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JULY 1962 35¢

WINNER OF A SECOND PRIZE

MARGARET AUSTIN

INTRODUCING ELLERY'S MOM

A DAVIS PUBLICATION

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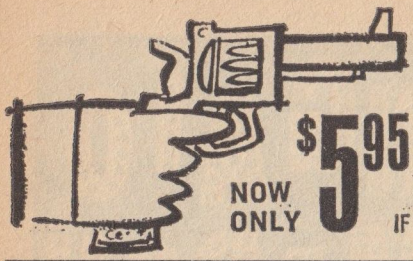

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WINNER OF A SECOND PRIZE

Well, we've had other "Mom" stories in the pages of EQMM (notably James Yaffe's). But here is a new "Mom"—and what a welcome addition she is to our gallery of family portraits! The first part of Mrs. Austin's story is charming, and the second part, you will discover, grows firmer and more substantial as it goes along—altogether an auspicious beginning for a new series.

Believe it or not, this is Mrs. Austin's second published story—her first, titled "Ladies First," appeared in the October 1960 issue of EQMM.

INTRODUCING ELLERY'S MOM:

Mom's First Two Cases

by MARGARET AUSTIN

MOM IS A GOOD SORT, SHORT AND kind of pudgy—what Dad calls "a comfortable armful"—and looks like she might belong to the Garden Club, which she does. I guess it's 'cause we've known her all our lives that we don't think of her as Katherine Sanders MacKay, with her name on as many mystery book jackets as Agatha Christie's.

To Dad she's just "Kate," and to us five kids, "Mom." To the town busybodies for a good many years she was "that woman who neglects those poor kids, my, I don't know how the doctor stands it!" Only Mom didn't look at it that way. She said making our own peanut butter sandwiches taught us self-reliance and independence and that after being around disinfected neatness all day, it relaxed Dad to come home to a place that was lived-in.

As for Dad, I think he liked Mom being a writer. When he was called out at night, she'd get up and beat out a few hundred words, then when he got home they'd drink coffee and discuss their respective cases.

Anyway, we grew up with Father Brown, Arsène Lupin, and Hercule Poirot the way most kids grow up with Joe Di Maggio, Yogi Berra, and Mickey Mantle. We knew about aconite, the poison, long before we saw aconite, the flower. And not one of us would have eaten a castor bean more willingly than we swallowed castor oil.

'Course, sometimes I think Mom carried this murder business too far. It's convenient for a mystery writer to have a doctor on tap but it kind of rocked Dad to have her ask, right in the middle of serving

scrambled eggs, "Where would you knife a person to have instantaneous death and very little blood?" or have her suddenly come out of a reverie with "I think I'll freeze him to death." What I mean is, it isn't normal conversation.

Then, too, there were the names. She was still getting printed rejection slips when Nicholas (Nick) Charles was born, followed a year later by Hildegarde, both now in college. I was next, then came Ngaio, then Perry, the baby, though he's in second grade now. He got named that by default; Dad tromped on Mom's first suggestions —said the kid would have enough burdens in this vale of tears without bearing "Sherlock," "Philo," or "Nero," which were Mom's first choices.

Me, I'm Ellery, though mostly everyone says "Ray," me not being the Ellery type.

By the time Perry came along, Mom was well known to the lending libraries. MURDER IN THE MATERNITY WARD came out soon after and the TV sale and reprint checks started piling up, so she hired a housekeeper and Perry never got to learn self-reliance and independence.

Anyway, by the day James Griggs, the chemistry teacher, died, Mom was something of a celebrity around Maplecrest, where we live.

Once I asked Mom if she couldn't get more inspiration living in a city where more exciting things happened than in Maplecrest, which took a sleeping pill sometime in the 1880s.

"My goodness, no!" she replied. "What you need for inspiration is not excitement—it's character. City dwellers don't know five people as well as I know most of the population here. I just ask myself what Ross Hammond would do if his wife started chasing around, and pretty soon I have a story."

We were close enough to New York so she could go in three or four times a year for research and editorial conferences, yet far enough to keep the would-be commuters from moving out to Maplecrest. Most of the houses in town were old and big and comfortable and most of them had a History, which is why they built the new High School of colonial brick, even though it's low and sprawling and completely modern inside.

Which brings me back to the day Mr. Griggs, the chemistry teacher, died and why I needed to talk to Mom.

Since I'd been at baseball tryouts after school, the halls were deserted when I went to my locker. First, there's the West entrance, which goes out to the parking lot, then the chemistry lab, chemistry classroom, and another classroom, then the bank of lockers where I was assigned—so that I had a position in the dugout, so to say, for what happened.

It started when Miss Dean came

out of the chem lab. She turned at the door and trilled, "I'll see you tomorrow night at eight, then?" She listened briefly to someone inside the lab and continued, "No, I'm sure he doesn't suspect anything—it would be terrible if he did!"

She clicked briskly down the hall, stuffing a bright card into an envelope as she came. I wished I could have shrunk into the locker or go into orbit or something, but I just stood there and said, "Hello, Miss Dean," real original-like.

Sure, it startled her, but she recovered quickly, threw me a brief wave, and clicked on. I was shook up enough to dump everything off the locker shelf trying to dig out the U.S. History book, so I said a few short pithy words—not from one of Mom's books—and scooped up a year's accumulation of junk. What with that and getting on the jacket and cap Mom always insisted on my wearing, even if the weather was spring-balmy, it must have been five minutes before I heard Mr. Griggs scream. Men usually yell but this was a scream, like in agony, along with a great thumping and crashing of glass—then silence.

Well, naturally, I raced down the hall but even so, I wasn't the first one there. The principal, Mr. Wilson, pelted through the West door and beat me to the lab by a good thirty feet.

"Stay back, stay back, boy!" he yelled, so I parked in the doorway.

Mr. Wilson was kneeling on the floor in a mess of broken test tubes and crucibles, some of them still leaking unfinished experiments. The principal blocked the view but those were unmistakably Mr. Griggs's long skinny legs. His feet flopped out with one toe pointing to me and the other to the open window across the room. Just looking at those feet, you knew he was dead.

I stood there, peering at the mess until old Smitty, the janitor who's been with the schools for the last century, tapped my shoulder. Then, of course, I moved into the room to let him through.

The principal stood up, pulled a handkerchief from his pocket, and wiped it across his forehead. Now all of Mr. Griggs was exposed. You'd think, with Dad being a doctor and Mom writing about death all the time, that I'd be hardened. But it doesn't look the same in real life as it does in books.

Nobody ever called Mr. Griggs handsome. His eyes kind of bulged, maybe from looking at too many Bunsen burners, his nose hooked under at the end, and his chin slipped toward his Adam's apple. A couple of weeks ago, when Miss Dean started pussyfooting around in quiet corners with him, I sure wondered why.

Sprawled there on the lab floor he was even less appealing. His skin was gray, like rain-soaked paper . . . Well, let's skip the details.

One thing really fascinated me, though. His shirt sleeves were rolled up and on his left forearm, which had fallen across his chest, there was a small red spot. As I watched, the spot grew bigger and redder. Seemed mighty indecent for a spot to do that on a dead man.

"Smitty," Mr. Wilson said, "Clean up this broken stuff before someone is cut. He's dead"—nodding toward Mr. Griggs "—probably his heart, but I'll call Doc Morton." Noticing me, he added like an apology, "His office is right across the street."

"Ray," he went on, almost kindly, "there's nothing we can do. Go on home and try not to think about this."

Well, I can tell when I'm dismissed, so I went outside—but not home. Nossirreebob! I went out to the parking lot, then circled back through the evergreens until I was outside the chem lab window. And was I glad I did! There in the soft earth under the window was a mess of footprints—blurred, like whoever stood there had shuffled around some—but maybe the police could find one clear enough for a cast.

It wasn't long till voices came through the lab window. Coronary attack, all right, Dr. Morton pronounced, and it didn't surprise him one bit, the way Jim Griggs wouldn't listen when he was told to take it easy. More talk, medical stuff, then a discussion of which funeral home to call since the deceased didn't have any relatives in Maplecrest. Dr. Morton said they'd better notify Police Chief Higgins—no business for him but he likes to know what's going on around town.

I got careless and Mr. Wilson spied my red cap above the window sill. A principal has lots of practice reading the riot act to boys—so I blasted off for home and Mom.

The housekeeper said Mom was on the sun porch. 'Course, it's been soundproofed and winterized now for Mom's office, but we still call it the sun porch. Snitching a couple of fresh cookies, I headed that way.

Mom was whittling away at a sheaf of yellow paper, her fat black pencil moving fast and furiously. The editor must of gotten tough about the deadline on MAKE MINE MURDER, the current epic.

"Hello, dear—have a nice day?" The pencil didn't break its flying rhythm.

"Mom, something strange happened this afternoon."

"Don't talk with your mouth full, Ray."

I gulped down the rest of the cookie. "Mr. Griggs died."

"Hmm. That's nice, dear." The pencil still flew.

"Mom," I said loudly, "it might be M-U-R-D-E-R."

That stopped the pencil in midflight.

"Ray, there hasn't been a murder in Maplecrest sice 1858, when a

slave dealer found half the town in the Underground Railroad—and that was more a lynching than murder! Poor dear, you've inherited my imagination, but sit down and tell me all about it."

I told her everything, just the way it had happened.

"But Bob Wilson is engaged to that pretty Clara Dean, isn't he?"

"That's it, Mom! He gave her the ring at Christmas. They're supposed to be married this summer. But for the last couple of weeks he's been sneaking around with Mr. Griggs, and then he dies and Mr. Wilson is right there on the scene!"

"Bob Wilson has always been most cooperative with the PTA. Hmm. What do you think of him, Ellery?" She's getting serious when she starts calling me Ellery.

"For a principal, he's always seemed like a right guy. He was even pretty decent about it when he lifted my peashooter—" Too late. There I stood with a mouth full of size-10 brogan.

"What's this, young man?"

"Aw, Mom, all the gang has them, like everybody had hula hoops a couple of years ago. There's nothing wrong with 'em—we use paper and it doesn't even sting."

"In the future you will tend to your studies and not to shooting paper wads." She kind of snorted. "At girls, no doubt." With that taken care of, she got back to the case.

"Wish they'd called your father. Old Dr. Morton should have retired years ago—he couldn't tell a heart attack from . . ." Her voice trailed off and she got that spark in her eye, like when she's finally worked out the solution to a locked-room mystery. "Ellery, get your father's MODERN DRUG ENCYCLOPEDIA.

