flamboyant. Or, depending on the viewer's own taste, just crossed the line. The night being chilly for this early in the season, he was enveloped in a coat of fuzzy sand-colored texture, known generically as camel's-hair, with a belt gathered whiplash-tight around its middle. On the other hand, chilly or not, he had no hat whatever.

His necktie was patterned in regimental stripes, but they were perhaps the wrong regiments, selected from opposing armies. He carried a pipe clenched between his teeth, but with the bowl empty and turned down. A wide band of silver encircled the stem. His shoes were piebald affairs, with saddles of mahogany hue and the remainder almost yellow. They had no eyelets or laces, but were made like moccasins, to be thrust on the foot whole; a fringed leather tongue hung down on the outer side of each vamp.

He was liberally burdened with belongings, but none of these was a conventional, clothes-carrying piece of luggage. Under one arm he held tucked a large flat square, wrapped in brown paper, string-tied, and suggesting a picture-canvas. In that same hand he carried a large wrapped parcel, also brown-paper-bound; in the other a cased portable typewriter. From one pocket of the coat protruded rakishly a long oblong, once again brown-paper-wrapped.

Although he was alone, and not unduly noisy either in his move-

ments or his speech, his arrival had about it an aura of flurry and to-do, as if something of vast consequence were taking place. This, of course, might have derived from the unsubdued nature of his clothing. In later life he was not going to be the kind of man who is ever retiring or inconspicuous.

He disencumbered himself of all his paraphernalia by dropping some onto the floor and some onto the desk top, and inquired, "Is there a room waiting for Edgar Danville Moody?"

"Yes, sir, there certainly is," said the clerk cordially.

"Good and quiet, now?" he warned intently.

"You won't hear a pin drop," promised the clerk.

The guest signed the registration card with a flourish.

"Are you going to be with us long, Mr. Moody?" the clerk asked.

"It better not be too long," was the enigmatic answer, "or I'm in trouble."

"Take the gentleman up, Joe," hosted the clerk, motioning to a bellboy.

Joe began collecting the articles one by one.

"Wait a minute, not Gertie!" he was suddenly instructed.

Joe looked around, first on one side, then on the other. There was no one else standing there. "Gertie?" he said blankly.

Young Mr. Moody picked up the portable typewriter, patted the lid affectionately. "This is Gertie," he enlightened him. "I'm superstitious. I don't let anyone but me carry her when we're out on a job together."

They entered the elevator together, Moody carrying Gertie.

Joe held his peace for the first two floors, but beyond that he was incapable of remaining silent. "I never heard of a typewriter called Gertie," he remarked mildly, turning his head from the controls.

"I've worn out six," Moody proclaimed proudly. "Gertie's my seventh." He gave the lid a little love-pat. "I call them alphabetically. My first was Alice."

Joe was vastly interested. "How could you wear out six, like that? Mr. Elliot's had the same one in his office for years now, ever since I first came to work here, and he hasn't wore his out yet."

"Who's he?" said Moody.

"The hotel accountant."

"Aw-w-w," said Moody with vast disdain. "No wonder. He just writes figures. I'm a *writer*."

Joe was all but mesmerized. He'd liked the young fellow at sight, but now he was hypnotically fascinated. "Gee, are you a writer?" he said, almost breathlessly. "I always wanted to be a writer myself."

Moody was too interested in his own being a writer to acknowledge the other's wish to be one too.

"You write under your own name?" hinted Joe, unable to take his eyes off the new guest.

"Pretty much so." He enlarged on the reply. "Dan Moody. Ever read me?"

Joe was too innately naive to prevaricate plausibly. He scratched the back of his head. "Let me see now," he said. "I'm trying to think."

Moody's face dropped, almost into a sulk. However in a moment it had cleared again. "I guess you don't get much time to read, anyway, on a job like this," he explained to the satisfaction of the two of them.

"No, I don't, but I'd sure like to read something of yours," said Joe fervently. "Especially now that I know you." He wrenched at the lever, and the car began to reverse. It had gone up three floors too high, so intense had been his absorption.

Joe showed him into Room 923 and disposed of his encumbrances. Then he lingered there, unable to tear himself away. Nor did this have anything to do with the delay in his receiving a tip; for once, and in complete sincerity, Joe had forgotten all about there being such a thing.

Moody shed his tent-like topcoat, cast it onto a chair with a billowing overhead fling like a person about to immerse in a bath. Then he began to burst open brown paper with explosive sounds all over the room.

From the flat square came an equally flat, equally square cardboard mat, blank on the reverse side, protected by tissues on the front. Moody peeled these off to reveal a startling composition in vivid oil-paints. Its main factors were a plump-breasted girl in a disheveled, lavender-colored dress desperately fleeing from a pursuer, the look on whose face promised her additional dishevelment.

Joe became goggle-eyed, and remained so. Presently he took a step nearer, remaining transfixed. Moody stood the cardboard mat on the floor, against a chair.

"You do that?" Joe breathed in awe.

"No, the artist. It's next month's cover. I have to do a story to match up with it."

Joe said, puzzled, "I thought they did it the other way around. Wrote the story first, and then illustri-ated it."

"That's the usual procedure," Moody said, professionally glib. "They pick a feature story each month, and put that one on the cover. This time they had a little trouble. The fellow that was supposed to do the feature didn't come through on time, got sick or something. So the artist had to start off first, without waiting for him. Now there's no time left, so I have to rustle up a story to fit the cover."

"Gee," said Joe. "Going to be hard, isn't it?"

"Once you get started, it goes by itself. It's just getting started that's hard."

From the bulkier parcel had come, in the interim, two sizable slabs wrapped alike in dark-blue paper. He tore one open to extract a ream of white first-sheets, the other to extract a ream of manila second-sheets.

"I'm going to use this table here," he decided, and planted one stack on one corner of it, the second stack on the opposite corner. Between the two he placed Gertie the typewriter, in a sort of position of honor.

Also from the same parcel had come a pair of soft house-slippers, crushed together toe-to-heel and heel-to-toe. He dropped them under the table. "I can't write with my shoes on," he explained to his new disciple. "Nor with the neck of my shirt buttoned," he added, parting that and flinging his tie onto a chair.

From the slender pocket-slanted oblong, last of the wrapped shapes, came a carton of cigarettes. The pipe, evidently reserved for non-occupational hours, he promptly discarded.

"Now, is there an ashtray?" he queried, like a commander surveying an intended field of action.

Joe darted in and out of several corners of the room. "Gee, no, the last people must have swiped it," he said. "Wait a minute, I'll go get—"

"Never mind, I'll use this instead," decided Moody, bringing over a metal wastebasket. "The amount of ashes I make when I'm working, a tray wouldn't be big enough to hold it all anyway."

The phone gave a very short ring, querulously interrogative. Moody picked it up, then relayed to Joe, "The man downstairs wants to know what's holding you, why you don't come down."

Joe gave a start, then came down to his everyday employment level from the rarefied heights of artistic creation he had been floating about in. He couldn't bear to turn his back, he started going backward to the door instead. "Is there anything else—?" he asked regretfully.

Moody passed a crumpled bill over to him. "Bring me back a—let's see, this is a cover story—you better make it an even dozen bottles of beer. It relaxes me when I'm working. Light, not dark."

"Right away, Mr. Moody," said Joe eagerly, beating a hasty retreat.

While he was gone, Moody made his penultimate preparations: sitting down to remove his shoes and put on the slippers, bringing within range and adjusting the focus of a shaded floor lamp, shifting the horrendous work of art back against the baseboard of the opposite wall so that it faced him squarely just over the table.

Then he went and asked for a number on the phone, without having to look it up.

A young woman answered, "Peerless, good evening."

He said, "Mr. Tartell please."

Another young woman said, "Mr. Tartell's office."

He said, "Hello, Cora. This is Dan Moody. I'm up here and I'm all set. Did Mr. Tartell go home yet?"

"He left half an hour ago," she said. "He left his home number with me, told me to give it to you; he wants you to call him in case you run into any difficulties, have any problems with it. But not later than eleven—they go to bed early out there in East Orange."

"I won't have any trouble," he said self-assuredly. "How long have I been doing this?"

"But this is a cover story. He's very worried. We have to go to the printer by nine tomorrow—we can't hold him up any longer."

"I'll make it, I'll make it," he said. "It'll be on his desk waiting for him at eight thirty on the dot."

"Oh, and I have good news for you. He's not only giving you Bill Hammond's rate on this one—two cents a word—but he told me to tell you that if you do a good job, he'll see to it that you get that extra additional bonus over and above the word count itself that you were hinting about when he first called you today."

"Swell!" he exclaimed gratefully.

A note of maternal instruction crept into her voice. "Now get down to work and show him what you can do. He really thinks a lot of you, Dan. I'm not supposed to say this. And try to have it down here before he comes in tomorrow. I hate to see him worry so. When he worries, I'm miserable along with him. Good luck." And she hung up.

Joe came back with the beer, six bottles in each of two paper sacks.

"Put them on the floor alongside the table, where I can just reach down," instructed Moody.

"He bawled the heck out of me downstairs, but I don't care, it was worth it. Here's a bottle opener the delicatessen people gave me."

"That about kills what I gave you." Moody calculated, fishing into his pocket. "Here's—"

"No," protested Joe sincerely, with a dissuading gesture. "I don't want to take any tip from *you*, Mr. Moody. You're different from other people that come in here. You're a Writer, and I always wanted to be a writer myself. But if I could ever get to read a story of yours—" he added wistfully.

Moody promptly rummaged in the remnants of the brown paper, came up with a magazine which had been entombed there. "Here—here's last month's," he said. "I was taking it home with me, but I can get another at the office."

Its title was *Startling Stories!*—complete with exclamation point. Joe wiped his fingertips reverently against his uniform before touching it, as though afraid of defiling it.

Moody opened it for him, offered it to him that way. "Here I am,

here," he said. "Second story. Next month I'm going to be the lead story, going to open the book on account of doing the cover story." He harked back to his humble beginnings for an indulgent moment. "When I first began, I used to be all the way in the back of the book. You know, where the muscle-building ads are."

"'Killing Time, by Dan Moody,'" Joe mouthed softly, like someone pronouncing a litany.

"They always change your titles on them, I don't know why," Moody complained fretfully. "My own title for that one was 'Out of the Mouths of Guns.' Don't you think that's better?"

"Wouldje—?" Joe was fumbling with a pencil, half afraid to offer it.

Moody took the pencil from Joe's fingers, wrote on the margin alongside the story title: "The best of luck to you, Joe—Dan Moody," Joe the while supporting the magazine from underneath with the flaps of both hands, like an acolyte making an offering at some altar.

"Gee," Joe breathed, "I'm going to keep this forever. I'm going to paste transparent paper over it, so it won't get rubbed off, where you wrote."

"I would have done it in ink for you," Moody said benevolently, "only the pulp paper won't take it —it soaks it up like a blotter."

The phone gave another of its irritable, foreshortened blats.

Joe jumped guiltily, hastily backed toward the door. "I better get back on duty, or he'll be raising cain down there." He half closed the door, reopened it to add, "If there's anything you want, Mr. Moody, just call down for me. I'll drop anything I'm doing and beat it right up here."

"Thanks, I will, Joe," Moody promised, with the warm, comfortable smile of someone whose ego has just been talcumed and cuddled in cotton-wool.

"And good luck to you on the story. I'll be rooting for you!"

"Thanks again, Joe."

Joe closed the door deferentially, holding the knob to the end, so that it should make a minimum of noise and not disturb the mystic creative process about to begin inside.

Before it did, however, Moody went to the phone and asked for a nearby Long Island number. A soprano that sounded like a schoolgirl's got on.

"It's me, honeybunch," Moody said.

The voice had been breathless already, so it couldn't get any more breathless; what it did do was not get any less breathless. "What happened? Ooh, hurry up, tell me! I can't wait. Did you get the assignment on the cover story?"

"Yes, I got it! I'm in the hotel room right now, and they're paying all the charges. And listen to this: I'm getting double word-rate, two cents—"

A squeal of sheer joy answered him.

"And wait a minute, you didn't let me finish. If he likes the job, I'm even getting an extra additional bonus on top of all that. Now what do you have to say to that?"

The squeals became multiple this time—a series of them instead of just one. When they subsided, he heard her almost gasp: "Oh, I'm so proud of you!"

"Is Sonny-bun awake yet?"

"Yes. I knew you'd want to say good night to him, so I kept him up. Wait a minute, I'll go and get him."

The voice faded, then came back again. However, it seemed to be as unaccompanied as before. "Say something to Daddy. Daddy's right here. Daddy wants to hear you say something to him."

Silence.

"Hello, Sonny-bun. How's my little Snooky?" Moody coaxed.

More silence.

The soprano almost sang, "Daddy's going to do a big important job. Aren't you going to wish him luck?"

There was a suspenseful pause, then a startled cluck like that of a little barnyard fowl, "Lock!"

The squeals of delight this time came from both ends of the line, and in both timbres, soprano and tenor. "He wished me luck! Did you hear that? He wished me luck! That's a good omen. Now it's bound to be a lulu of a story!"

The soprano voice was too taken up distributing smothered kisses over what seemed to be a considerable surface-area to be able to answer.

"Well," he said, "guess I better get down to business. I'll be home before noon—I'll take the ten forty-five, after I turn the story in at Tartell's office."

The parting became breathless, flurried, and tripartite.

"Do a bang-up job now"/"I'll make it a smasheroo"/"Remember, Sonny-bun and I are rooting for you"/"Miss me"/"And you miss us, too"/*"Smack, smack"/"Smack, smack, smack"/"Gluck!"*

He hung up smiling, sighed deeply to express his utter satisfaction with his domestic lot. Then he turned away, lathered his hands briskly, and rolled up his shirt sleeves.

The preliminaries were out of the way, the creative process was about to begin. The creative process, that mystic life force, that splurge out of which has come the Venus de Milo, the Mona Lisa, the Fantasie Impromptu, the Bayeux tapestries, Romeo and Juliet, the windows of Chartres Cathedral, Paradise Lost —and a pulp murder story by Dan Moody. The process is the same in all; if the results are a little uneven, that doesn't invalidate the basic similarity of origin.

He sat down before Gertie and, noting that the oval of light from the lamp fell on the machine, to

the neglect of the polychrome cardboard mat which slanted in comparative shade against the wall, he adjusted the pliable lamp-socket so that the luminous egg was cast almost completely on the drawing instead, with the typewriter now in the shadow. Actually he didn't need the light on his typewriter. He never looked at the keys when he wrote, nor at the sheet of paper in the machine. He was an expert typist, and if in the hectic pace of his fingering he sometimes struck the wrong letter, they took care of that down at the office, Tartell had special proofreaders for that. That wasn't Moody's job—he was the creator, he couldn't be bothered with picayune details like a few typographic errors. By the same token, he never went back over what he had written to reread it; he couldn't afford to, not at one cent a word (his regular rate) and at the pressure under which he worked. Besides, it was his experience that it always came out best the first time; if you went back and reread and fiddled around with it, you only spoiled it.

He palmed a sheet of white paper off the top of the stack and inserted it smoothly into the roller—an automatic movement to him. Ordinarily he made a sandwich of sheets—a white on top, a carbon in the middle, and a yellow at the bottom; that was in case the story should go astray in the mail, or be mislaid at the magazine office before the cashier had issued a check for it. But it was totally unnecessary in this case; he was delivering the story personally to Tartell's desk, it was a rush order, and it was to be sent to press immediately. Several extra moments would be wasted between manuscript pages if he took the time to make up "sandwiches," and besides, those yellow second-sheets cost forty-five cents a ream at Goldsmith's (fifty-five elsewhere). You had to watch your costs in this line of work.

He lit a cigarette, the first of the many that were inevitably to follow, that always accompanied the writing of every story—the cigarette-to-begin-on. He blew a blue pinwheel of smoke, craned his neck slightly, and stared hard at the master plan before him, standing there against the wall. And now for the first line. That was always the gimmick in every one of his stories. Until he had it, he couldn't get into it; but once he had it, the story started to unravel by itself—it was easy going after that, clear sailing. It was like plucking the edge of the gauze up from an enormous criss-crossed bandage.

The first line, the first line—

He stared intently, almost hypnotically.

Better begin with the girl—she was very prominent on the cover, and then bring the hero in later. Let's see, she was wearing a violet evening dress—

The little lady in the violet eve-

ning dress came hurrying terrifiedly down the street, looking back in terror. Behind her

His hands poised avariciously, then drew back again. No, wait a minute, she wouldn't be wearing an evening dress on the street, violet or any other color. Well, she'd have to change into it later in the story, that was all. In a 20,000-word novelette there would be plenty of room for her to change into an evening dress. Just a single line would do it, anywhere along.

She went home and changed her dress, and then came back again.

Now, let's try it again—

The beautiful red-head came hurrying down the street, looking back in terror. Behind her

Again he got stuck. Yes, but who was after her, and what had she done for them to be after her for? That was the problem.

I started in too soon, he decided. I better go back to where she does something that gets somebody after her. Then the chase can come in after that.

The cigarette was at an end, without having ignited anything other than itself. He started another one.

Now, let's see. What would a beautiful, innocent, *good* girl do that would be likely to get somebody after her? She had to be good—Tartell was very strict about that. "I don't want any lady-bums in my stories. If you have to introduce a lady-bum into one of my stories, see that you kill her off as soon as you can. And whatever you do, don't let her get next to the hero too much. Keep her away from the hero. If he falls for her, he's a sap. And if he doesn't fall for her, he's too much of a goody-goody. Keep her in the background—just let her open the door in a négligée when the big-shot gangster drops in for a visit. And close the door again—fast!"

He swirled a hand around in his hair, in a massage-like motion, dropped it to the table, pumeled the edge of the table with it twice, the way a person does when he's trying to start a balky drawer open. Let's see, let's see . . . She could find out something that she's not supposed to, and then *they* find out that she has found out, and they start after her to shut her up—good enough, that's it! Now, *how* did she find it out? She could go to a beauty parlor, and overhear in the next booth—no, beauty parlors were too feminine; Tartell wouldn't allow one of them in his stories. Besides, Moody had never been in one, wouldn't have known how to describe it on the inside. She could be in a phone booth and through the partition— No, he'd used that gambit in the July issue—in *Death Drops a Slug.*

A little lubrication was indicated here—something to help make the wheels go around, soften up the kinks. Absently, he picked up the bottle opener that Joe had left for

him, reached down to the floor, brought up a bottle and uncapped it, still with that same one hand, using the edge of the table for leverage. He poured a very little into the tumbler, and did no more than chastely moisten his lips with it.

Now. She could get a package at her house, and it was meant for somebody else, and—

He had that peculiar instinctive feeling that comes when someone is looking at you intently, steadfastly. He shook it off with a slight quirk of his head. It remained in abeyance for a moment or two, then slowly settled on him again.

The story thread suddenly dropped in a hopeless snarl, just as he was about to get it through the needle's eye of the first line.

He turned his head, to dissipate the feeling by glancing in the direction from which it seemed to assail him. And then he saw it. A pigeon was standing utterly motionless on the ledge just outside the pane of the window. Its head was cocked inquiringly, it was turned profileward toward him, and it was staring in at him with just the one eye. But the eye was almost leaning over toward the glass, it was so intent—less than an inch or two away from it.

As he stared back, the eye solemnly blinked. Just once, otherwise giving no indication of life.

He ignored it and turned back to his task.

There's a ring at the bell, she goes to the door, and a man hands her a package—

His eyes crept uncontrollably over to their extreme outer corners, as if trying to take a peek without his knowledge. He brought them back with a reprimanding knitting of the brows. But almost at once they started over that way again. Just knowing the pigeon was standing out there seemed to attract his eyes almost magnetically.

He turned his head toward it again. This time he gave it a heavy baleful scowl. "Get off of there," he mouthed at it. "Go somewhere else." He spoke by lip motion alone, because the glass between prevented hearing.

It blinked. More slowly than the first time, if a pigeon's blink can be measured. Scorn, contempt seemed to be expressed by the deliberateness of its blink.

Never slow to be affronted, he kindled at once. He swung his arm violently around toward it, in a complete half circle of riddance. Its wing feathers erupted a little, subsided again, as if the faintest of breezes had caressed them. Then with stately pomp it waddled around in a half circle, brought the other side of its head around toward the glass, and stared at him with the eye on that side.

Heatedly, he jumped from his chair, strode to the window, and flung it up. "I told you to get off of there!" he said threateningly. He

gave the air immediately over the surface of the ledge a thrashing swipe with his arm.

It eluded the gesture with no more difficulty than a child jumping rope. Only, instead of coming down again as the rope passed underneath, it stayed up! It made a little looping journey with scarcely stirring wings, and as soon as his arm was drawn in again, it descended almost to the precise spot where it had stood before.

Once more they repeated this passage between them, with identical results. The pigeon expended far less energy coasting around at a safe height than he did flinging his arm hectically about, and he realized that a law of diminishing returns would soon set in on this point. Moreover, he over-aimed the second time and crashed the back of his hand into the stone coping alongside the window, so that he had to suck at his knuckles and breathe on them to alleviate the sting.

He had never hated a bird so before. In fact, he had never hated a bird before.

He slammed the window down furiously. Thereupon, as though it realized it had that much more advance warning against possible armstrikes, the pigeon began to strut from one side to the other of the window ledge. Like a picket, enjoining him from working. Each time he made a turn, it cocked that beady eye at him.

He picked up the metal wastebasket and tested it in his hand for solidity. Then he put it down again, regretfully. He'd need it during the course of the story; he couldn't just drop the cigarette butts on the floor, he'd be kept too busy stamping them out to avoid starting a fire. And even if the basket knocked the damned bird off the ledge, it would probably go over with it.

He picked up the phone, demanded the desk clerk so that he could vent his indignation on something human.

"Do I have to have pigeons on my window sill?" he shouted accusingly. "Why didn't you tell me there were going to be pigeons on my window sill?"

The clerk was more than taken aback; he was stunned by the onslaught. "I—ah—ah—never had a complaint like this before," he finally managed to stammer.

"Well, you've got one now!" Moody let him know with firm disapproval.

"Yes, sir, but—but what's it doing?" the clerk floundered. "Is it making any noise?"

"It doesn't have to," Moody flared. "I just don't want it there!"

There was a momentary pause, during which it was to be surmised the clerk was baffled, scrubbing the side of his jaw, or perhaps his temple or forehead. Then he came back again, completely at a loss. "I'm sorry, sir—but I don't see what

you expect *me* to do about it. You're up there with it, and I'm down here. Haven't—haven't you tried chasing it?"

"Haven't I tried?" choked Moody exasperatedly. "That's all I've been doing! It free-wheels out and around and comes right back again!"

"Well, about the only thing I can suggest," the clerk said helplessly, "is to send up a boy with a mop or broom, and have him stand there by the window and—"

"I can't work with a bellboy in here doing sentinel duty with a mop or broom slung over his shoulder!" Moody exploded. "That'd be worse than the pigeon!"

The clerk breathed deeply, with bottomless patience. "Well, I'm sorry, sir, but—"

Moody got it out first. "'I don't see what I can do about it.' 'I don't see what I can do about it'!" he mimicked ferociously. "Thanks! You've been a big help," he said with ponderous sarcasm. "I don't know what I would have done without you!"—and hung up.

He looked around at it, a resigned expression in his eyes that those energetic, enthusiastic irises seldom showed.

The pigeon had its neck craned at an acute angle, almost down to the stone sill, but still looking in at him from that oblique perspective, as if to say, "Was that about me? Did it have to do with me?"

He went over and jerked the window up. That didn't even make it stir any more.

He turned and went back to his writing chair. He addressed the pigeon coldly from there. Aloud, but coldly, and with the condescension of the superior forms of life toward the inferior ones. "Look. You want to come in? Is that what it's all about? You're dying to come in? You won't be happy till you do come in? Then for the love of Mike come in and get it over with, and let me get back to work! There's a nice comfortable chair, there's a nice plumpy sofa, there's a nice wide bed-rail for a perch. The whole room is yours. Come in and have yourself a ball!"

Its head came up, from that sneaky way of regarding him under-wing. It contemplated the invitation. Then its twig-like little vermilion legs dipped and it threw him a derogatory chuck of the head, as if to say "That for you and your room!"—and unexpectedly took off, this time in a straight, unerring line of final departure.

His feet detonated in such a burst of choleric anger that the chair went over. He snatched up the wastebasket, rushed to the window, and swung it violently—without any hope, of course, of overtaking his already vanished target.

"Dirty damn squab!" he railed bitterly. "Come back here and I'll—! Doing that to me, after I'm just about to get rolling! I hope

you run into a high-tension wire headfirst. I hope you run into a hawk—"

His anger, however, settled as rapidly as a spent seidlitz powder. He closed the window without violence. A smothered chuckle had already begun to sound in him on his way back to the chair, and he was grinning sheepishly as he reached it.

"Feuding with a pigeon yet," he murmured deprecatingly to himself. "I'd better get a grip on myself."

Another cigarette, two good hearty gulps of beer, and now, let's see — where was I? The opening line. He stared up at the ceiling.

His fingers spread, poised, and then suddenly began to splatter all over the dark keyboard like heavy drops of rain.

"For me?" the young woman said, staring unbelievably at the shifty-eyed man holding the package.

"You're

One hand paused, then two of its fingers snapped, demanding inspiration. "Got to get a name for her," he muttered. He stared fruitlessly at the ceiling for a moment, then glanced over at the window. The hand resumed.

"You're Pearl Dove, ain't ya?"

"Why, yes, but I wasn't expecting anything."

("Not too much dialogue," Tartell always cautioned. "Get them moving, get them doing something. Dialogue leaves big blanks on the pages, and the reader doesn't get as much reading for his money.")

He thrust it at her, turned and disappeared as suddenly as he appeared

Two "appeareds" in one line—too many. He triphammered the x-key eight times.

and disappeared as suddenly as he had showed up. She tried to call him back but he was no longer in sight. Somewhere out in the night the whine of an expensive car taking off came to her ears

He frowned, closed his eyes briefly, then began typing automatically again.

She looked at the package she had been left holding

He never bothered to consult what he had written so far — such fussy niceties were for smooth-paper writers and poets. In stories like the one he was writing, it was almost impossible to break the thread of the action, anyway. Just so long as he kept going, that was all that mattered. If there was an occasional gap, Tartell's proofreaders would knit it together with a couple of words.

He drained the beer in the glass, refilled it, gazed dreamily at the ceiling. The wide, blank expanse of the ceiling gave his characters more room to move around in as his mind's eye conjured them up.

"She has a boy friend who's on the Homicide Squad," he murmured confidentially. "Not really a

boy friend, just sort of a brotherly protector." ("Don't give 'em sweethearts," was Tartell's constant admonishment, "just give 'em pals. You might want to kill the girl off, and if she's already his sweetheart you can't very well do that, or he loses face with the readers.") "She calls him up to tell him she has received a mysterious package. He tells her not to open it, he'll be right over—" The rest was mechanical fingerwork. Fast and furious. The keys dipped and rose like a canopy of leaves shot through by an autumn wind.

The page jumped up out of the roller by itself, and he knew he'd struck off the last line there was room for. He pitched it aside to the floor without even glancing at it, slipped in a new sheet, all in one accustomed, fluid motion. Then, with the same almost unconscious ease, he reached down for a new bottle, uncapped it, and poured until a cream puff of a head burgeoned at the top of it.

They were at the business of opening the package now. He stalled for two lines, to give himself time to improvise what was going to be inside the package, which he hadn't had an opportunity to do until now—

He stared down at it. Then his eyes narrowed and he nodded grimly.

"What do you make of it?" she breathed, clutching her throat.

Then he was smack up against it, and the improvisation had to be here and now. The keys coasted to a reluctant but full stop. There was almost smoke coming from them by now, or else it was from his ever-present cigarette riding the edge of the table, drifting the long way around by way of the machine.

There were always certain staples that were good for the contents of mysterious packages. Opium pellets —but that meant bringing in a Chinese villain, and the menace on the cover drawing certainly wasn't Chinese—

He got up abruptly, swung his chair out away from the table, and shifted it farther over, directly under the phantom tableau on the ceiling that had come to a halt simultaneously with the keys—the way the figures on a motion picture screen freeze into immobility when something goes wrong with the projector.

He got up on the chair seat with both feet, craned his neck, peered intently and with complete sincerity. He was only about two feet away from the visualization on the ceiling. His little bit of fetishism, or idiosyncrasy, had worked for him before in similar stoppages, and it did now. He could *see* the inside of the package, he could see—

He jumped lithely down again, looped the chair back into place, speared avidly at the keys.

Uncut diamonds!

"Aren't they beautiful?" she said,

clutching her pulsing throat.

(Well, if there were too many clutches in there, Tartell's hirelings could take one or two of them out. It was always hard to know what to have your female characters do with their hands. Clutching the throat and holding the heart were his own favorite standbys. The male characters could always be fingering a gun or swinging a punch at someone, but it wasn't refined for women to do that in *Startling Stories*!)

"Beautiful but hot," he growled. Her eyes widened. "How do you know?"

"They're the Espinoza consignment, they've been missing for a week." He unlimbered his gun. "This spells trouble for someone."

That was enough dialogue for a few pages—he had to get into some fast, red-hot action.

There weren't any more hitches now. The story flowed like a torrent. The margin bell chimed almost staccato, the roller turned with almost piston-like continuity, the pages sprang up almost like blobs of batter from a pancake skillet. The beer kept rising in the glass and, contradictorily, steadily falling lower. The cigarettes gave up their ghosts, long thin gray ghosts, in a good cause; the mortality rate was terrible.

His train of thought, the story's lifeline, beer-lubricated but no whit impeded, flashed and sputtered and coursed ahead like lightning in a topaze mist, and the loose fingers and hiccuping keys followed as fast as they could. Only once more, just before the end, was there a near hitch, and that wasn't in the sense of a stoppage of thought, but rather of an error in memory—what he mistakenly took to be a duplication. The line:

Hands clutching her throat, Pearl tore down the street in her violet evening dress

streamed off the keys, and he came to a lumbering, uneasy halt.

Wait a minute, I had that in in the beginning. She can't keep running down the street all the time in a violet evening dress; the readers'll get fed up. How'd she get into a violet evening dress anyway? A minute ago the guy *tore her white blouse and revealed her quivering white shoulder.*

He half turned in the chair (and none too steadily), about to essay the almost hopeless task of winnowing through the blanket of white pages that lay all around him on the floor, and then recollection came to his aid in the nick of time.

I remember now! I moved the beginning around to the middle, and began with the package at the door instead. (It seemed like a long, long time ago, even to him, that the package had arrived at the door; weeks and weeks ago; another story ago.) This is the first time she's run down the street in a violet evening dress, she hasn't done it before. Okay, let her run.

However, logically enough, in order to get her into it in the first place, he x-ed out the line anyway, and put in for groundwork:

"If it hadn't been for your quick thinking, that guy would have got me sure. I'm taking you to dinner tonight, and that's an order."