She whipped through the pages until she found what she wanted, then she scribbled a few lines on a sheet of yellow paper and jammed it in her pocket.

"I still don't see . . ." she murmured to herself. "If he came in the West door, the footprints . . ." Then to me, "Were there screens on that window? No—that's it, of course!"

"Got it solved, Mom?" I asked hopefully.

"Absolutely! Identical to THE CASE OF THE ERRANT ANTHROPOLOGIST—stupid of me not to see it immediately. Oh, he was clever and he would have got clean away with it if you hadn't been there. Come on, we're going to talk to Chief Higgins—you can be sure he won't see it!" She added generously, "Of course, he doesn't have all the facts, as I do."

It wasn't as plain to me as it was to her, but rather than be classified with the Chief, I pretended to be with it.

She refused a ride on my bike—this wasn't the time, she said, to arrive at the Town Hall on the cross-

bar of a bicycle. So we walked—it's only four blocks.

Mom bounced along full of purpose and I trailed her.

Chief Higgins greeted us cheerfully. He and Mom have gotten to know each other pretty well through the years, what with her having to check on police procedure and such.

"Well, Kate MacKay! This is a pleasant surprise! How's the doctor and the rest of the family?"

With the small talk out of the way, Mom brought the business meeting to order: "Chief, I've heard about Jim Griggs' death at the High School this afternoon. Ray was there when it happened and I think between us we might be helpful to you. I don't mean to be poking my nose into your department, but some facts may have been concealed."

"There isn't a police chief in this country who wouldn't be honored to have the assistance of the most skillful mystery authoress writing today."

Wow!—didn't know the old guy had it in him!

Mom sat there, glowing and smoothing her dress over her knees. Then, armed with his compliment, she told what I'd heard and seen.

The Chief pulled out the bottom desk drawer, leaned 'way back in his leather swivel chair, and stuck his big boots on top of the drawer. You could see by the scratches that this was routine.

When Mom finished my part in the case, the Chief looked puzzled and said slowly, "Yes, that's the way it happened, but I don't see what you're drivin' at."

So Mom gave him the rest.

"Well, I didn't see it either, at first. But did you know Clara Dean is engaged to Bob Wilson? And that she's been two-timing him with Jim Griggs recently—Ellery has seen them together several times. That certainly gives Bob Wilson a motive and he was right at the scene. From the footprints outside the window, I believe he was standing there when Griggs started screaming. He could have run from there to the chemistry laboratory much quicker than Ellery could from his locker.

"All that tied together very neatly but it left the question of how he actually committed the murder—the *modus operandi,* Chief. That baffled me until Ellery let slip about the principal's taking a peashooter away from him. There you have it! The natives of Borneo use blowguns with poisoned darts most effectively and at far greater distances than Wilson was from Griggs. Then, when Wilson reached the body he ordered Ellery to stay back *while he removed the dart*—you'll find a puncture on Griggs' left arm, I'm sure—and pocketed it under the pretense of removing his handkerchief.

"Oh, yes," she finished, "an autopsy will probably show that

Quinidine was the poison used." She took the slip of yellow paper from her pocket and put it on his desk. "As principal, he could easily unlock the nurse's office at night and take all he needed. If the theft were noticed, it would be reported to him and that would be the end of it—he'd simply 'forget' it. Quinidine gives the reaction and appearance of a heart attack. Another doctor might have been suspicious but, confidentially, you and I both know that Dr. Morton is fighting senility. That is probably why Bob Wilson called him."

No doubt about it, Chief Higgins was jolted. He sat there for a few moments, then carefully took his feet off the drawer, came back to vertical, kicked in the drawer, and put his arms on top the desk.

"Kate, for a long time now I've been a great admirer of yours. I've read all your books and, frankly, the hero usually figures out the murderer before I do. But this beats anything you ever wrote. It's as logical and tidy, with no loose ends, as any bit of deduction ever was. My hat's off to you."

Mom sat there, flushed and beaming—even more than she did the night the Mystery Writers of America gave her an "Edgar."

"In fact," the Chief continued, "it makes me downright ashamed to tell you that it didn't happen that way at all." Then he added generously, "Of course, you don't have all the facts, like I do.

"First, there wasn't anything between Jim Griggs and Clara Dean —except plans for Bob Wilson's surprise birthday party tomorrow night. The whole faculty were in on it, but those two were getting the present and handling all the details.

"Second, it was Smitty the janitor who made those tracks in the dirt outside the window—while he was washing it. Bob Wilson had forgotten some Merit Scholarship forms and returned for them—Smitty saw him come straight from the parking lot."

Well, Mom was deflating like a busted balloon.

"Third," the Chief went on, "Jim Griggs did have a heart condition—has had it for several years —but he's kept quiet about it because he didn't want the school board to find out. You're right about the puncture on his arm. Made by an early wasp, though—there's your murderer. Griggs crashed around in the lab trying to kill it. The exertion, plus excitement, plus shock from the wasp's sting, set off the heart attack."

Man! Maybe you think we didn't have a funeral march all the way home! Mom really took it hard, and I forgot my own goof, worrying about her.

When we reached the front porch, Mom plunked into the swing. Like our house, it's old-fashioned, hanging by chains from the porch ceiling, and it squeaked and rattled when she sat down.

I dropped on the steps and made like "The Thinker," of which Dad has a pair of bookends in his office.

Dad came home soon, and seeing me sitting there he asked, "Why the gloom?"

"There is no joy in Mudville tonight," I replied.

"What?"

I told him the whole humiliating story and when I got to the poison he started grinning. "She should have called me," he said. "It would take a harpoon to carry a lethal load of Quinidine."

I threw him a look of pain and said how it was going to ruin Mom as a writer—maybe even give her all sorts of complexes—and just about wreck our family life. So he wiped off the grin.

We both looked down to the end of the porch where Mom still sat in the swing.

Her eyes had that over-the-hills-and-far-away glaze they always get when she's plotting a new novel.

"Who do you suppose," she asked dreamily, "knew about Jim Griggs' heart condition and wanted him out of the way badly enough to leave a wasp in the chemistry laboratory?"

Mom's Second Case

Chief of Police Higgins must of called Mom as a peace offering, like a fellow sends candy to his steady when they've had a blow-up. Not, of course, that there was anything like that between the Chief and Mom—they're both married to someone else with kids and homes and all, but they've been friends practically forever.

Anyway, after Mom's big goof, thinking Jim Griggs was murdered when all the time a wasp caused a heart attack, why, I guess the Chief felt bad—like maybe it should of been murder 'cause Mom figured it out so clever. So that's why he phoned Mom when the double deaths happened at Rockwood.

I got home early that afternoon—no baseball practice. Mom was just hanging up, real excited and thoughtful. "Ray, there's been a murder at Rockwood and Chief Higgins has kindly asked if I'd care to ride out there with him. You may come, too, if you'd like."

"A murder! What are they doing—playing ten little Indians?"

"Ray! That will be enough! It's one thing to be facetious about death and violence in my books, but this is not a book and you'll speak with respect. Besides," she continued, simmering down to normal, "Marcia Bancroft's death this morning was an accident, a fall from her horse. This new one is quite different. That nice little Japanese gardener has been strangled. Well, do you want to come?"

Man, did I! Ever since Ambassador Bancroft—they call him that although he's retired—reopened the family home, I'd been working on

a reason to see the place. It sure set our town of Maplecrest buzzing, what with the estate closed so many years while he served in one of those Oriental countries with lots of mystery and glamor. Marcia was sent to England to learn ladylike manners and when to say "Tally-ho!" Then after he retired, they lived in Japan until some ten months ago when they returned to cultivate his two big interests, horticulture and horses.

Town gossip had it he'd paid a half million for Battle Song, the retired Derby winner—and that was just one of the horses he bought. Seemed nearly every week the lovely Marcia's face beamed out of the local paper, with a horse peeking over her shoulder and her cuddling a silver cup like other girls do a baby. The Bancrofts didn't get into town often but their big red horse-van sailed through frequently. They must of covered the whole Eastern show circuit.

To manage the flower part of his hobbies, the Ambassador brought with him from Japan a gardener named Iso Nakata, and his grandson. Iso, we heard, once worked for the Emperor himself.

Rockwood was about six hundred acres of fancy real estate—Dad said with the taxes it paid, we didn't need a big industrial plant in the county. I wanted to see it like Roger Maris wanted that 61st home run!

So Mom told the housekeeper not to hold dinner if we were delayed and when the Chief honked, we piled into the car, Mom up front with him, me in back where I could hang over the seat to listen.

"Who would kill that nice little Mr. Nakata?" Mom asked without even greeting the Chief—not like her at all 'cause she's usually very polite and makes us kids mind our manners, too. "Do you have any clues?"

"Strictly speaking, Kate, it isn't even my case since it's outside the town corporation limits. It's the county sheriff's, but we work together, so he asked me to back him up. He thinks one of the other gardeners might be guilty. They were free of real authority for so long that having a boss again was like a cutworm in the tomato patch—'specially an imported boss who doesn't speak English."

Mom protested. "You couldn't hate such a gentle person as Iso Nakata any more than you could hate flowers. He gave a demonstration of floral arrangements at the garden club last month—he was an Ikebana master, you know—and a sweeter, more polite individual I've never met."

"Thought he couldn't speak English?"

"Oh, he can't, just the crudest pidgin. He did the demonstrations while his grandson, Joe, translated. Joe grew up during the occupation and speaks as well as Ray." She considered. "Better than Ray, in fact."

She quizzed Chief Higgins

again. "Do you suppose there's any connection between Marcia's accident this morning and Mr. Nakata's murder this afternoon?"

"Can't see it offhand. I was out there after they found her and it looked authentic. Horse spooked and threw her down a ravine. Banged her head in the fall. That's all there was to it but we'll double-check . . . Downright shame, that accident. Everybody seems to have been fond of her—why, the Ambassador's secretary even needed a sedative. He—"

"He?" Mom interrupted.

"Yes, young chap—Richard Gillespie. I got the impression he might have been sweet on the Bancroft girl. Anyway, this will sure hit the Ambassador hard when he hears about it."

The Chief filled us in on how Joe Nakata had driven into New York early that morning to meet the Ambassador's one p.m. flight from Ireland, where he'd been buying more horses. They weren't expected back for a couple more hours, longer if the flight was delayed.

Then he quit talking to concentrate on the road. For the past few miles it had been swinging in wide curves and gradually climbing a mountain. 'Course, visitors from the west snort and say they aren't even decent foothills, but they still can be tricky to negotiate. I sure wouldn't of wanted to drive a horse-van down this one.