"I'll run home and change. I've got a new dress I'm dying to break in."

And that took care of that.

Ten minutes later (according to story time, not his), due to the unfortunate contretemps of having arrived at the wrong café at the wrong time, the line reappeared, now legitimatized, and she was duly *tearing down the street, screaming, clutching her throat with her violet evening dress.* (The "with" he had intended for an "in.") The line had even gained something by waiting. This time she was screaming as well, which she hadn't been doing the first time.

And then finally, somewhere in the malt-drenched mists ahead, maybe an hour or maybe two hours, maybe a dozen cigarettes or maybe a pack and a half, maybe two bottles of beer or maybe four, a page popped up out of the roller onto which he had just ground the words *The End,* and the story was done.

He blew out a deep breath, a vacuum-cleaner-deep breath. He let his head go over and rest for a few moments against the edge of the table. Then he got up from the chair, very unsteadily, and wavered over toward the bed, treading on the litter of fallen pages. But he had his shoes off, so that didn't hurt them much.

He didn't hear the springs creak as he flattened out. His ears were already asleep . . .

Sometime in the early morning, the very early early-morning (just like at home), that six-year-old of the neighbors started with that velocipede of his, racing it up and down in front of the house and trilling the bell incessantly. He stirred and mumbled disconsolately to his wife, "Can't you call out the window and make that brat stay in front of his own house with that damn contraption?"

Moody struggled up tormentedly on one elbow, and at that point the kid characteristically went back into the house for good, and the ringing stopped. But when Moody opened his blurred eyes, he wasn't sitting up at home at all; he was in a hotel room.

"Take your time," a voice said sarcastically. "I've got all day."

Moody swiveled his head, stunned, and Joe was holding the room door open to permit Tartell, his magazine editor, to glare in at him. Tartell was short, but impressive. He was of a great age, as Moody's measurements of time went, a redwood-tree age, around forty-five or forty-eight or somewhere up there. And right now

Tartell wasn't in good humor.

"Twice the printers have called," he barked, "asking if they get that story today or not!"

Moody's body gave a convulsive jerk and his heels braked against the floor. "Gee, is it that late—?"

"No, not at all!" Tartell shouted. "The magazine can come out anytime! Don't let a little thing like that worry you! If Cora hadn't had the presence of mind to call me at my house before I left for the office, I wouldn't have stopped by here like this, and we'd all be waiting around another hour down at the office. Now where is it? Let me have it. I'll take it down with me."

Moody gestured helplessly toward the floor, which looked as though a political rally, with pamphlets, had taken place on it the night before.

"Very systematic," Tartell commented acridly. He surged forward into the room, doubling over into a sort of cushiony right-angle as he did so, and began to zigzag, picking up papers without let-up, like a diligent, near-sighted park attendant spearing leaves at close range. "This is fine right after a heavy breakfast," he added. "The best thing I could do!"

Joe looked pained, but on Moody's behalf, not Tartell's. "I'll help you, sir," he offered placatingly, and started bobbing in turn.

Tartell stopped suddenly, and without rising, seemed to be trying to read, from the unconventional position of looking straight down from up above. "They're blank," he accused. "Where does it begin?"

"Turn them over," Moody said, wearied with so much fussiness. "They must have fallen on their faces."

"They're that way on both sides, Mr. Moody," Joe faltered.

"What've you been doing?" Tartell demanded wrathfully. "Wait a minute—!" His head came up to full height, he swerved, went over to Gertie, and examined the unlidded machine closely.

Then he brought both fists up in the air, each still clutching pinwheels of the sterile pages, and pounded them down with maniacal fury on both ends of the writing table. The noise of the concussion was only less than the noise of his unbridled voice.

"You damn-fool idiot!" he roared insanely, looking up at the ceiling as if in quest of aid with which to curb his assault-tempted emotions. "You've been pounding thin air all night! You've been beating the hell out of blank paper! *You forgot to put a ribbon in your typewriter!*"

Joe, looking beyond Tartell, took a quick step forward, arms raised in support of somebody or something.

Tartell slashed his hand at him forbiddingly, keeping him where he was. "Don't catch him, let him land," he ordered, wormwood-bitter. "Maybe a good clunk against the floor will knock some sense into his stupid—talented—head."

a new story by

AUTHOR: **MICHAEL GILBERT**

TITLE: ***The Second Skin***

TYPE: Detective Story

DETECTIVE: Sergeant Petrella

LOCALE: London

TIME: The Present

COMMENTS: *"A coat is such a personal thing, almost a second skin." The raincoat in the Martin case was the "big clue"—the one that might lead to the "end of the scarlet thread."*

EDITORS' FILE CARD

THE TABLE WAS THE FIRST THING which caught your eye as you came into the room. Its legs were of green-painted angle-iron, bolted to the floor; its top was a solid block of polished teak.

Overhead shone five white fluorescent lights.

On the wide, shadowless, aseptic surface of the table the raincoat looked out of place, like some jolly, seedy old tramp who has strayed into an operating theater. A coat is such a personal thing, almost a second skin. As it loses its own shape and takes on the outlines of its wearer, as its pockets become a repository of tobacco flakes and sand and fragments of leaves, and its exterior becomes spotted with more unexpected things than rain, so a coat takes on a life of its own.

There was an element of indecency, Petrella thought, in tearing this life from it. The earnest man in rimless glasses and a white laboratory overall had just finished going over the lining with a pocket-sized vacuum cleaner that had a thimble-shaped container. Now he was at work on the exterior. He cut a broad strip of adhesive tape and laid it on the outside of the coat, pressing it down firmly. He then marked the area with a special pencil and pulled the tape off.

There was nothing visible to the naked eye on the under surface of the tape, but the laboratory man seemed satisfied.

"We'll make a few micro-slides," he said. "They'll tell us anything we want to know. There's no need for you to hang around if you don't want to."

Sergeant Petrella disliked being told, even indirectly, that he was wasting his time. If the truth must be told, he did not care for Scientific Assistant Worsley at all. Worsley had the slightly patronizing manner of one who has himself been admitted to the inner circles of knowledge and is speaking to unfortunates who are still outside the pale (a habit, Petrella had noticed, which was very marked at the outset of many scientific careers, but which diminished as the scientist gained experience and realized how little certainty there was, even under the eye of the microscope).

"All right," he said. "I'll push off and come back in a couple of hours."

"To do the job completely," said Worsley, "will take about six days." He looked complacently at the neat range of Petri dishes round the table and the test samples he had so far extracted. "Then perhaps another three days to tabulate the results."

"All the same," said Petrella, "I'll look in this evening and see what you have got for me"

"As long as you appreciate," said Worsley, "that the results I give you will be unchecked."

"I'll take the chance."

"That, of course, is for you to decide." The laboratory man's voice contained a reproof: impetuous people, police officers; unschooled in the discipline of science; jumpers to conclusions. People on whom careful, controlled research was usually wasted. Worsley sighed audibly.

Sergeant Petrella said nothing. He had long ago found out that it was a waste of time antagonizing people who were in a position to help you.

He consulted his watch, his notebook, and his stomach. He had a call to make in Wandsworth, another in Acton, and a third in South Harrow. Then he would come back to the Forensic Science Laboratory to see what Worsley had got for them. Then he would go back to Highside and report to Superintendent Haxtell. He might just possibly have time for lunch between Acton and South Harrow. If not, the prospect of food was remote, for once he reached Highside there was no saying that Haxtell would not have a lot more visits lined up for him.

All this activity—and, indirectly, the coat lying on the laboratory table—stemmed from a discovery made by a milkman at 39 Carhow Mansions. Carhow Mansions is a

tall block of flats overlooking the southern edge of Helenwood Common.

Miss Martin, who lived alone at 39, was a woman of about thirty. Neither beautiful nor clever; nor ugly, nor stupid. She was secretary to Dr. Hunter who had a house and consulting room in Wimpole Street. She did her work well and was well paid for it.

The flat, which was tucked away on the top story and was smaller than the others in the block, was known as a "single"—which means that it had about as little accommodation as one person could actually exist in. A living room which was also a dining room. A cubbyhole which served as a bedroom. Another cubbyhole called a kitchen and another called a bathroom. Not that Miss Martin had ever been heard to complain. She had no time to waste on housework and ate most of her meals out. Her interests were Shakespeare and tennis.

Which brings us to the milkman who, finding Friday's milk bottle still unused outside the door of Flat 39 on Saturday, mentioned the matter to the caretaker.

The caretaker was not immediately worried. Tenants often went away without telling him, although Miss Martin was usually punctilious about such matters. Later in the morning his rounds took him up to 39 and he looked at the two milk bottles and found the sight faintly disturbing. Fortunately he had his passkey with him.

Which brought Superintendent Haxtell onto the scene in a fast car. And Chief Superintendent Barstow from District Headquarters. And photographic and fingerprint detachments, and a well-known pathologist, and a crowd on the pavement, and a uniformed policeman to control them; and, eventually, since Carhow Mansions was in his district, Sergeant Petrella.

Junior detective sergeants do not conduct investigations into murders but they are allowed to help, in much the same way as a junior officer helps to run a war. They are allowed to do the work, while their superiors do the thinking. In this case there was a lot of work to do.

"I don't like it," said Barstow in the explosive rumble which was his normal conversational voice. "Here's this girl, as ordinary as apples and custard. No one's got a word to say against her. Her life's an open book. Then someone comes in and hits her on the head. Not once—five or six times."

"Any one of the blows might have caused death," agreed the pathologist. "She's been dead more than twenty-four hours. Probably killed on Friday morning. And I think there's no doubt that that was the weapon."

He indicated a heavy long-handled screwdriver.

"It could have belonged to her," said Haxtell. "Funny thing to find in a flat like this though. More like a piece of workshop equipment."

"All right," said Barstow. "Suppose the murderer brought it with him. Ideal for the job. You could force a front door with a thing like that. Then, if the owner comes out, it's just as handy as a weapon. But it's still"—he boggled over the word—"it's still mad."

And the further they looked, and the wider they spread their net, the madder it seemed.

Certain facts, however, came to light at once. Haxtell talked to Doctor Hunter of Wimpole Street within an hour. The doctor explained that Miss Martin had not come to work on Friday because he himself had ordered her to stay in bed. "I think she'd been overworking her eyes," said the doctor. "That gave her a headache, and the headache in turn affected her stomach. It was a form of migraine. What she needed was forty-eight hours on her back, with the blinds down. I told her to take Friday off and come back on Monday only if she felt well enough. She's been with me for nearly ten years now. An excellent secretary, and such a nice girl."

He spoke with so much warmth that Haxtell, who was a cynic, made a mental note of a possible line of inquiry. But nothing came of it. The doctor, it developed, was very happily married.

"That part of it fits all right," said Haxtell to Chief Superintendent Barstow. "She was in bed when the intruder arrived. He hit her as she was coming out of her bedroom."

"Then you think he was simply a housebreaker?"

"I imagine so. Yes," said Haxtell. "The screwdriver looks like the sort of thing a housebreaker would carry. You could force an ordinary mortice lock right off with it. He didn't have to use it in this instance because she used a simple catch lock that a child of six could open. I don't doubt he merely slipped it with a piece of talc."

"But why did he choose her flat?"

"Because it was an isolated one on the top floor. Or because he knew her habits. Just bad luck that she should have been at home at that time."

"Bad luck for her," agreed Barstow, sourly. "Well, we've got the machine working. We may turn something up."

Haxtell was an experienced police officer. He knew that investigating a murder was like dropping a stone into a pool of water. He started two inquiries at once. Everybody within a hundred yards of the flat was asked what they had been doing and whether they had noticed anything. And everyone remotely connected with Miss Martin, by ties of blood, friendship or business, was questioned.

It is a system which involves an enormous amount of work for a large number of people, and has only one thing in its favor: it is nearly always successful in the end.

To Sergeant Petrella fell the task of questioning all the other tenants in the building. This involved seven visits. In each case at least one person, it appeared, had been home all Friday morning. And no one had heard anything at all, which was disappointing. Had anything unusual happened on Friday morning? The first six people to whom this inquiry was addressed scratched their heads and said they didn't think anything had. The seventh mentioned the gentleman who had left census papers.

Now by then Petrella was both hot and tired. He was, according to which way you looked at it, either very late for his lunch or rather early for his tea. He was on the point of dismissing the gentleman with the census papers when the instinct—which guides all good policemen—drove him to persevere with one further inquiry. Had he not done so, the Martin case would probably have remained unsolved. But as the sergeant probed, a curious little story emerged. The gentleman had not actually left any papers behind him. He had been making preliminary inquiries as to the number of people on the premises so that further arrangements for the census could be made. The census papers themselves would be issued later.

Petrella trudged down three flights of stairs (it is only in a grave emergency that policemen are allowed to use private telephones) and rang up the Municipal Returning Officer from a call box. After that he revisited the first six flats. The occupants unanimously agreed that a "man from the Council" had called on them that Friday morning. They had not mentioned it because Petrella had asked if anything "unusual" had happened. There was nothing in the least unusual in men from the Council snooping round. Petrella asked for a description and collected, from his six informants, the following: the man in question was "young," "youngish," "and sort of middle-aged" (the last from a teen-aged daughter in 37); he was bareheaded and had tousled hair; he was wearing a hat; he had a shifty look (flat 34), a nice smile (teen-aged daughter); couldn't say, didn't really look at him (the remainder); he was about six foot, five foot nine, five foot six, and didn't notice; he had an ordinary sort of voice; he was wearing an old Harrovian tie (old gentleman in ground-floor flat 34); he seemed to walk with rather a stiff sort of leg, almost a limp (four out of six informants).

Petrella hurried back to Crown Road Police Station where he

found Haxtell and Barstow in conference.

"There doesn't seem to be much doubt," he reported, "that it was a sneak thief posing as a Council employee. I've checked with the Council and they are certain he couldn't have been genuine. His plan would be to knock once or twice. If he got no answer he'd either slip the lock or force it. He drew blank at the first seven flats—someone answered the door in each of them. When he got to 39, on the top floor, I expect Miss Martin didn't hear him. The migraine must have made her pretty blind and deaf."

"That's right, said Barstow. "And then she came out and caught him at it. So he hit her."

"The descriptions aren't much good," said Haxtell, "but we'll get all the pictures from the C.R.O. of people known to go in for this sort of lark. They may sort someone out for us."

"Don't forget the most important item," said Barstow. "The limp."

Petrella said, "It did occur to me to wonder whether we ought to place too much reliance on the limp, sir."

He received a glare which would have daunted a less self-confident man, but he persisted. "He would have to have somewhere to hide that big screwdriver. It was almost two feet long. The natural place would be a pocket inside his trouser leg. That might account for the appearance of a stiff leg."

Haxtell avoided Barstow's eye.

"It's an idea," Haxtell said. "Now just get along and start checking on this list of Miss Martin's known relations."

"There was one other thing—" Petrella went on.

"Do you know," observed Chief Superintendent Barstow unkindly, "why God gave young policemen two feet but only one head?"

Petrella took the hint and departed.

But the idea kept gnawing at Petrella and later that day, when he was alone with Superintendent Haxtell, he voiced it again.

"Do you remember," he said, "about six months ago, I think it was, we had an outbreak of this sort of thing in the Cholderton Road, Park Branch area? A man cleared out three or four blocks of flats, and we never caught him. He was posing as a Pools Salesman then."

"The man who left his coat behind?"

"That's right," said Petrella. "With Colonel Wing."

Colonel Wing was nearly ninety and stone-deaf, but still spry. He had fought in one Zulu and countless Afghan wars and the walls of his top-floor living room in Cholderton Mansions were adorned with a fine selection of assegais, yataghans, and knobkerries. Six months before the Martin

case he had had an experience which might have unnerved a less seasoned warrior. He was not an early riser. Pottering out of his bedroom one fine morning at about eleven o'clock he had observed a man kneeling in front of his sideboard and quietly sorting out the silver. It was difficult to say who had been more taken aback. The intruder had jumped up and run from the room. Colonel Wing had regretfully dismissed the idea of trying to spear him with an assegai from the balcony as he left the front door of the flats, and had rung up the police. They had made one curious discovery.

Hanging in the hall was a strange raincoat.

"Never seen it before in my life," insisted Colonel Wing. "D'you mean to say the damn fellow had the cheek to hang his coat up before starting work? Wonder he didn't help himself to a whiskey and soda while he was about it."

Haxtell said that he had known housebreakers to do just that. He talked to Colonel Wing at length about the habits of criminals; and removed the coat for examination. Since the crime was only an attempted robbery, it was not thought worthwhile wasting too much time on it. A superficial examination produced no results in the way of name tabs or tailor's marks, but the coat was carefully placed in cellophane and stored.

"I'd better have a word with him," suggested Petrella.

He found Colonel Wing engaged in writing a letter to the United Services Journal on the comparative fighting qualities of Zulus and Russians. The Colonel listened to the composite descriptions of the more recent intruder, and said that, so far as he could tell, they sounded like the same man. His intruder had been on the young side of middle age, of medium height, and strongly built.

"There's one thing," said the Colonel. "I saw him in a good light, and I may be deaf but I've got excellent eyesight. There's a tiny spot in his left eye. A little red spot, like a fire opal. You couldn't mistake it. If you catch him, I'll identify him for you."

"The trouble is," said Petrella, "that it looks as if he's never been through our hands. Almost the only real lead we've got is that coat he left behind him at your place. We're going over it again—much more thoroughly this time."

Thus the coat had grown in importance. It had improved its status. It had become an exhibit in a murder case.

"Give it everything," said Haxtell to the laboratory. And the scientists prepared to oblige.

That evening, after a weary afternoon spent interrogating Miss Martin's father's relatives in Acton and South Harrow, Petrella found himself back on the Embankment.

The Forensic Science Laboratory observes civilized hours and Mr. Worsley was on the point of removing his long white overall and replacing it with a rather deplorable tweed coat with homemade leather patches on the elbows.

"I've finished my preliminary work on the right-hand pocket," he said. "We have isolated arrowroot starch, pipe tobacco, and a quantity of common silver sand."

"Splendid," said Petrella. "Splendid. All I have now got to do is to find a housewife who smokes a pipe and has recently been to the seaside and we shall be home and dry."

"What use you make of the data we provide must be entirely a matter for you," said Mr. Worsley coldly. He was already late for a meeting of the South Wimbledon Medico-Legal Society to whose members he had promised a paper titled *The Part of the Laboratory in Modern Crime Detection.*

Petrella went back to Highside.

Here he found a note from Superintendent Haxtell which ran: "A friend of Miss Martin's has suggested that some of these were, or might have been, boy friends of the deceased. I am seeing the ones marked with a cross. Would you tackle the others?"

There followed a list of names and addresses ranging from Welwyn Garden City to Morden. Petrella looked at his watch. It was half-past seven. With any luck he could knock off a few of the names before midnight.

In the ensuing days the ripples spread, wider and wider, diminishing in size and importance as they became more distant from the center of the disturbance. Petrella worked his way from near relatives and close friends, who said, "How terrible! Who ever would have thought of anything like that happening to Marjorie," and then through more distant connections who said, "Miss Martin? Yes, I know her. I haven't seen her for a long time," all the way out to the circumference where people simply looked bewildered and said, "Miss Martin? —I'm sorry, I don't think I remember anyone of that name." And on being reminded that they had danced with her at a tennis club dance two years before, they said, "If you say so, I expect it's right—but I'm dashed if I can remember what she looked like."

It was in the course of the third day that Petrella called at a nice little house in Herne Hill. The name was Taylor. Mr. Taylor was not at home but the door was opened by his wife, a cheerful redhead who banished her two children to the kitchen when she understood what Petrella was after. Her reactions were the standard ones. Apprehension, followed as soon as she understood that what Petrella wanted had nothing to

do with her, by a cheerful communicativeness. Miss Martin was, she believed, her husband's cousin. That is to say, not his cousin but his second cousin, or something like that. Her husband's father's married sister's husband's niece. So far as she knew they had only met her once, and that was six months before, at the funeral of Miss Martin's mother who was, of course, sister to her husband's uncle by marriage.

Petrella disentangled this complicated relationship without too much difficulty. He was already a considerable expert on the Martin family tree. But unfortunately Mrs. Taylor could tell him nothing more. Her acquaintance with Miss Martin was confined to this single occasion and she had not set eyes on her since. Her husband, who was a commercial traveler for Joblox, the London paint firm, was unlikely to be back until very late. He was on a tour in the Midlands, and his return home depended on the traffic. Petrella said he quite understood. The interview remained in his memory chiefly because it was on his way back from it that he picked up his copy of the laboratory report on the raincoat.

The scientists had done themselves proud. Not one square inch of the coat's surface, interior or exterior, had escaped their microscopic gaze. Petrella cast his eye desperately over the eight closely typed foolscap pages. Stains on the exterior had been isolated, chemically tested, and proved beyond reasonable doubt to be, in two cases, ink, in one case rabbit blood, and in one case varnish. A quantity of sisal-hemp fluff had been recovered from the seam of the left-hand cuff and some marmalade from the right-hand one. A sliver of soft wood, originally identified on the Chatterton Key Card as ordinary *pinus sylvestris* was now believed to be *Chamaecyparis Lawsoniana*. In the right-hand pocket had been discovered a number of fragments of oyster shell and a stain of oil shown by quantitative analysis to be a thick oil of the sort used in marine engineering.

Petrella read the report in the underground between Charing Cross and Highside. When he reached Crown Road he found Haxtell in the C.I.D. room. The Superintendent had in front of him the reports of all visits made so far. There were two hundred and thirty of them. Petrella added the five he had completed that afternoon and was about to retire when he remembered the laboratory report and cautiously added that, too, to the pile. He was conscious of thunder in the air.

"Don't bother," said Haxtell. "I've had a copy." His eyes were red-rimmed from lack of sleep. "So has the Chief Superintendent. He's just been here. He wants us to take some action on it."

"Action, sir?"

"He suggests," said Haxtell in ominously quiet tones, "that we re-examine all persons interviewed so far"—his hand flickered for a moment over the pile of papers on the table—"to ascertain whether they have ever been interested in the oyster-fishing industry. He feels that the coincidence of oyster shell and marine oil must have some significance."

"I see, sir," said Petrella. "When do we start?"

Haxtell stopped himself within an ace of saying something which would have been both indiscreet and insubordinate. Then, to his eternal credit, he laughed instead.

"We are both," he said, "going to get one good night's rest first. We'll start tomorrow morning."

"I wonder if I could borrow the reports until then," said Petrella.

"Do what you like with them," said Haxtell. "I've got three days' routine work to catch up with."

Petrella took the reports back with him to Mrs. Cat's where that worthy widow had prepared a high tea for him, his first leisured meal in three days. Sustained by a mountainous dish of sausages and eggs and refreshed by his third cup of strong tea, he started on the task of proving the theory that had come to him.

Each paper was skimmed, then put to one side. Every now and then he would stop, extract one, and add it to a much smaller pile beside his plate. At the end of an hour Petrella looked at the results of his work with satisfaction. In the small pile were six papers—six summaries of interviews with friends or relations of the murdered girl. If his theory was right, he had thus, at a stroke, reduced the possibles from two hundred and thirty-five to six. And of those six possibles only one was a probable. He knew it in his heart of hearts.

There came back into his mind the visit he had made that afternoon. It was there, in that place and no other, the answer lay. There he had glimpsed, without realizing it, the end of the scarlet thread which led to the heart of this untidy, rambling labyrinth. He thought of a nice red-headed girl and two red-headed children, and unexpectedly he found himself shivering.

It was dusk before he got back to Herne Hill. The lights were on in the nice little house, upstairs and downstairs, and a muddy car stood in the gravel driveway leading to the garage. Sounds suggested that the red-headed children were being put to bed by both their parents and were enjoying it.

One hour went by, and then a second. Petrella had found an empty house opposite and he was squatting in the yard, his back propped against a tree. The night was warm and he was quite comfortable, and his head was nodding

on his chest when the front door of the house opposite opened, and Mr. Taylor appeared.

He stood for a moment, outlined against the light from the hall, saying something to his wife. He was too far off for Petrella to make out the words. Then he came down the path. He ignored his car and made for the front gate, for which Petrella was thankful. He had made certain arrangements to cope with the contingency that Mr. Taylor might use his car, but it was much easier if he remained on foot.

A short walk took them both, pursuer and pursued, to the door of the King of France public house. Mr. Taylor went into the saloon. Petrella himself chose the Private Bar. Like most Private Bars it had nothing to recommend it save its Privacy, being narrow, bare, and quite empty. But it had the advantage of looking straight across the serving counter into the saloon.

Petrella let his man order first. He was evidently a well-known character. He called the landlord Sam, and the landlord called him Mr. Taylor.

Petrella drank his own beer slowly. Ten minutes later the moment for which he had been waiting arrived. Mr. Taylor picked up a couple of glasses and strolled across with them to the counter. Petrella also rose casually to his feet. For a moment they faced each other, a bare two paces apart, under the bright bar lights.

Petrella saw in front of him a man of youngish middle age, with a nondescript face, neutral-colored tousled hair, perhaps five foot nine in height, and wearing some sort of old school tie.

As if aware that he was being looked at, Mr. Taylor raised his head; and Petrella observed, in the left eye, a tiny red spot. It was, as Colonel Wing had said, exactly the color of a fire opal . . .

"We showed his photograph to everyone in the block," said Haxtell with satisfaction, "and all of them picked it out straight away, out of a set of six. Also the Colonel."

"Good enough," said Chief Superintendent Barstow. "Any background?"

"We made a cautious inquiry at Joblox. Taylor certainly works for them. But he's what they call an outside commission man. He sells in his spare time and gets a percentage on sales. Last year he made about a hundred pounds."

"Which wouldn't keep him in his present style."

"Definitely not. And of course a job like that would be very useful cover for a criminal sideline. He could be out when and where he liked, and no questions asked by his family."

Barstow considered the matter slowly. The decision was his.

"Pull him in," he said. "Charge him with the job at Colonel Wing's. The rest will sort itself out quickly enough when we search his house. Take a search warrant with you. By the way, I never asked how you got onto him. Has he some connection with the oyster trade?"

Petrella said cautiously, "Well, no, sir. As a matter of fact, he hadn't. But the report was very useful corroborative evidence."

"Clever chaps, these scientists," said Barstow.

"Come clean," said Haxtell, when the Chief Superintendent had departed. "It had nothing to do with that coat, did it?"

"Nothing at all," said Petrella. "What occurred to me was that it was a very curious murder—presuming it was the same man both times. Take Colonel Wing: he's full of beans, but when all's said and done he's a frail old man, over ninety. He saw the intruder in a clear light and the man simply turned tail and bolted. Then he bumps into Miss Martin, who's a girl, but a muscular young tennis player, and he *kills* her, coldly and deliberately."

"From which you deduced that Miss Martin knew him, and he was prepared to kill to preserve the secret of his identity. Particularly as he had never been in the hands of the police."

"There was a bit more to it than that," said Petrella. "It had to be someone who knew Miss Martin, *but so casually that he would have no idea where she lived.* Mightn't even remember her name. If he'd had any idea that it was the flat of someone who knew him he wouldn't have touched it with a barge pole. What I was looking for, then, was someone who was distantly connected with Miss Martin, but happened to have renewed his acquaintance with her recently. He had to be a very distant connection, you see—*but they had to know each other by sight.* There were half a dozen who would have filled the bill. I had this one in my mind because I'd interviewed Mrs. Taylor only that afternoon. Of course, I'd have tried all the others afterwards. Only it wasn't necessary."

There was neither pleasure nor satisfaction in his voice. He was seeing nothing but a nice red-headed girl and two nice red-headed children . . .

It was perhaps six months later that Petrella ran across Colonel Wing again. The Taylor case was now only an uncomfortable memory, for Mr. Taylor had taken his own life in his cell at Wandsworth, and the red-headed girl was now a widow. Petrella was on his way home, and he might not have noticed him, but the Colonel came right across the road to greet him, narrowly missing death at the hands of a motorcyclist of whose

approach he had been blissfully unaware.

"Good evening, Sergeant," the old man said. "How are you?"

"Very well, thank you, Colonel," said Petrella. "And how are you?"

"I'm not getting any younger," said the Colonel. Petrella suddenly perceived that the old man was covered with embarrassment. He waited patiently for him to speak.

"I wonder," said the Colonel at last, "it's an awkward thing to have to ask, but could you get that coat back—you remember—?"

"Get it *back?*" asked Petrella. "I don't know. I suppose so."

"If it was mine, I wouldn't bother. But it isn't. I find it's my cousin Tom's. I'd forgotten all about it, until he reminded me."

Petrella stared at the old man.

"Do you mean to say—"

"Tom stayed the night with me—he does that sometimes, between trips. Just drops in. Of course, when he reminded me—"

"Between trips," repeated Petrella weakly. "He isn't by any chance an oyster fisherman?"

It was the Colonel's turn to stare.

"Certainly not," he said. "He's one of the best known breeders of budgerigars in the country."

"Budgerigars?"

"Very well known for them. I believe I'm right in saying he introduced the foreign system of burnishing their feathers with oil. It's funny you should mention oysters though. That's something he's very keen on. Powdered oyster shell in the feed. It improves their high notes."

Petrella removed his hat in a belated salute to the Forensic Science Laboratory.

"Certainly you shall have your coat back," he said. "It'll need a thorough cleaning and a little repairing, but I am delighted to know that at last it is going to be of use to someone."

EDITORS' FILE CARD

AUTHOR: **ST. CLAIR MCKELWAY**

TITLE: ***The Shooting at Forty-Seven***

TYPE: Crime Story

LOCALE: New York City

TIME: The Present

COMMENTS: *An intimate insight into the daily life of a disc jockey, on the morning of his 47th birthday, when his hangover was really no worse than usual . . . a "rascality" in the* New Yorker *manner.*

ON THE MORNING OF THE DAY HE shot a man for the first time in his life, Ted Parker began to come awake a few minutes after eleven. It was a Saturday, and he always slept late on Saturdays. He also slept late on Sundays. He was a moderately successful disc jockey employed by Station NYAS, and on Mondays, Tuesdays, Wednesdays, Thursdays, and Fridays he went to the studio at 7:30 A.M., where, after reading over the new texts, and the revisions in the old texts, of the twenty-six commercials he had to recite, or sometimes sing, in the course of the program, he gargled thoroughly with hot salt water, took a quarter-grain tablet of phenobarbital, chewed up and swallowed two anti-acid tablets made of pulverized aluminum, and was on the air at eight o'clock, saying, "This is Ted Parker, bringing you five hours of recorded music from Station NYAS, pronounced 'nice.' Yes, it's *nice* to be here once again at NYAS, because NYAS *sounds* just like what it is—*nice*. NYAS *sounds* nice. NYAS *is* nice."

Parker was past middle age, bald, fattish, with thin lips, a tiny thumb-end of a nose, and eyes that seemed square, rather than oval. His pink, unwrinkled face

expressed more than any other two things good-naturedness and patience. At cocktail parties and dinner parties, he smiled engagingly at women and shook hands earnestly with men. He was affable, gregarious, and anxious to please, and was asked out a good deal. (Hostess to host: "And maybe Ted Parker, too, you think?" Host to hostess: "Oh, sure, let's have old Parker.") On Sundays, Mondays, Tuesdays, Wednesdays, and Thursdays, Parker cut short his social activities at 9:30 P.M., no matter what they were, because he knew he'd have to be on hand at the studio at 7:30 on the mornings after those evenings. On Friday and Saturday nights, he stayed out as late as he pleased, and was good and drunk when he got home to the Hotel Forty-Seven, where he had an apartment with a dropped living room, a bedroom, a bath, and a kitchenette. He lived alone, had been born to live alone. He had made a number of unsuccessful attempts to dodge this destiny, and was now reconciled to it.

When Parker opened his eyes, he blinked once at the ceiling of his bedroom, and remembered drowsily that this was his birthday, that the ludicrous coincidence he'd foreseen when he leased this hotel apartment several years back had now, at last, occurred. For life to find him at the Hotel Forty-Seven on his forty-seventh birthday was, he felt, both a smack on the head and a poke in the ribs. Whatever it was, he accepted it, as he did all things life brought him, with good-natured patience. He found himself thinking of other absurd circumstances, which seemed to have characterized much of his existence —the time, for example, when he had found it necessary to take the little revolver away from his second wife on Christmas Eve in 1945. That had been *nice,* he said to himself. He had never been able to make up his mind whether she was about to shoot him or about to shoot herself that evening. He had removed the gun from her wily hands, and later on, after making her a cash settlement, had got rid of her by divorce. For some reason, though, he'd hung onto the gun. Right now it was at the bottom of the small suitcase that was inside the big suitcase on the top shelf of the closet on the balcony that hung over his dropped living room.

The recollection of the cash settlement brought to Parker's mind the fact that he was short of money again. He made fifteen thousand a year at NYAS, but was frequently short of money, because he was by nature a spendthrift. He told himself that he could, of course, write a check for fifty dollars and cash it at the desk downstairs, but unless he got a salary advance from Mr. Cooper at NYAS on Monday and rushed it into the bank before the check got there, the check, he knew, would bounce. The hotel wouldn't

put him in jail for that, to be sure, but he didn't like the hotel to know he was insolvent. He had long ago recognized the fact that his self-esteem was precariously balanced, and he bolstered it in little ways, such as encouraging desk clerks, telephone operators, bellboys, maids, waiters, and busboys to think of him as the well-to-do Ted Parker, deliberately overtipping them month in and month out. He didn't want to get a salary advance from Mr. Cooper at NYAS, partly because he didn't want to admit to Mr. Cooper (who had, in his estimation, the personality of a dyspeptic embalmer) that he needed one. Payday was on the first of the month. That would be this coming Wednesday. He could if he had, oh, twenty or thirty get along easily enough until then could sign for food and drinks at dollars for tips and taxicabs. He the hotel and at any number of restaurants and night clubs. Night clubs reminded him of the time his second wife threw the chafing dish, and abruptly he sat up in bed and grinned.

He remembered examining that little revolver on that Christmas Eve in 1945. It had been brand-new, of Swiss manufacture, with a pretty pearl handle and gold inlay, and it had not been used to this day. He also remembered getting the bill for it later on from Abercrombie's, where his second wife had charged it to him. It had cost something over a hundred bucks. When he'd decided to keep it, he'd applied for and obtained a license for it, and, consequently, there would be no difficulty in disposing of it today at that respectable and friendly pawnshop on Sixth Avenue, in and out of which he'd been on infrequent occasions through the years.

Parker got out of bed, pulled down the suitcases from the closet shelf, found the gun, and started to take out the six .25-calibre cartridges that were in it, but then he decided the pawnshop people might possibly want to test the gun before they lent any money on it, so he left it as it was and put it on top of his bureau, alongside his empty wallet, his address book, his keys, a small pile of change, some crinkled dollar bills, and the silver pillbox in which he kept his anti-acid tablets and his phenobarbital. Humming a commercial having to do with hair tonic, he went into his bathroom. His hangover, he was glad to note, was no worse than his usual Saturday one.

He wanted a new blade to shave with, but the automatic dispenser broke down when the blade had just begun to emerge, and he could neither pull the blade out nor push it back. He slammed the dispenser into the wastebasket and shaved with the old blade. The day before, he had bought a tube of the new, greenish toothpaste that he had been telling his radio audience deters decay and tastes like mint.

Drunk as he had been when he got home, he had taken it out of his overcoat pocket and placed it on the bathroom shelf in its handsome package. The package itself opened fairly easily, but around the neck of the tube was a flinty band of transparent plastic. He couldn't get it off. When he tried to pry it loose with his nail scissors, he gashed his forefinger. When that stopped bleeding, he jabbed a hole in the side of the tube and squeezed out enough green paste to brush his teeth with. It did indeed taste like mint. He was thankful he had slept so late. Now he could have a drink right away in the bar downstairs without any fooling around about breakfast. After a couple of drinks, he'd have lunch and then go over to Sixth Avenue. He showered and dressed in a hurry and went down to the bar, carrying the gun in the right-hand pocket of his cashmere jacket.

The bar was of the flossy sort and was in charge of a giant named Leo. Parker was the first customer of the day.

"Hello, Leo," said Parker. "I think I'll have a whiskey sour—half orange juice and half lemon. You know."

"It's giving me hell today," said Leo, making no move to mix the drink.

"What is?"

"The hip! What else? Arthritis, rheumatism, what the hell ever it is, anyway it bucked on me again coming up Seventh Avenue this morning in front of the pet shop. I was stooping over to look at these dachshunds in the window, and it bucked on me. Prior to that, I hadn't had any trouble with it for six months. No, seven. No, I guess six at that. Or six and a half. I got the long shift today, too—nine hours behind this bar and the hip aching and paining."

"That's tough, Leo," said Parker. "Half orange juice."

"No oranges," said Leo. "They haven't come in yet. Be along soon."

"Well, just give me a plain whiskey sour."

"How do you mean, *plain?*"

"Just a whiskey sour, that's all, with lemon."

"I never heard of a *plain* whiskey sour. There's *your* kind of whiskey sour, with half orange and half lemon and trouble measuring it, but the only other kind of whiskey sour I ever heard of is a whiskey sour, not plain, not nothing—a whiskey sour. That what you want?"

"Yes."

Parker was sorry there were no oranges. He had a theory that when he drank a whiskey sour with half orange juice it was practically like having breakfast, and that after drinking one he could smoke a cigarette without unduly increasing his chronic hyperacidity. However, after a couple of sips of the all-lemon sour he began to feel cheerful again.

"Prior to this attack, it was six and a half months," said Leo, facing Parker and gripping the bar with both hands as if he intended to stay in that attitude forever. "The left side is okay, see? It's only this right side of the hip. This one here. I spent fortunes on medical advice prior to the last attack, the one six and a half months ago. There was this humpbacked doc, so-called physician, used to be attached to Bellevue. He said this cortyzony stuff might help, but it's supposed to be dangerous and may clot your blood or send you off your rocker or something. No use fooling around with that, *I* say, and *he* says *he* agrees. Thirty fish I pay for that advice to a humpbacked doc. Tell me this: If he's such a hell of a physician, why don't he fix up his own humpback? I ask you that, Mr. Parker. Why don't he fix up his own humpback? Huh?"

"That's right," said Parker. "I'll have another one of these, Leo."

Now he could try a cigarette. He went to the machine, put in a quarter, and pressed the button for his favorite brand—the brand he claimed, five days a week, was both soothing and lift-giving. The quarter came back. He put the quarter in and tried again, and it came back again. He put the quarter in a third time, pressed the button for his next-to-favorite brand, and the machine gave him a package of them, along with a book of matches that asked in bold type if he was hard of hearing. He dropped the matches behind the machine and went back to the bar.

"Excepting the hip," said Leo, "I got practically no cause for complaints. See this upper plate back here on this side? Works wonderful and slips out as easy as that! Out and then in! Nothing to it. See?"

"Let me have some matches, Leo," said Parker.

Leo handed him a book of hotel matches, and Parker took a sip of the second sour and started to open the package of his next-to-favorite-brand of cigarettes. The little red band around the top broke. He began working on the sealed cellophane with his thumbnail. Leo turned around to dust the bottles on the shelf behind the bar and, with his back to Parker, gave up talking. Parker kept struggling unsuccessfully with the impenetrable package of cigarettes. He felt like whimpering. There seemed to be no way to get into the package without using a hatchet. He was about to throw it away and get another one from the machine when, instead, he reached into his coat pocket and pulled out the gun. He pointed it at his right temple and, rolling his eyes, thought how easy it would be on this, his forty-seventh birthday, to put an end to the long, long chain of absurdities. Right in the bar of the Hotel Forty-Seven. Then he moved the gun

away from his temple, aimed carefully at the bartender, and, to his surprise, pulled the trigger. Leo screamed—a high-pitched shriek—like a woman.

All in all, the aftermath of Parker's action was not as discomfiting, either to himself or to Leo, as it might have been. Before the house physician got there, Leo had cheerfully accepted Parker's explanation as to how he had been examining the little gun and how the damned thing had suddenly gone off. "Of course it was an accident," Leo kept saying. He repeated this over and over to the house physician, to the policemen who came over in a squad car, and to the lawyer who represented the hotel. He had to go to a hospital for the removal of the bullet, but long before it was out he had happily signed a waiver in exchange for which the hotel's insurance company not only paid him medical expenses but gave him a neat lump sum of cash. Since Parker had a license for the gun, the police brought no charge against him and let him keep it. Parker pawned it that same afternoon for sixty dollars, bought himself an expensive new hat, and got along easily until payday on what he had left over. He was on the air at eight o'clock that Monday morning.

NEXT MONTH...

The Great Merlini in a brand-new "impossible crime"—

CLAYTON RAWSON's *Miracles—All in the Day's Work*

THE MOTIVE

by ELLERY QUEEN

(Part Two — Conclusion)

What has happened so far: It all began with the disappearance of Tom Cooley, son of recently widowed farmer, John Cooley. Young Susan Marsh, red-headed librarian of Northfield's Flora G. Sloan Library, had been feeding Tommy's hunger for books on his never-failing visits to town from the Valley the first Monday of each month. When the boy did not show up early in November, and another week passed, Susan was sure something was wrong.

Driving out to the Cooley farm in the battered old Buick that Flora G. Sloan had given her a few weeks before, in October, Susan finds the farm deserted, with no sign of either young Tom or old John. So, reluctantly—because sheriff's deputy Lincoln Pearce, with whom she had grown up, persists in treating her as if she were still in pigtails—Susan reports Tommy's disappearance to Linc. Linc is disposed to scoff. John Cooley has been away over a month trying to find a new farm, having left Tommy in charge; Tommy is only seventeen . . . But Susan shames Linc into investigating.

They find old Cooley back home, deeply troubled over his son's disappearance. The only thing missing is the boy's rifle. Susan was the last to see Tommy, on October 3rd.

On the theory that Tommy might have gone off on a hunting trip and got into trouble, Linc organizes search parties, pressing into service Frenchy Lafont, owner of the Northfield Bar & Grill, the best tracker in the county. The first snowfall of the winter, ten days later, brings the searchers back, empty-handed. And despite Linc's best official efforts, Tommy remains missing, his fate unknown. Susan, unreasonably blaming Linc for not finding her protégé, hardly speaks to Linc all winter.

Tommy is found in the spring, when ebbing flood-waters uncover a shallow grave two miles from the Cooley farm, just off the Valley road. He has been murdered—the whole back of his head is smashed in. The coroner's opinion is that the boy was killed either last October or early November.

Old John, grief-stricken, scrabbles in the grave to retrieve mementos of his son—a pebble, a chunk of glass, a rotted jacket-button. When the autopsy reveals no clue, Tommy's rusty rifle, found in the grave with the body, is returned to the old man.

Susan, pleading with Linc to let her help him find Tommy's killer, meets with a rebuff. Linc still thinks of her as a child. But Linc gets nowhere, and grows gaunter and tighter-lipped. As for John Cooley, he neglects his farm and spends more and more time silently poring over his Bible.

One night toward the end of May, Linc shows up at Susan's house in the Valley to patch up their quarrel. But they are still at odds over Linc's failure in the Cooley case, and he is about to leave when Susan's phone rings. It is Frenchy Lafont's bartender, Bib Hadley, urgently asking for Linc. Frenchy's body has just been found off the Valley road, the back of his head caved in.

"Like Tommy Cooley," Susan whispered.

"I'll say like Tommy Cooley." Linc waved his long arms futilely. "Bib says they found Frenchy lying in the exact spot where we dug up Tommy's body!"

THE VALLEY ROAD WAS A WILD mess of private cars and jeeps and farm trucks, some racing around slowpokes, slowpokes chugging desperately, drivers cursing, and every visible face a livid glimmer as Linc and Susan wormed past. In one car Susan saw Miss Flora Sloan. The withered despot of Northfield was driving her new Chevrolet like a demon, the daisies in her straw hat bobbing crazily.

Linc had to keep his siren going all the way.

We're scared witless, Susan thought. She almost said it aloud. But one look at Linc, and she did not.

Two state police cars had set up roadblocks near the site of the new horror. Linc plowed onto the soft shoulder and skidded around into the cleared space. The road in both directions was a double string of lights. Everywhere Susan looked, people were jumping out of cars and running along the road. The only sounds were the squeals of distant tires and the thud of running feet. In a twinkling the fifty feet of highway between the roadblocks was rimmed with eyes . . . Susan suddenly recalled a hunting trip with her father when she was eleven years old. They had pitched camp for the night in a clearing in the dense woods, and her father had had to build the fire up when she became frightened at the glittering holes in the black wall of the unknown surrounding them. For years afterward she had had nightmares in which a ring of fiercely glowing little planets closed in on her from outer space; she still awoke occasionally in a sweat.

But this was worse. This was the menace of the known. The known turned evil. Old neighbors, good people, transformed into a hostile mob.

Susan almost trod on Linc's heels.

She peeped around his long torso at what lay just off the road on the north side. It sprang at her, brutally detailed, in the police flares. Susan jerked back, hiding her eyes.

She was to remember that photographic flash for the rest of her life. The mound of sandy earth where the grave had been refilled after the removal of Tommy Cooley's body, pebbled, flint-spangled, scabby with weeds; and across it, as on one of Art Ormsby's biers, the flung remains of what had been Frenchy Lafont.

Susan could not see his wound; she could only imagine what it looked like. They had turned him over, so that his face was tilted sharply back to the stars. It did not look the least bit like Frenchy Lafont's face. Frenchy Lafont's face had been dark and vivid, lively with mischief, with beautiful lips over white teeth and a line of vain black mustache. This face looked like old suet; the mouth was a gaping black cavern; the eyes stared like dusty pieces of glass.

"Just like the Cooley kid," one of the troopers was saying in a highpitched voice. "Just like."

His voice raised a deep echo, like a far-off growl of thunder. There was more than fear in the growl; there was anger, and under the anger, hate. The troopers and Linc looked around, startled.

"Sounds like trouble, Pearce," one of the older troopers muttered to Linc. "They're your people. Better do something."

Linc walked off toward one of the police cars. For a moment Susan almost ran after him; she felt as if she had been left standing naked in the flares.

But the eyes were not on her.

Linc vaulted to the hood of the car and flung his arms wide. The rumble choked and died. Susan could not decide which was more terrifying, their noise or their silence.

"Neighbors, I knew Frenchy Lafont all my life," Linc said in a quiet way. "Most of you did, too. There isn't a man or woman in Northfield wants more to identify the one who did this and see that he gets what's coming to him. But we can't do it this way. We'll find Frenchy's killer if you'll only go home and give us a chance."

"Like you found the killer of my boy?"

It was John Cooley's hoarse bass voice. He was near the west roadblock, standing tall in his jeep, his thick arm with the flail of fist at the end like a wrathful judgment. Linc turned to face him.

"Go home, John," Linc said gently.

"Yeah, John, go home!" a shrill voice yelled from behind the other barrier. "Go home and get yourself murdered like Tommy was!"

"That's not helping, Wes Bartlett," Linc said. "Use your head, man—"

But his voice went down under a tidal wave.

"We want protection!"

"Aya!"

"Who's next on the list?"

"Long as *he's* deputy—"

"Resign!"

"New sheriff's what we need!"

"Aya! Resign!"

In the roar of the crowd the clatter of Linc's badge on the hood of the police car was surprisingly loud.

"All right, there's my badge!" Linc shouted. "Now who's the miracle man thinks he can do the job better? I'll recommend him to Sheriff Howland myself. Come on, don't be bashful! Speak up."

He gave them glare for glare. The glares dimmed, the answering silence became uneasy. Something embarrassed invaded the night air.

"Well?" Linc jeered.

Somewhere down the line a car engine started . . .

Ten minutes later, except for a cluster of cars around the roadblocks, the highway was empty and dark.

Linc jumped off the police car, reached for his badge, and went over to the troopers.

"Nice going, Sheriff," Susan murmured.

But he strode past her to the edge of the burial mound, rock-hard and bitter.

"Let's get to it."

At first they thought it had been a murder in the course of a robbery. Frenchy Lafont's wallet was found untouched on the body, but an envelope with the day's café receipts, which he had been known to have on him earlier in the evening, was missing. The robbery theory collapsed overnight. The envelope of money was found in the night depository box of the First National Bank of Northfield on Main Street when old Sanford Brown, first vice-president of the bank, unlocked the box in the morning.

The weapon was not found.

It was the Tommy Cooley case all over again.

Everything about the café owner's murder was baffling. He was a bachelor who lived with his aged mother on the old Lafont place off the Valley road, a mile out of town. His elder brother, a prosperous merchant of Quebec, had not heard from him in months. The brother, in town to make the funeral arrangements and take charge of the mother, could shed no light on the mystery. Old Mrs. Lafont knew nothing; she spoke little English, was acquainted with few of her son's associates, and could not even say whether or not he had been home that evening. He always ate dinner at his café, and she had gone to bed early.

On the evening of his murder Lafont had left the café shortly before nine, alone, taking the day's receipts with him. He drove

off in his new Ford. An hour or so later he was dead some six miles out of town, on the site of the Cooley tragedy. His car was found near the mound. It was towed into the police garage at the Gurleytown barracks and gone over by experts. It yielded nothing but Frenchy Lafont's fingerprints. No blood, no indication of a struggle, no clue of any kind. The fuel tank was almost full.

"He dropped the envelope into the slot at the bank," Linc told Susan, "stopped in at Howie Grebe's gas station to fill up, and drove off west on the Valley road. He must have gone straight to his death. Nothing to show that he was waylaid and held up—nothing was taken, and Frenchy didn't touch the pistol he carried in his glove compartment. Bib Hadley says he was his usual wisecracking self when he left the café, and Howie Grebe says the same thing."

"You think he had a date with somebody he knew?" Susan asked.

"Well, Hadley says he got a phone call at the café," Linc said slowly, "about eight o'clock that night."

"I hadn't heard that! Who phoned him, Linc?"

"Bib doesn't know. Frenchy answered the call himself, and he didn't say."

"Did Bib Hadley overhear anything?"

"No."

"Was Frenchy excited — concerned—alarmed? There must have been *something,* Linc!"

"Bib didn't notice anything unusual. The call might have had nothing to do with the case."

"Maybe it was some woman Frenchy was fooling with. I've heard stories about him and Logan Street." Susan colored. Logan Street was a part of Northfield no respectable girl ever mentioned to the opposite sex.

"So far all alibis have stood up." Linc passed his hand over his eyes like an old man. "It's no good thinking, theorizing. I have to *know,* Sue, and there's not a fact I can sink my teeth into."

"But there's got to be a reason for a man's getting the back of his head knocked in," Susan cried. "*Why* was Frenchy murdered? *Why* was his body dumped on the spot where the murderer had buried Tommy? You can hardly say it was another psychopathic tramp, Linc."

"Maybe it was the same one."

"Oh, rot."

Linc looked at her in a persecuted way. He was glassy-eyed with exhaustion. But he merely said, "Could be. Only there doesn't seem to be any more sense in Frenchy's death than in Tom Cooley's. Look, Susie, I've got work to do, and talk won't help me do it, even with you. If you'll excuse me . . ."

"Certainly," Susan said frigidly. "But let me tell you, Linc Pearce—when these murders are solved it'll be talk and theories and *thinking*

that solve it!" And she swept out of Linc's office thoroughly miserable.

Northfield was a strange town these days. People came in to shop, exchange tight greetings, and go swiftly home. A PTA dance scarcely met expenses. The 4-H Club canceled a fair at the order of parents. At night the deserted streets were patroled by state police cars Northfield had never seen when it was murder-free.

Burry's Hollow took on a sinister shape. Susan, who had been born there and had a pet name for every tree and boulder, found herself locking the cottage doors at night. Monsters lurked in every berry patch and clump of willows, great featureless things armed with clubs.

She kept tossing night after night, asking herself unanswerable questions. Why had Tommy Cooley been killed? Why had Frenchy Lafont followed him in death? What was the connection between the two? And—the most frightening question of all—who was going to be the next victim?

A week after Lafont's murder Susan was waiting at the café entrance when Bib Hadley came to open up.

"You must hanker after a cup of my coffee real bad, Miss Marsh," the fat bartender said, unlocking the door. "Come on in. I'll have the urn going in a jiffy."

"What I want, Bib, is information," Susan said grimly. "I'm sick and tired of moping around, waiting to get my head bashed in."

The bartender tied a clean apron around his ample middle. "Seems like every Tom, Dick, and Mary between Northfield and Boston's been in for the same reason. Even had a newspaperman in yesterday from one of the city wire services, made a special trip just to pump ol' Bib. So get your list in now, Miss Marsh, while Frenchy's brother makes up his mind what to do with this place. What do you want to know?"

"The connection between Tommy Cooley and Frenchy Lafont," Susan said.

"Wasn't any," Bib Hadley said. "Next?"

"But there must have been, Bib! Did Tommy ever work for Mr. Lafont?"

"Nope."

"Did Tommy ever come in here?"

"Tell you the truth, Miss Marsh," the bartender said, lighting the gas under the urn, "I don't believe Frenchy would have known young Tom Cooley if he'd tripped over him in broad daylight. You know how Frenchy was about teenagers. He'd stand 'em all treat over at Tracy's ice cream parlor, but he wouldn't let 'em come into his own place even for coffee. Gave a good bar a bad name, Frenchy used to say."

"Well, there was a connection between Tommy and Frenchy La-

font," Susan said positively, "and these murders won't ever be solved till it's found."

"And you're going to find it, I s'pose, Sue?"

Susan jumped. There he was, in the café doorway, jaws working away like Gary Cooper's in an emotional moment. She knew this was Crisis.

"I saw you ambush Bib from my office window," Linc said bitterly. "Don't you trust me to ask the right questions, either?"

I don't know why I'm feeling guilty, Susan thought furiously. This is a free country!

Linc jammed his big foot on the rim of the tub holding the dusty palm. "You want my badge, too, Sue? Don't you think I've asked Bib every question you have, and a whole lot more? This is a tough case. Do you have to make it tougher for me by getting underfoot?"

"Thanks!" Susan said. "People who won't accept help when they're stuck from people trying to unstick them are just—just perambulating *pigheads.*"

"We stopped playing tag in your dad's cow barn long ago, Sue," Linc said, jaws grinding powerfully. "When are you going to grow up?"

"I've *grown* up! Oh, how I've grown up, Linc Pearce—and everybody knows it but you!" Susan screamed. "And do we have to stand here screaming in front of people?"

"I'm not people," Bib Hadley said. "I ain't even here."

"Nobody's screaming but you." Linc drew himself up so tall Susan's neck began to hurt. "I thought we knew each other pretty well, Susie. Maybe we don't know each other at all."

"I'm sure of it!" Susan tried to say it with dignity, but it came out so choky-sounding she fled past Linc to her jalopy and drove off down Hill Street with the gas pedal to the floor.

Two nights later the body of Flora Sloan, autocrat of Northfield, was found by a motorcycle trooper just off the Valley highway.

The back of her head had been battered in.

As in the case of Frenchy Lafont, the old lady's body had been tossed onto Tommy Cooley's winter grave.

Flora Sloan had attended a vestry meeting in Christ Church, at which certain parish and financial problems had been argued. As usual, Miss Flora dominated the debate; as usual, she got her way. She had left the meeting in lively spirits when it broke up just before ten o'clock, climbed into her Chevrolet, waved triumphantly at Sanford Brown, who had been her chief antagonist at the meeting, and driven off. Presumably she had been been bound for the big Sloan house on the western edge of

town. But she never reached it; or rather, she had bypassed it, for the Valley road ran by her property.

When her body was found shortly after midnight by the motorcycle trooper, she had been dead about an hour.

Had Flora Sloan picked someone up, someone who had forced her to drive to the lonely spot six miles from town and there murdered her? But the old lady had been famous for her dislike of tramps and her suspicion of hitchhikers. She had never been known to give a stranger a lift.

Her purse, money untouched, was found beside her body. A valuable ruby brooch, a Sloan family heirloom, was still pinned to her blue lace dress. The Chevrolet was parked near the grave in almost the identical spot on which Frenchy Lafont's Ford had been abandoned. There were no fingerprints in the car except her own, no clues in the car or anywhere in the vicinity of the grave.

Three nights after Flora Sloan's murder, Sanford Brown, first selectman of Northfield, called a special town meeting. The city fathers, lean old Yankee farmers and businessmen, sat down behind the scarred chestnut table in the Town Hall meeting room under an American flag like a panel of hanging judges; and among them — Susan thought they looked dismally like prisoners—sat County Sheriff Howland and his local deputy, Lincoln Pearce.

It was an oppressive night, and the overflow crowd made the room suffocating. Old ladies Susan had not seen since Election Day were there in choker-collared force. Susan saw Dr. Buxton, Art Ormsby, Howie Grebe, Will Pease, Bib Hadley, Frenchy Lafont's Canadian brother, old Mrs. Lafont in rigid mourning. She saw everyone she knew, and some faces she had forgotten.

Old Sanford Brown rapped his gavel hard on the table. A profound silence greeted him.

"Under the authority vested in me," old Brown said rapidly through his nose, "I call this town meetin' to order. As this is special, we will dispense with the usual order of business and get right to it. Sheriff Howland's come down from the county seat at the selectmen's request. Floor's yours, Sheriff."

Sheriff Howland was a large perspiring man in a smart city suit and a black string tie. He got to his feet, drying his bald head with a sodden handkerchief.

"Friends, when I was elected to office in this county I looked for the best man I could find to be my deputy in your district. I asked round and about and was told there wasn't finer deputy material in Northfield than young Linclon Pearce. I want you and him to know I have every confidence in his ability to discharge the duties

of his office. Linc, you tell your good folks what you told me today."

The buck having been deftly passed to him, Linc rose. His blue eyes were mourning-edged and he was so pale that Susan bled for him.

"I'm no expert on murder, never claimed to be one," Linc began in a matter-of-fact voice, but Susan could see his knuckles whiten on the edge of the table. "However, I've had the help of the best technical men of the state police. And they're as high up a tree as the 'coon of this piece. And that's me."

An old lady chuckled, and several men grinned. Humility, Linc? Susan thought in a sort of pain. Maybe one of these days you'll get around to me . . .

"Three people have been beaten to death," Linc said. "One was a boy of seventeen, son of a dirt farmer, quiet boy, Congregationalist, never in trouble. One was a bar and grill owner, French-Canadian descent, Roman Catholic, one of the most popular men in town. The third was a the last survivor of the family that founded Northfield—rich woman, tight-fisted, some said, but we all know her many generosities. She just about ran Northfield all her life. She was a pillar of Christ Episcopal Church, on every important committee, with her finger in every community pie."

He thinks he has them, Susan thought, glancing about her at the long bony faces. Linc, Linc . . .

"The bodies of these three were found in the same spot. So their deaths have to be connected some way. But how? There doesn't seem to be any answer—at least, we haven't been able to find one so far.

"We know nothing about Tommy Cooley's death because of the months that passed before we found his body. Frenchy Lafont was probably lured to his death by a phone call from somebody he knew and wasn't afraid of. Flora Sloan probably picked her killer up as she left the church meeting, which she wouldn't have done unless it was someone she knew. Tommy Cooley's clothing was too far gone to tell us anything, and the rains this spring wiped out any clues that might have been left in his case. But we found dirt on the knees of Frenchy's trousers and Flora Sloan's skirt, so maybe Tommy was made to kneel on that spot just like Frenchy and Miss Flora afterward—and hit from behind a killing blow."

You can talk and talk, Linc, they won't let you alone any more, Susan thought. They won't do anything to you—they'll just ignore you from now on . . .

"That's all we have," Linc said. "No connection among the three victims—not one. No motive. Not gain—nothing was taken in any of the three cases far as we know.

Tommy Cooley had nothing to leave anybody, Frenchy Lafont's business and house he left to his eighty-one-year old mother, and now we're told that Flora Sloan willed her entire estate to charity. No motive—no woman or other man in the case, no jealous husband, wife, or sweetheart. *No motive.*"

Linc stopped, looking down. Susan shut her eyes.

"When someone kills for no reason, he's insane. Three people died because a maniac is loose in our town. It's the only answer that makes sense. If anyone here has a better, for God's sake let's all hear it."

Now the noise came back like a rising wind, and Sanford Brown banged it back to silence. But it was still there, waiting.

"I want to say one more thing." And Susan heard Linc's pride take stubborn voice again. Linc, Linc, don't you know you've had it? Old Sanford, the selectmen, Sheriff Howland—they all know it. Don't you? "I'm not going to hand over my badge unless Sheriff Howland asks for it. Want it, Sheriff?"

The politician squirmed. "No, Linc, course not—unless the good folks of Northfield feel—"

Poor Linc. Here it comes.

"Let Linc Pearce keep his badge!" a burly farmer shouted from the floor. "The boy's doin' his best. But he's just a boy, that's the trouble. What we need's a Committee o' Safety. Men with guns to stand watch near that grave site . . . patrol the roads! . . ."

"Mr. Chairman!"

Susan slipped out of the meeting room as motions and resolutions winged toward the table from every corner. She caught up with Linc on the steps of the Town Hall.

"'Lo, Susie," Linc said with a stiffish grin. "Come after me to watch me digest crow?"

"Committee of Safety, men guarding the grave," Susan said bitterly. "What do they expect him to do, walk into their arms? Linc, *please* let me help. You're not beaten yet. Let's you and I talk it over. There must be something you missed! Maybe if we put our heads together—"

"You know something?" Linc put his big hands about her waist and lifted her to his level like a doll. "All of a sudden I want to kiss you."

"Linc, put me down. Don't treat me as if I were a child. Please, Linc?"

"My little old Susie."

"And *don't* call me Susie! I loathe it! I've loathed it all my life! Linc, put me down, I say!"