For a while we paralleled a high stone wall; then, where it humped into stone gates, we turned into Rockwood. The concrete road twisted through open woods with an occasional trail leading off to the side, usually marked *Caution, Bridle Path.*

About a half mile in, the road forked. A rustic sign saying *Rockwood* pointed to the right, and a smaller sign to the left read *Service.*

"Want to see where the accident happened?" the Chief asked, swinging the car down the Service road.

We circled the mountain top and descended to a bridge spanning a deep ravine, where the Chief pulled over. "It's up that trail about a hundred yards."

Well, Mom tumbled out and charged the trail like the hundred yard dash, me and the Chief tagging behind. "Whoa! You're going too far," he called as we rounded a curve and saw Mom still bouncing off in the distance.

It was a good place for an accident, all right. The trail was about six feet wide and must of been blasted right out of the mountain. A straight rocky cliff shot above it on the mountain side, maybe fifteen feet high, then leveled off before climbing gradually up into trees again. The ravine side was a rock-studded drop to a little river about thirty feet below. The low rail guarding the drop wouldn't help a person thrown from a horse.

I mean the goosebumps were making base hits up my spine, just

thinking about it, but Mom asked calmly, "How'd they find her, hidden so far from the road?"

"The river bed below is in plain view. Her horse ran back to the stables—they're just beyond that last clump of woods across the ravine—and the stable boys came out looking for her."

"What would frighten the horse?"

"Several things could have—a rabbit, a falling leaf, one of these stones breaking from the cliff."

He indicated the stones lying at the trail's edge. "Who knows what spooks a horse? Often it's only something they think they see."

Right then I got real ashamed of Mom. Here they were talking seriously about death, the Chief even holding his cap, when Mom lets out a delighted "OOooouuuu!"—just like she's received a huge royalty check.

She was looking across the ravine. "Isn't that the most marvelous cherry tree ever! I simply must see it closer. Chief, would you mind terribly if I went ahead to look at it while you're getting the car?"

Well, I could see the Chief wishing he'd drowned his kindly impulse to ask her along, but we didn't talk about it as we got the car and drove to where Mom was Oooouuuuing and Ahhhhing over the tree. It was pretty all right—covered all over with big rosy-pink blossoms—but this was no garden club tour.

Mom returned to the car bearing a branch of the blooms. "Do you think anyone will mind? I'm sure it's a Sekiyama cherry but I'd like to verify it at home." She added, like an afterthought, "That means Gateway to the Mountains. Most appropriate—really, most appropriate."

Beyond the last clump of woods the whole layout spread before us. The manor house—you've got to call a pile of bricks that big a manor house—was on the last slope, with hedges and gardens all around. Our road twined around service buidings and training rings to the far left of the manor, then joined the main road to the house. White rail fences chopped through rolling pastures below the buildings—I mean, like something out of old Virginy, which probably was what the Ambassador's grandfather planned when he sold the plantation and moved North before the Civil War.

"Let's stop at the stables first." The Chief braked hard before a brick building that sprawled off in a long T. Horses are better to look at than a dead man any day, so that was okay by me.

The crossbar of the T, where we entered, held the tack and trophy rooms on one side and the office and manager's quarters on the other. Beyond these stretched a tanbark aisle between box stalls the size of Mom's writing office. Man, there are people—millions of 'em—

not living half as good as those horses! Their stalls were solid mahogany oiled like a catcher's mitt, each with its own mahogany feed box, copper pail for water, and brass nameplate on the stall door.

A tall black-haired man, maybe in his early forties, slapped together some record books and whipped out of the office. He moved in his tan breeches, plaid shirt, and worn black boots like he'd been born in them. Even the leather gloves poked out of his hip pocket with the right casual air. I'd of traded my baseball uniform any minute to look like that!

The Chief introduced him as Charlie Mason, the stable manager, and they yakked about Mr. Nakata before the Chief asked to see Marcia Bancroft's horse.

"Witchcraft? Sure, she's down here."

Only she wasn't. Her stall was empty and she was dancing between crossties on a tile-floored washrack. One man in blue jeans held a stick-gadget, ending with a rope, twisted around her upper lip. Another guy in jeans had hold of her tail with one hand and was trying to smear some gooky white salve on her hip with the other. He'd touch her, she'd lash out with a hind foot, he'd swear, and the first guy would take a half turn on the stick. Then she'd snort and roll her eyes and they'd start all over again.

Mason sprang forward with a yell. "Sam, you trying to ruin that mare? Get away from her!" He stroked her head and talked to her until she quieted down, then he stepped around her, running his hand along her neck, across her back, and down the rear leg. Cupping a hand around her foot, he lifted it and doubled it back.

"Now, Sam, come here and hold this foot up. Gus, get a good grip on that twitch," he commanded softly.

Mason circled the mare again, talking all the time, picked up the jar of salve from a shelf, and spread it gently. When he finished, a white patch about the size and shape of a football stood out against the sleek chestnut hip and the mare was led back to her stall without further fuss.

"Mare get that scrape this morning?" the Chief asked.

"Yeah, must have reared and fallen. That would be when Miss Bancroft went off," he replied. "Shame, too. She's a top show horse but if this doesn't heal right she may never be inside a ring again."

Seemed kind of heartless to me, fussing about the horse when the girl was the one killed. But I guess he and the Chief had covered that in the morning.

"Mason," the Chief asked, "did Marcia Bancroft always follow the same trail on her rides?"

"No, sometimes she'd take one, sometimes another."

"Hmm," the Chief mused. "But

she'd always have to cross that bridge to come back, wouldn't she?"

"Suppose she could have taken the other bridge on the main road, but this one leads directly to the stable."

Mom was standing in front of the next stall, examining one of those copper water pails. Smiling brightly, she waved the pail and said, "Wouldn't this be absolutely perfect for chrysanthemums, Ray?"

When I wouldn't answer, she huffed off toward the trophy room. Soon, I got to feeling guilty—after all, she is my mother, so I followed.

In addition to a stone fireplace, bookshelves, and a lot of deep leather chairs, the room had a glass trophy case stretching clear across one wall. In the center were shelves for cups. Cork squares were framed off on each side, with different horses' names on them.

Witchcraft's square held a blue marked *Working Hunter, National Horse Show,* a couple of big purple rosettes marked *Hunter Championship* with other show names below, some more blues for other hunter classes, and maybe ten reds. Guess they don't display anything lower than second, or maybe she never won anything less.

There wasn't much to look at in there, so we wandered back to the Chief and Mason. When they were through, Mom asked, "Isn't Battle Song here? His name isn't on a stall."

Mason smiled at her. "He's over in the stud barn with the other two stallions. We don't keep them in with these horses."

"I didn't know the Ambassador had so many stallions. Do you charge as much for the others as for Battle Song?"

Mason scuffed his foot in the tanbark, like he wanted to change the subject, but with five kids and maybe ten times that many murders to her credit, Mom doesn't embarrass easy. She waited bright-eyed.

"We charge $5,000 for Battle Song and it's a bargain. Some of his foals are worth three, four times that the minute they drop. We charge $1,000 for each of the other studs."

"Why do you have the others," I asked, getting curious, too.

"It's a matter of bloodlines. You can't breed every mare to the same stud and you can't keep breeding successive generations to the same stud. Some bloodlines nick and some don't. Now, the Ambassador aims to breed the best hunters and the best steeplechasers this country has ever seen. Battle Song has the speed but . . ."

He hadn't reached the home stretch when the Chief said we'd better get over to the greenhouse or the Sheriff would wrap up the case and head home before we arrived.

In the car we realized that Mom wasn't with us. A honk on the horn brought her trotting, a copper pail in hand.

"Wasn't it nice of Mr. Mason to give me a pail for the chrysanthamums!" she exclaimed.

The Chief and I exchanged glances—guess we felt the same way about it.

"Chief," I asked, "doesn't a hunter have to be pretty steady?"

"Sure does, Ray. By the time he's trained, a good one won't twitch his ears at snapping whips, hounds, tin cans, or most anything else. Why?"

"I was just wondering. That Witchcraft has a whole mess of ribbons."

"Hmm. See what you mean. While you're being so observant, what did you think of the sore on her rump?"

I hadn't thought about it but obviously he expected me to say something bright, so I said it seemed tidy. Must of been the right thing 'cause the Chief beamed.

Mom was still polishing that fool pail with a handkerchief when we parked by the greenhouse.

Well, Mom nearly flipped when the Chief escorted us into a big flower-arranging room. It could of been a Fifth Avenue florist shop, what with a sink and long wooden counter along one wall, with cabinets below, and shelves of vases above, and more shelves with wires and wraps and spikes—it could handle anything from a single pansy to a Derby wreath. Across from the vases was a big glass-doored refrigerator loaded with cut flowers and some finished arrangements.

Not that we had much time to look. The Chief herded us through to another room set up as an office, with files and desks and such. It also held the Sheriff and Mr. Nakata —I deduced the sheet-covered hump on the floor was the murdered gardener. There wasn't much doubt that the big hump on the chair, looking like a football player 30 years after training, was the Sheriff.

When we were introduced, the Sheriff said he was honored to meet Mom, that he'd read some of her books, and offered to show them the body, kind of pointedly excluding me. He raised the sheet so that it blocked my view. Mom let out a gaspy "Ooooffff"—just like when my kid brother Perry crashed smack into her middle one day.

"No, a victim of strangulation isn't very attractive," the Sheriff said, like he regretted having shown the body.

Mom said she didn't think she could ever arrange any more flowers after seeing that floral wire around his neck and the Chief eased her into a chair. He picked a desk chair for himself, hooked the bottom drawer out with his toe, stuck his feet on top of the drawer, and leaned back, like he was in his own office. Then he asked if they'd found the killer.

The Sheriff put on a glum face and told us he'd run out of ideas. The medical examiner fixed the time of death as somewhere be-

tween 10 a.m. and noon, which cleared all the other gardeners. They were working in the rose garden on the far side of the house.

"The whole business is senseless," the Sheriff concluded. "Why would anyone else want to kill the old guy? There's no reason—not a single motive."

"Ralph," Chief Higgins said, "we just may have stirred up a motive for you. Now suppose—just suppose, you understand—that Marcia Bancroft's death wasn't an accident. Suppose Nakata knew it wasn't. Would that be motive enough?"

"You have any proof?" The Sheriff sat up as straight and stiff as his paunch would let him.