"Sorry." Linc looked genuinely surprised. He deposited her quietly on the step. "As far as the other thing is concerned, my answer's got to be the same, Sue. They can make up all the committees and posses they want—this is my job and I'll do it by myself or go bust. . . .

Can I drive you home now?"

"Not *ever!*" And Susan fled to the safety of the old Buick that Flora Sloan had given her, where she could burst into tears in decent privacy.

Linc sat in his office long after the last selectman had gone and Rollie Fawcott had darkened the building. He was blackly conscious of the thunderstorm that had sprung up. The rain lashing his windows seemed fitting and proper.

There must be something you missed . . .

Linc was irritated more by the source of the phrase going round in his head than by its persistence. That little fire-eater! She'd singed his tail from the start. Talk about one-track minds . . .

But suppose she's right?

The thought was like his collar, chafing him raw.

What *could* he have missed? What? What hadn't he followed up? He'd been over the three cases a hundred times. He couldn't possibly have missed anything. Or had he? . . .

Linc Pearce finally saw it—appropriately enough, during a flash of lightning. The bare office with its whitewashed walls for an instant became bright as day, and in that flash of illumination Linc remembered what he had missed.

It had happened on that first night of the long nightmare. The night Tommy Cooley's body had been found, washed out of its roadside grave by the receding waters of the spring flood. John Cooley had been kneeling in the grave, his hands scrabbling in the mud for some keepsake of his son. The pitiful little things he had found and tucked away in the pocket of his checkered red mackinaw . . . *suppose one of those things, unknown to Cooley, had been a clue?*

Linc grabbed a slicker and ran.

The Cooley farmhouse was dark. Linc turned off his lights and ignition, skin prickling at some danger he could not define.

The rain had turned into a tropical downpour. Lightning tore the sky open in quick bursts, like cannon salvos, lighting up the shade-drawn windows, the porch with the rickety rocking chairs turned to the wall, the open door of the nearby garage . . .

John Cooley's jeep was not in the garage.

Linc reached for a flashlight and jumped out of his car. He splashed over to the garage and swung his light about. Yes, the farm truck was here, but the jeep was out . . .

Linc relaxed. He had not noticed John Cooley at the town meeting, but he must have been there. If he was, with a committee of safety forming, he'd surely be one of the men to be staked out in the brush near Tommy's grave.

Linc went up on the porch and tried the door. It was not locked,

and he opened it and stepped into the hall.

"John?" He could be wrong. There might be a dozen explanations for the missing jeep. "John?"

No one answered. Linc went upstairs and looked into the bedrooms. They were empty.

He went back to John Cooley's old-fashioned bedroom and played his flash about. Of course, the chifforobe. He opened the doors. It was filled with winter garments.

And there was the red mackinaw.

Linc breathed a prayer and put his hand into the right pocket.

They were still there, all right.

He took them out one by one, carefully, turning them over in his fingers. The button from young Tom's rotted leather jacket. A pebble. A chunk of dirt-crusted glass . . .

The piece of glass!

It was thick, ridged glass with a curve to it, a roughly triangular piece cracked off from something larger. It was . . . it was . . .

My God, Linc thought.

He went over it again and again, refusing to believe. It couldn't be that simple. The answer to the murders that had happened. The warning of the murder that was going to happen.

The murder of Susan Marsh.

Of Sue.

For a moment of sheer horror Linc saw her flying red hair, the familiar little face, the snub nose he used to tweak, the brookwater eyes, the impudent mouth that had tormented him all his life.

He saw them all soiled and still.

A world without Sue . . .

Linc never knew how he got out of the house.

Susan had gone to bed swollen-eyed. But she had been unable to sleep. The mugginess, the storm, the thunder crashes, the lightning bolts bouncing off her pond, made the night hideous. She had never felt so alone.

She crept out of bed, got into a wrap, and pattered about clicking switches. She put on every light in the house. Then she went into her tiny parlor and sat there, rigidly listening to the storm.

Oh, Linc, Linc . . .

Her first thought when the crash came and the curtains began blowing about and a cold spray hit her bare feet was that the gale had blown the front door loose.

She looked up.

John Cooley stood in her splintered doorway. He had Tommy's hunting rifle cradled in his arm. In the farmer's eyes Susan saw her death.

"They're watching at the grave," John Cooley said. His voice was all cracked and high, not like his bass at all. "So I can't take you there, Susan Marsh."

"You killed them," Susan said stiffly. "You."

"Get down on your knees, girl, and pray."

He was insane. She saw that now. He had been tottering on the brink ever since Tommy's disappearance, his only son, the child of his beloved Sarah. And he had toppled over when the body was found. Only no one had seen it, not Linc, not she, not anyone.

Linc, Linc.

"Not Tommy," Susan whispered. "You loved Tommy, Mr. Cooley. You wouldn't—couldn't have killed Tommy."

The farmer's twitching face, with its distended eyes, softened into something vaguely human. Tears welled into the eyes. The heavy shoulders began to shake.

Oh, dear God, let me find a way to keep him from killing me as he killed Frenchy Lafont and Miss Flora . . .

"I know you didn't kill Tommy, Mr. Cooley."

With the metal-sheathed butt of Tommy's hunting rifle. That was the weapon that had crushed out Frenchy Lafont's and Miss Flora's lives . . . dear God . . . I mustn't faint, mustn't . . . those dark smears on the butt . . . get him talking . . . maybe the phone . . . no, no, that would be fatal . . . What can I do! Linc . . .

"Not Tommy. Somebody else killed Tommy, Mr. Cooley. Who was it? Why don't you tell me?"

The farmer sank into the tapestried chair near the door. The rain beat in on him, mixing with his tears.

"You killed him, Susan Marsh," he wept.

"Oh, no!" Susan cried faintly.

"You, or the Frenchy, or the old woman. I knew from the hunk of glass in the boy's grave. A hunk of headlight glass. Headlight from an old auto. He was run over on the road, hit by an auto from the back . . . from the back. You killed him with an auto and you put him in a dirty hole and piled dirt on him and you ran away. You, or the Frenchy, or the old woman."

Susan wet her lips. "The Buick," she said. "My old Buick."

John Cooley looked up, suddenly cunning. "I found it! Didn't think I would, hey? I looked all over Northfield and I found the auto it come from. I looked for a smashed headlight, and the auto the old woman gave you was the one the hunk of glass fitted. Was it you run Tommy over? Or the old woman, who run the car before you? Or the Frenchy, who owned the Buick before the old woman?"

"Frenchy Lafont sold that car to Flora Sloan—in October?" Susan gasped.

"Didn't think I'd track that down, hey?" John Cooley said with a sly chuckle. "Aya! Lafont sold it to the old woman when he bought his new Ford. And she gave it to you a couple weeks later when she won a Chevrolet in the Grange bazaar. Oh, I tracked it all down. I was careful to do proper justice." The eyes began to start again; he

whimpered. "But which one, which one? I didn't know which one of you killed Tommy in October, 'cause nobody knows what day in October he was run over. So I got to kill all three of you. That way the Lord's vengeance is mine. The wrath. With the boy's gun. I phoned that Lafont and I says meet me at the grave, I have to talk to you . . . I walked into the town and I waited for the old woman to come out of the church, and I stopped her and made her drive out to the grave. 'Pray, Flora Sloan,' I says. 'Get down on your murdering knees, sinner, and pray for your damned soul,' I says. And then I used the Lord's gun butt on her."

The room was shimmering.

John Cooley was on his feet, the great eyes shining.

"Pray, Susan Marsh," he thundered. "Down on your knees, girl, and pray."

Now the steel hand was at the back of her neck, forcing her to her knees.

Dear God . . . Linc, you're the one I love, the only only one I've ever . . .

The last thing Susan saw as she strained against the paralyzing clutch on her neck was that exultant face, terrible in triumph, and the rusty blood-caked butt of the rifle held high above it.

She fainted just as Linc Pearce plunged into the room and hurled himself at the madman.

Susan opened her eyes. She was in her own bed. Linc's long face was close to hers.

"I thought I heard you say something, Linc, a million years ago," Susan murmured. "Or maybe it was just now. Didn't you say something, oh, so nice?"

"I said I love you, Susie—Susan," Linc muttered. "And something about will you marry me."

Susan closed her eyes again. "That's what I thought you said," she said contentedly.

They never did find out which one had accidentally run Tommy Cooley over, whether Frenchy LaFont or old Miss Flora. They argued about it for years.

EDITORS' FILE CARD

AUTHOR: **HENRY SLESAR**

TITLE: ***Ten Per Cent of Murder***

TYPE: Crime Story

LOCALE: New York City

TIME: The Present

COMMENTS: *This grim little guignol of a small-time theatrical agent whose services to his most important client take a gruesome turn . . .*

YOU KNOW WHAT MAKES ME laugh? Those glossy photographs that line my office walls, with all the sleek, bright-eyed faces of my clients, grinning at me over handwritten inscriptions that read: *To Matt, with deep fondness and gratitude.* Boy, what a gallery of phonies! When they make their personal appearances at my desk, all the toothpaste smiles are replaced by frowns, and they show about as much fondness and gratitude as a snake being clobbered with a stick. But that's what I get for being a theatrical agent, a ten per center. I walked into the business with my eyes wide open.

The worst of the lot was Hildegarde Hayes, but that was to be expected, too. Hildy was my bread-and-butter client; more than half my income was dependent upon the plays she starred in, the TV guest shots she made, her infrequent movies. Hildy was my Big Name, and if she wanted to scowl and scream and thump my desk, that was all right with Matt Lafferty. Me, I'm understanding. Me, I'm the original wooden Indian.

But when Hildy got me on the phone that Wednesday afternoon, I have to admit that my mahogany composure started to crack. Talk about hysteria! — she made the snake pit sound like a rest home. I had four people in my office from NBC, and we were at the have-a-cigar-and-let's-talk-contract stage, and I was in no mood to play nursemaid to a temperamental star. But Hildy raved on, and after a while I got the idea. Either I headed for her apartment, and fast, or my Big Name would be on

somebody else's client list. I made my apologies as best as I could, grabbed my hat, and taxied to Hildy's duplex on Central Park South.

Jimmy, the apartment house doorman, and Pete, the elevator jockey, gave me respectful salutes and knowing grins. Both these worthies knew the purpose of my visit because it was always the same. Hildy tossed her prima-donna tantrums about once every two weeks, and the reasons varied from a drunken fight with her husband—a TV western star named Kevin Culver—to frantic concern over her poodle's upset stomach. I didn't know what to expect this time when I punched the doorbell and Hildy let me in.

She was calm now—like a dormant volcano. She was wearing a feathery housecoat, and her make-up was clotted in pink patches on her face. Some critic once said that Hildy had hair like golden wheat. Now it looked more like shredded wheat. But what really riveted my attention was Hildy's eyes. There wasn't even a spark in what were usually twin furnaces.

"What's the matter now?" I said. "Poochie got the pip again?"

"Don't joke," she said hoarsely. "For God's sake, no jokes, Matt."

I threw my hat on the sofa and sat down. "All right, let's hear it. I broke up a crucial meeting for this, so better make it good."

She didn't answer. She went to the window and stared at the light drizzle outside like Sadie Thompson. I figured it was an act, and was all set to say so, when Hildy turned around. I knew she wasn't *that* good an actress, so the ghastly expression she was wearing made me sit up straight.

"Something awful's happened," she whispered. "I killed Kevin."

"You did *what?*"

"I killed him. With that little gun he bought for me last Christmas. About half an hour ago.

"Now cut it out," I said, wanting to believe it was a gag and knowing even then that she was serious. "This is no time to play games, Hildy."

She walked to the bedroom door and opened it. She didn't go inside, just stood there with her hand on the knob.

"He's in there, on the floor. Oh my God, I can't believe it's true!"

I whipped out of the chair and brushed past her to the bedroom. At first I didn't see anything but the mile-wide bed and plush furnishings. Then I saw a pair of shiny shoes near the end table, and Kevin Culver's feet were still in them. He was stretched out like one of his own victims in the western TV show, and there wasn't any blood visible. The bullet had entered the back of his head and killed him instantly. I stood up, saw myself in the vanity mirror, and almost shrieked; then I re-

turned quietly to the living room.

Hildy had a tumblerful of whiskey in her hand. I grabbed it from her, swallowed half, and handed back the rest. She finished it while I sat down and rubbed my eyes.

"Now do you believe me?" she said, with a weird note of triumph.

"I believe you. But *why*, for God's sake?"

"I don't know what came over me. I knew about that Sudderth woman for a long time; I didn't think I really cared—"

"Wilma Sudderth?"

"Oh, don't act so innocent—you know Kevin was carrying on with her. I've known about it for two months, but I didn't think it was any more serious than a bad cold. But then Kevin came home around four and started to pack a bag; he was going up to that ritzy mountain lodge of hers—"

I groaned, and tried to fight off visions of poverty. I didn't feel any great sorrow in the world's loss of Kevin Culver, or even in the arrest of Hildegarde Hayes. All I could foresee was the end of my livelihood.

I said, "But why *shoot* him? Was he worth it?"

Hildy looked thoughtful. "Now that I look back, I guess not. But I wasn't thinking. I reached for a tissue in the drawer of the night table when I saw the gun. It felt so dramatic pointing it at him, and the next thing I knew—" She slammed her whiskey glass to the table. "You've got to help me out of this, Matt."

"What?"

"You've got to find me a way out. I'm not a *murderer*, for heaven's sake. You know that."

"Technically, Hildy—"

"Oh, don't be difficult! You manage everything else for me, don't you? Well, I want you to manage this."

She was sounding like the old Hildy again.

"Now, look," I said, "this isn't part of an agent's service—"

"You've got a lot at stake, Matt, and don't tell me different. Without me your little agency isn't worth getting up in the morning for."

It was true, of course.

"Well, what do you expect me to do? Take the rap for you?"

"There must be *something* you can do!" Her voice went from a screech to a scream. "Get rid of him! Drop him in an alley or something. Make the police think he killed himself—"

"That would be ducky. Only how does a suicide shoot himself in the back of the head? The least you could have done was make it look better—"

"I wasn't *thinking* at the time, don't you understand?"

"You sure weren't, baby."

But I was thinking now, and the more I thought, the blacker the situation looked. It was funny how

a beautiful career could be blotted out by one split second of passion and stupidity—my career, I mean, the hell with Hildy's. And if I wanted to save the pieces, I had to come up with some fancy thinking.

"All right," I said, getting to my feet. "I'll try and work something out. Best thing for you to do is get dressed and get out of here. But go some place where I can reach you in a hurry."

She looked at me like a puppy dog, fond and grateful at last. "You're wonderful, Matt."

"We'll see how wonderful."

She headed for the bedroom, yipped when she remembered the body was still there, then became quiet. I did some painful cerebration and picked up the telephone. I dialed the number of a New York newspaper and prayed that Larry Cole would be available. Luckily, he was.

"Hello, Larry? This is Matt Lafferty."

The columnist didn't exactly cheer.

"Listen, Larry, I got some hot poop for you, but I don't want you to sit on it all week. Column all closed up for tomorrow's paper?"

"Hard to say," Cole answered. "What's the story?"

"It's about Hildy's husband, Kevin. Now for God's sake, don't tell Hildy where you got the information or she'll kill me. But Hildy's asked him for a divorce, and the poor slob's all broken up."

"No kidding?"

"Yeah. You know how nuts Kevin is about Hildy—he'd climb the Alps for her. He even threatened to kill himself if she walked out on him—"

"When did this happen?"

"Today, right before my eyes. I'm with Kevin now, trying to console him. But he's drinking pretty heavy—"

"Well, I dunno, Matt. Seems to me I got an item about Culver already—"

"But it's a great story! TV star threatens to kill himself when actress wife gives him the air. Hell, I'm not trying to write it for you, Larry, you know that. Oh-oh—"

"What's the matter?"

"Kevin's coming out of the bedroom. I thought he'd passed out. You want me to call you back, or is that enough?"

"I'll see about it, Matt—"

"Sure," I said, detecting interest in his casual response. Then I hung up.

Hildy came out of the bedroom a couple of minutes later, having performed a miracle with a girdle, a comb, and a box of paints. She went to the door and said, "I'll be at Toot's. I hope it goes okay, Matt."

"You and me both."

When she was gone I went into the bedroom and took another look at Hildy's handiwork. I got myself a face cloth and wiped away the blood on Kevin's neck.

In the closet I found Kevin's

wide-brimmed hat and stuck it on his head. Then I hoisted him up with his arms around my shoulders and dragged him toward the doorway. He wasn't a big man, despite the fact that he looks nine feet two on television, but I found out what they mean by dead weight. I was puffing and wheezing by the time I had him across the living room carpet and out the front door.

I propped him against the wall, hoping he would remain stable. But as I walked to the elevator, he started to slide to the floor of the hallway. I was scared, but I had to take the chance. I punched the elevator button, then scrambled back to pick up the body.

I had him back in position by the time Pete, the elevator man, slid open the door and blinked at us.

"Now come on, Kevin," I said to the corpse. "You don't *really* want to go out again—"

"Need any help?" Pete grinned.

"It's okay, Pete. Mr. Culver's been celebrating, but we've had our fun for the day. How about it Kev? Come on inside and I'll make us some coffee . . ."

"Boy!" Pete whistled. "He's really out like a light, huh, Mr. Lafferty?"

"Killed a whole quart," I said confidingly. "Now he wants to go out and paint the town—"

"He'll never make it," Pete laughed.

"I guess not," I laughed back. "Come on, Kev, let's get that coffee . . ."

I steered him back to the apartment door and pushed it open. "Sorry to bother you, Pete," I said.

"That's okay, Mr. Lafferty."

The elevator door slid shut.

I was so exhausted at this point that I let Kevin's body drop to the carpet in an ungainly heap. Then I sat down, winded, and lit a cigarette, figuring out the next move. This was hard work.

Finally I got up and went to the window. The apartment was on the seventeenth floor of the twenty-story building and the windows faced the street. It was a long, long way to some mighty hard pavement. There wouldn't be very much for a suspicious eye to see once Kevin Culver ended that vertical trip.

I raised the double-hung window as far as I could, then dragged the body to the ledge. It took all the strength I could muster to lift him into position, to make his limp body sit on the ledge in precarious balance without toppling over prematurely. It was gruesome labor, let me tell you, but I finally got him there.

Then I left the apartment and went to the elevator.

"How's Mr. Culver?" Pete asked, hungry for some elevator small talk besides the weather.

"Okay, I guess," I frowned. "He's feeling pretty blue, though. Talking real crazy—"

"Gosh," Pete said, round-eyed.

On the lobby floor I strolled out

under the front canopy and took a cigarette from my pocket. Then I went through an act of patting pockets and looking for a match before approaching Jimmy the doorman.

"Thanks," I said, when he lit me. "Getting cooler, don't you think?"

"Yeah, I guess so," Jimmy said amiably.

I walked out a few steps, away from the awning, and looked upward at the apartment building, trying hard to be nonchalant.

"Hope Kev's all right," I said. "You ever watch him on TV, Jimmy?"

"Naw, I don't get the chance, Mr. Lafferty. My wife, she likes them quiz programs."

"That's too bad. *Hey!*"

I didn't give the line much of a reading, but I'm an agent, not an actor.

"What's wrong, Mr. Lafferty?"

"Am I seeing things?"

I kept staring up, and the doorman joined me, shading his eyes against the light with his hand.

"What is it?"

"I don't know. Looks like a man, out on the ledge—"

"My God, you're right!"

"What floor is that? Twenty, nineteen, eighteen—oh, my God!"

"That guy must be nuts!"

"It's Kevin!" I shouted. "It's Kevin's floor!"

"What'll we do?" Jimmy started to quake so hard his epaulets shook.

"Better call the police! I'll go upstairs and see if I can stop him—"

"Yeah, yeah," the doorman said, and started in four directions at once. Finally he took off for the phone in the lobby, and I went straight to the elevator. Pete looked baffled at my return, but I didn't say anything, not wanting him to follow me during the rest of my routine.

I got off on the seventeenth and rushed for the apartment door. I went through it like a fullback hitting the line, and kept on going until I reached the window. It didn't take much of a shove to send Kevin's body flying into space.

Then I gave out with the loudest yell you ever heard. It was so convincing that I scared myself.

Pete came running. I covered my eyes with one hand and pointed to the open window with the other, speechless. He ran to the ledge and looked down.

"Poor Mr. Culver," he whispered.

Well, I was proud of myself. I was proud of the way Jimmy and Pete told their stories to the police. I was proud of the heartbroken act Hildy put on, and the free-flowing tears she produced. It was her greatest performance.

I almost chuckled when I heard Pete, the elevator man, describe his version of the episode. He swore that Kevin had rung for the elevator a few minutes before his suicide, and had been arguing with me drunkenly. As for the doorman,

he gave a dramatic account of how Kevin was up there on the window ledge, waving his arms and yelling. Instead of suspicion, all Hildy and I got was sympathy, and there wasn't any mention of the word autopsy.

The cops let me go home around midnight, and I stopped at the corner newsstand and bought the morning edition of the tabloid where Larry Cole's column appeared.

I waited until I got upstairs to open it.

As soon as I scanned it, I realized that Cole had decided against including it. But that wasn't the worst part. The worst was the item he *did* use.

Kevin Culver, star of the TV western Fast on the Draw, has been squiring food-store heiress Wilma Sudderth to the local niteries. Friends say he's ready to call it quits with his wife, actress Hildegarde Hayes . . .

I went icy reading it. The story was exactly the opposite of the one I had planted! If the police saw it, they'd start asking questions, start wondering why a man ready to leave his wife for an heiress would commit suicide . . .

Well, I guess you know what happened after that. The cops saw the column, all right, and called Larry Cole down for questioning. He made them curious enough to order an autopsy and they found the bullet in Kevin's head. It was a cinch to match it up with the neat little revolver in Hildy's night table. She was convicted of second-degree murder and got twenty years. I was convicted as an accomplice after the fact, and with good behavior, got off with two. Wouldn't you know it would be ten per cent?

NEXT MONTH...

An unforgettable story—different!

RAY BRADBURY'S *The Town Where No One Got Off*

BEST MYSTERIES OF THE MONTH

recommended by ANTHONY BOUCHER

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★ ★ ★ ★ **THE COLOR OF MURDER, *by Julian Symons*** (Harper, $2.95)

Detailedly perceptive study of mental disintegration, leading to an admirably real murder trial . . . and a startling epilog. Voted Best Novel of 1957 by England's Crime Writers Association, and a powerful candidate for a similar award here in 1958.

★ ★ ★ ★ **HEAT WAVE, *by Caesar Smith*** (Ballantine, $2.95)

It is obviously impossible to write a tender compassionate idyll about a murderer's discovery of love in the three days between crime and exposure; but pseudonymous Mr. Smith has incredibly done just that, in a sensitive and beautiful novel.

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★ ★ ★ **MALICE IN WONDERLAND, *by Rufus King*** (Crime Club, $2.95)

A novelet and 7 short stories (mostly from EQMM) about the devious denizens of Halcyon, Fla.—deftly plotted and delightfully sparkling. And for another EQMM regular, see Agatha Christie's 13 stories of Miss Marple in THE TUESDAY CLUB MURDERS (1933; Avon, 35¢).

EDITORS' FILE CARD

AUTHOR: **IRENE HOLT ALBERT**

TITLE: ***The Spent Heart***

TYPE: Suspense Story

LOCALE: France

TIME: The Present

COMMENTS: *The incredibly beautiful Cassandra (née Phoebe Klaatz of St. Louis) had an irresistible attraction for men — usually other women's husbands . . . A tale of hate and evil, of exquisite violence.*

I WAS STAYING WITH FRIENDS IN Antibes when Suzy's letter came, asking me to go over to Aix to see Edward and Cassandra.

"Something dreadful must have happened at Marseilles," she wrote. "Cassandra has concussion and a broken hip. I don't know what's wrong with Edward, but they're both at Aix in a nursing home called l'Ange d'Or."

I didn't even know they were in France. They had left Paris in the autumn for a Mediterranean honeymoon. Although there had been the ribald gossip inevitable when an older woman marries a very young man, this was the first direct word of them since Christmas cards from Cairo had said they were spending the winter in North Africa because Edward loved it so.

Edward was one of those fresh-faced boys just down from Oxford who had come over to spend a year on the continent. That was in the breathing space between wars, when young Englishmen were reverting to their fathers' and grandfathers' code of a European grand tour before settling down in their tweeds and cheviots to manage dwindling family estates in Surrey and Essex, or ancient London firms selling bonds, or Newcastle coal.

Edward was visiting us in Paris, getting ready to go off for some climbing in Switzerland, when he met Cassandra. We had dropped in to see Suzy late one afternoon

and she took us across the room to introduce us.

"Janie, you've heard me speak of mother's old friend Cassan—dra." Suzy caught herself, but the final syllable slipped out.

"Cassandra, Suzy?" The older woman laughed and repeated the name lightly. "On the whole I think I prefer it to others I've had." Her voice was full and smooth, like heavy cream, and it was clotted with amusement. She was beautiful by any standard. Not just amazingly well preserved, but incredibly, strikingly beautiful. Her figure would have done credit to a Powers model costumed by Dior. And her eyes were magnificent—dark-lashed amethyst, in striking contrast to ivory skin and platinum hair. Beside her I felt young and gauche. I suppose Suzy did too. But Edward was as coolly self-possessed as Agamemnon probably was when he encountered the original Cassandra after the siege of Troy. I could understand Clytemnestra's fury.

Suzy looked relieved. I knew she wasn't sure whether or not Cassandra knew what most of her friends called her. As the fabulous Phoebe Klaatz of St. Louis, Cassandra's career had started with purple eyes, copper hair, and an irresistible attraction for men—usually, unfortunately, other women's husbands. When an old friend of the Klaatz family shot her husband and then tried to shoot Phoebe because she found them together in her own bedroom, the St. Louis girl had been sent to Europe with a chaperone to stay until the scandal blew over. Her first husband had been a young British officer who left her for a French floozie in Marseilles after the first World War, her second a Belgian count who died of tuberculosis in Davos a year or two later. Phoebe's father was killed in an accident that same winter, leaving her a beer fortune, and not long afterward she married a rich South American and went to live in Rio. All the Midwest knew of her after that was what appeared in the society columns of the smart magazines, where she was pictured with successive husbands and an increasing collection of jewels and houses and yachts.

"I never can tear myself away from Paris in the spring," she confessed ruefully. "I suppose I'm foolish—Rome, too, is at its loveliest, and I should be getting home—but Paris seems enchanted. Even when one is lonely." She concluded wistfully, "I have missed so many springs."

"What need has Primavera of the spring?" smiled Edward as he bowed over her hand. She looked at him, her face lighting swiftly with pleasure.

"It is a long time since a young man has said anything like that to me," she observed. "I told you Paris is enchanted."

We all knew what she meant. Washington and Vienna, London

and Tokyo, all have their breath-taking moments, but somehow the sheer glory of the season belongs to Paris . . . the air of excitement, emotionally charged, that goes to one's head like champagne on an empty stomach. I think each of us involuntarily felt sorry for her—her incredible beauty, her aloneness—and wanted her to enjoy this reprieve. Neither Suzy nor I realized then how susceptible Edward was.

"Why don't we have a picnic in the Bois?" Suzy suggested, and we all liked the idea. Several pots of tea later our suggestions had run the gamut from les Halles at five a.m. to Manon and Josephine Baker at a more respectable hour, with dinner at Foyot's or the glass-walled Pavillon d'Elysées. Cassandra insisted in advance on footing the bills, because she knew well enough that none of us had that kind of money.

"My first fun in years," she assured us. "It's like scuttling the calendar. You make me feel as young as you are." If any of us thought of the discrepancy in ages it didn't amount to much. Paris and spring were the great equalizers. It was as natural for Edward and Cassandra to pair off as it must have been for Abélard and Héloïse. We had a wonderful fling—truite au bleu, fraises des bois, and dancing at Maxim's—a welcome change from our Left Bank economies. No one quite realized that Cassandra had deferred her return to Rome indefinitely and Edward his climb in Switzerland. I guess he figured the Alps would always be there, while Cassandra was a new experience.

"She makes me think of English violets," he confided as we passed the flower stalls by the Madeleine one morning. "Spring is really just a resurrection of loveliness, isn't it?" His voice was charged with feeling and for the first time since I had known him I saw Edward as somehow defenseless and vulnerable. He selected a great bunch of purple bloom, its head crisp and shining with dew.

"Violets so early?" exclaimed Cassandra when we stopped by her hotel to pick her up for lunch. "You're a dear boy. You make me forget a great deal—even how to be lonely," she smiled. "I don't know when I've been so hungry. Let's go out to Robinson-sur-Seine and have lunch in the treetops."

Chestnut blossoms had been as fragrant on the air at Robinson-sur-Seine as the acacias were at Antibes where I was lunching with my hostess on the red-tiled terrace above the sea. "How do I get to Aix from here?" I inquired over the cheese and coffee. "I've had word that friends are in a hospital there and I should go over."

"Why don't you take the MG?" answered Betsy. "The drive along the Corniche to Frejus is lovely and much shorter than inland. Jake

would take you, but he's trying to finish the van Anselm portrait before they sail next week."

"The MG will be fine," I thanked her. "Isn't it about a hundred and fifty kilometers from here?"

"Pretty close," she nodded, "but don't rush—you've plenty of time."

"Time for what?" demanded Jake, emerging from his studio. "May I have some more coffee, Bets—black? That's the devil of painting ugly women. You have to tank up on something to survive, and coffee keeps me awake." He sipped gloomily and wiggled his toes in their espadrilles. "What were you saying when I came out? You're not leaving us, Janie?"

"Some friends are ill at Aix," Betsy explained. "Janie's taking the MG and I told her she had plenty of time."

"Anyone we know?" Jake looked up.

"I don't think so. You might have met Cassandra in Paris at some time or other, but Edward was never out of England until last spring."

"Cassandra?" Jake reflected, offering us cigarettes and taking one himself. "There's signora la contessa Cintarro of Rome. Somebody nicknamed her Cassandra."

"She's the one," I nodded. "Do you know her?"

"I did," he laughed sardonically, "in Rome. I painted her portrait after she married the old devil. Most beautiful woman I ever laid eyes on. The count was as jealous as sin. Accompanied her to all sittings and kept her locked up in his Tuscan villa between times, I understand. There were plenty of rumors after the wedding, but no one saw her in Rome again until he finally died a couple of years ago."

"She married again, you know?" I observed.

"Again? After that?" His look was quizzical. "No, I didn't know. I haven't been back for years."

"Edward Fortescue," I added, "an English boy."

"Boy?" Jake lifted his eyebrows. "What do you mean—boy? She must be pushing sixty."

"Sixty?" I was incredulous. "She can't be! Edward is twenty-two."

"Good God! An Oedipus complex?"

"I don't know." I was nonplussed. "I'd have said Cassandra is about thirty-five."

"Not if she's the contessa, she isn't. I hope she's luckier than her original."

"Edward calls her Primavera."

"Poor devil, he's not—"

"Now, Jake," interrupted Betsy, "it's none of your business. You said yourself she was the most beautiful woman you had ever laid eyes on."

"Still is, probably," he muttered. "Amethyst and alabaster—and old enough to be his grandmother. Where'd you meet her, Janie? What's wrong with them?"

"I don't know. Some sort of accident, I think. Cassandra went to school with Suzy Lafitte's mother when they were girls in St. Louis. I never met her until last spring."

"That when they were married?"

As I nodded I wondered if Edward would have married Cassandra had it not been spring. "They spent the summer in England. Edward's people don't like her," I added.

Cassandra had been as shining and beautiful as ever when they came through Paris in the fall, but Edward had looked as though he might be having a bad bout of emotional indigestion. He had been abstracted and distrait, so quiet at times that even the effort of breathing seemed too much for him. Cassandra told us they were going south for the winter, that Edward had had the flu and was still listless and moody.

"The English climate is very trying," she had said. "Poor Edward." She did not say that the family climate had also been trying, but the implication was there. Edward's parents must both have been considerably younger than she, and he an only child. They had probably been too stricken with the incongruity of his May-December marriage to be even customarily British and polite.

"Don't wait dinner for me," I told Betsy and Jake as I left them on the terrace above the sea and headed for Cannes.

Suzy's letter had been no more sketchy and hurried than her letters usually were, but as the Corniche d'Or wound its ragged way along the coast of the Esterels I wished I knew more of the situation I would encounter at Aix. What had happened at Marseilles? Something dreadful, Suzy wrote; earlier word from Cassandra in Algiers had said Edward was under the weather, but hadn't sounded too serious. "I won't write to them," Suzy had concluded, "until I hear from you how things are." I passed the great sweep of bay at Cannes with its bold mountain background, its foreground of sunbaked villas, swarthy rocks, and strong, hot color. The air was heavy with lemon and mimosa, and masses of dark firs clung to the red porphyry cliffs.

How would things be, I wondered, with a wife of almost sixty and a husband of twenty-two, both of them ill or injured? Jake's comments had shaken me more than I realized. It had never before seemed strange that Cassandra had no old friends in Paris, nor that she should be so lonely. I could not recall ever having heard her speak of any person or event not immediately concerned with the present.

"She looks far too young and beautiful for most of her old friends," Suzy's mother had once observed with a shrug. "Beside her the rest of us are travesties." I wondered how it would feel to be re-

jected by your own generation, to fear the ridicule of the younger, perhaps, and the loneliness that lay between?

I remembered the sudden news of her marriage to Edward. Suzy had read the cable from London with polite incredulity, I in startled silence. If intuition or premonition or extrasensory perception or whatever you choose to call it was supposed to be on the books that season, we were both of us well in the red. We had mistaken a stockpile of unspent emotions for a case of spring fever. I now realized that Edward and Cassandra had been irresistible magnets for each other from the day they met. He was her knight in shining armor and she his blessed damozel. The decades that separated them were of even less consequence than what other people were going to think and, undoubtedly, say. "It's like scuttling the calendar," Cassandra had said. I wondered what she was using now instead of years as the least common denominator of their existence.

I nosed the MG into Frejus and looked at my watch. I had made good time. Mont St. Victoire rose majestically across the Valley of Pourrières, its peak snow-capped and shining against the blue sky above Aix.

From outside, l'Ange d'Or looked like some particularly handsome villa sprawled among sweeping lawns and gardens. People lounged on private terraces or clustered in groups by the fountain feeding the white swans and peacocks. A young nun with smooth pink cheeks and a pleasant smile met me at the door and escorted me to the office of the Mother Superior. On the floor were deep piled rugs, Gobelins on every wall. At one time it had probably been some millionaire's villa. The office itself was cool and quiet, bare of all but the essentials—a desk, a couple of chairs, a silver and ebony crucifix on one wall. Tall windows looked over the gardens toward distant sweeps of green spiked with the crimson of oleanders and gold mimosa.

"Be seated, mademoiselle," the Mother Superior rose and extended her hand. "Sister Marie Cécile tells me that you wish to see the Fortescues. You are a friend—" she hesitated almost imperceptibly, "of both?"

"Of both, Mother," I assured her.

"You are young, my child. They are greatly changed," she warned. "You will not be shocked?"

"I don't think so. Are they improving?"

"We are most concerned." She regarded me gravely and shook her head.

"Were they so badly hurt, then?"

"Very badly, my child." She crossed herself quickly and touched her beads.

"You mean—" I hesitated and she finished the question. "Will they recover?" She shook her head

slowly. "Only le bon Dieu knows that, but I doubt it. I doubt it very much."

"They are going to die?" I was shocked despite myself. "Both of them?"

"We are doing everything possible." Again she crossed herself and touched her beads. "The doctors are of the finest. The treatment also. No effort is being spared."

"Of that I am sure, Mother," I said quickly. "It is simply that nobody knew, nobody realized, that they were ill. It was only today I learned that they were here."

The nun scrutinized me and seemed to weigh her next question carefully before asking it. "You know what happened, my child?"

I shook my head. "We thought they were still in North Africa."

"They returned from there two months ago," she told me. "The young man with a serious malady with which the doctors have not been able to cope. The strange country, the heat—madame must not have realized—were too much for him." Her face grew stern. "To cure him she took him alone into the desert." I remained silent and she continued.

"We do not know whether it was the sirocco—or some other thing—that made him delirious, but he became unmanageable. It was necessary for madame to bind him with sheets while she left him to summon the good brothers from the monastery at Oum el Asel. It was a full day's journey through the sand to reach him and get back to the monastery where they could care for him until the fever was past."

"Did he recover?" I asked, remembering Edward's depression following the flu and his listless quietude in the fall.

"From the delirium, yes, mademoiselle. He was still weak, but his mind was quite clear when madame came to take him away."

"That was when they returned to France?"

"To Marseilles," she assented. "The good brothers remonstrated, for he was not yet strong enough to travel. But madame insisted. In the hotel that first night the delirium recurred." I thought of the young British officer, Cassandra's first husband, who had left her for a little French tart in Marseilles. Even rudimentary psychology discerned an unfortunate parallel. "He threw her downstairs," she concluded. "She suffered concussion and a broken hip. It was a great sin," she shook her head sadly, "a great pity—le pauvre petit."

"And now?" I asked.

"The concussion has cleared. The hip heals slowly," she said thoughtfully, "but madame's heart is not good. She is no longer a young woman and there has been much shock—for that we must make allowances—but she is very bitter. I have tried, we have all tried, but—" She lifted one hand expres-

sively, palm upturned as though in supplication.

"Has she much pain?"

"Not now. She rests quite easily and says very little—too little—for there is something between them, something strange and unforgiving, which I feel but cannot see. The doctors are helpless, we are all helpless. It is as though they in that room were orphans of God." She bowed her head and crossed herself against his blasphemy.

"In her room?" I asked.

"He was failing so rapidly when they came," she explained, "that we placed a bed for him in her room. Perhaps it was not wise, but we did not want him to die alone and among strangers. The young man is very weak. He has not spoken for days and seems incapable of making the effort to remain alive. Perhaps they could have saved him had he remained with the good brothers at Oum el Asel. I do not know." The Mother Superior was obviously distressed and troubled as she spoke.

"She loved him greatly, Mother. His illness must have been a tremendous blow."

"A great love can become a great hate, my child," she replied sorrowfully. "Madame no longer loves, of that I am sure, and the poor young man no longer resists." She seemed about to say something further but checked herself. I had the feeling that she was carrying an intolerable burden, which she would like to share, but condemned the impulse as a weakness in herself.

"Yes, Mother?"

"I do not know, my child, I cannot say surely." Her next words disturbed the serenity of the room as effectively as a stone flung into the quiet waters of a pool. "But, God forgive me, I think they are dying of hate."

The words in themselves were fantastic, but coming from her they possessed the undistorted clarity, the stinging core, of logic. "There is about them," she concluded slowly, "the air of consuming and being consumed."

The late afternoon wind from the mountains touched my cheek with cold, invisible fingers.

"May I see them?" I asked. "Is there anything one can do?"

"Only le bon Dieu." She rose briskly. "Come with me."

I followed her from the room. The corridors had the tranquil elegance of a fine hotel, deep-piled underfoot, ivory-paneled doors spaced at irregular intervals along each wall. She paused before one and tapped softly before opening it.

"A visitor for you, my children," she announced, motioning me to enter. "I will leave you in her care until later," she murmured as the novice on duty came to meet me.

Cassandra was lying in the center of a high bed facing long windows which framed the fragmentary loveliness of Provence. Sunlit hedges and gardens rose where the

iridescent bubbles of a fountain clung to the sky, beyond them the cloud-capped blue of the Maritime Alps. At least they have something beautiful to look at, I thought. Delicate pastel pillows supported Cassandra's shoulders, and beneath her head were puffs of down covered with lace and embroidery, fragile as a spider's web. Her jacket and gown were ivory satin crusted with lace, like those from a bride's trousseau. Above them her eyes looked out like purple bruises in the pallid mask of her face. Skin stretched taut across the cheekbones, a thousand tiny lines wrinkling their way across the sagging flesh. She looked shrunken and flat, formless beneath the covers. An old, old woman. An evil and horrible caricature of what she had been.

"Janie?" Even her voice was formless and flat. I wondered where Edward was. The room was so obviously, invidiously feminine. A battery of scent bottles stood on the table beside the bed, along with a bowl of enormous English violets.

"I'm sorry to find you so wretched," I said, lifting one shriveled hand from the bed. It was curved and predatory like the claw of a bird.

"Edward will be so glad to see you, Janie," she smiled mirthlessly. "He had missed his young friends." My eyes followed hers to the far side of the room. Against the wall was a narrow bed, not much more than a cot, upon which lay a still figure, eyes closed, shallow breathing scarcely perceptible. His hair clung to his head like wet silver and his features were pinched and drawn as those of a runner in the final stages of exhaustion. He seemed to have passed beyond the sense of sound and did not open his eyes.

"Don't waken him," I spoke softly. "I'll come again."

"Oh, he's awake," Cassandra assured me harshly. "If he opens his eyes he'll have to look at me or the wall there, so he keeps them shut." I then realized that his bed faced away from the windows. With eyes open he could see only the immovable wall peopled with his own imaginings, or the old woman on the bed. I stared at her blankly.

"He hates me, you know," she informed me with a wry twist of lips that were garish against her pallor. "I'm only waiting for him to die, then Cook's will take me home. I've already made arrangements." I turned hastily toward the young nun, whose fingers seemed frozen on her rosary.

"Madame has sent some letters," she answered my unspoken question. "I do not know to whom." The room was silent except for the clicking of her beads.

"You needn't pray for me, sister," Cassandra advised her, "and it won't do him any good. Not where he's going." The nun went on with her beads as though she had heard

nothing, but an instant later the door clicked shut as she left the room.

"Why don't you open your eyes, Edward, and look at Janie?" Cassandra taunted him. "He can hear perfectly well"—her mouth was an ugly line—"he just doesn't want to."

"It doesn't matter," I protested. "Don't bother him. Suzy asked—"

"I wrote Suzy," Cassandra interrupted. "Otherwise nobody would have known, would they, Janie?"

"Known what?" I asked slowly.

"That Edward is going to die," she gloated. "It's I who am old, Janie, but it's Edward who's dying." Her face was livid. "Do only the good die young, Janie? It doesn't really matter—nothing matters any more, because Edward won't know anything about it." The enormity of her triumph was grotesque and horrible. I could think of nothing but how to curb this spate of viciousness.

"Stop it, stop it—you're monstrous!" I fought a surge of nausea as I spoke. The room was corroded with evil. I wanted to run out into the clear air, away from the hatred consuming the old woman and the vulnerable boy. I hoped he was unconscious. I looked for a bell but Cassandra had anticipated me. The one attached to her bed she had buried beneath her pillows.

"Don't look so horrified," she admonished me. "He hated me for not being young. He tried to hide it but I could tell. He wanted to go home." She turned her head toward the other bed. "Remember your mother and the white lilacs, Edward? Remember England the day we left? They won't see you again now, will they, Edward? Not even to bury you!" I was frozen in this incredible nightmare. She turned to me again and observed conversationally, "I've made arrangements for him to be buried here. There's no point in carting a corpse halfway across Europe." I tried to drag my fascinated eyes from the face of such naked hatred. Edward, denied even the solace of dying, might already have been a corpse. He was as still as one, but it seemed a lightening stillness. Cassandra was as frightening as the old witch in the fairy tale—an ersatz princess who opened her mouth only to spew forth toads.

"How can you?" My lips were stiff but I forced them to shape the syllables carefully.

"How can I what?" she mocked.

"Hate him so," I murmured.

"Why shouldn't I?" she demanded. "Look what he did to me. I was beautiful, I was rich, I was free. I wasn't young, no—but should that have made his flesh crawl? He married me—"

"He married you," I interrupted fiercely and the words clogged my throat, "because he thought he loved you and you loved him—"

"Love," she spat furiously. "What do you know of love? You and

Suzy and Edward with your insipid little faces and your vapid little minds. You don't know what love is! You aren't capable of it." I was scorched by her contempt. Again she turned her head toward the unresponsive figure on the other bed.

"You know about love now, don't you, Edward?" she purred. "Remember North Africa? You loved the harbors and bazaars and coffee shops at dusk, didn't you, Edward? But you didn't love the nights, not even at first. You said they reminded you of stale violets." The room was stifling with fragrance from the violets by her bed.

"What does the desert remind you of, Edward?" she persisted. "There were no violets there—only sand and the sirocco. That's what love is—blinding and furious and relentless. You didn't expect icicles in the desert, did you, Edward? I would have given you anything—everything—" the mask of her face broke into a thousand pieces, "and you couldn't even bear to kiss me. I knew it, but I thought you'd get over it. I'd make you—" the purr was a vicious rasp, "and you tried to kill me. But it's you who are dying. Do you hear me, Edward? It's *you* dying."

I turned and groped blindly for the door somewhere behind me. My legs were like ropes, the room enormous with shadows creeping inward as from the edges of a dream. A nurse appeared suddenly bearing hypodermic syringes on a tray.

"I am desolated, mademoiselle," she apologized, moving hastily toward the bed. "The doctor was out—we did not know—" She plunged the needle into Cassandra's arm and looked at me whitely before moving to Edward's side and lifting his wrist between finger and thumb. She then swabbed his arm and slipped the needle gently beneath the skin.

The vituperations from the high bed were stilled, but I was sick with horror for two fellow-creatures trapped in the web of their own emotions—hers too great, his too untried. I wondered what his parents knew. What to tell Suzy. The mountains beyond the windows were remote and silent.

"I believe he wishes to see you, mademoiselle," the nurse murmured at my shoulder. I turned to find Edward's blue eyes upon me, vague and slightly out of focus, like those of a very young child.

"Edward?" I spoke gently. "It's Janie."

"I heard your voice." He tried to smile. "It wasn't a dream, then. I'm going home, Janie. By spring I'll—be—home." His voice was blurred and husky from disuse.

"I know, Edward. I'm sorry you've been so ill."

"It wasn't the illness, Janie. It was taking love into your arms and having it go all rotten. Love shouldn't decay." He gave a faint

sigh and closed his eyes again. The nurse touched my arm.

"He will sleep now. I have given him something to make him sleep." As I turned there was a faint sound and his eyes opened again.

"Is there anything you want, Edward? Anything I can do?" I stooped to catch his barely audible reply.

"Tell mother," his voice was wistful, like that of a homesick child, "I'd like—a pear—and—some—little cakes—for tea." His whisper strayed into nothingness, his eyes clouded. The lids fell.

"I'll tell her," I nodded blindly. The Mother Superior had come into the room; she led me out.

"It is a tragedy, my child," she said compassionately when we were safely outside, "but le bon Dieu is kind. The young man is aware of very little any more. Today is the first he has spoken in many weeks. When he came to us he was completely spent."

"But she?" I exclaimed, "and her arrangements! Doesn't she know that she's dying, too?"

"The arrangements are those of a sick mind, my child," the nun shook her head. "She does not realize that when he goes she will have no further need of living. Her heart will go like that." She made a simple gesture with her fingers, and her hand fell to her side.

NEXT MONTH...

Bride-to-be vanishes on the eve of her wedding—

AVRAM DAVIDSON's *"Thou Still Unravished Bride"*

EDITORS' FILE CARD

AUTHOR: **ARNOLD BENNETT**

TITLE: ***What to Do Next?***

TYPE: Humorous Crime Story

PROTAGONIST: Mr. Penfound, retired

LOCALE: London

TIME: In the dead of the night

COMMENTS: *About a man who had learned "the true philosophy of life" and a pair of burglars who found themselves in "a ridiculous position" . . .*

THE CHAIN OF CIRCUMSTANCES leading to the sudden and unexpected return of Mr. and Mrs. Penfound from their Continental holiday was in itself curious and even remarkable, but it has nothing to do with the present narrative, which begins with the actual arrival of Mr. and Mrs. Penfound before the portal of their suburban residence, No. 7 Munster Gardens, at a quarter before midnight on the 30th of August.

It was a detached house, with a spacious triangular garden at the back; it had an air of comfort, of sobriety, of good form, of success; one divined by looking at it that the rent ran to a not inconsiderable sum, and that the tenant was not a man who had to save up for quarter days. It was a credit to the street, which upon the whole, with its noble trees and its pretty curve, is distinctly the best street in Fulham. And, in fact, No. 7 in every way justified the innocent pride of the Penfounds.

"I can feel cobwebs all over me," said Mrs. Penfound crossly, as they entered the porch, and Mr. Penfound took out his latchkey. She was hungry, hot, and tired, and she exhibited a certain pettishness — a pettishness which Mr. Penfound, whenever it occurred, found a particular pleasure in soothing. Mr. Penfound himself was seldom ruffled.

Most men would have been preoccupied with the discomforts of the arrival, but not George Penfound. Mr. Penfound was not, and had never been, of those who go daily into the city by a particular train, and think

the world is coming to an end if the newsagent fails to put the newspaper on the doorstep before 8 A.M.

Mr. Penfound had lived. He had lived adventurously and he had lived everywhere. He had slept under the stars and over the throbbing turbines of ocean steamers. He knew the harbors of the British Empire, and the waste places of the unpeopled West, and the mysterious environs of foreign cities. He had been first mate on a tramp steamer, wood sawyer in Ontario, ganger on the Canadian Pacific Railway, clerk at a Rand mine, and land agent in California.

It was the last occupation that had happened to yield the two hundred thousand dollars which rendered him independent and established him so splendidly, at the age of 40, in Fulham, the place of his birth. Thin, shrewd, clear, and kindly, his face was the face of a man who has learned the true philosophy of life. He took the world as he found it, and he found it good.

To such a man an unexpected journey, even though it ended at a deserted and unprepared home, whose larder proved as empty as his stomach, was really nothing.

By the time Mr. Penfound had locked up the house, turned out the light in the hall, and arrived in the bedroom, Mrs. Penfound was fast asleep. He sat down in the armchair by the window, charmed by the gentle radiance of the night, and unwilling to go to bed. Like most men who have seen the world, he had developed the instincts of a poet, and was something of a dreamer. Half an hour — or it might have been an hour: poets are oblivious of time — had passed, when into Mr. Penfound's visions there entered a sinister element. He straightened himself stiffly in the chair and listened, smiling.

"By Jove!" he whispered. "I do believe it's a burglar. I'll give the beggar time to get fairly in, and then we'll have some fun."

It seemed to him that he heard a few clicking noises at the back of the house, and then a sound as if something was being shoved hard.

"The dining-room window," he said.

In a few minutes it became perfectly evident to his trained and acute ear that a burglar occupied the dining-room, and accordingly he proceeded to carry out other arrangements.

Removing his boots, he put on a pair of soft, woollen house slippers which lay under the bed. Then he went to a chest of drawers and took out two revolvers. Handling these lovingly, and, shod in the silent woollen, passed noiselessly out of the room. By stepping very close to the wall, so as to put as slight a strain as possible on the flooring, he contrived to descend to the half-landing without causing a sound, but on the half-landing itself there occurred an awful creak — a creak that seemed to reverberate into infinite space. Mr. Penfound stopped a second, but, perceiving the unwisdom of a halt, immediately proceeded.

In that second of consternation he had remembered that only two chambers of one revolver and one chamber of the other were loaded. It was an unfortunate mischance. Should he return and load fully? Preposterous! He remembered with pride the sensation which he had caused one night ten years before in a private shooting-saloon in Paris. Three shots to cripple one burglar — for *him* it was a positive extravagance of means. So he continued down the stairs, cautiously but rapidly feeling his way.

The next occurrence brought him up standing at the dining-room door, which was open. He heard voices in the dining-room. There were two burglars! Three shots for two burglars? Pooh! Ample!

This was the conversation Mr. Penfound heard:

"Did you drink out of this glass, Jack?"

"Not I. I took a pull out of the bottle."

"So did I."

"Well?"

There was a pause. Mr. Penfound discovered that by putting an eye to the crack at the hinges he could see the burglars, who had put on one soft light and were sitting at the table. They were his first burglars, and they rather shocked his preconceived notions of the type. They hadn't the look of burglars — no bluish chins, no lowering eyes, no corduroy trousers, no knotted red handkerchiefs.

One, the younger, dressed in blue serge, with linen collar and a soiled pink necktie, might have been a city clerk of the lower grade; he had light, bushy hair and a yellow mustache; his eyes were large and pale blue, his chin weak: altogether Mr. Penfound decided that had he seen the young man elsewhere he would never have suspected him to be a burglar. The other was of middle age, neatly dressed in dark gray, but with a ruffian's face, and black hair, cut extremely close; he wore a soft felt hat and was smoking a cigarette. He was examining the glass out of which Mr. Penfound had but recently drunk whiskey.

"Look here, Jack," the man in gray said to his companion. "You haven't drunk out of this glass, and I haven't; but someone's drunk out of it. It's wet."

The young man paled, and with an oath snatched up the glass to look at it. Mr. Penfound noticed how suddenly his features writhed into a complicated expression of cowardice, cunning, and vice. He no longer doubted that the youth was an authentic burglar. The older man remained calm.

"This house isn't as empty as we thought. There's someone here."

"Yes, gentlemen, there is," remarked Mr. Penfound, quietly stepping into the room with a revolver raised in each hand.

The young man dropped the glass, and, after rolling along the table it fell on the floor and broke, making a marvelous noise in the silence.

"Well, I'm blowed!" exclaimed the burglar in gray, and turned to the window.

"Don't move! Up with your hands, and be quick about it — I mean business," said Mr. Penfound steadily.

The burglar in gray made two hasty steps to the window. Mr. Penfound's revolver spoke — it was the one in his left hand, containing two shots — and with a muffled howl the burglar suddenly halted, cursing with pain and anger.

"Hands up, both of you!" repeated Mr. Penfound imperturbably.

A few drops of blood appeared on the left wrist of the older burglar, showing where he had been hit. With evident pain he raised both hands to the level of his shoulders; the left hand clearly was useless — it hung sideways in a peculiar fashion. The youthful criminal was trembling like a spray of maidenhair, and had his hands high up over his head.

Mr. Penfound joyfully reflected that no London burglar had ever before found himself in such a ridiculous position as these two, and he took a genuine, artistic pleasure in the spectacle.

But what to do next?

The youth began to speak with a whine like that of a beggar.

"Silence!" said Mr. Penfound impressively, and proceeded with his cogitations, a revolver firm and steady in each hand. The shot had evidently not wakened his wife, and to disturb her now from a refreshing and long-needed sleep in order to send her for the police would not only be unchivalrous, it would disclose a lack of resource, a certain clumsiness of management, in an affair which Mr. Penfound felt sure he ought to be able to carry neatly to an effective conclusion.

Besides, if a revolver shot in the house had not wakened his wife, what could wake her? He could not go upstairs to her and leave the burglars to await his return.

Then an idea occurred to Mr. Penfound.

"Now, my men," he said cheerfully, "I think you understand that I am not joking, and that I can shoot a bit, and that, whatever the laws of this country, I *do* shoot." He waved the muzzle of one revolver in the direction of the gray man's injured wrist.

"Look here, gov'nor," the owner of the wrist pleaded, "it hurts dreadful. I'm going to faint."

"Faint, then. I know it hurts."

The man's face was white with pain, but Mr. Penfound had seen too many strange sights in his life to be greatly moved by the sight of a rascal with a bullet in his anatomy.

"To proceed. You will stand side by side and turn round. The young gentleman will open the window, and you will walk out into the garden. March! Slower, slower, I say. Halt!"

The burglars were now outside, while Mr. Penfound was still within the room. He followed them, and in doing so stumbled over a black bag which lay on the floor. Fortunately he recovered himself instantly. He noticed lying on the top of the bag a small bunch of skeleton keys, some putty, and what looked like a thong

of rawhide. He also observed that three small panes of the French window had been forced inwards.

"Turn to your left, go down the pathway, and stop when you come to the side gate. And don't hurry, mind you."

They obeyed, without speaking even to each other. Mr. Penfound had no fear of their disobedience. He was within two yards of their heels, and he said to himself that his hands were superbly steady.

It was at this point that Mr. Penfound began to feel hungry, really hungry. The whiskey had appeased the cravings of his stomach for a short time, but suddenly its demands were imperious. Owing to the exigencies of the day's journey he had not had a satisfying meal for thirty hours; and Mr. Penfound, since settling down, had developed a liking for regular meals. However, there was nothing to be done at present.

He therefore proceeded with and safely accomplished his plan of driving the burglars before him into the street.

"Here," he thought, "we shall soon be seeing a policeman, or some late bird who will fetch a policeman." And he drove his curious team up Munster Park Gardens towards Fulham Road, that interminable highway, once rural, but rural no longer.

The thoroughfares seemed to be absolutely deserted. Mr. Penfound could scarcely believe that London, even in the dead of night, could be so lonely. The street lamps shone steady in the still, warm air, and above them the star-studded sky, with a thin sickle moon, at which, however, beautiful as it was, Mr. Penfound could not look. His gaze was fixed on the burglars. As he inspected their backs he wondered what their thoughts were.

He felt that in their place he should have been somewhat amused by the humor of the predicament. But their backs showed no sign of feeling, unless it were that of resignation. The older man had dropped his injured arm, with Mr. Penfound's tacit consent, and it now hung loose at his side.

The procession moved slowly eastward along Fulham Road, the two burglars first, silent, glum, and disgusted, and Mr. Penfound with his revolvers close behind.

Still no policeman, no wayfarer. Mr. Penfound began to feel a little anxious. And his hunger was becoming insufferable. This little procession of his could not move on forever. Something must occur, and Mr. Penfound said that something must occur quickly. He looked up at the houses with a swift glance, but these dark faces of brick, all with closed eyelids, gave him no sign of encouragement. He thought of firing his revolver in order to attract attention, but remembered in time that if he did so he would have only one shot left for his burglars, an insufficient allowance in case of contingencies.

But presently, as the clock of Fulham parish church struck three, Mr. Penfound beheld an oasis of waving

palms and cool water in this desert — that is to say, he saw in the distance one of those coffee-stalls which just before midnight mysteriously dot themselves about London, only to disappear again at breakfast time. The burglars also saw it, and stopped almost involuntarily.

"Get on now," said Mr. Penfound gruffly, "and stop five paces *past* the coffee-stall. Do you hear?"

"Yes, sir," whined the young burglar.

"Aye," remarked the old burglar coolly.

As Mr. Penfound approached the coffee-stall, he observed that it was no ordinary coffee-stall. It belonged to the aristocracy of coffee-stalls. It was painted a lovely deep crimson, and on this crimson, amid flowers and scrolls, had been inscribed the names of the delicacies within: tea, coffee, cocoa, rolls, sandwiches, toast, sausages, even bacon and eggs. Mr. Penfound's stomach called aloud within him at the rumor of these good things.

When the trio arrived, the stallkeeper happened to be bending over a tea-urn, and he did not notice the halt of the procession until Mr. Penfound spoke.

"I say," Mr. Penfound began, holding the revolvers about the level of his top waistcoat-button, and with his eyes fixed on the burglars — "I say!"

"Tea or coffee?" asked the stallkeeper shortly, looking up.

"Neither — that is, at present," replied Mr. Penfound. "The fact is, I've got two burglars here."

"Two *what* — where?"

Mr. Penfound then explained, concluding, "And I want you to fetch a couple of policemen."

The stallkeeper paused a moment. He was a grim fellow, as Mr. Penfound gathered out of the corner of his eye.

"Well, that's about the rummest story I ever 'eard," the stallkeeper said. "And you want me to fetch a policeman?"

"Yes — and I hope you'll hurry up. I'm tired of holding these revolvers."

"And I'm to leave my stall, am I?"

"Certainly."

The stallkeeper placed the first finger of his left hand upright against his nose.

"Well, I just ain't then. What d'ye take me for? A bloomin' owl? Look 'ere, mister, nigh every night some joker tries to get me away from my stall, so as they can empty it and run off. But I ain't been in this line nineteen year for nuthin'. No, you go and take yer tale and yer pistols and yer bloomin' burglars somewhere else. 'Ear?"

"As you please," said Mr. Penfound, with dignity. "Only I'll wait here till a policeman comes along, or someone. You will then learn that I have told you the truth. How soon will a policeman be along?"

"Might be a 'our, might be more. There ain't likely to be no other people till four thirty or thereabouts; that's when my trade begins."

Mr. Penfound was annoyed. His hunger, exasperated by the exquisite

odors of the stall, increased every second, and the prospect of waiting an hour, or even half an hour, was appalling.

Another idea occurred to him.

"Will you," he said to the stallkeeper, "kindly put one of those sausages into my mouth? I daren't let loose these revolvers."

"Not till I sees yer money."

Hunger made Mr. Penfound humble, and he continued, "Will you come round and take the money out of my pocket?"

"No, I won't! I don't leave this 'ere counter. I know yer dodges."

"Very well, I will wait."

"Steady on, gov'nor. You aren't the only chap that's hungry."

Mr. Penfound turned sharply at the voice. It was the older burglar who spoke, and he was now approaching the stall, regardless of the revolvers. Mr. Penfound noticed a twinkle in the man's eye, a faint appreciation of the fact that the situation was funny, and Mr. Penfound gave way to a slight smile. He was being disobeyed flatly, but for the life of him he could not shoot. Besides, there was no occasion to shoot, as the burglar was making no attempt to escape.

"Two slabs and a pint o' thick," the burglar said to the stallkeeper, and was immediately served with a jug of coffee and two huge pieces of bread and butter, for which he flung down a couple of coins.

Mr. Penfound was astounded — indeed, too astounded to speak — by the coolness of this criminal.

"Look here," the older burglar continued, quietly handing one of the pieces of bread and butter to his companion in sin, who by this time had also crept up, "you can put down them revolvers and tuck in till the peeler comes along. We know when we're copped, and we aren't going to skip. Tuck in, gov'nor."