"Heck, no—that's what you've got to find. All I have to go on is that she was riding a horse that wouldn't spook easy and that probably hadn't reared since it finished basic training. Also that the horse is wearing one compact sore high on the rump, where if it fell it should be skinned more on the haunch and leg.

"Remember where the accident happened? Now suppose someone hid on top of that cliff above the trail. When she rode along there, which she had to do to reach the bridge—few horsemen will ride on a concrete road—she'd be a perfect target. Maybe one rock on the horse's rump to make it act up, then maybe another on Marcia's head if she didn't go down the ravine on the first try."

Mom's fictional detectives couldn't have tied it up neater. The Chief really had his little gray cells working. The Sheriff said that when his deputies returned from interviewing the household staff he'd send them out to look for horsehair or blood on the loose rocks and signs of someone's being on the cliff. He eased his glasses up on his forehead and rubbed the bridge of his nose, kind of perplexed like.

"But if Nakata did see her killed—that is, if she was murdered—why didn't he come to us when we were here this morning?" Scarcely pausing, he answered himself. "Of course, he could have been dead by the time we got here. We didn't go into the greenhouse."

"Why would anyone kill Marcia, though—and who?" Mom inquired quietly.

The Sheriff snapped his fingers. "Gillespie, that's who! He was nuts about her but he wasn't a type she would go for. Scorned love—that's the cause of more than one killing."

He phoned the house and asked the secretary to come over. While we waited, an ambulance came for Mr. Nakata, which was a big relief. That hump on the floor kind of kept me from concentrating on who might of put it there. I think it affected Mom the same way—she's usually bubbling with deductions, like when Mr. Griggs had his heart attack.

Two deputies reported that the household staff seemed in the clear

and the Sheriff sent them off to the ravine. Finally, Gillespie slipped through the door. When Mom puts such an oddball in a book, she usually writes "esthetic." I mean, he was sorry-looking—real shook up, with eyes fixed in a dopey glaze and fingers plucking like at harp strings.

Well, the Sheriff started pitching questions and Gillespie couldn't field them. He just kept protesting. No, he hadn't killed either of them —he loved Marcia too much but she was unaware of it; no, he'd never harm her, and Iso Nakata was a splendid old man. He even claimed he hadn't known Marcia was home; he thought she'd planned to drive into New York to meet her father— she must have changed her mind this morning, but, no, he hadn't seen her.

Mom sneaked off to the flower-arranging room, which I guess is where she wanted to be all along. We heard her poking around, shifting vases and opening drawers, and soon I heard what must have been the big refrigerator door open, then close again.

Fairly soon she came back in and tapped Chief Higgins' shoulder. Reluctantly he followed her and I followed him. Mom had one of the flower arrangements on the wooden counter.

"There," she said triumphantly, pointing to it. The Chief eyed her, cool-like.

"Don't you see?" she asked impatiently. "It's the Sekiyama cherry— identical with the branch I took from the tree across the ravine! That places Nakata definitely where he could have seen Marcia killed. Of course, we can't prove what time . . ." She trailed off as the Chief rushed back to tell the Sheriff.

Well, I know when I'm on the losing team, so I apologized to Mom for thinking she was only interested in flowers. While I was doing the honesty bit, I had to add that it wasn't much of a flower arrangement—the one the cherry branch was used in—and if that was Japanese art, please include me out.

It was really a mess—the arrangement, I mean. Little black rocks were scattered on the bottom of a flat dish and heaped around the flower stems. The cherry branch dipped way down to the left so that one end touched water and the other touched rock. A pine branch was angled above it at about 45°. Sticking up from the center was one tall white chrysanthemum. The only other flower was a single narcissus stuck over by itself to the right, its stem bent, almost broken.

Frowning, Mom reached out to adjust it into better balance. Then her hand jerked back so fast I expected a bee to buzz out. "Ray, get Chief Higgins!" she ordered.

As I opened the door, the Chief's big voice was booming, "All right, so maybe you didn't kill her because she didn't know you were alive. Maybe you've been juggling the

Ambassador's accounts and she found out." The secretary, white as that narcissus, was still protesting.

"Pssst, Chief, Mom wants to see you," I interrupted. "It's something important." He turned Gillespie back to the Sheriff.

"That poor little man," Mom said to us sadly. "He sat in this room arranging flowers when he knew that Marcia had been murdered and that he would be next—and couldn't tell anyone about it. The only ones he could talk with, his grandson and the Ambassador, were away."

"Kate MacKay, did you get me out here to sympathize with the dead man?" the Chief demanded.

"Yes," Mom said calmly. "We all should sympathize with him—and thank him, too, for leaving this dying message." She indicated the awkward arrangement. "In Ikebana art, flowers are arranged according to rule and symbolism, with three main elements—Heaven, Man, and Earth. Others may be added but Nakata used only these three—and the narcissus. In Ikebana symbolism the narcissus means a farewell to the past—or himself, nearly broken, awaiting death.

"For the Heaven line he chose a white chrysanthemum. That symbolizes dignity—so we can interpret it as directed to the Ambassador, certainly a dignified man and one who was in the heavens in an airplane."

I'd started off thinking she'd sprung a leak in the cranium—but now it was getting interesting.

"This line," she continued, tracing the cherry branch, "is the Earth line. Cherry blossoms symbolize purity—so it's fair to interpret this as Marcia Bancroft, crushed to the rocks. Above it is the Man line, and here Nakata chose to use a pine branch. That symbolizes energy and manhood—certainly not that frightened secretary! Now, who would you say is the most energetic and manliest person around here?"

"Charlie Mason," the Chief and I replied in unison.

The Chief called the Sheriff and Mom explained it again—all about the Heaven, Earth, and Man lines. You'd think it would have cheered him up, but it only made him gloomier. "So I have a good suspect and two possible motives. Now you try to sell me another suspect—and on what kind of evidence? A few flowers that would wilt before we could get them into court. No *proof*, no *motive*—just a bunch of guesses hung on a pine branch. Huh!"

It was true. Mom knew it. She sat on a stool by the counter and put her chin on her hands.

"Maybe he was in love with her, too," I offered feebly.

"He was nearly old enough to be her father," the Chief replied.

"Well, Charlie Chaplin . . ."

"Shush, Ray!" Mom commanded.

The secretary poked his head through the door and peeped, "And

what is more, you may have access to my accounts at any time."

"Accounts!" the Chief exclaimed.

Mom chimed in, "That's it! A stable manager also handles accounts—and big ones. Why, those stud fees alone . . ."

She and the Chief were back in harmony. "Do you think he would dare?"

"Who'd find out if he was careful about it?"

"And then Marcia came to the stables this morning when she was supposed to be driving to New York to meet her father's plane . . ."

"Embezzlement, that's it! And even if the Bancrofts didn't prosecute he'd never work with horses again."

"Whoa!" The Sheriff interrupted. "Let me in on it, too."

They explained. With a $5,000 stud fee for Battle Song and $1,000 for each of the other two horses, Mason could switch records so as to pocket the $4,000 difference whenever he wanted to. The mare would be actually bred to Battle Song and the owner's registration papers made out correctly, but the stable books would show a service to one of the others. Unless the Bancrofts checked all the Jockey Club registrations against their stud book they'd never discover the falsifications. The stable hands didn't see the books and Mason was careful to switch entries only when the Bancrofts were away, which was often.

Then Marcia turned up unexpectedly while a mare was in the stud barn. She probably looked in the book out of curiosity and stumbled onto the discrepancy. Some people walk when they think; she went riding to decide what to do. Mason waited on the cliff and Iso Nakata happened to be cutting cherry branches when Mason killed her.

That's the way they explained it and that's the way it was. Mason had been so sure he was above suspicion that he hadn't even changed the account books—and so they had him solid. He even told them where he had hidden the money—a good start toward his own breeding farm in Kentucky. Guess all he cared about was horses.

We ducked out, leaving Mason to the deputies, and the Sheriff to wait for the Ambassador and Joe Nakata. After all, it was his case.

Dad's car was in the driveway, so Mom asked Chief Higgins in for a celebration drink. They told Dad the story, each handing the other all the credit, and then they toasted each other with some flowery prose.

Dad finally broke it up by proposing a toast to both of them: "Here's to the best team of homicide detectives the town of Maplecrest ever boasted."

That was safe enough—it was our first murder in more than 100 years.

A NEW STORY BY CHARLOTTE ARMSTRONG

"Celia could look like an angel, and be bright and beautiful. It took a while to realize how spoiled she was . . ." Romance and ratiocination—in a blend that Charlotte Armstrong has a special talent for . . .

THE OTHER SHOE

by CHARLOTTE ARMSTRONG

"JENNY." A HAND ON MY BARE ARM pulled me away from the group around the piano in the den. "Celia and Blair, in there . . ." Carmen said. "Look, I'm a pretty easy-going hostess, but Blair is drunk and Celia is screaming at him and it isn't funny any more. Do you think you could stop them?"

"Oh, Carmen, I'm sorry. But Celia pays less than no attention to me."

"She's your sister."

"Stepsister," I corrected.

Carmen's big eyes flashed. "You better do something—for Blair's sake," she added knowingly.

"I'll try," I said.

I went into the living room. It wasn't hard to spot my stepsister, Celia, since she and I were dressed exactly alike. All of us at this party were the remains of a wedding—gay souls who had chased the bride and groom with traditional hilarity, and had then wound up at this country house of Carmen's to carry on into the night.

Celia and I still wore our bridesmaid's dresses, pale apricot organdy, and both of us still had on our feet the fantastic straw-colored devices, a few narrow straps tying on some four-inch heels, that were supposed to be shoes.

Those shoes!

In the living room, people were silently listening—in malice or in helpless distaste. Celia was standing in an ugly pose, as if her feet hurt and she didn't care who knew it. Her face, that could look like an angel's, was pinched and sharpened.

"And if you thought," she was saying in a piercing voice, "that you were just going to use my money without any advice from me, you were living in a dream world, genius boy."

"Advish, sure," Blair Meaghan mumbled. There had been a lot of champagne at the wedding and he seemed to have had more than his share of it. "Always glad to lishen to advish. But don't give me orders. Have another drink."

"You take my money, you take my orders," Celia snapped. "And be glad to get both. I'm in on this deal all the way, or I'm out. Understand?"

"You don't unnerstan'," he muttered. "Papers signed. Bishness deal. Ashk anybody." Blair waved his glass. His dark hair wouldn't plaster down—it rose in a crest. I adored him and I hated this ugly scene, but I didn't see what I could do.

"Business!" Celia hooted. "When you came whining to me, I said I'd keep on with the financing. That was for pity's sake. But I'm not *giving* you the money."