"Give it a name," said the stallkeeper, with an eye to business.

Mr. Penfound, scarcely knowing what he did or why he did it, put down one revolver and then the other, fished a coin from his pocket, and presently was engaged in the consumption of a ham sandwich and coffee.

"You're a cool one," he said at length to the older burglar.

"So are you," said the older burglar; and he and Mr. Penfound both glanced somewhat scornfully at the other burglar, undersized, pale, and still cringing.

"Ever been caught before?" asked Mr. Penfound pleasantly.

"What's that got to do with you?"

The retort was gruff, final — a snub, and Mr. Penfound felt it as such. He had the curious sensation that he was in the presence of a superior spirit, a stronger personality than his own.

"Here's a policeman," remarked the stallkeeper casually. They all listened, and heard the noise of regular footfalls round a distant corner.

Mr. Penfound struggled inwardly with a sudden overmastering impulse, and then yielded.

"You can go," he said quietly to the older burglar. "So clear off before the policeman sees you."

"Straight?" the man said, looking him in the eyes to make sure there was no joking.

"Straight, my friend. . . . Here, shake."

So it happened that Mr. Penfound and the older burglar shook hands. The next instant Mr. Penfound was alone with the stallkeeper; the other two, with the celerity born of long practice, had vanished into the night.

"Did you ever see such a man?" said Mr. Penfound to the stallkeeper, putting the revolvers in his pocket, and feeling strangely happy, as one who has done a good action.

"Yer don't kid me," was the curt reply. "It was all a plant. Want anythink else? Because, if not, ye'd best go."

"Yes, I do," said Mr. Penfound, for he had thought of his wife. He selected various good things, and was just gathering his purchases together when the policeman appeared.

"Good night, officer," he called out blithely, and set off to run home, as though for his life.

As he re-entered the bedroom at No. 7 his wife sat up in bed, a beautiful but accusing figure.

"George, where have you been?"

"My love," he answered, "I've been out into the night to get you this sausage, and this cake, and this sandwich. Eat them. They will do you good."

NEXT MONTH . . .

One of the strangest stories you have ever read—

HOLLY ROTH's *They Didn't Deserve Her Death*

EDITORS' FILE CARD

AUTHOR: **WILLIAM RAWLE WEEKS**

TITLE: ***As the Hunter Feels***

TYPE: International Secret Police

LOCALE: Denver, Colorado

TIME: The Present

COMMENTS: *An unusual story about a political exile who has been granted asylum in America — and who is in terror of his life ... by the author of* KNOCK AND WAIT A WHILE, *awarded the coveted "Edgar" by MWA as the best first mystery novel of 1957.*

HE REACHED OUT THE FINGERS OF his left hand tentatively until their blunt tips came to the cigarette that was offered, and he said finally, with decision and scorn, although the fingers were brown-stained, "There is no need that you offer tobacco to soften me. If I were not prepared to confess myself fully, such an offer would only make me stubborn. And because I wish to confess, you only waste tobacco. It is serious police inefficiency to select a wrong method. I hope your superiors do not hear of it. Am I permitted to continue now?"

He sat back, away from the edge of the long oak table. His hands gripped the arms of the wooden chair.

"I was not unwarned. For two nights before, my big German dogs that stay between the two fences had barked for me. For a long time on the first night. But only a very little the night before last. And last night not at all. Then I began to be very much afraid because, of course, I understood what that meant.

"You also do not need so bright a light above my head. That is something for little thieves or political old men. You appear to have the methods that we grew out of twenty years ago."

He twisted his thin, pinched white face instantly in the direction of the sound when a wall switch clicked to his right and behind him.

"That is much cooler for all four of you as well," he said. "The interrogator cannot be uncomfortable if he is to be efficient . . . Therefore when the dogs barked last night not at all, I took up the telephone to call for you who were to protect me. Then to find that the telephone no longer worked frightened me still more. Someone had come up to the fence on the first night to be seen by the dogs and to bring something to them. Perhaps food. Perhaps to leave a lady dog in season tied outside the fence. On the second night he had come at the same hour for the same purpose, and by the third night he was expected and the dogs were quiet.

"With the floodlights such a thing took both courage and knowledge, as I myself well knew, and training and self-discipline as well. Therefore when I tried to use my telephone and it did not work, I knew that I was in much danger because they had been able to come past the dogs and the fences. And, to make dead my telephone, they had been able to come to the house itself.

"When I found the telephone was dead, I stayed for many seconds in my bed, leaning on my elbow, holding the mouthpiece and not able to move. I was not even able to breathe properly, although I knew clearly what I must do. For Kovac had taught us many times that these moments happen to everybody, no matter how brave, and are not to be ashamed of, but that it is absolutely necessary to make some motion—any motion, however small—with the body, and that then the paralysis of the mind would be cured also.

"I knew that he was correct because of the once before when I had had the paralysis. If I had been able to move that first time . . .

"Who is Kovac? In Denver do you know anything of the world? Kovac was the Chief of the State Security Police in my country between 1951 and 1954. Before that, when I began with the Security Police, Kovac was in charge of training the little section of people who were to carry out domestic and foreign political liquidation, where I volunteered, as was required, and was fortunate enough to be accepted.

"You understand that I mean I considered it fortunate then. Now, of course, I know the errors of my thinking. No one was better qualified or more experienced or more gifted to be in charge of this training than Kovac. He deserved the greatest respect.

"But by 1954 Kovac was demonstrating unreliability to my government by certain sophistication of thought, cosmopolitanism, and neo-

fascistic tendencies. I was then chief of the section in which he had trained me, and I was ordered to cleanse the Security Police of his corrupting influence. Because of a delicate readjustment going on in the balance of our leadership at that time, it was decided that Kovac should be dealt with privately and immediately rather than in a long public trial, where it was possible for him to have caused much embarrassment.

"When it was the time, I gained admittance to Kovac's bedroom and waited for him there. It was a thing of unbelievable difficulty. If only you knew how he was guarded. The guarding of public officials in this country is altogether inadequate and neglected, unlike in my country.

"I had taken a position in an armchair in Kovac's darkened room. Very suddenly and without a sound from the turning of the doorknob, for which I was listening, Kovac opened the door of his bedroom a crack until he could reach the switch for the light. He turned the light on and swung the door wide before entering the room.

"This is a normal form of entrance and I was prepared for it in my mind. Nevertheless I have no shame in admitting that, as he stood outside the doorway waiting until he could see the whole of the room before entering, I saw him only a little instant, and perhaps not at all, before he saw me, and it was then I had the paralysis for the only other time.

"Can you understand? To be faced so suddenly by Kovac, who had survived so many things of this sort and had never seemed to care about any of them. To face him as he stood there in the hallway and smiled at me sitting in his chair with my long, silenced gun waiting on my knee. I have thought about it and decided that the paralysis is more from embarrassment than fear. Although, it is true, I still see him at times suddenly standing in front of me in his old mussed clothing, and my heart will skip a beat.

"In the paralysis I remember wondering why he did not draw a gun and shoot me or walk away for help. But then I recalled having often heard from Kovac himself, in training, that it is necessary to make a movement to break the paralysis. So I understood that he did not move for the same reason that I did not move.

"We both acted together then.

"The skill of my planning had its reward. I had only to raise the pistol from my knee and fire, while he had to reach under his coat to his gun.

"As of course you know, a silencer destroys accuracy, even from very close. Although I intended to hit him in the chest, the bullet struck him in the head just above the face, which was still smil-

ing. It knocked him against the wall across the corridor before he fell to the floor.

"Now! Please! I will smoke a cigarette. You will have to light it as well, since you have taken everything from my pockets . . . Thank you.

"Although a good silencer makes only a little cough, it is a little cough of peculiar pitch and anyone who has heard it does not forget. Therefore I knew that with that sound and the crash of Kovac's body I had very little time, even with the best of luck, to arrive at the automobile that by now would be below to take me to the airport and out of reach of those few people who would still be foolishly loyal to Kovac.

"Nevertheless I got up out of the chair with a feeling of excitement stronger than the need to escape. For I knew that I had done what no one else in my country could have done. I had killed Kovac. I had prepared the plan. I had waited for him. I had been no more afraid than he was. I had broken the paralysis and fired first. And I was on my feet, walking and untouched, and the great Kovac was now only crumpled clothing. I had proved a very great deal to myself. As long as Kovac was alive, and unless I killed him myself, I could never have been absolutely sure of being the best.

"As I approached the body of Kovac quickly, I even felt as the hunter feels who has just shot the most cunning animal in the forest: great satisfaction to have hunted so well, but also a regret that the hunt is over. I felt disappointment that I had killed Kovac so easily.

"As I stooped over the body of Kovac, determined to take from him a trophy—the gun in his hand, with which he would have killed me if he had been able—I turned my head to look along the hallway. When I turned it back, I found Kovac's eyes open and staring up at me, and his sagging bloody face not smiling but ugly with holding back the pain. He was not quite dead after all, and he had raised his automatic. Its muzzle was inches from my face.

"He seemed to wait only long enough to see the look of shock come over my face, then he jabbed the gun a little at me and pulled the trigger and the blast exploded around my head.

"Now . . . Where is an ashtray? . . . I do not believe that I ever became unconscious. Even as I was bounding over sidewards and backwards from the bullet striking my head, I was thinking how I must get to my feet and run, but how first of all I must finish off Kovac while he was still alive to see me do it.

"But as soon as I came rolling to my feet I knew that I had no time to think of Kovac or anything else but flight. For when I had wiped the blood from my eyes,

the blackness in front of them was still there, no matter in which direction I turned my head, even upwards toward the hallway ceiling, where the light was.

"Kovac had made me blind.

"As Kovac had taught us in training, if the planning is not good, nothing—not luck, not skill, not courage—will save the operation. My planning had been very good, so that I knew more of Kovac's residence than he did. I knew it better than my own home, or the face of my wife who is still there.

"And therefore, although blind, I had only to grope until I found the door to Kovac's room, thus making sure of my starting position. From there I went across his room and out onto the balcony. Along the balcony to the ledge and along the ledge to the corner. I dropped from the ledge twenty feet to the little patch of lawn, went along the edge of the gravel path, on the soft dirt, to the gate that had been opened for me. Then I was in the car and away. I had no fear of being caught, for I thought that after Kovac and the blindness there was nothing more that could be done to me. I moved rapidly and without hesitation and I had not the slightest difficulty in the escape . . .

"With last night? It has everything to do with last night: I was very quickly brought to America when I requested asylum, and I was given a new name and this fenced and lighted house with the dogs of which you were all so sure. And for a time I was given great importance as I told what I knew. Even the old exiles of my country made a hero of me. I had nothing to do with them. We were well rid of them, and so should you be. They are the sort who only take from America what they can get for their own ends.

"It has been three years since I have been of importance. By now I would have been an official of high rank in my own country. A fact that has not been properly rewarded in America. What have I been given? A house? Food? Clothing? . . .

"Yes, yes, I am ready now to tell of last night, when I lay in my bed holding the telephone which did not work and fighting with the paralysis of the fear that comes only from very greatest danger . . .

"I knew that I must make some movement, however small. Still, I could not. I lay there, my hand beginning to make sweat on the telephone and my heart thumping so loudly that, although I know it is not possible, I thought it must be heard throughout the house. Holding the muscles of my stomach so rigid began to give me a strong urge to relieve myself.

"But such an act would clearly identify my position. Therefore I could no longer afford the paralysis

that caused it, and with a sudden command to myself I was able to force my hand to lay the telephone beside me on the pillow. The noise of putting it back on its cradle would have been an explosion in the silent house.

"As Kovac had taught, once this simple thing was done I was fully able to think and move again. I could breathe and relax. My heart bounced heavily, but its noise no more filled my ears.

"With the greatest of care I spread my weight equally along the left side of the bed. From the holster, nailed to the wooden side of the bed, I lifted the automatic pistol. And very slowly I rolled my body over the side of the bed, keeping the weight evenly distributed so as not to cause a spring to squeak or a sudden rustling of the bedclothes . . .

"Yes, of course. When I came out of my bed I was facing the wall, and I was in the act of turning to the door, across the room, when that same thought came to me and left me again motionless. I had no way of knowing whether I was performing my tricks ridiculously under the full lights for someone who was watching my antics.

"But still I had heard and sensed nothing. Also in my house, whenever an electric light comes on, a small soft bell rings each few minutes to warn or remind me of it.

"And so I thought, I have not heard the bell nor anything else and I feel nothing near me. So I do not believe I am in light. But even if I am in light I must believe that I am not, for I have no other choice.

"I turned therefore to the door, with my automatic cocked, and crawled on my hands and toes around the room and finally into the hall, taking two or three moves forward, then lowering myself to my knees to rest and listen and smell very carefully . . .

"On my hands and toes? That also was the teaching of Kovac. For two reasons: so that if someone heard you moving in the darkness and fired for the height of a man's middle, he would shoot above you; second, if you brushed into someone in the darkness, you would be in a position to charge instantly against his knees, knocking him down or off-balance. You would do well to introduce a similar exercise and method. There is no room to question its superiority.

"I went along the length of the hallway floor, which is tile. I listened at the entrance to each of the rooms and then crawled through, brushing each piece of furniture, the location of which I knew exactly, with my fingers. I did not open the closets because the doors slide and such a noise would have been heard.

"When I came to the end of the hallway, then, with the entrance hall to my left and the big living room to my right, I stopped, to

rest, quite sure that no one was behind me. I began even to feel foolish. To be crawling around my house, with its two fences and dogs!

"The dogs had still not barked. I began to doubt my own thinking, a thing that Kovac had taught us happened many times in darkness and must be overcome. But, after all, was it a sign of danger when dogs do not bark? My stomach relaxed and I thought, now I will stand up like a human being. I began even to smile, and I let out the great quantity of air I had been holding in my lungs.

"At the first sound of this letting out of my breath, a bullet splintered the doorway beside me and on a level with my head as a gun exploded on the opposite side of the room. So great was my surprise and shock that I did not fire back at the place from which the sound had come.

"That I had stopped behind the doorway at the end of the hall, that I had not gone into the open space between entrance hall and living room, spared my life.

"There was no further sound from the room. I might have had the paralysis for the third time, but the pain growing in my chest from holding my breath after the shot forced me to raise my arm and let the air out very carefully against the sleeve of my pajamas. I then breathed in very slowly, although my need of air was terrible.

"While I crouched and breathed there I knew I had been right, that the danger was very real. That the dogs had been skillfully dealt with, perhaps even killed. And I knew that no burglar, but someone to kill me, was in my little house.

"Most important, I knew that he had fired, not at where a man should be if he were standing, but exactly at the height where I was kneeling. So it was one who knew also what Kovac taught. Perhaps one I had trained myself! Therefore after three years they had come from my country to kill me. A thing your government promised could never happen.

"Your government does not understand the world as it is.

"I knew too, absolutely, about the lights. For a man who could shoot at a sound as this man had shot, would surely have killed me in the light. I thought, He cannot know that I am blind. Confident of his skill and knowledge, he has said to himself, Why should I give my quarry a chance to shoot at me in the light when I can so easily murder him in darkness?

"I felt the greatest anger that someone would still come to kill me, who had not been of political importance for many years. Or was it because of the cleansing of Kovac? But that had been long ago and had been done, after all, on official orders. I was angrier still that someone would dare to come showing off the tricks of Kovac to me! Going past fences and dogs,

showing the greatest scorn for one who had faced Kovac in the light and shot him. Trying to kill me in darkness! Also, I thought, he has only the tricks and not the bravery, for he believes he is making himself safer in the darkness, too.

"Allowing this anger to drive me, I moved quickly around the corner of the hallway wall and stopped behind the leather chair, just inside the living room. I reached with care to the top of the small table beside the chair, and I took a cigarette from the little vase. I pulled the cigarette into two halves. Then, lying flat behind the chair, and with my automatic ready so that I could fire instantly, I flicked half the cigarette toward the left side of the room.

"I heard very distinctly the rustling drop of the little paper. I waited, holding my breath. There was no shot.

"Then he is also that good, I thought, and he will not be fooled by the basic tricks. Not even the basic tricks of Kovac.

"Half a cigarette? Of course. It had to be the tiny sound of accident. To throw a brick through the window glass is for your radio cowboys.

"I had now two choices. I could lie and wait for a mistake on his part, hoping in the meantime that Carl, who serves me, would hear the shot in his room above the garage and come to help. But the garage is on the other side of the house, and I did not believe Carl would hear. I was even not sure I wanted interference in this matter.

"The other choice was to hunt this man who had come to kill me, using my knowledge of the house. Also the ears of the blind are better than eyes in the dark. Although from the cigarette I knew his ears to be unusually good.

"I decided that I could not wait. Two o'clock in the morning had struck before I left my bed and, being summer, at four thirty there would be light enough for him to shoot me and darkness enough for him to escape.

"In the meantime I knew, from the sound of his first shot, that he was waiting at the far end of the room, where the fireplace and bookshelves are. That was forty feet from where I was behind my chair.

"By going backwards through the entrance way and turning left instead of returning to the bedroom hallway, I could go through the kitchen and pantry into the dining room. Here the archway would take me again into the living room, and I would be to the side of him or even, with luck, behind him.

"I began this little trip, holding the gun in my right hand and searching ahead of me with my left hand. I explored each corner and behind every door, pausing to listen before moving on, and letting the fingers of my left hand hang as limp as the trailing leaves of a willow, so that if they brushed

against him he would have no more sensation of it than from a cobweb. It was a trick that Kovac had taught us for finding the exact position of a man sleeping in a bed before using a knife. Although I found later that Kovac had learned this from the Sikhs of India.

"I went so slowly that when the clock chimed three, I was no farther than my little pantry. The first chime sounded very loud in the silent house and it was immediately followed by a slight noise I could not quite locate. It could have been the stirring of the man startled by the sudden ring, or his shifting slightly from a tiring position, using the noise of the clock to cover his movement. However, it was so uncertain and impossible to place that it did me no good.

"When the single bell of the half hour had struck three thirty, and after perhaps another fifteen minutes—though I was never able to keep the time accurately in my mind as Kovac tried to teach us—I had finished the full circle. I had trailed my fingers in each corner, my knees and toes were raw from the coarse carpets, and my hand on the gun was cramped from holding the automatic and crawling on the wrist. The bother of these hurts was beginning to intrude on concentration. But with the exception of the little rustling after the clock first struck three, I had heard nothing and sensed nothing and smelled nothing.

"Therefore I moved slowly back to the middle of the living room on the right side, with my back to that side, so that the entrance and hallway were on my left and the fireplace and books were on my right. There I decided to relax as best I could and wait with patience, because some time this man had to make a noise. I would leave it to him.

"Suddenly, as I was lowering myself to a position of more comfort, the wood of the house creaked once on my right, at the fireplace, and it was as if a pebble had been thrown into the middle of a tight drum. Little fires of shock ran outward through me along the nerves of my body, so that I was an instant slow in swinging the gun in that direction of the sound. It made me angry with myself that that second could have made such a difference.

"And at that moment there was a second blast from his gun directly into the fireplace. The shot had come from the kitchen, and I thought, At any rate he does not expect me to be crawling since his first shot. Because this time he had fired so high that he had shot into the mantelpiece—I had heard the splintering of wood near shoulder level.

"Now I got myself instantly ready, for such a noise told me with certainty where he was, and moreover what he was up to. For he was making the same circle that

I had made—in the same direction, or we would have met—but much more slowly, for he could not know the house as I know it. He would now either have to remain where he was, waiting for me to approach one end or the other of the kitchen, or he would move immediately out of there and pass the living room either at the entrance hall or the dining room.

"It had now been proved that both of us were capable of moving through a house with equal skill and without noise. I had forgotten about Carl, about everything except that it was nearly four o'clock. Even now the first false light would be beginning. By four thirty it would be all over for me.

"So I determined on a plan almost as soon as the wood of the mantelpiece became silent. I would count in my head to six hundred, slowly. In this way I could measure off ten minutes. When I reached six hundred I would fire two shots rapidly to my left, low, at the entrance to the hall. I would then instantly, although the risk was great, fire twice more in the same fashion at the dining-room archway. If I had timed correctly his movement from the living room to the kitchen, I would have some chance of catching him returning at one place or the other. It was not a satisfactory plan, but dawn would soon come, and I wanted very much to end this grueling business.

"I began immediately to count. I told myself as I counted that soon the clock would strike four and that I must not be tricked by the sound. I pictured every detail of the room from where I was sitting, placing each piece of furniture in my mind so I would not waste a bullet by firing into a chair or a table or a sofa. Also, if he returned a shot from my right, I could crawl without clumsiness to the leather chair on my left behind which I had first hidden. And if he fired back from my left I could crawl directly to the brick corner where the fireplace juts out on my right. I practised in the dark pointing the gun according to the pattern in my head, and swinging it rapidly from left to right. I had determined to fire in that order, believing that after the shot in the kitchen he would return the way he had come, knowing by then the house in that direction and being more sure therefore of not running into something.

When I had counted to three hundred ninety-seven the clock struck four o'clock. This time I heard nothing but the striking and knew that he also had prepared himself for it and was not surprised. I had then a very great urge to carry out the plan at that moment, for why was four hundred not as good a guess as six hundred? The light would now be beginning.

"When I had reached five hun-

dred I doubted the plan very much, for I would surely expose myself with the greatest clarity. Still I counted, as if the numbers had mesmerized me into foolishness. At five hundred and fifty I raised myself to my knees, turning my body sidewise so as to make the smallest possible target, and I raised the gun and aimed it according to the picture of the room in my head.

"And at precisely six hundred I fired twice to the left very rapidly. I dropped instantly lower as I had planned, and fired again, twice to the right, the first shot quickly but carefully as I intended, the second wildly and carelessly, because even as I fired the first there was an answering shot from the hallway on my left. A very bad shot, quite high, so that it broke the huge, stupid window behind me.

"This spoiled my second shot to the right, which did not matter. Also it might mean that I had hit him. Why else should he have aimed so badly? But at first I did not think this. At the instant his shot came I swung the gun to the left and fired at the sound and rolled away to my right.

"And still there was no answering shot from him. I had not heard a body fall, nor had I heard my bullets strike into a body, although that could have been because of the noise of the shooting.

"I waited many seconds, hearing nothing, wondering whether I should crawl in that direction to see what I had done, and growing more afraid because of the daylight that I knew must be increasing.

"It was at the thought of the daylight, and of the big, absurd, and useless windows of your American houses that would let it in, that fear froze my body like an attack of the heart and stopped the breath in my throat.

"Before I even let the thought develop that came suddenly into my mind, I forced myself around the brick corner, crawling, even scrambling, and into the open mouth of the fireplace, empty for summer, and in there I curled into the smallest possible shape, trembling. All these actions I did not plan out. I only let them happen to me . . .

"Afraid? Of course I was afraid! With running sweat and shaking. Do you not understand it yet? No? Well, I will tell it all to you.

"The thought that came to me was of the windows and the light, and then of his shot that had come from the left and broken the window. He had been waiting there on the left, but he had not shot until I did. And yet, how was it possible for a mind to be so blank as mine had been? I had been waiting for him there in the middle of the room, with these terrible long windows *at my back*. A perfect silhouette against the growing light!

"But he had not fired until my shots had told him where to aim.

"Now I knew why he had not turned on the lights. It was not that he was proud of his skill in darkness. Not that he was a coward, hiding behind the dark. He could use the lights no more than I. *He was blind as I am!*

"Think of such a man! Think what he had to do to come here! What planning, determination, courage! How much he has wanted to kill me and for how long.

"Not yet? Not really yet? It was Kovac himself you found in my little hallway. Shot twice. And I have won. But best? Just think of such a man!

"Now I shout, which is not necessary . . . There, in that fireplace, I knew first who it was. I remembered the time before, in our country, when Kovac was lying in the hallway of his own house, the blood running across his face as it was to run down mine, his eyes wide open, staring at me. To see my expression when he fired, I had thought. But really only open in the awful, useless, concentration I know now so well. We had made each other blind!

"Nothing in the world, when I knew this, could have made me leave the fireplace. Curled up, even as I was when you finally came. But if I could, I would have cried out, Kovac! Let it stop now! We have both proved enough and, yes, you have proved more! Let us live here in this house together. And let us talk of old times and proper ways of operation, for we can be of no use to anyone now except to each other. Let us quit while there are two of us . . .

"But I did not dare. At the first sound I make, no matter how small, he will hear the echo in the fireplace and know exactly where I am and kill me without knowing what I have to say, or caring. I did not dare say one word, scarcely draw a breath.

"So there it all is for you. It was Kovac. And I am now even lonelier. I do not care what you will do with me. Still, it is true that I did win. Moreover, could I ever really have trusted such a man?"

EDITORS' FILE CARD

AUTHOR:	**JACK SCHAEFER**
TITLE:	***Ghost Town***
TYPE:	Crime Story
LOCALE:	United States — the far West
TIME:	The Present
COMMENTS:	*An amusing bunco yarn by the author of* SHANE, *one of the most famous Westerns of our time . . .*

I OWNED A WHOLE TOWN ONCE. What was left of it anyway. A ghost town. One of the mining camps back in the hills that must have been quite a place when the gold rush was on. Then the diggings there petered out and people began moving on and the flimsy houses started collapsing after everyone was gone.

You can find traces of plenty of those old towns scattered up the back creeks. But this one was better than most. Some of the men there knew how to build a kiln and fire it and there was a clay bank nearby. A half dozen buildings were made of brick and these stood solid enough through the years. The roofs had fallen in, and the windows and doors were missing, but the walls were still standing. You could even figure out what they had been: a general store; a post office and stage station; a blacksmith shop; a two-room jail; a small saloon; another saloon with space for dancing or gambling tables and some rooms on a second floor.

This old town of mine was up a narrow gulch that wasn't good for a thing once the gold was gone. But it was only about a half mile from a modern main highway and the old dirt road leading to it was still passable. I drove in there one day and was poking around when another car loaded with tourists pulled up and the people piled out and wandered around with the women oh-ing and ah-ing as if they were seeing something wonderful.

That's when I had my idea.

It took time but I ran that town

down on the tax books and found out all about it. The county had taken title to the whole place for back taxes maybe fifty years before —so long before, it had been written off the accounts as a dead loss and just about forgotten. When I offered to buy it the county officials thought I was crazy and jumped to make a deal. They hadn't expected ever to get another nickel out of the place. I paid $800 and I owned a town.

I cleaned out the old buildings enough so you could walk around inside them. I painted names on them telling what they had been. I fixed a few bad spots in the dirt road. I plastered signs along the highway for maybe five miles in each direction and a big one where the dirt road turned off. I roofed over one room of the old jail for my own quarters. I charged fifty cents a head for a look-see through the old place—and I was in business.

It was a good business. Not in the winter, of course, and slow in the spring and fall, but good all summer—enough to carry me comfortably all year. During the rough months I'd stay at a rooming house in the live town that was the county seat and as soon as the weather was right I'd move out and start collecting my half dollars.

Sometimes I'd have four or five cars at a time parked by the entrance and a dozen or more people listening to my talk. I'd check the license plates and temper the talk accordingly. If they were from the home state or one nearby, I'd go easy on the fancy trimmings. Those people might know too much real history. But if they were from far states, maybe eastern ones, I'd let loose and make it strong. I'd tell about fights in the saloons—shootings and knifings and big brawls with bottles flying. I'd tell about road agents stopping stages carrying gold and getting caught and being locked up in the jail and maybe a daring escape or two. I'd make it good and the eastern tourists lapped it up. What if all of it happened only in my head? Such things could have happened and maybe did. What if I did get a couple of complaints from the state historical society? There wasn't anything anyone could do so long as I made up the names too. The town belonged to me.

It was a good business. For three years. Then it collapsed just the way the old town itself did 'way back when. The state started straightening the highway and knocked off the loop that came near my ghost town. That put the main route about seven miles away. I slapped up more signs but not many people would bother to turn off onto the old route and try to find the place. My business started skidding. I tried to unload it on the historical society and they just laughed at me. They'd bought a ghost town of their own and were fixing it up. Soon as they had it

open, they'd finish the job of killing my business.

I was stuck with that town. I'd put hard money into it and now I was stuck with it. The summer season started and I was lucky to average a single car a day. I was figuring I'd have to swallow the loss and move on when this pink-cheeked young fellow came along. It was late one afternoon and he was pink-cheeked like a boy with maybe a little fuzz on his chin that hadn't even begun to be whiskers yet. He drove up in an old car that had lost its color in dust and he paid his fifty cents and started poking around. I was so lonesome for customers, or just anyone to talk to, that I stuck close and kept words bouncing back and forth with him. He looked so young and innocent I figured he was a college kid seeing some of the country on vacation time. But no. He said he'd had all the college he could absorb. He was a mining engineer by profession but there wasn't much professing to be done in that field about then, so he was knocking around looking over the old camps. He liked to see how they did things in the old days. Maybe he'd write a book on it some time.

"Mighty interesting town you have here," he said. "Those buildings. Brick. Don't see much brick in the old camps. They haul them in here?"

"Why, no," I said. "They had a kiln right here—you can see where it was behind the blacksmith shop. They dug the clay out of the bank over there." And right away this young fellow had to see that too.

"Mighty interesting," he said. "Found the clay right here. Don't often come on good brick clay in these parts. But you can see they cleaned out this streak in the bank. They sure liked bricks. If they hadn't run out of the clay they might still be making them."

"That'd be a damn fool stunt," I said. "Who'd be wanting bricks around here now?"

"Yes," he said. "Yes, it would. A damn fool stunt." And he wandered on, me with him and him talking more about what sturdy buildings these bricks had made and other things like that.

"Mighty interesting business you're in," he said. "Playing nursemaid to an old town like this and having people pay to look it over. Must be kind of a nice life."

That's when I had another idea.

I took that pink-cheeked young fellow into my jail-room and persuaded him to stay for supper. I began coughing at strategic intervals during the meal and I told him my health was bad and the climate bothered me, otherwise I wouldn't even be thinking of maybe leaving such a nice life in such an interesting business. I played it clever with indirect questions and got out of him the fact he had a bit of cash to invest. Then I really went to work on him.

"Stay here tonight," I said, "and stick around tomorrow. You'll see what a good business this really is." He said he would and I worked on him some more and after a while I asked him to keep an eye on the place while I drove over to the county seat to tend to a few things.

I tended to the things all right, but not at the county seat. I burned up the roads getting to various men I knew around about. Each stop I put the same proposition. "There's ten dollars in it for you," I said, "if you'll take time tomorrow to put the missus and anyone else handy in the car and drive over to the old town and make like a tourist gawking around some." I covered a lot of miles and I was turned down at a few stops, but at last I had eleven cars promised and with the extras that would run to about forty people.

When I got back my pink-cheeked baby was sleeping like one on the cot I'd fixed up for him. He woke long enough to grunt a greeting, then rolled over and went to sleep again. But I could tell he'd been snooping in the last summer's tally-book I'd left out on purpose where he would see it. The highway change hadn't been finished then and that had been a good summer.

Come morning everything clicked just right. My home-grown tourists started coming and kept coming at about the times I'd suggested all the way through the morning and early afternoon. I was worried that my young visitor might get to talking with them and sniff some suspicions but he didn't bother with them at all. He just watched what was going on and wandered around by himself and spent some time poking in what was left of the old kiln. I worked on him a bit during lunch and about the middle of the afternoon, when the last of the cars had left, I figured it was time to hook him.

"Not bad," I said. "Eleven cars and forty-one people. Twenty dollars and a fifty cent piece over. And all I did was just sit here and let them come."

"Mighty interesting," he said. "That's more people than I expected."

"That?" I said. "Just a low average. Good enough for a weekday but you should see the week ends. Saturdays double it. And Sundays? Why, Sundays triple it."

"You don't say?" he said. "Too bad about your health. Didn't you mention something about wanting to sell out?"

And right then I knew I had him.

It was just a matter of price after that and on price I always was a tough one. When I chucked my things in my car so I could turn the place over to him that same day and led the way to the county seat with him following so we could find a notary and sign the papers,

I'd pushed him up to a thousand bucks. He looked so young and innocent tagging after me into the notary's that I was almost ashamed of myself . . .

Brother, let me tell you something. When a pink-cheeked young tenderfoot with maybe some fuzz on his chin that hasn't even begun to be real whiskers comes your way, just watch your step. Watch it close. That's the kind will take you for anything you've got worth taking —while you're still wondering whether he's been weaned. It wasn't a week later I saw this baby-faced sucker I thought I'd trimmed coming toward me along a street and I ducked quick into a bar. He followed me in and cornered me.

"How's business?" I said, hoping to get over any unpleasantness fast.

"Business?" he said. "Now that's mighty interesting. Do you really think you fooled me with those fake tourists? The license plates tipped me right away. All from this state. All from this county." He grinned — the same innocent grin he had the first time I saw him. "Let me buy you a drink. No hard feelings. Your so-called business didn't interest me at all. It was the buildings. I've a crew out there now tearing them down."

"Tearing them down?" I said.

"Certainly," he said. "Those bricks. That clay was the best pocket of pay dirt in the whole gulch—only those old-time miners didn't know it. There was gold dust in that clay and it's right there in the bricks. I'm having them crushed and washing the gold out. There's close to a hundred tons of those bricks and they're panning about eight hundred dollars to the ton."

NEXT MONTH...

A humorous Western crime story in the great tradition—

A. B. GUTHRIE, Jr.'s

The Celebrated Skunk of the Moon Dance Bar; or, Shorty As a Personal Magnet

EDITORS' FILE CARD

AUTHOR:	**ANTHONY BOUCHER**
TITLE:	***The Last Hand***
TYPE:	Gambling Story
DETECTIVE:	Fergus O'Breen
LOCALE:	Transcontinental train, United States
TIME:	More than ten years ago
COMMENTS:	*On his way home to be married, the ex-G.I. was fleeced out of every cent of his back pay. Fergus O'Breen obeyed that impulse — he took a hand in the dirty game . . .*

THE YOUNG MAN CLEARLY HAD A hangover; and just as clearly, there was something deeper the matter with him.

The tremor which spilled water from his glass was not due solely to the jolting of the train. His reddened eyes had difficulty focusing on the menu. His civilian suit looked at once awkwardly new and thoroughly slept in.

Fergus O'Breen studied these patent symptoms, then went back and studied the young man's eyes more closely. There was a hurt there, a fear that went deeper than their morning pain.

The ruptured duck made an easy starting point for conversation. One day out of the separation center . . . his wife waiting for him in California . . . From there on, Fergus quietly ate his breakfast and listened, knowing that the answer would come in time.

For the O'Breen curiosity is matched only by the O'Breen ability to elicit confidences — and the rash O'Breen impulses to do something about those confidences.

The break came with the second cup of coffee when the young man (whose name turned out to be Herb Ellis) asked, "You play poker, O'Breen?"

Fergus began to get it. He said, "Yes," and added, "The porter said there was a big game on last night.

I was too sleepy to look in. You have any luck?"

Ellis groaned. "It couldn't have happened. It just couldn't! Look, O'Breen, you know how it gets toward the end of an evening—"

"Sure. You've been playing along at a nice quiet little limit, then you start raising the stakes. Then maybe for the last hand you take off all the limits . . ."

"Uh huh. Just a last hand of no-limit stud. And there I was with kings back to back, and nothing showing against me—nothing but a measly pair of threes—I thought. It had to be a pair of threes—he couldn't've bet that way if they weren't. So I went the limit—all my back pay, every damned cent I had on me. And what I was sure was a pair of threes . . . well, it turned out to be a straight."

Fergus frowned. "You're a big boy now. I don't have to tell you about playing cards with strangers on trains. But this interests me. Tell me more." And as Ellis hesitated, Fergus passed over the card that said *Confidential Investigations.* "This one will be on the house," Fergus added.

The train was pulling into Chicago when Ellis had finished describing in detail every moment of that fateful last hand.

"And that's torn it," he said. "There goes the TV repair business I had a deal set on, there goes the kid we've been planning on . . . Hell, I can't go out and face Virginia now. I might as well stay here in Chi and—"

Fergus expressed his opinion of that course tersely and vigorously. "Besides," he added, "I've got an idea. God-out-of-the-Machine O'Breen they call me—or maybe I'm your fairy godfather. How would pink wings go with my red hair? Look: Two things are certain. This Hugo Wentworth, who dealt himself that straight, is a professional cardsharp. And he's due to be taken—tonight—and by me. I'll make you a proposition: you point him out to me on the westbound train, and I'll get back your money and split my profit with you."

"You mean you . . . Can you do things with cards?"

"Not the way you mean. I couldn't deal a stacked deck to save my neck. If he'd pulled any other trick but this one, I'd have no angle but to try to spot his gimmick and turn him over to a railway detective—and that wouldn't get your money back."

"And Virginia . . ." That was all Ellis said, but his eyes told how Virginia would feel.

"We've got a couple of hours in Chicago," Fergus said. "Let's have a good lunch at the Pump Room and forget our troubles—after I take care of just one errand. I've got to buy a book."

There was nothing colorful about Hugo Wentworth. You can have

all the color you want if you're running a floating crap game in New York or a casino in Las Vegas; but if you're fleecing discharged G.I.'s on trains, it helps to look kindly and drab.

Mr. Wentworth was an easy man to meet. A half hour in the club car, a large tip to the bartender, some loud big-talk, and Fergus found himself casually adopted by the plump little man with the sheepish features.

The line was reeled in slowly. It was at least an hour later that Mr. Wentworth mentioned the game in his compartment that evening. "I don't know if you'd be interested," he said apologetically. "We'll be playing for rather small stakes . . ."

There were three other players, it developed. Five men crowded the compartment badly, and Fergus had some difficulty disposing of his topcoat, with the stiff-boarded bump in the pocket. But cramped quarters and smoke-filled air never matter much after the first round.

"Just to get it straight," Fergus said as they settled down, "I suppose we're playing according to Hoyle?"

Mr. Wentworth hemmed. "It's dealer's choice. Of course on any wild games, the dealer sets the rules. But in straight poker . . . why, yes, strictly according to Hoyle."

The two small businessmen, who might have been twins but had never met before, played a tight conservative game and were apt to fold on the second card if a victory were not almost certain. The publisher's representative had a passion for the wildest of wild games, and usually insisted on Baseball Poker —in which nines are jokers, fours showing give you an extra card, and an exposed three makes your hand dead—when he was not dealing a peculiar perversion which involved laying five cards out in a Y and turning them over in accordance with a highly improbable ritual.

Mr. Wentworth limited his own deals to straight poker, usually stud, and played sensibly but vigorously.

Fergus drank more than he normally cared to when gambling, and freely followed his impetuous inclination, usually held in check, to stay in every pot whether he had any business there or not. Oddly, his luck was in, and for all his recklessness he was not running far into the hole. In fact, the entire game remained annoyingly even; obviously Mr. Wentworth was withholding his talents for the grand finale.

The inevitable moment arrived when the publisher's representative (saving Mr. Wentworth the trouble) suggested higher stakes. Now matters became worthwhile. The stack of chips grew in front of the kindly drab gentleman, and folding money came into play.

And at last, with much business of consulting watches, it was the

final round, and at last it was Mr. Wentworth's turn to deal the very last hand, and at last Mr. Wentworth said, "Just for a little excitement, how's about making this a no-limit hand?"

And as they all agreed, Mr. Wentworth laid a fifty-dollar bill on the table and said, "Everybody in for twenty-five for a little honest stud."

Five cards went around face down. On the second round, the first businessman drew an open ace, the publisher's representative a five of hearts, Fergus another ace, the second businessman a king, and Mr. Wentworth a deuce of clubs.

The first ace grunted and bet ten dollars. The five of hearts met the bet. Fergus, with the ostentatious caution of an amateur, looked again at his hole card and made it fifty. The king, with sagacity unwonted in modern monarchs, folded.

Mr. Wentworth smiled suavely and said, "Gentlemen, I think it's worth a hundred dollars to stay in the last hand."

The four of them stayed. The third deal of cards went around. The first ace drew a ten. The five of hearts drew a queen of hearts. Fergus caught a king. And Mr. Wentworth's deuce of clubs was joined by a six of diamonds.

"Ace-king bets," said Mr. Wentworth.

Fergus bet a hundred. And the deuce-six of mixed suits not only saw it but raised a hundred.

When the fifth set of cards had been dealt, Fergus surveyed the hands. The publisher's representative, obviously staying on a four-flush in hearts, had folded when his fifth card was black. The first businessman, always cautious, had stayed with nothing better than ace-high showing. Therefore he had a pair, probably aces back-to-back. Mr. Wentworth had two-three-four-six showing; his bets unquestionably indicated a pair of deuces.

Fergus went through the peering routine again. His hole card was still an ace. And his next card was a king, whereas the businessman's possible aces were backed by nothing higher than a ten. Fergus's pair of aces seemed a sure thing.

He emptied his once-fat wallet and bet one thousand dollars.

Mr. Wentworth saw the bet and raised a thousand.

The businessman folded, his face shaped in a soundless groan.

"So we're really playing poker," Fergus observed. "Nice to get rid of the ribbon clerks, Wentworth. You want me to think you've got a straight, don't you? That would mean a five in the hole. And that would mean you started heavy raising on a two-five—which no man in his right senses has ever done. I'll see you, Wentworth, and . . . I've got a certified check here from my last job for five thousand dollars. That's my last cent, but it

means a four thousand raise. Willing to see it?"

Mr. Wentworth just barely failed to gulp. He opened his luggage, found a second wallet, and counted off the money. "I'm seeing you," he said quietly. "What've you got, O'Breen?"

"Aces back to back." Fergus exposed them.

"Which I'm afraid," Mr. Wentworth murmured, "does not beat a straight," and he turned over his five in the hole.

The publisher's representative goggled. "Now I've seen everything!"

"It was a hunch," Wentworth began to explain modestly. "A pure hunch, and—"

"Just a minute," Fergus said. He reached for his overcoat. "I happen to have a book here . . ."

"And he paid off?" Herb Ellis marveled. They were sitting in Fergus's compartment where the porter's cracked ice agreeably supplemented the contents of the O'Breen luggage.

"He couldn't help it," Fergus grinned. "The other three were just a little suspicious of that 'hunch' anyway. And if anybody complained to the railroad and the railway dicks discovered just how often he'd won on that same 'hunch' . . . No, he couldn't afford to do anything but pay off. Here's your losses from last night, and here," Fergus counted meticulously, "is your cut of tonight's profit—which still leaves me a pretty fee for a few hours' work, better than I've made out of some murder cases. And nothing left to do but tip off the railway boys to watch Mr. W."

"Thank God Virginia'll never know how much she has to thank you for," said Ellis humbly. "But if everybody knew that trick, I hate to think what it'd do to the good old game of American poker."

Fergus grinned again. "Even Wentworth would never have believed it if I didn't have the book with me. Here you are: look for yourself. This is the current edition of Hoyle, what's called the Autograph Edition. And there it is, plain as day, on page 291:

" 'Stud Poker: . . . *Straights are not played.*'

"Strictly," Fergus's grin was even wider, "according to Hoyle."

EDITORS' NOTE: *Now, hold on to your horses! Don't rush to your typewriter or box of personal stationery and dash off an indignant letter to your humble-pie Editors. Believe it or not—and we admit it is hard to believe—the reference-source given by Mr. Boucher is quoted accurately. At the time Mr. Boucher wrote the story, at the time the events were sup-*

posed to have taken place, the rule in Hoyle's was exactly that: straights are not allowed in stud poker. That's what the book said, and if you have a copy of Hoyle's Autograph Edition handy, you can check for yourself.

As a matter of fact, we did a little research and discovered other curious rules of Hoyle. In a 1931 copy of FOSTER'S COMPLETE HOYLE *(revised and enlarged edition) we came upon the following strange statement on page 202, also governing stud poker: "Straight flushes do not count." Now, how would you interpret that rule? If the hand does not count as a straight flush, is it also dead as an ordinary flush? Oddly enough, the 1931 edition does not rule out a straight in stud poker.*

In any event, we have been told that the rule on straights and flushes in stud poker has been changed in the latest editions of Hoyle—so that Fergus O'Breen could not use the "gimmick" today. All hands in stud poker now rank the same as in draw poker. But one rule has never been changed, and never should be: DON'T PLAY CARDS WITH STRANGERS.

COMING ATTRACTIONS...

Watch for new stories by

HUGH PENTECOST

GEORGE HARMON COXE

MARGERY ALLINGHAM

RUFUS KING

JOHN COLLIER

HELEN NIELSEN

FRANCES & RICHARD LOCKRIDGE

CORNELL WOOLRICH

Rudyard Kipling was the first English writer to be awarded the Nobel Prize for literature. He probably received more literary and academic honors than any writer of his time: the Order of Merit (which he refused), the Gold Medal of the Royal Society of Literature (previously awarded only to Sir Walter Scott, George Meredith, and Thomas Hardy), and honorary degrees from the Universities of Oxford, Cambridge, Edinburgh, Durham, McGill, Athens, Paris, and Strasbourg. A truculent and aggressive imperialist, who was constantly the storm-center of political arguments, Rudyard Kipling has attained undisputed rank as one of the most eminent English men of letters. Yet his contribution to the literature of crime is still almost completely unascertained: some of his tales about Strickland, "of the Police," fall into the detective classification; and many of Kipling's tales of Indian and military life are shot through not only with humor and horror but with haunts and homicide.

THE RETURN OF IMRAY

by RUDYARD KIPLING

IMRAY ACHIEVED THE IMPOSSIBLE. Without warning, for no conceivable motive, in his youth, at the threshold of his career he chose to disappear from the world — which is to say, the little Indian station where he lived.

Upon a day he was alive, well, happy, and in great evidence among the billiard tables at his Club. Upon a morning, he was not, and no manner of search could make sure where he might be. He had stepped out of his place; he had not appeared at his office at the proper time, and his dog-cart was not upon the public roads. For these reasons, and because he was hampering, in a microscopical degree, the administration of the Indian Empire, that Empire paused for one microscopical moment to make inquiry into the fate of Imray. Ponds were dragged, wells were plumbed, telegrams were despatched down the lines of railways and to the nearest seaport town — 1200 miles away; but Imray was not at the end of the drag-ropes nor the telegraph wires. He was gone, and his place knew him no more. Then the work of the great Indian Empire swept forward, because it could not be delayed, and Imray from being a man became a mystery — such a thing as men talk over at their tables in the Club for a month, and then forget utterly. His guns, horses, and carts were sold to the highest bidder. His superior officer wrote an altogether absurd letter to his mother, saying that Imray had unaccountably

disappeared, and his bungalow stood empty.

After three or four months of the scorching hot weather had gone by, my friend Strickland, of the Police, saw fit to rent the bungalow from the native landlord. This was before he was engaged to Miss Youghal — an affair which has been described in another place — and while he was pursuing his investigations into native life. His own life was sufficiently peculiar, and men complained of his manners and customs. There was always food in his house, but there were no regular times for meals. He ate, standing up and walking about, whatever he might find at the sideboard, and this is not good for human beings. His domestic equipment was limited to six rifles, three shotguns, five saddles, and a collection of stiff-jointed mahseer rods, bigger and stronger than the largest salmon rods. These occupied one-half of his bungalow, and the other half was given up to Strickland and his dog Tietjens — an enormous Rampur slut who devoured daily the rations of two men. She spoke to Strickland in a language of her own; and whenever, walking abroad, she saw things calculated to destroy the peace of Her Majesty the Queen-Empress, she returned to her master and laid information. Strickland would take steps at once, and the end of his labors was trouble and fine and imprisonment for other people. The natives believed that Tietjens was a familiar spirit, and treated her with the great reverence that is born of hate and fear. One room in the bungalow was set apart for her special use. She owned a bedstead, a blanket, and a drinking trough, and if anyone came into Strickland's room at night her custom was to knock down the invader and give tongue till someone came with a light. Strickland owed his life to her, when he was on the Frontier, in search of a local murderer, who came in the gray dawn to send Strickland much farther than the Andaman Islands. Tietjens caught the man as he was crawling into Strickland's tent with a dagger between his teeth; and after his record of iniquity was established in the eyes of the law he was hanged. From that date Tietjens wore a collar of rough silver, and employed a monogram on her night blanket; and the blanket was of double woven Kashmir cloth, for she was a delicate dog.

Under no circumstances would she be separated from Strickland; and once, when he was ill with fever, made great trouble for the doctors, because she did not know how to help her master and would not allow another creature to attempt aid. Macarnaght, of the Indian Medical Service, beat her over her head with a gun-butt before she could understand that she must give room for those who could give quinine.

A short time after Strickland had taken Imray's bungalow, my business took me through that Station, and naturally, the Club quarters being full, I quartered myself upon Strickland. It was a desirable bungalow,

eight-roomed and heavily thatched against any chance of leakage from rain. Under the pitch of the roof ran a ceiling-cloth which looked just as neat as a whitewashed ceiling. Unless you knew how Indian bungalows were built you would never have suspected that above the cloth lay the dark three-cornered cavern of the roof, where the beams and the underside of the thatch harbored all manner of rats, bats, ants, and foul things.

Tietjens met me in the verandah with a bay like the boom of the bell of St. Paul's, putting her paws on my shoulder to show she was glad to see me. Strickland had contrived to claw together a sort of meal which he called lunch, and immediately after it was finished went out about his business. I was left alone with Tietjens and my own affairs. The heat of the summer had broken up and turned to the warm damp of the rains. There was no motion in the heated air, but the rain fell like ramrods on the earth, and flung up a blue mist when it splashed back. The bamboos, and the custard-apples, the poinsettias, and the mango trees in the garden stood still while the warm water lashed through them, and the frogs began to sing among the aloe hedges.

A little before the light failed, and when the rain was at its worst, I sat in the back verandah and heard the water roar from the eaves, and scratched myself because I was covered with the thing called prickly-heat. Tietjens came out with me and put her head in my lap and was very sorrowful; so I gave her biscuits when tea was ready, and I took tea in the back verandah on account of the little coolness found there. The rooms of the house were dark behind me. I could smell Strickland's saddlery and the oil on his guns, and I had no desire to sit among these things. My own servant came to me in the twilight, the muslin of his clothes clinging tightly to his drenched body, and told me that a gentleman had called and wished to see someone. Very much against my will, but only because of the darkness of the rooms, I went into the naked drawing-room, telling my man to bring the lights. There might or might not have been a caller waiting — it seemed to me that I saw a figure by one of the windows — but when the lights came there was nothing save the spikes of the rain without, and the smell of the drinking earth in my nostrils. I explained to my servant that he was no wiser than he ought to be, and went back to the verandah to talk to Tietjens. She had gone out into the wet, and I could hardly coax her back to me; even with biscuits with sugar tops. Strickland came home, dripping wet, just before dinner, and the first thing he said was.

"Has anyone called?"

I explained, with apologies, that my servant had summoned me into the drawing-room on a false alarm; or that some loafer had tried to call on Strickland, and thinking better of it had fled after giving his name. Strickland ordered dinner, without

comment, and since it was a real dinner with a white tablecloth attached, we sat down.

At 9 o'clock Strickland wanted to go to bed, and I was tired too. Tietjens, who had been lying underneath the table, rose up, and swung into the least exposed verandah as soon as her master moved to his own room, which was next to the stately chamber set apart for Tietjens. If a mere wife had wished to sleep out of doors in that pelting rain it would not have mattered; but Tietjens was a dog, and therefore the better animal. I looked at Strickland, expecting to see him flay her with a whip. He smiled queerly, as a man would smile after telling some unpleasant domestic tragedy. "She has done this ever since I moved in here," said he. "Let her go."

The dog was Strickland's dog, so I said nothing, but I felt all that Strickland felt in being thus made light of. Tietjens encamped outside my bedroom window, and storm after storm came up, thundered on the thatch, and died away. The lightning spattered the sky as a thrown egg spatters a barn door, but the light was pale blue, not yellow; and looking through my split bamboo blinds, I could see the great dog standing, not sleeping, in the verandah, the hackles alift on her back and her feet anchored as tensely as the drawn wire-rope of a suspension bridge. In the very short pauses of the thunder I tried to sleep, but it seemed that someone wanted me very urgently. He, whoever he was, was trying to call me by name, but his voice was no more than a husky whisper. The thunder ceased, and Tietjens went into the garden and howled at the low moon. Somebody tried to open my door, walked about and about through the house and stood breathing heavily in the verandahs, and just when I was falling asleep I fancied that I heard a wild hammering and clamoring above my head or on the door.

I ran into Strickland's room and asked him whether he was ill, and had been calling for me. He was lying on his bed half dressed, a pipe in his mouth. "I thought you'd come," he said. "Have I been walking round the house recently?"

I explained that he had been tramping in the dining-room and the smoking-room and two or three other places, and he laughed and told me to go back to bed. I went back to bed and slept till the morning, but through all my mixed dreams I was sure I was doing someone an injustice in not attending to his wants. What those wants were I could not tell; but a fluttering, whispering, bolt-fumbling, lurking, loitering Someone was reproaching me for my slackness, and, half awake, I heard the howling of Tietjens in the garden and the threshing of the rain.

I lived in that house for two days. Strickland went to his office daily, leaving me alone for eight or ten hours with Tietjens for my only companion. As long as the full light lasted I was comfortable, and so was Tietjens; but in the twilight she and I

moved into the back verandah and cuddled each other for company. We were alone in the house, but none the less it was much too fully occupied by a tenant with whom I did not wish to interfere. I never saw him, but I could see the curtains between the rooms quivering where he had just passed through; I could hear the chairs creaking as the bamboos sprung under a weight that had just quitted them; and I could feel when I went to get a book from the dining-room that somebody was waiting in the shadows of the front verandah till I should have gone away. Tietjens made the twilight more interesting by glaring into the darkened rooms with every hair erect, and following the motions of something that I could not see. She never entered the rooms, but her eyes moved interestedly: that was quite sufficient. Only when my servant came to trim the lamps and make all light and habitable she would come in with me and spend her time sitting on her haunches, watching an invisible extra man as he moved about behind my shoulder. Dogs are cheerful companions.

I explained to Strickland, gently as might be, that I would go over to the Club and find quarters there. I admired his hospitality, was pleased with his guns and rods, but I did not much care for his house and its atmosphere. He heard me out to the end, and then smiled very wearily, but without contempt, for he is a man who understands things. "Stay on," he said, "and see what this thing means. All you have talked about I have known since I took the bungalow. Stay on and wait. Tietjens has left me. Are you going too?"

I had seen him through one little affair, connected with a heathen idol, that had brought me to the doors of a lunatic asylum, and I had no desire to help him through further experiences. He was a man to whom unpleasantnesses arrived as do dinners to ordinary people.

Therefore I explained more clearly than ever that I liked him immensely, and would be happy to see him in the daytime; but that I did not care to sleep under his roof. This was after dinner, when Tietjens had gone out to lie in the verandah.

" 'Pon my soul, I don't wonder," said Strickland, with his eyes on the ceiling-cloth. "Look at that!"

The tails of two brown snakes were hanging between the cloth and the cornice of the wall. They threw long shadows in the lamplight.

"If you are afraid of snakes of course —" said Strickland.

I hate and fear snakes, because if you look into the eyes of any snake you will see that it knows all and more of the mystery of man's fall, and that it feels all the contempt that the Devil felt when Adam was evicted from Eden. Besides which its bite is generally fatal, and it twists up trouser legs.

"You ought to get your thatch overhauled," I said. "Give me a mahseer rod, and we'll poke 'em down."

"They'll hide among the roof beams," said Strickland. "I can't stand snakes overhead. I'm going up into the roof. If I shake 'em down, stand by with a cleaning rod and break their backs."

I was not anxious to assist Strickland in his work, but I took the cleaning rod and waited in the dining-room, while Strickland brought a gardener's ladder from the verandah, and set it against the side of the room. The snake-tails drew themselves up and disappeared. We could hear the dry rushing scuttle of long bodies running over the baggy ceiling-cloth. Strickland took a lamp with him, while I tried to make clear to him the danger of hunting snakes between a ceiling-cloth and a thatch, apart from the deterioration of property caused by ripping out ceiling-cloths.

"Nonsense!" said Strickland. "They're sure to hide near the walls by the cloth. The bricks are too cold for 'em, and the heat of the room is just what they like." He put his hand to the corner of the stuff and ripped it from the cornice. It gave with a great sound of tearing, and Strickland put his head through the opening into the dark of the angle of the roof-beams. I set my teeth and lifted the rod, for I had not the least knowledge of what might descend.

"H'm!" said Strickland, and his voice rolled and rumbled in the roof. "There's room for another set of rooms up here, and, by Jove, some one is occupying 'em!"

"Snakes?" I said from below.

"No. It's a buffalo. Hand me up the two last joints of a mahseer rod, and I'll prod it. It's lying on the main roof beam."

I handed up the rod.

"What a nest for owls and serpents! No wonder the snakes live here," said Strickland, climbing farther into the roof. I could see his elbow thrusting with the rod. "Come out of that, whoever you are! Heads below there! It's falling."

I saw the ceiling-cloth nearly in the center of the room bag with a shape that was pressing it downwards and downwards towards the lighted lamp on the table. I snatched the lamp out of danger and stood back. Then the cloth ripped out from the walls, tore, split, swayed, and shot down upon the table something that I dared not look at, till Strickland had slid down the ladder and was standing by my side.

He did not say much, being a man of few words; but he picked up the loose end of the tablecloth and threw it over the remnants on the table.

"It strikes me," said he, putting down the lamp, "our friend Imray has come back. Oh! you would, would you?"

There was a movement under the cloth, and a little snake wriggled out, to be back-broken by the butt of the mahseer rod. I was sufficiently sick to make no remarks worth recording.

Strickland meditated, and helped himself to drinks. The arrangement under the cloth made no more signs of life.

"Is it Imray?" I said.

Strickland turned back the cloth for a moment, and looked.

"It is Imray," he said; "and his throat is cut from ear to ear."

Then we spoke, but together and to ourselves: "That's why he whispered about the house."

Tietjens, in the garden, began to bay furiously. A little later her great nose heaved open the dining-room door.

She sniffed and was still. The tattered ceiling-cloth hung down almost to the level of the table, and there was hardly room to move away from the discovery.

Tietjens came in and sat down; her teeth bared under her lip and her forepaws planted. She looked at Strickland.

"It's a bad business, old lady," said he. "Men don't climb up into the roofs of their bungalows to die, and they don't fasten up the ceiling cloth behind 'em. Let's think it out."

"Let's think it out somewhere else," I said.

"Excellent idea! Turn the lamps out. We'll get into my room."

I did not turn the lamps out. I went into Strickland's room first, and allowed him to make the darkness. Then he followed me, and we lit tobacco and thought. Strickland thought. I smoked furiously, because I was afraid.

"Imray is back," said Strickland. "The question is — who killed Imray? Don't talk, I've a notion of my own. When I took this bungalow I took over most of Imray's servants. Imray was guileless and inoffensive, wasn't he?"

I agreed; though the heap under the cloth had looked neither one thing nor the other.

"If I call in all the servants they will stand fast in a crowd and lie like Aryans. What do you suggest?"

"Call 'em in one by one," I said.

"They'll run away and give the news to all their fellows," said Strickland. "We must segregate 'em. Do you suppose your servant knows anything about it?"

"He may, for all I know; but I don't think it's likely. He has only been here two or three days," I answered. "What's your notion?"

"I can't quite tell. How the dickens did the man get the wrong side of the ceiling-cloth?"

There was a heavy coughing outside Strickland's bedroom door. This showed that Bahadur Khan, his body-servant, had wakened from sleep and wished to put Strickland to bed.

"Come in," said Strickland. "It's a very warm night, isn't it?"

Bahadur Khan, a great, green-turbaned, six-foot Mahomedan, said that it was a very warm night; but that there was more rain pending, which, by his Honor's favor, would bring relief to the country.

"It will be so, if God pleases," said Strickland, tugging off his boots. "It is in my mind, Bahadur Khan, that I have worked thee remorselessly for many days — ever since that time when thou first camest into my service. What time was that?"

"Has the Heaven-born forgotten? It was when Imray Sahib went secretly to Europe without warning given; and I — even I — came into the honored service of the protector of the poor."

"And Imray Sahib went to Europe?"

"It is so said among those who were his servants."

"And thou wilt take service with him when he returns?"

"Assuredly, Sahib. He was a good master, and cherished his dependents."

"That is true. I am very tired, but I go buck shooting tomorrow. Give me the little sharp rifle that I use for black buck; it is in the case yonder."

The man stooped over the case, handed barrels, stock, and fore-end to Strickland, who fitted all together, yawning dolefully. Then he reached down to the gun case, took a solid-drawn cartridge, and slipped it into the breech of the .360 Express.

"And Imray Sahib has gone to Europe secretly! That is very strange, Bahadur Khan, is it not?"

"What do I know of the ways of the white man, Heaven-born?"

"Very little, truly. But thou shalt know more anon. It has reached me that Imray Sahib has returned from his so long journeyings, and that even now he lies in the next room."

"Sahib!"

The lamplight slid along the barrels of the rifle as they leveled themselves at Bahadur Khan's broad breast.

"Go and look!" said Strickland. "Take a lamp. Thy master is tired, and he waits thee. Go!"

The man picked up a lamp, and went into the dining-room, Strickland following, and almost pushing him with the muzzle of the rifle. He looked for a moment at the black depths behind the ceiling-cloth; at the writhing snake under foot; and last, a gray glaze settling on his face, at the thing under the cloth.

"Hast thou seen?" said Strickland.

"I have seen. I am clay in the white man's hands. What does the Presence do?"

"Hang thee within the month. What else?"

"For killing him? Nay, Sahib, consider. Walking among us, his servants, he cast his eyes upon my child, who was four years old. Him he bewitched, and in ten days he died of the fever — my child!"