Blair's face was pale. "Coursh not. Inveshment . . ."

Celia said, "You do what I say or I take my money *out!* Do you hear, or are you too drunk?"

"Orders, no." Blair shook his head. "Papers don't say—"

"I spit on the papers," shreiked Celia. "You do it or I'm getting out and there won't be any money. If you want to start any lawsuits you can count on me telling how you whined and cried after I threw you over. You'd enjoy that. And you'd lose. Don't think you wouldn't. Last chance." She still thought she might get her way.

But Blair raised his glass. "To the money! Hail and farewell! And I hope it's farewell to you, forever." He drained the liquid down. "I ought to wring your neck," he said, rather quietly. "A public servish."

Nobody else in the room was speaking or moving. Everybody knew that Celia and Blair had been engaged last summer. Everybody knew that Celia had wanted someone else—and hadn't got him. Everybody knew how much her money meant to Blair.

It was her own money—from her dead mother's family. Neither father nor I had any. Celia did as she pleased with what was her own. She had invested it, all properly, in Blair's project, and in what he thought was good faith.

Celia could look like an angel, and be bright and beautiful. It took a while to realize how spoiled, how totally unreliable she was. Blair knew it now, twice over. There she stood, welshing on a business deal in a fit of arrogance, and there he stood, watching his hard-wrought plan, his work, his hope, his dream, dying by her hand.

He wasn't in love with Celia any more.

He had thought she was civilized. But she was like a stone.

There was only one thing I could think of doing. I took Blair's arm. "Blair, take me home?" I begged.

"What, Jenny?" He was so angry or so drunk he seemed blind.

"I've got to go home, right away," I said urgently. Blair had always been fond of me, and kind.

"Why, what's the matter?" He wasn't seeing me, blind as he was, but at least he recognized my voice. He let me lead him out of that

room. I didn't have to turn and look to know the contempt that would be on Celia's face. She, and everyone else in the room, knew very well how deeply I was in love with Blair.

At least, I had broken up the nasty scene. Carmen fluttered after us with my stole. Her husband warned me that Blair must not drive a car. So there we were, ten o'clock that night, in Blair's convertible, with me driving and Blair sodden on the seat beside me.

The last sound I heard from that house was Celia's voice: "Let Jenny comfort him. Jenny likes nothing better." I made the car jump away from the sound of her laughter.

Carmen's long low house sits on a hill and the driveway goes to the north and winds down gradually to the highway. We hadn't yet reached the main road when I discovered that I couldn't possibly drive a car in those ridiculous shoes.

I pulled in close to the shrubbery and parked, unbuckled the ankle straps, got the silly things off my feet, and sat massaging my toes.

Blair said in a clear and sober voice, "I'll drive, Jenny. Thanks for getting me out of there. I thought it was better to act drunk," he told me quietly. "Because that is a scene I never want to remember."

His voice made me want to cry. But I am not one to cry or rage or carry on. Celia did too much of that. I said in my normal commonsense voice, "What does it mean if Celia takes the money out?"

"I start at the bottom again," he said. "It's all to do over."

What Blair Meaghan wanted to do is not impossible. It can be done; it has been done. Yet there is really no way to do it. He wanted to produce and direct a motion picture. The "way" to that is so arduous and chancy, such a zigzag among hopes and promises, such a miracle of timing, that nothing can produce an independent motion picture but a powerful dream and the courage to survive a thousand heartbreaks.

I listened to him and I knew he would survive. He wasn't whining. He spoke in a clear tight voice, about loans and percentages and banks and the screenplay and the actors who would not and could not wait—the whole web of tentative and interdependent commitments that had taken him two years to weave, but which had now vanished with Celia's decision.

We forgot to change seats, he in his need to talk and me in my need to listen. Celia was wrong about my liking nothing better than to comfort Blair. There were many things I would have liked better than to listen to the crisp exact details of his ruin.

Half an hour went by. Cars passed in the highway below us. Not many. They couldn't see us, nor we them. No car came down Carmen's drive. Nobody else left the party. There we were, halfway

down the hill, forgotten and forgetting, until finally Blair's voice ran down. He looked at his watch.

"Ten thirty-six," he said. "We better get going. Thanks for listening, Jenny. It helped. You always help me."

He did sound eased. He swung me over his lap and took the wheel. We continued downward, turned to the right on the highway, and came opposite the long, little-used flight of wooden stairs that led up the middle of the hill to Carmen's house.

There was something lying out of place, there in the margin.

Blair braked. The moon was up and we could see the heap of organdy.

We sprang from the car and there she was. Celia. In the dusty weeds, and dead.

No car came by while Blair used his flashlight long enough to make sure she was dead, and to see that she had been strangled.

"We can't help her," he said harshly. His fingers bit my arm. "Get in." I limped on stockinged feet. "Quick!" He lifted me into the car. "Oh, Lord, don't leave a shoe!"

He picked it off the pavement and threw it into my lap. He ran around, jerked the car away from there, and yanked it sharply to the left onto a country road, which was another way back to town—the way we called "going around the mountain."

I couldn't speak. I couldn't think. But when we were into a fold of the hill, he stopped the car. "You don't get it." I could feel him trembling.

"We shouldn't run away," I said.

"What else can we do?" he said grimly. "No, you don't get it. But I do. I said I'd like to wring her neck, remember? In front of a room full of witnesses. Who is going to believe that you and I were talking in the car all this while, and that *somebody else* came and wrung her neck?"

"But I can swear—"

"Who would believe you?" he said sadly. "Ah, Jenny, that's the way it is. Don't you see?"

I saw. That was the way it was. My heart had been on my sleeve for all to see, for him to see, a long, long time. No testimony of mine could help him.

"What good can it do if you and I are both dragged into the limelight and dirtied by the newspapers?" he demanded. "We didn't hurt her. But we'll be the first ones suspected. We are set up for it. Perfectly."

"We'd be cleared," I said feebly, "as soon as they find out—"

"And will suspecting us and dirtying us *help* them find out?" he said angrily. "How could it? Suspecting us will only help the one who did do it. By the time they get through with you and me . . ." He shook his head desperately. "I'm not going to let this happen. You were good to listen. You were do-

ing what was kind. You don't deserve to be dragged into something like this. Just because I had to cry on your shoulder—"

"You didn't cry," I murmured.

But I could see ahead now and if I had been the kind to carry on, I would have cried. I could see myself trying to tell the truth, which would sound so feeble and unbelievable beside the powerful motives both of us had to—hurt Celia, who had hurt us.

I thought of my father, who was old and not well. Celia's death would be rough enough on him. How much worse, to have to watch me being suspected of her murder! I felt a pang of terror when I realized that on top of all the rest, I was Celia's heir. And loved the man, as everyone knew, who needed Celia's money so much.

Blair was right. We were set up for it—both of us, together, perfectly.

"Jenny," Blair said, "we are going to have to get out from under."

"I don't see how," I said.

"We've lost—let's see—thirty-nine minutes. If we could account for that time some other way . . ."

"Hurry on to town, you mean?"

"No, we can't make up that much time. And we can't take the chance of speeding. But I've got an idea so crazy . . . Jenny, have you nerve enough to fake an alibi?"

"I guess so."

"I suppose it's wrong—"

"I'm not so sure it would be wrong." My teeth were chattering. "It might be foolish."

"We'll go back if you say so," Blair told me. "I could take it. Don't much care. But I want to get *you* out of this mess. Please let me, Jenny?" he begged. "It will be so damn nasty."

The thing I was thinking now was purely selfish. If we had to go through something "so damn nasty," then never (never, never, never!) could Blair and I be together. "What do you think of those two? Hah!" "Pretty fishy." "What's the answer? He got the money, she got her man. Hah!" I could hear it . . .

The law couldn't *make* us innocent. We would be guilty the moment we got together—or judged guilty by people's tongues. So we would have to stay apart.

I took hold of myself. "If you've got an idea, tell me," I said.

We sat there a few more minutes, while Blair figured it out. That scenic mountain road was not much used at night. We were lucky, and no car came by.

Blair was doing arithmetic. He explained. I understood. We could try.

Finally we went on another mile. High on the bank to our right was a cabin. Blair knew who sometimes lived there. It was a wild and lonely spot, but we could see a light in the windows.

Blair let the car coast silently on the slight downgrade, until we

were well beyond that cabin. Then he stopped the car and I got out.

"It had better be you," Blair whispered, "because everyone thought I was drunk, remember? Can you do this, Jenny?"

"Of course," I said. "Wait till I get my shoes."

"Shoes?" He fumbled around on the seat of the car. "Jenny, we can *use* your shoes," he exclaimed. "Take just this one. Hook the heel in your belt. You are supposed to have been walking, but of course you couldn't walk in those things. Look, I'll throw your other shoe out of the car a couple of miles farther on. You watch out for it. That's going to look good. Look like evidence. Now, don't try to rouse anybody for nine or ten minutes. Can you time it? Use the waiting to beat up your stockings. Maybe your dress. Remember, you have walked you don't know how far. But it's taken you nearly an hour. This is how we make up those lost minutes. Use the phone right away. I know this guy, Frederick, is there, this week-end. There's a light. But if by chance he isn't home, you break a window and get in and use that phone."

"I will. I will. I understand."

"It's risky. If I meet anyone in the next few miles, we'll be in the soup, Jenny." He touched my cheek. "So young and fair . . ." I thought he said.

"We are in the soup," I said impatiently. "Let's do it, Blair. Better to try to get out than just stay there."

His fingertips trailed off my face. The car started and softly crept away.

I paced and stamped and kicked the ground with my stockinged feet. I dragged my organdy along some briary stuff. I tore my stole. I fell on my knees to dirty my skirt. These were mad antics, alone in that wild dark silent spot. All the time I was counting off the minutes. Not thinking about Celia. Not thinking about anything but making his plan work.

Finally, I went limping and panting up the rutted way to the cabin. I beat on the door. The man who opened it was stricken dumb.

"Excuse me for disturbing—" I was really breathless. "Our car is stuck up the road. Could I please use your phone?"

"Of course," he said shrilly, as if I had frightened him out of his wits. "Come in. Come in."

He rolled his eyes at me as I limped in, looked about, and spotted his phone. I called my father's house. "Dad? It's Jenny. Blair and I started home around the mountain and the car broke down. I just don't want you to worry. What time is it now?"

"It's eleven-o-four," said my Dad in gruff precision. "I thought you were going to stay over to Carmen's."

"No, we started home. But I don't know when we'll get in now. Got to call a garage."