"What said Imray Sahib?"

"He said he was a handsome child, and patted him on the head; wherefore my child died. Wherefore I killed Imray Sahib in the twilight, when he had come back from office, and was sleeping. Wherefore I dragged him up into the roof beams and made all fast behind him. The Heaven-born knows all things. I am the servant of the Heaven-born."

Strickland looked at me.

"Thou art witness to this saying? He has killed."

Bahadur Khan stood ashen gray in the light of the one lamp. The need for justification came upon him very swiftly. "I am trapped," he said, "but the offense was that man's. He cast an evil eye upon my child, and I

killed and hid him. Only such as are served by devils," he glared at Tietjens, crouched stolidly before him, "only such could know what I did."

"It was clever. But thou shouldst have lashed him to the beam with a rope. Now, thou thyself wilt hang by a rope. Orderly!"

A drowsy policeman answered Strickland's call. He was followed by another. Tietjens sat wondrous still.

"Take him to the police station," said Strickland.

"Do I hang, then?" said Bahadur Khan, making no attempt to escape, and keeping his eyes on the ground.

"If the sun shines or the water runs — yes!" said Strickland.

Bahadur Khan stepped back one long pace, quivered, and stood still.

"Go!" said Strickland.

"Nay; but I go very swiftly," said Bahadur Khan. "Look! I am even now a dead man."

He lifted his foot, and to the little toe there clung the head of the half-killed snake, firm fixed in the agony of death.

"I come of land-holding stock," said Bahadur Khan, rocking where he stood. "It were a disgrace to me to go to the public scaffold: therefore I take this way. Be it remembered that the Sahib's shirts are correctly enumerated, and that there is an extra piece of soap in his washbasin. My child was bewitched, and I slew the wizard. Why should you seek to slay me with the rope? My honor is saved, and — and — I die."

At the end of an hour he died, as they die who are bitten by the little brown *karait*, and the policemen bore him and the thing under the cloth to their appointed places.

"This," said Strickland, very calmly, as he climbed into bed, "is called the Nineteenth Century. Did you hear what that man said?"

"I heard," I answered. "Imray made a mistake."

"Simply and solely through not knowing the nature of the Oriental, and the coincidence of a little seasonal fever. Bahadur Khan had been with him for four years."

I shuddered. My own servant had been with me for exactly that length of time. When I went over to my own room I found my man waiting, impassive as the copper head on a penny.

"What has befallen Bahadur Khan?" said I.

"He was bitten by a snake and died. The rest the Sahib knows."

"And how much of this matter hast thou known?"

"As much as might be gathered from One coming in the twilight to seek satisfaction. Gently, Sahib. Let me pull off those boots."

I had just settled to the sleep of exhaustion when I heard Strickland shouting from his side of the house —

"Tietjens has come back to her place!"

And so she had. The great deerhound was couched statelily on her own bedstead on her own blanket, while, in the next room, the idle, empty ceiling-cloth waggled as it trailed on the table.

EDITORS' FILE CARD

AUTHOR:	**ALVIN PEVEHOUSE**
TITLE:	***The Fifth Element***
TYPE:	Detective Story
DETECTIVES:	Judge Hampton Seawright and Sheriff Woody Seawright
LOCALE:	Western Oklahoma
TIME:	The Present
COMMENTS:	*The old judge believed that solving a murder case is like solving a theorem of Euclid: "You have got to know five things so that they fit together like a pentagon."*

JUDGE HAMPTON SEAWRIGHT OF THE Third Judicial District of Oklahoma stood beneath the tattered mulberry tree in his chicken yard, watching a Plymouth sedan with a sheriff's star on its side jump the runneled tracks of the lane as it sped toward his farmhouse.

The judge continued to shake a Mason jar of Venetian red and water, a mixture his Cherokee grandmother swore would cure the roup in any flock of chickens.

He ambled past a rusting buzz saw and a water-stained emery wheel with a broken treadle, stooped, and poured the mixture into the poultry waterer.

The sheriff's car nearly sideswiped the choked bailer and blew the October hay into swirling heaps.

The judge wiped his hands on a red gingham handkerchief. He put the handkerchief back in his overalls pocket and went down the crumbling limestone walk toward the front porch, his back to the onrushing car. He knew who it was.

The judge eased his bulk into the porch swing as a tall man in his late twenties, wearing a Stetson the color of dust and whipcords, got out of the car. It was his son Woody, Oklahoma's youngest and smilingest sheriff. Too active to study law, the judge often said, and most probably not smart enough to be much of a sheriff.

The young man walked rapidly to the gap in the fence, crossed the yard and climbed the porch steps.

"Hi, now," Woody said to his father. "Don't suppose you expected to see me this morning."

"Oh, I dunno," the judge said, shifting his eyes to the dust devils skipping across the county road. "You won the election, I figure you must be about ready to retire for four years."

"Sure," the young man said, sitting down on the porch and leaning his shoulder against a post. "Like you retire June to November in this overgrown blackberry patch."

The judge looked shrewdly at his son. "I got a flock of sick chickens, so I don't plan to do no travelin' today. Hear me?" He settled his back against the swing and gave it a gentle, creaking push with his foot. "You don't have to do no political grinnin' out here."

The sheriff's face broke into the shy smile of a ten-year-old boy who's just been told he's good-looking. "Politics is hard on the teeth," he said.

"Well," the judge said, "who got killed?"

Woody Seawright sat up quickly. "So you heard!"

"I ain't heard nothin' in a week, except a letter from some woman in Nowata wants to take the spittoons out of the courthouse."

The boy eyed his father skeptically.

The old judge sighed. "You got a pretty wife and those fools who voted for you last Tuesday ain't done shakin' your hand yet, so I didn't expect you out here until the first pool hall was robbed. Whose pool hall is it?"

"Murder, like you said the first time. Devereaux Hausman. That crazy man had a farm up there between South Coffeyville and Noxie. He's dead."

"I don't doubt it," the judge said. "But I'm sorry to hear it." He wiped his sweating brow with the handkerchief. "You know who?"

"Well, it couldn't have been but one person," his sheriff son said. "You remember those Renners, live over near Noxie? Big family. Six boys and a girl. Chicken thieves. Had some mash barrels set over by Devil's Hollow and run a little moonshine there in the timber. Well, the girl, Lina, has been livin' common law with Hausman on that eighty acres of his. She killed him."

"What for?" the judge said.

"Well, that's what I don't know."

"The Hausmans are a well-to-do family back East. Did he leave her any money?'

The young sheriff rubbed at the dust on the inlaid leather of his boots. "He was worth darn near a million dollars, according to his brother. But she don't get any of that, because she signed a property release about a year ago."

"Oh?" the judge said.

"Yes. It all goes to the brother; but he lives in Philadelphia."

"Somebody else pay Hausman a call, maybe?"

"Lina says no. I can believe it; everybody out that way steered pretty clear of Hausman."

"Was he really crazy?" the judge asked.

An inquisitive cow that looked a little Guernsey from the East and a little Holstein from the West, with a draught-threatened udder and a tail full of cockleburs, walked up to the sheriff's car, stared dumbly across it, then lowered herself into the slice of leeward shade.

"He was a nut, no questions about that. Hausman's written a couple of books. *Wallpaper Colors and the Sex of Children,* one's called. Another's *The Medicinal Uses of Dirt.* When he died, he was working on one called *God's Hay.* His idea, seems, was to let that eighty acres grow wild, which he did, and live for a year out there with that Renner woman on weeds and vitamin pills. They just have a lean-to shack, because he was a fresh air fiend, too."

The judge started the porch swing into gentle motion again. "What she poison him with?"

"Well, she made a salad—some of it still left on the table when Doc Smith called me out there—dock, sheep shower, dandelion, and Jimson weed."

"Jimson weed!" the judge said, stopping the swing.

"Killed him deader than a blackleg horse."

The old man mopped his face again. "You ruled out accident, son?"

"Well, that's the story Lina tells. She says he gathered the weeds himself, for her to fix dinner with. Like he's been doin' nearly a year now."

"Only this time he got Jimson weed by mistake?"

"That's what she claims."

"And she, not noticin', stuck 'em in the salad. What then?"

"I took her in."

The judge reached in his back pocket, pulled out a tattered sack of Mail Pouch, and extracted a few strands of the crimp-cut tobacco. He looked at his hands as he rolled the tobacco into a ball.

The boy settled his hat back on his head. "I had to take her in. But that was all right. I'd a sight rather live in my jail than in her lean-to. They had pure water and some wooden dishes and spoons. There were books—no real books—more like patent medicine pamphlets—from all over. A bed without sheets; just an old pair of green portieres with red tassels thrown over it. And the whole blessed place open to the wind and weather on one side."

"This Renner girl," the judge said. "She pretty upset about her man dyin' and her havin' to go back and cook for that family of seven grown men?"

He put the cud of tobacco in his mouth, and worked at it.

" 'Course the Renner clan ain't the cryin' kind," Woody said. He shredded a match with his broad yellow nail. "But it seemed to me Lina was uncommonly quiet. I couldn't exactly tell you what I felt. Something in her, like a teacher the day after school was out, or a mother the day after her son had gone to the army. Like something she'd been waitin' for a long time had finally happened. And even if she didn't put the Jimson weed in the salad, she's gathered enough greens in her day to know Jimson weed when she sees it and to know it's poison. So I brought her in."

"You got her in there now?"

"No. One of the Renner boys picked her up and took her back to their place, I guess. Your friend at the D.A.'s office, Leach, says we ain't got a sign of a case against her. We've got no motive, because she didn't stand to gain a thing by Hausman's dying."

Judge Seawright cleared the depths of his throat. "I wouldn't depend on Leach too much. He's got practically the same trouble you have, except backwards: knows too much about law and too little about people."

The backyard hens moved in a slow erratic ellipse around the corner of the house, each with its eye peeled on what the closest chicken was pecking. The white leghorn with the roupy blind eye fluffed her feathers in a private foxhole of dirt and pretended to see.

Woody shifted on the rain-warped boards of the porch. "I thought maybe I'd give it one last look-over at Hausman's place, and then go over to the Renners' and talk to Lina again. You want to come over there with me?"

Judge Seawright turned his glance away from the chickens. Leaning against the chains of the porch swing, he eyed the sheriff.

"What was you plannin' to do, son, go look for clues?"

The boy broke away from the old man's stare, irritably brushing match shavings from his whipcords.

"I could send you to the tool shed," the judge continued, "to get me a peavy, but if you don't know what a peavy is, you won't come back with much just because you went lookin' for it."

"Well!" Woody blazed up at his father. "What am I supposed to do?"

The judge grinned shyly at his son—the aged, ageless Southern grinning, a head-averted, straight-eyed grin that meant he wasn't so much talking from conviction as prodding the boy where he had no defenses.

"As I said, all in the world you need to prove somebody was killed is a dead body. But to prove who did the killin', you have five elements. If one of these is missing, there just ain't much use you takin' the case to trial."

He spat over the side of the porch

and held up his hand as the young sheriff's forehead wrinkled, preparatory to speech.

"Even when you know all five, you still may not have a reasonable case."

"So what do I need?" the sheriff asked glumly.

"Workin' up a murder case is like workin' through a theorem of Euclid. Most murders can be solved like a geometrical problem. Now look here: You have got to know five things so that they fit together like a pentagon; you work from what you know to what you don't know. Five things:

"A victim . . .

"A killer . . .

"A means . . .

"An opportunity . . .

"And a motive."

The boy stood up, anxious to get on with his work. "I got all that stuff on her already—all except the motive."

"Sure, now. Like the man said, there's mighty nigh nothing new under the whole blessed sun. Euclid believed that. He believed a man can start with what he knows and end up finding what he doesn't know. Now let's see what you're goin' to look for."

The judge gingerly removed his wad of tobacco and threw it at the roupy chicken. She cackled once, left the cover of her foxhole, and headed for the backyard.

"You got a killed man."

"Sure. Mr. Hausman."

"But what kind of a man?"

"Well," Woody said. "A fanatic. A guy lived on weeds."

"All right," the judge said. "So that's given. And you got a murderer."

"Yes, sir. Lina Renner."

"Unless you want to believe Hausman all of a sudden forgot Jimson weed's poisonous."

"'Course he didn't. And she didn't forget either, when she put it in the salad."

"All right now. The murderer's given. How about an opportunity?"

"Yesterday noon she fed him the salad with the Jimson weed in it. Doc Smith says there ain't no doubt about when he ate and that what he ate killed him."

"Then that's given. How about the means?"

"Jimson weeds grow darn near everywhere in northern Oklahoma. And even pigs won't eat it."

"Well, sir," the judge nodded. "That's about it."

"Yes, sir. We got no motive."

"But we know where to look, don't we?"

"No, sir. I can't say that I do."

The judge pulled his frame up from the damp slats of the porch swing. "You want to go over there now?" he asked.

Woody looked at the fleece-white sun high in the hot sky. "It's pretty near dinner time. Must be half-past eleven. Maybe we could have a bite here and then go on over. I know how you hate to miss . . ."

His father held up his hand. "If we are going to do any good," he said, "I think we'd better go right now."

The sheriff's car sped through thickets and sweeping elms, through the black cinder dust of back county roads. Hay hands waved at the judge from loaded wagons and two boys in patched overalls, one carrying a string of sun perch too small to eat, stood solemnly beside the road as the sheriff's car passed.

The noon mail, headed toward Tulsa, stopped them at the theoretical town of Noxie, where only one store remained open. Judge Seawright could see a few spools of black thread below the U.S. Post Office sign, a Garret snuff advertisement, and a streaked jar of Christmas candy through the patched window as his son pulled the car up to the weathered porch.

The woman who ran the place sat on the porch in a chair that had gradually sunk earthward. She held a wedge of red watermelon and blew a mist of black seeds into the dirt as the sheriff and the judge stepped from the car.

"Morning, Mattie," the judge said, removing his hat.

"Been a long time since you been out in this neck of the woods, Judge. You runnin' for somethin'?" Mattie held her watermelon with one hand and fanned herself with a cardboard fan depicting Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane with the other.

"No, I'm just ridin' around with the sheriff this morning."

Woody squinted up at her in the bright sunlight, standing by his car. "You probably heard about Lina Renner's husband dying, ma'am."

"I heard."

"We thought maybe she came by here to pick up her mail."

"Who'd be writin' the Renners?" the woman said, her face leaning toward the watermelon.

"You ain't seen her, then?"

"I didn't say that. She was here. Got no mail, though. Traded me a man's watch for some groceries."

"Any of the Renner boys with her?" the judge asked.

"She ain't goin' back to keep house for that mess of boys. Told me she was goin' back and live in that open shack where her man died."

"Thank you very much, Mattie," the judge said, and he turned back toward the car.

"You run for somethin', Judge, you send me some cards. I'll pass 'em out for you."

"Why, thank you, ma'am, I surely will."

A mile farther along they turned off the main road into a thicket of slowly browning blackjack.

"You think you know what you're lookin' for?" Woody asked. He touched the brakes to let a young blue racer squiggle through the dust.

"Can't say as I know what

I'm lookin' for, no," the old man said. "You got no motive in this case. What I say is, when we find the motive it will be somethin' like we already found."

Woody halted the car at a gap in the crooked, lichen-grown fence posts and three-strand barbed wire. He turned the car into an overgrown country lane.

The oaks were higher here, but the wild blackberry in the sunny interstices and the ropes of wild grape hanging from the unpruned branches whipped the sheriff's car as its quiet motor pulled them down the narrow, hump-centered road.

Abruptly the road ran out and they were faced with a kind of clearing in which sat a tumble-down lean-to. The judge moved out of the car as Woody switched off the ignition.

Judge Seawright stared quietly and knowingly into the deep onyx eyes of Carolina Renner.

Carolina sat at a wooden table from which books and pamphlets had been swept to the ground. A small Coleman cook-stove, its lids incongruously gray with a hot fire in the hot noon, belched a soft smoke into the blue sky.

Before Carolina was a platter with at least four pounds of well-done beefsteak, a Silver-leaf lard bucket filled to the brim with cream gravy, and a loaf of bakery-made lightbread.

A little drop of anticipation was sliding down her chin.

'Q'

NEXT MONTH . . .

The first of a fascinating new series—

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AUTHOR: **STANLEY ELLIN**

TITLE: ***Unreasonable Doubt***

EDITORS' FILE CARD

TYPE: Crime Puzzler

LOCALE: United States

TIME: The Present

COMMENTS: *Mr. Willoughby was just starting a much-needed vacation. It was imperative that his mind be free of worry, tension — of any problems whatsoever. Relax, the doctor had ordered — and that's good advice to the reader too* — IF YOU CAN!

MR. WILLOUGHBY FOUND A SEAT in the club car and gingerly settled into it. So far, he reflected with overwhelming gratitude, the vacation was a complete success. Not a hint of the headaches he had lived with the past year. Not a suggestion of the iron band drawing tight around the skull, the gimlet boring into it, the hammers tapping away at it.

"Tension," the doctor had said. "Physically you're sound as a nut, but you sit over your desk all day worrying over one problem after another until your mind is as tight as a mainspring. Then you take the problems home and worry them to death there. Don't get much sleep, do you?"

Mr. Willoughby admitted that he did not.

"I thought so," said the doctor. "Well, there's only one answer. A vacation. And I do mean a real vacation where you get away from it all. Seal your mind up. Don't let anything get into it but idle talk. Don't think about any problems at all. Don't even try a crossword puzzle. Just close your eyes and listen to the world go round.

That'll do it," he assured him.

And it *had* done it, as Mr. Willoughby realized even after only one day of the treatment. And there were weeks of blissful relaxation ahead. Of course, it wasn't always easy to push aside every problem that came to mind. For example, there was a newspaper on the smoking-table next to his chair right now, its headline partly revealing the words *NEW CRISIS IN*— Mr. Willoughby hastily averted his head and thrust the paper into the rack beneath the table. A small triumph, but a pleasant one.

He was watching the rise and fall of the landscape outside the window, dreamily counting mile posts as they flashed by, when he first became aware of the voice at his elbow. The corner of his chair was backed up near that of his neighbor, a stout, white-haired man who was deep in talk with a companion. The stout man's voice was not loud, but it was penetrating. The voice, one might say, of a trained actor whose every whisper can be distinctly heard by the gallery. Even if one did not choose to be an eavesdropper it was impossible not to follow every word spoken. Mr. Willoughby, however, deliberately chose to eavesdrop. The talk was largely an erudite discourse on legal matters; the stout man was apparently a lawyer of vast experience and uncanny recollective powers; and, all in all, the combination had the effect on Mr. Willoughby of chamber music being played softly by skilled hands.

Then suddenly his ears pricked like a terrier's. "The most interesting case I ever worked on?" the stout man was saying in answer to his companion's query. "Well, sir, there's one I regard not only as the most interesting I ever handled, but which would have staggered any lawyer in history, right up to Solomon himself. It was the strangest, most fantastic, damndest thing that ever came my way. And the way it wound up—the real surprise after it was supposedly over and done with—is enough to knock a man out of his chair when he thinks of it. But let me tell it to you just as it took place."

Mr. Willoughby slid down in his chair, pressed his heels into the floor, and surreptitiously closed the gap between his chair and his neighbor's. With his legs extended, his eyes closed, and his arms folded peaceably on his chest he was a fair representation of a man sound asleep. Actually, he had never been more wide-awake in his life.

Naturally [the stout man said], I won't use the right names of any of these people, even though all this took place a long time ago. That's understandable when you realize it involves a murder. A cold-blooded murder for profit, beautifully planned, flawlessly executed,

and aimed at making a travesty of everything written in the law books.

The victim—let's call him Hosea Snow—was the richest man in our town. An old-fashioned sort of man —I remember him wearing a black derby and a stiff collar on the hottest days in summer—he owned the bank, the mill, and a couple of other local interests. There wasn't any secret among folks as to how much he was worth. On the day of his death it came to about two million dollars. Considering how low taxes were in those days, and how much a dollar could buy, you can see why he was held in such high esteem.

His only family consisted of two nephews, his brother's sons, Ben and Orville. They represented the poor side of the family, you might say. When their father and mother died all that was left to them was a rundown old house which they lived in together.

Ben and Orville were nice-looking boys in their middle twenties about that time. Smooth-faced, regular features, much of a size and shape, they could have been a lot more popular than they were, but they deliberately kept apart from people. It wasn't that they were unfriendly — any time they passed you on the street they'd smile and give you the time of day —but they were sufficient unto themselves. Nowadays you hear a lot of talk about sibling rivalries and fraternal complexes, but it would never fit those two boys.

They worked in their uncle's bank, but their hearts were never in it. Even though they knew that when Hosea died his money would be divided between them it didn't seem to cheer the boys any. Fact is, Hosea was one of those dried-out, leathery specimens who are likely to go on forever. Looking forward to an inheritance from somebody like that can be a trying experience, and there's no question that the boys had been looking forward to that inheritance from the time they first knew what a dollar was worth.

But what they seemed to be concerned with, meanwhile, was something altogether different from banking and money — something Hosea himself could never understand or sympathize with, as he told me on more than one occasion. They wanted to be song writers, and, for all I know, they had some talent for it. Whenever there was any affair in town that called for entertainment, Ben and Orville would show up with some songs they had written all by themselves. Nobody ever knew which of them did the words and which did the music, and that in itself was one of the small mysteries about them that used to amuse the town. You can pretty well judge the size and disposition of the place if something like that was a conversation piece.

But the situation was all shaken

up the day Hosea Snow was found dead in his big house, a bullet hole right square in the middle of his forehead. The first I heard of it was when a phone call got me out of bed early in the morning. It was the County Prosecutor telling me that Ben Snow had murdered his uncle during the night, had just been arrested, and was asking me to come to the jail right quick.

I ran over to the jail half dressed, and was pulled up short by the sight of Ben locked in a cell, reading a newspaper, and seemingly indifferent to the fact that he was on his way to a trapdoor with a rope around his neck.

"Ben," I said, "you didn't do it, did you?"

"They tell me I did," he said in a matter-of-fact voice.

I don't know which bewildered me more—what he said or the unconcerned way he said it.

"What do you mean?" I asked him. "And you'd better have a good story to tell me, boy, because you're in serious trouble."

"Well," he said, "in the middle of the night the police and the County Prosecutor walked in on Orville and me, because Uncle Hosea was killed, and after some talking they said I did it. When I got tired of them nagging me about it I said, all right, I did do it."

"You mean," I said, "they've got evidence against you?"

He smiled. "That'll come out in court," he said. "All you've got to do is call Orville as my witness at the trial, and you won't have any trouble. I'm not going to testify for myself, so they can't cross-examine me. But don't you worry any. Orville'll take care of everything."

I felt a terrible suspicion creeping into my mind, but I didn't let myself consider it. "Ben," I said, "have you and Orville been reading law books?"

"We've been looking into them," he admitted. "They're mighty interesting"—and that was all I could get out of him. I got even less from Orville when I went over to the bank and tried to talk to him about his testimony.

Considering that, you can imagine my state of mind when we finally came to trial. The case was the biggest sensation the town had ever known, the courthouse was packed, and here I was in the middle of things with no idea of what I could do for Ben, and Ben himself totally indifferent. I felt sick every time I got a look at the prosecutor's smug and smiling face. Not that I could blame him for looking like the cat that ate the canary. The crime was a brutal one, he and the police had solved it in jig time, and here he was with an airtight case.

In his opening address to the jury he threw the works at them. The motive was obvious: Ben Snow stood to inherit a million dollars from his uncle's death. The method was right there on the clerk's desk where everyone could see it: an old

pistol that Ben Snow's father had left among his effects years before, and which was found—one bullet freshly discharged from it—right in the kitchen where Ben and Orville were drinking coffee when the police broke in on them. And the confession signed by Ben before witnesses settled things beyond the shadow of a doubt.

The only thing I could do in the face of this was put blind faith in Ben and do what he wanted me to. I had Orville Snow called as my first witness—and my only witness, too, as far as I could see—and then, without any idea of what he was going to say, I put him on the stand. He took the oath, sat down, straightened the crease in his trousers, and looked at me with the calm unconcern his brother had shown throughout the whole terrible business.

You see, I knew so little about the affair that it was hard to think of even a good opening question for him. Finally, I took the bull by the horns and said, "Would you please tell the jury where you were the night of the crime?"

"Glad to," said Orville. "I was in Uncle Hosea's house with a gun in my hand. If the police had only gotten to me before they started pestering Ben about this, I could have told them so right off. Fact is, I was the one who killed uncle."

Talk about sensations in court! And in the middle of the uproar I saw Ben eagerly signaling me over to him. "Now, whatever you do," he whispered to me, "don't you ask that this trial be stopped. It's got to go to the jury, do you understand?"

I understood, all right. I had had my suspicions all along, but for the sake of my own conscience I just didn't want to heed them. Now I knew for sure, and for all I hated Ben and Orville right then I had to admire them just a little bit. And it was that little bit of admiration which led me to play it Ben's way. With the prosecutor waiting hangdog for me to ask that the trial be stopped I went back to Orville on the witness stand and had him go ahead with his story as if nothing spectacular had happened.

He told it like a master. He started 'way back when the desire for his uncle's money had seeped into his veins like a drug, and went along in detail right up to the killing itself. He had the jury hypnotized, and just to make sure the job was complete I wound up my closing speech by reminding them that all they needed in finding a man innocent was a reasonable doubt of his guilt.

"That is the law of this state," I told them. "Reasonable doubt. It is exactly what you are feeling now in the light of Orville Snow's confession that he alone committed the crime his brother was charged with!"

The police grabbed Orville right after the verdict of "Not Guilty" was brought in. I saw him that eve-

ning in the small cell Ben had been kept in, and I already knew what he was going to tell me.

"Ben's my witness," he said. "Just keep me off the witness stand and let him do the talking."

I said to him, "One of you two killed your uncle, Orville. Don't you think that as your lawyer I ought to know which of you it was?"

"No, I don't," said Orville, pleasantly enough.

"You're putting a lot of faith in your brother," I told him. "Ben's free and clear now. If he doesn't want to testify for you the way you did for him, he gets two million dollars and you get the gallows. Doesn't that worry you any?"

"No," said Orville. "If it worried us any we wouldn't have done it in the first place."

"All right," I said, "if that's the way you want it. But tell me one thing, Orville, just for curiosity's sake. How did you decide which one of you should kill Hosea?"

"We cut cards," said Orville, and that was the end of it, as far as he was concerned.

If Ben's trial had stirred up the town, Orville's had people coming in from all over the county. It was the prosecutor's turn to look sick now when he faced that crowd. He knew in his bones what was coming, and he couldn't do a blessed thing about it. More than that, he was honestly outraged at what looked to be an obscene mockery of the law. Ben and Orville Snow had found a loophole in justice, so to speak, and were on their way to sneaking through it. A jury couldn't convict a man if it had a reasonable doubt of his guilt; a man couldn't be retried for a crime when a jury has acquitted him of it; it wasn't even possible to indict the two boys together for conspiracy to commit murder, because that was a lesser charge in the murder indictment and covered by it. It was enough to make any prosecutor wild with frustration.

But this one held himself in check until Ben had finished telling his story to the jury. Ben told that story every bit as well as Orville had told his at the previous trial. He made it so graphic you could almost see him there in the room with his uncle, the gun flashing out death, the old man crumpling to the floor. The jurymen sat there spellbound, and the prosecutor chewed his nails to the quick while he watched them. Then when he faced Ben on the stand he really cut loose.

"Isn't all this a monstrous lie?" he shouted. "How can you be innocent of this crime one day, and guilty of it the next?"

Ben raised his eyebrows. "I never told anybody I was innocent," he said indignantly. "I've been saying right along I was guilty."

There was no denying that. There was nothing in the record to dispute it. And I never felt so

sure of myself, and so unhappy, as when I summed up the case for the jury. It took me just one minute, the quickest summing-up in my record.

"If I were sitting among you good people in that jury box," I said, "I know just what I'd be thinking. A heinous crime has been committed, and one of two men in this very courtroom has committed it. But I can take my oath that I don't know which of them it was, any more than you do, and like it or not I'd know I had to bring in a verdict of 'Not Guilty.'"

That was all they needed, too. They brought in their verdict even quicker than the jury had in Ben's case. And I had the dubious pleasure of seeing two young men, one of them guilty of murder, smilingly walk out of that room. As I said, I hated them, but I felt a sort of infuriated admiration for them too. They had gambled everything on their loyalty to each other, and the loyalty had stood the test of fire . . .

The stout man was silent. From his direction came the sound of a match striking, and then an eddy of expensive cigar smoke drifted under Mr. Willoughby's nostrils. It was the pungent scene of the present dissolving the fascinating web of the past.

"Yes, sir," the stout man said, and there was a depth of nostalgia in his voice, "you'd have to go a long way to find a case to match that."

"You mean," said his companion, "that they actually got away with it? That they found a way of committing the perfect murder?"

The stout man snorted. "Perfect murder, bosh! That's where the final, fantastic surprise comes in. They *didn't* get away with it!"

"They didn't?"

"Of course not. You see, when they—good heavens, isn't this our station?" the stout man suddenly cried, and the next instant he went flying past Mr. Willoughby's outstretched feet, briefcase in hand, overcoat flapping over his arm, companion in tow.

Mr. Willoughby sat there dazed for a moment, his eyes wide-open, his mouth dry, his heart hammering. Then he leaped to his feet—but it was too late: the men had disappeared from the car. He took a few frantic steps in the direction they had gone, realized it was pointless, then ran to a window of the car overlooking the station.

The stout man stood on the platform almost below him, buttoning his coat, and saying something to his companion. Mr. Willoughby made a mighty effort to raise the window, but failed to budge it. Then he rapped on the pane with his knuckles, and the stout man looked up at him.

"H-o-w?" Mr. Willoughby mouthed through the closed window, and saw with horror that the stout man did not understand him at all. Inspiration seized him. He

made a pistol of his hand, aimed the extended forefinger at the stout man, and let his thumb fall like a hammer on a cartridge. "Bang!" he yelled. "Bang, bang! H-o-w?"

The stout man looked at him in astonishment, glanced at his companion, and then putting his own forefinger to his temple, made a slow circling motion. That was how Mr. Willoughby last saw him as the train slowly, and then with increasing speed, pulled away.

It was when he moved away from the window that Mr. Willoughby became aware of two things. One was that every face in the car was turned toward him with rapt interest. The other was that an iron band was drawing tight around his skull, a gimlet was boring into it, tiny hammers were tapping at it.

It was, he knew with utter despair, going to be a perfectly terrible vacation.

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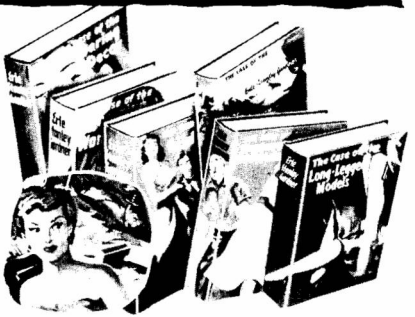

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