"Was it a crackup, Jenny?" Dad was suspicious.

"No, no. I'm perfectly all right, and so is Blair. Something conked out in the motor, that's all. Don't worry."

"Where is Celia?"

"Oh, she stayed," I said carelessly. (I couldn't tell him she was dead. I wasn't supposed to know it. Ah, but he would know all too soon!)

I called an all-night garage.

"Lady, that's a long way around the mountain and it's pretty late."

"It's only a little after eleven," I said tartly, and gratefully. I argued with him, emphasizing the time, insisting that I had left a friend marooned in the car. At last he agreed to send somebody. Then I sagged.

"Sit down," my host said cordially, as if he had now assimilated his surprise. "You look tired. My name, by the way, is Lloyd Frederick."

"I'm Jenny Olcutt. I guess I look outlandish. This costume was for a garden wedding, a long time ago today."

"You look very pretty," he said gallantly. "A bit bedraggled. Haven't you any shoes? How far did you have to walk? Better let me pour you a drink."

He was an extraordinarily handsome man. A small-time actor, Blair had said. No one could have been kinder. He brought me the drink. He also brought a big bowl full of warm water and I stripped off my ruined nylons and put my feet, that I had taken care to bruise, into the warm comfort of it.

Frederick watched with amusement as I plucked the shoe from where it was hanging at my belt.

"You can see that these aren't exactly hiking boots," I said, patting my belt. "Oh, me," I sighed. "I've lost my other shoe."

"Shoe!" He raised an eyebrow at the frivolous contraption. "I thought it was some kind of modernistic corsage. How could you even stand up in such a thing?"

"They are pretty much for sitting down," I laughed. "Still, it's possible." I thrust my damp toes into it and fingered the straps. "Like this. Oh, darn, the other one is lost. And they cost a fortune."

"A fortune? For three cents' worth of whatever that is?" He seemed amused. "There's never any traffic on this road at night. No one is going to run over your other shoe. We'll find it."

He was going to take his car out and bring me to Blair. I knew that Blair had had plenty of time to fake a breakdown, so I didn't stall too long with the footbath. I played my role. I thrust aside the heavy knowledge of Celia's death, and the heavy knowledge that I was telling lies and using this kind man for a purpose he couldn't imagine. I even found it possible to be rather gay and to look at him flirtatiously.

We went outside. I was barefoot. I "forgot" my one shoe.

He went behind the cabin and

backed his car out from a kind of lean-to. I got in. It was a strange ride. For some reason neither of us spoke of anything but my missing shoe. We were obsessed by it. We went on a mile, two miles. No shoe in the road. We went almost three miles.

Then we saw the flames. I screamed. A car was burning, down there, down at the bottom of the mountain slope off to the left. We got out and ran. A strange man stood at the brink. Then I saw Blair lying on the road.

I knelt beside him in panic. His warm hand clung to mine. I could hear the stranger talking rapidly to Mr. Frederick. "Me and a friend was coming around the mountain in his half-truck. Didn't mean to get on this road. Fact, we was lost. We was looking for a turnaround. So we find this fella, stalled in a fancy car. Well, so we manage to turn the truck and we was going to give him a push, see would that start his motor. By golly, that fancy job went right outa control! He pretty near went over with her. Just made it out, as she tipped and went over. Busted his leg, though, or so it looks like. Fella that was with me, *he's* gone back to town in the truck to get an ambulance out here. Better wait on *it,* I'd say. Don't want to move no broken bones. Cheee, look at her burn!"

Only I could hear Blair's whisper. "Jenny, too many shoes. I must have given you *her* shoe."

Celia's shoe!

"They are just alike," I whispered.

"When I found a *pair* of shoes on the car floor . . . didn't know what to do. Couldn't throw one of them out—Jenny, I didn't know which foot! Do you see? Couldn't let you end up with two left shoes. Fatal. Didn't know which one was the 'other' shoe."

"Ssh," I was so close we could have kissed. "Where are my shoes now?"

"In the car. Burning."

"They'll burn fine," I said. "It won't matter. Are you hurt very much?"

"No so bad," he said, his voice low but calm, almost cheerful. "Doesn't anything shake your nerve?" He caught at my shoulder. "Skip all this, Jenny. You'd better tell the truth. Nobody on earth could ever believe . . . So young and fair."

His voice had become too loud. So I kissed him. Afterward, I whispered, "Too late. We have to stick to the story. Don't you talk at all."

"If you get hurt—" he began, and then he fainted.

I rode into town in the ambulance when it came.. All the way I thought about those shoes. Celia's right shoe was in the man's cabin. Both my shoes had burned with Blair's convertible. But I'd said I'd lost one on the road. Well, I would say that it must have been taken away by some animal.

When Blair, still unconscious, had been delivered to the hospital and I was limping wearily through the lobby to call a cab and get home, I ran into the policeman.

"You Miss Jenny Olcutt?" He wore plain clothes, but he was some kind of policeman—I knew it at once. "Had a little trouble?" he asked.

"Well, yes, we did, and I'm—a little bit worn out." I smiled politely.

"I don't know if you've been told." He shifted his weight. "Miss Celia Olcutt. Isn't that your sister?"

"Stepsister," I corrected mechanically.

"She was found dead," he said, abruptly enough to shock me.

It wasn't difficult to look shocked. I was scared.

"Now, I understand there was a quarrel at this party?" So he knew about that.

"Yes, that's why Mr. Meaghan and I left early."

"Pretty drunk, was he?"

"Well, I drove. He fell asleep."

"Left that house out there at ten o'clock? Took the mountain road? Why?"

"I don't know why," I said flatly. Blair and I had not discussed any possible reason. But I saw, now, that my very lack of reason was more convincing.

"Car stalled, you say? So you walked about three miles back to this Frederick's place? Why back?"

"Going ahead was farther and steeper," I explained.

"Why didn't your boy friend do the walking?"

"Well, you see, he had been drinking."

"Yeah," the policeman said. It was convincing. "Now you were at Frederick's place by eleven-o-four?"

"Was I?" I frowned.

"That's when you phoned your father. The garage says you phoned them at eleven-o-eight. That right?"

"I guess so," I said, looking bewildered. (But I was not. He was only doing the arithmetic that Blair and I had planned for him to do.)

"Now, Celia Olcutt," he went on, "she left the party at ten twenty. Must have walked down those long stairs."

"Why?" I burst out. "What for? Was she going to hitchhike on the highway? Or what?" I honestly did not know the answer. My bewilderment was so convincing that I felt a surge of confidence.

"We think she could have had a rendezvous," he said. "She was seen talking on the phone. Or could be she just wandered outside and somebody called to her." He looked sly.

I looked as baffled as I genuinely felt. "*Called* to her?"

"Maybe I better check some figures with you, young lady. Mr. Meaghan's car went a mile down the drive to the bottom of the stairs, then three miles beyond. At maxi-

mum speed on that kind of road at night it would have got to the place where it broke down in, say, seven or eight minutes. After that you walked in your stocking feet three miles up and downgrade in the dark. Superhuman if you did it in say, less than forty-five minutes. So even taking the fastest times, it didn't work out. Celia Olcutt left the house ten twenty, and it must have taken her *some* time to get down to the highway and get killed. Let me see—all you and Meaghan had was between, say, ten twenty five and—"

"What are you talking about?" I said. "Ten twenty-five?"

"I mean if you killed her," he said.

I just stared at him.

"If you did, then you got to tear off four miles on the mountain road and walk back three and get there not long after eleven. It just don't work out."

"You've lost me," I said to him boldly.

"I'm saying that if you really walked back from that breakdown, then you and Blair Meaghan are alibied for the murder of Celia Olcutt."

"I should hope so," I said angrily.

"Now, now," he said in a gentle tone. "I can see you aren't a stupid young lady. You had motives, you know—both of you."

"Did we?" I protested. "Well, how did we get at her? Did we wait around for our victim to 'wander' out?"

"Or you called her out, on the phone," he said soberly. "There's a phone booth in a gas station not too far down the highway."

"But who could have phoned her?" I asked in real perplexity. "Did someone *call* her to the phone? Would *she* answer the phone in Carmen's house?"

He let out a humming sound. I had dented him. "Well, I'll tell you, Miss, I got to go over the ground. And that's my duty. How about coming with me? And talk to this Frederick, too?"

"Now?" I rubbed my eyes.

"I know you're tired. Especially after that long walk." I didn't like the sound of that.

"I might as well," I said. "How could I sleep?"

I went with him. I knew, all the time, that our story hinged on one thing. The body of Celia must have had only one shoe. (Her other shoe was at Frederick's, and supposed to be mine.) But no shoes of mine were lying in the road. Our story lacked that bit. And Celia's missing shoe was potentially dangerous—as soon as my policeman saw it.

Yet the one thing that would really give us away would be if the police were to find any traces of my own two shoes in the burning car. Then Blair and I would be proved liars—we would be prime suspects. Celia's shoe would then become evidence against us.

I went with the policeman because I had to know.

I couldn't ask, but I might find out.

I did. We stopped at the point of the accident and looked down at the ruins of Blair's car. A man in uniform came up to us. "Not a thing left," he said. My policeman checked his speedometer and we drove on.

I breathed a little easier.

It was close to dawn, but Lloyd Frederick was up and about. "Couldn't sleep," he said. "Burning automobiles, broken legs, young woman in distress—too much for *me.*"

He let us in and offered coffee.

My policeman said, "Reason I got to check up on this car breakdown, there's been a murder. Stepsister of *this* Miss Olcutt got strangled to death last night."

"Not Celia Olcutt!" cried Lloyd Frederick.

"You know the lady?" The policeman and I were both suddenly suspicious.

"Of course. I met her in a business way." He went through a gamut of explanations, which added no light. Then my policeman got down to Celia's murder.

"Tell me what happened around here last night. You hear Mr. Meaghan's car go by, for instance? If so, when?"

"I may have heard it," Frederick cocked his handsome head. "Lord, I don't know. I was reading scripts. Paying no attention. I don't even know when Miss Jenny Olcutt got here." He smiled at me.

"You know this Miss Olcutt, too?"

"Never saw her before tonight, to my sorrow," he said gallantly. His eyes sought mine.

"I'm looking for some kind of tricky time business," said my policeman frankly. "This Meaghan had a real dilly of a fight with the murdered girl. He even said he ought to wring her neck. He had plenty of motive. What I need now is his opportunity."

Frederick looked startled. "But wasn't Miss Jenny with him? You don't think she—"

"Oh, I wonder," my policeman said blithely, "because it's my job to wonder. Now, they tell me that shoes were worn at this wedding. But it's a funny thing." My heart stopped. "Where are this Miss Olcutt's shoes? Maybe their condition could tell me something."

He looked shrewd. Didn't he believe that I had walked three miles? Was there a sign on me, something I didn't know about, to tell him that I hadn't?

"This lady's shoes, if that's what you can call them, won't tell you much," Lloyd Frederick said. "I'll show you." He rummaged on a shelf and turned to us with a pair of shoes in his hands. "See? I finally found your other one," he said to me, flashing his smile. "You must have dropped it just after you start-

ed walking to this cabin. You see, officer? She couldn't walk in these. In fact, these are sitting-down shoes, so I am told." He was being very charming.

"*Those* are *shoes!*" my policeman said, staring at them incredulously.

"May I put them on?" I said.

So I put them on. I stood up in the silly things. My feet were swollen and the straps cut into them. But, standing there in *two* shoes, I was safe. Blair was safe. Our story was safe; it would hold up. Who could prove it wasn't true?

I could.

"I guess I'm not Cinderella," I sighed. "I'm the stepsister. These are Celia's shoes. See, they're too small for me!"

"But that's impossible!" cried Frederick.

"Celia had *no* shoes on, did she?" I asked my policeman. "No shoes at all. Well, I can tell you how *one* of them got here. You will have to ask Mr. Frederick about the other one."

"What are you trying to say?" cried Frederick. "What do you mean, these are Celia's shoes? They can't be too small for you. They're exactly the same—"

"That's because they are *both* Celia's," I said patiently.

"That not so! Only the one . . ." Frederick yelled—and when he saw that he had tripped on his own tongue he dove for me. My policeman jumped protectively, before Lloyd Frederick could wring my neck.

I said to Blair in the hospital, "She phoned him."

"Celia was bound he'd have a part in my picture," Blair told me. "He's pure ham. I couldn't do that. I suppose she called to tell him that we'd split up."

"He met her at the bottom of the stairs," I went on. "Probably she got into his car to talk. Probably she had her shoes in her hand—she couldn't have walked down all those steps with them on. He was furious that she'd muffed the deal, and she was in that vicious mood. She made him feel like wringing her neck. And he did. Dumped her out. Hurried home. No wonder I scared him! I must have looked like Celia's ghost, in the same dress."

"And then you left her shoe in the cabin—the shoe I'd picked up next to her body."

"Celia's other shoe must have been in his car," I said. "He found it too late. Maybe he found it when he got the car out for me. That was a strange ride. Shoes on our minds. Both of us."

"Why too late, Jenny?"

"If he'd found it *before* I came, he'd have paid more attention"

Blair twisted in the hospital bed. "I don't see why he didn't just destroy the shoe that he knew was Celia's."

"Instead, he helped our story," I said. "Of course, he believed me—he knew who had killed Celia. He just saw a chance to get rid of Celia's shoe."

"I don't get it."

"Well, I did. After we had gone to the hospital, he must have rushed back to the cabin, took her shoe in, and picked up the one he thought was mine, to compare them. They were mates, a right and a left. They were the same size. Don't you see why he had to do what he did? He hadn't paid close attention to me. He'd seen me put my foot into one of those shoes. But he must have shuffled them, got them mixed up, and didn't know which one *I* had brought to the cabin. Don't you see?—he couldn't be sure *which one to destroy*. But *I'd* know which one I'd put my foot in. He didn't."

"So he cleverly produced both."

"We'd watched the road. No shoe of mine there. He thought it was pretty clever."

"It *was* clever," Blair said.

"Yes, I know."

Blair sighed. "Until you took a notion to lie about the size."

"That wasn't hard," I said. "My feet were all puffed up. So I knew he'd think some store could prove that they really were Celia's shoes. It rattled him. He just blew up."

"You ought to be in the motion picture industry," Blair said. "Anybody who can *think* in the midst of all that trouble and confusion . . ." Then he went on gently. "But he had helped us, Jenny. We were pretty safe."

"No," I said. "Because he was a murderer. Besides, I don't like telling lies." I broke off. "Blair, what are they going to do to us?"

Blair was laughing at me. "You beat all," he teased. "You don't like telling lies and so you told another. Know what I think? You've got the police baffled."

After a while I said, "One thing . . . I'll have Celia's money. So if they don't get around to putting us in jail or anything, do you want a partner?"

Blair sat up as far as he could. "No," he shouted. Then he shouted, "Yes."

"Well, which?" I said.

"I want *you* for a partner all the rest of my life," he said, "as you well know. But not that money!"

"S-sh," I said. "Don't look so wild. There isn't any problem. And we'll make your picture."

Blair said, "I think we will," in a funny voice.

Well, they didn't put us in jail. We'd told a lot of lies. Yet our lies had helped to catch the murderer, so I suppose it was a little confusing to the police.

Anyhow, the real murderer has been caught. No doubt hangs over us now and nothing can keep us apart.

People talk, of course. People say we must be crazy. We are going to make a motion picture, although all we have is the dream. We gave away the money. To a charitable foundation. It buys things for poor needy persons. Especially shoes.

EDITORS' FILE CARD

AUTHOR: **WILLIAM BANKIER**

TITLE: ***What Happened in Act One***

TYPE: A touch of the "supernatural"

LOCALE: New York City

TIME: The Present

COMMENTS: *Agnew Plover was as strange a man as ever drank at the Act One bar. He was a man "possessed"—into his body came the spirits of dead men, both famous and infamous . . .*

COME IN AND TAKE A CHAIR AND watch it all happen, the way I did. Sit right up there at the bar, beside the head of creamy cheddar cheese and the bowl of fist-filling pretzels. Eat as much as you want and have several cold seidels of lowenbrau, the best Munich can brew.

Oh, refreshment, oh, satisfaction, oh, exhilaration! This is New York in the summertime—and anything can happen.

Keep your eye on the door; somebody is about to come in. Not now, but very soon. This is a playback. I am going to rerun it for you the way I saw it happen the first time.

Why are you here? Please share my excuse. You have been sent to New York by the Head Office to study the organizational setup of the main Accounting Department. When you have it all filed and tabulated in your mind, you will go back to the mid-West and install an identical system in the regional office. Time allotted for this project: one month. Actual time required: one week. Expense account: generous in the extreme.

And so, as I did, you have spent several evenings visiting the various tourist attractions—enjoying, for example, the Metropole bar, chuckling at the droll monologue of the guide on the Day Line Cruise around the island, knuckling the glass to arouse the pigmy marmoset in his modest enclosure at the Bronx Zoo. All this done, you have now settled down to some serious drinking.

It is an intoxicating bar. The

warm brown wood and red-leather interior, the dim glow of sepia light always in the semidistance, the slow and hypnotic sweep of the second hand on the illuminated clock—all these are quite enough to make a man forget home and wife and job and other responsibilities . . .

Okay, then: join the rest of the lotus eaters and wait for the arrival of Agnew Plover. By now you are studying the faded photograph hanging over the bar, sipping your beer, and wondering idly who that young man is in the boxing trunks, standing with his arm raised in victory, the blood from his nose and the ugly cut over his eye unable to mask the glow of sheer triumph shining on his face. Could this be the man who now tends bar? Terry O'Biggo, the lard-cheeked, dull-eyed gentleman who smiles with china teeth and corduroy skin as he mops bottle rings from the mahogany?

No matter, for old Terry and the boy boxer have nothing to do with our story beyond the fact that they were there when it happened.

But hush—I can hear a gay step on the walk outside and a creak from the ebony door. This is how it began—the first entrance of Agnew Plover. Bartender, would you please reduce the volume on the Muzak system? I love the way Charlie Parker plays *Everything Happens To Me,* but we must concentrate on the center ring.

Correction. I said a moment ago that this would be the first entrance of Agnew Plover. To be more accurate, I should say that this was his first arrival in my presence, but I was a newcomer and Agnew Plover had been in this bar several times before.

It is a large bar; they call it Act One. The bar itself seems miles long, covering the total length of the west wall except for three feet of doorway leading into the Men's Room.

The rest of the room is occupied by small round tables, none larger than a barrel head. The decor in Act One is limited mainly to bottles —bottles that make people drink. What subtly seductive shapes the glass blowers have contrived, and how suggestively the labels wink and leer, some garish, some sophisticated, some bizarrely European, others as American as Kentucky corn. Whatever your personality, at Act One a bottle beckons.

Wait now. Spring doors flutter, conversation falters. All eyes focus on the door.

Agnew Plover is here.

Disappointed? Well, there he is. Some might call him effeminate, that being invariably the first impression: green corduroy trousers, yellow shirt with tails knotted about the waist, large head capped with yellow hair close-cropped and carelessly combed, ringing his skull like the curls of a childish Nero. And the face of Agnew Plover: eyes, two brown caramels, mouth

protruding in a perpetual pout, chin thrust forward inquisitively.

Queer? I can still see the rowdy who took out his handkerchief and whipped it across Plover's path as he made his grand entrance. With a lightning gesture, Agnew seized the fluttering linen in both hands, reversed their position, and drew the cloth around the hoodlum's throat. Then, with no perceptible effort, he raised the lout off the floor and bore him, legs dragging, to the front entrance where he flung him through the doors and into the street. The thug tried to return and Agnew hit him—not *in* the face, but (and this is the only time I have ever seen it) Agnew Plover hit his man *through* the face and put him flat on the pavement.

No, Agnew Plover is a man—make no mistake about that.

On the first night I saw him, he walked in off 48th Street, waved to several of the Act One habitués with a modest smile, and nodded his head at Terry O'Biggo behind the bar. Terry poured four ounces of straight gin into a glass, dropped a wedge of lemon into it, and carried the glass across the room to Plover's table. Plover drained the glass, then popped the wedge of lemon into his mouth, chewed it and swallowed it, skin and all. Throughout this procedure there was almost complete silence in the place except for the hum of an exhaust fan near the door.

His drink finished, Agnew Plover smiled again, drew a book from his pocket, and calmly began to read. O'Biggo went behind the bar and a dozen conversations chattered back to life. I was soon to learn the reason why this little community took time out whenever they were joined by this curious fellow.

Perhaps half an hour passed. I had three beers and went back to the Men's Room. On my return, I saw Agnew Plover leaning back in his chair, his head slumped forward on his chest, his body swaying back and forth in rhythm with a low crooning.

"The drink seems to have disagreed with our friend," I began.

"Shush," Terry O'Biggo said. "It's the possession. It comes over him every now and then."

"The possession?"

"That's right. The spirit of a dead person enters his body and takes over. It only lasts a short while. We've seen it before."

"I've never seen anything like . . ."

"Well, you're seeing it now. Just hush up and don't disturb him. It could kill him if he's disturbed while he's under the possession. Watch now."

I watched. After a few minutes the convulsive movements stopped and Plover sat up. He seemed to be himself now and yet there was something different about his face—a commanding, imperious expression.

Then he spoke, but not in any

language that I had ever heard before.

"What's he saying?" O'Biggo asked.

A man at the end of the bar said, "It sounds like Polish to me. He asked where the piano is."

For the first time I noticed the upright piano at the far end of the room. The keyboard was covered and it had an air of disuse about it. At the same moment Plover—or whoever now inhabited Plover's body—saw the piano and walked over to it.

Silence came over the bar as he sat down, stared at the instrument for a moment, then began to play. If I live on into the two thousands, I never expect to hear anything like that again. The flow of music from that piano was like the spray off Niagara Falls. It hit us in a million cool drops, but there was muted thunder in its sheer power. I tried to place the composer; it sounded like Chopin though I could not be sure.

It was not a long performance—perhaps five minutes. As the last brilliant chord echoed through the room, Plover lowered his forehead to the backs of his hands. Then he shivered, raised his eyes, turned, and looked at us.

"Did I just play?" he asked.

A chorus of delighted affirmation flowed about him.

"I've never played a note," he said. "I wonder who it was this time?"

"You spoke Polish. You asked for a piano in Polish," said the man at the end of the bar.

I volunteered, "I'm not sure, but the music sounded like Chopin to me. Chopin was Polish."

A murmur of excitement passed through the crowd. Plover stood up, yawned, and stretched his arms.

"It always takes a lot out of him," the bartender whispered to me.

Plover joined us, dropping a bill on the bar. "My tab, please Terence," he said. O'Biggo tried to push the money back to him. "Please Terry," Agnew said, "I'm not an itinerant minstrel. I pay for my drinks."

The bartender made change and Plover went away into the night, leaving a generous tip on the bar. When he had gone, conversation rose in a flurry to a peak of excitement.

"You've seen all this many times?" I asked.

"A few times," Terry corrected me. "See that painting over the bar?"

I glanced up and saw a brilliant orange-and-black poster done roughly in oils. There was no mistaking the posturing figure in the foreground, the rakish top hat, the elongated jaw in profile.

"He began to speak French one night. Lucky we had somebody here could make it out. He asked for paints, so a lady who lives next door ran upstairs and got her oils. He dashed that off in ten minutes."

"So "Toulouse-Lautrec" had been here on 48th Street in the body of this unbelievable man. And unbelievable is the word. I could see him painting, I had heard him play.

"You must consider yourselves lucky," I said, "falling heir to all this free entertainment."

"Oh, it isn't always so pleasant. One night he came up Hitler."

I almost choked on my drink.

"He stood up here by the bar and he almost looked like him. And when he spoke, there was no doubt. He gave us a real harangue, just like in the old newsreels."

"That must have been a treat."

"Like, I said. There was this guy in here that night, Sol Bloom. Drives a cab and comes in here on his free nights. He took offense and threw a punch. It was a glancing blow but Agnew kind of stiffened and his eyes almost came out of his head and he threw up right here on the floor. It was messy for a few minutes."

I shook my head in sympathy and understanding.

"It was after that Agnew told us how dangerous it was for him to be brought out of it sudden-like. He has to be left alone. Like sleepwalking."

My own sleep that night was broken, not by an ambulatory excursion but by visions of a man whose body seemed to act as a living receiver, picking up transmissions from some celestial tower where the spirits of good and evil dwelt—the famous and infamous.

I was unable to visit Act One on the following night owing to an unexpected dinner invitation from the personnel chief of the Head office. But the next night found me at my accustomed spot at the head of the bar. I was half full of ale and overflowing with anticipation when Agnew Plover finally arrived about 11:30.

We were all to be disappointed. Nothing happened that night. Plover merely had two of his gin and lemon specials just like any other barfly. And so, home to bed.

But the following evening was something else again. The procedure was the same: a drink, a short period of reading, then head on chest, then moaning and swaying. When he sat up and faced the expectant room, a frightening change had overtaken his features. His face was pale, his cheeks seemed hollow, and his eyes burned with a feverish fire. Then he spoke. "What place is this?'

A sigh crossed the room. "Ah, you're English-speaking, sir," Terry O'Biggo said somewhat unnecessarily. "My name is Terence O'Biggo. Delighted to welcome you to the Act One bar."

"Poe is my name," Plover said. "Edgar A. Poe." He coughed into his handkerchief. "Have you anything for a man to drink? A brandy? God, I don't feel well."

Made brave by beer, I ventured, "Would you be Edgar Allan Poe, the writer?"

He glanced at me and then away.

"I write some, but I did not realize my fame was widely spread."

The bartender brought a generous glass of brandy to Plover-Poe's table. The man drank it and Terry refilled it from the bottle he had carried with him. The liquor seemed to revive the fellow's spirit for he took his glass to the bar where he sat down beside me.

"So you're familiar with my work. I'm flattered, sir." He smiled at me and raised his glass.

"I've read *The Fall of the House of Usher,*" I said, "and *The Pit and the Pendulum.* And of course, *The Raven.*"

He nodded at each of the titles, sipping his brandy. Then he said, not so much to me as to the room, "I've just finished a story. Perhaps you'd like to hear some of it and I can profit from your reaction."

We chorused our approval.

"Very well," he said. "This story is called *The Murders in the Rue Morgue.*"

I don't know if you have ever read that great classic, but it is a story that lifts the reader to a pinnacle of horror and fascination. Plover now began to deliver a portion of it in a moody recitation so grandly in character with the subject matter of the tale that an audible sigh hissed from the rapt gathering. At the conclusion there was the beginning of applause but Terry raised his hand and said, "Hush . . . don't disturb him."

This time Plover did not resume his own personality in our presence. Instead, he downed his drink, nodded casually to me and O'Biggo, then strolled, as Edgar Allan Poe might have done, out of the bar and into the hustle of 48th Street.

"He left like that," the bartender said, "when he was John Barrymore. That kind seems to favor the dramatic exit."

Three days went by before we saw Plover again. It was Saturday night and the Act One was crowded with the old clientele, all getting a good start on the week-end.

Perhaps only now, in retrospect, does that Saturday evening seem to have had an air of finality about it. Indeed, I was finished with my research at the Head Office, and the end of next week would surely see me back home in the middle West. But this feeling of termination went beyond the boundaries of my own mood—it permeated the whole bar.

Agnew Plover arrived about ten o'clock, and half an hour went by before the possession overtook him. I didn't see it happen. One moment he was glancing around and munching his lemon section; the next time I looked, his head was slumped forward on the bar, and as slow tremors shook his body, a high keening moan arose from the mound of white shirt and yellow hair.

Silence eddied out quickly as everyone in the room concentrated on Plover. They had not long to

wait. Suddenly he sat up, turned his head, and looked slowly around the room. There was something menacing about the strangely altered features and a steely glint of malevolent purpose in his eyes that killed, almost as soon as it was born, the speculative murmur that usually accompanied one of Agnew's periods of possession.

One circuit of the room by his frozen eyes was enough. Plover licked his lips which seemed now thinner and paler than before. With a graceful movement he slipped from the stool and swaggered to the middle of the bar. As he walked, he held his arms stiffly out and a little back from his body, fingers spread wide a few inches from his thighs. His heels clumped a hollow march on the wooden floor.

When he reached the place along the bar where Terry O'Biggo was standing, he stopped and said, "Now, they ain't *nobody* goin' to move a muscle."

A gentleman at the far corner of the room began to snicker and choked it off in mid-breath. Like a jungle cat, Plover spun toward the sound, crouching, knees bent. At the same time he brought his right hand along his trouser leg in a whipping motion and then held the hand extended, the index finger pointing menacingly at the man who had dared to laugh.

"What's so funny, mister?", he said, his voice touched with a slight drawl. "You see anything here to laugh at? 'Cause if you do, I wanna tell you, mister, 'tween these two guns I got seventeen notches. And they is room for plenty more."

Sitting near O'Biggo, I turned my head to the bartender and raised my eyebrows. Terry's face was pale but he frowned and shook his head in warning: Leave him alone.

Now Plover—although this rigid animal was surely not he—turned to O'Biggo and said, "And now you, friend, take off that apron and spread it on the bar."

"Anything you say, mister," Terry replied, slipping out of the white linen and clearing away glasses to make room. "By the way," he added, "who might I have the pleasure of serving?"

A faint smile twisted one corner of Plover's pale mouth. "The name is Bonney," he said. "Most folks know me as Billy the Kid."

This revelation drew a gasp from the customers of Act One, and this time Plover let it pass and fade away.

"All right," he said when the apron was spread, "you'll oblige me, bartender, by puttin' the night's takings in that apron."

Another gasp arose from the room and this time O'Biggo cut it short. "Quiet," he shouted. "I want you all to do exactly as Mr. Bonney here says. Don't nobody try to lay a hand on him or interfere in any way. If anyone needs an explanation, he'll get it later." And with

that he opened the cash register, scooped out its contents, and dumped the money into the apron.

"Bartender, you got sense," Bonney-Plover said. Now he turned and swept the pointing finger in a slow trajectory around the room. "One at a time now," he said, "come on up here and leave your wallets on the pile."

The outcry this time was immediate and prolonged, and spiced with such phrases as, "A joke is a joke," and "Going too far."

Again O'Biggo shut off the uproar. "I told you people to cooperate. I won't have this man disturbed. Just do as he says and nobody will lose a thing."

Well, the unburdening lasted about five minutes. When my neighbor at the bar came back from leaving his wallet he muttered, "I'm just glad that finger isn't loaded."

It was a stimulating little scene and it ended with Billy the Kid gathering up the ends of the apron and leaving the bar slowly, walking backward, his cocked finger aimed here and there, and carrying our wealth with him like a sack of laundry.

After the doors banged shut behind him, there was silence for fully half a minute, broken finally by the voice of Terence O'Biggo who said, "He'll be back soon."

So we waited. And we talked.

Midnight came and went, and conversation rose and fell away. Terry refused to call the police. "I'll not cause trouble for my good friend Agnew," he said.

We were all back in the Act One by opening time Sunday afternoon. And there the truth awaited us. When he had come to open up, Terry had found a well wrapped parcel jammed in front of the doors. Inside were all our wallets, our papers, our snapshots, our drivers' licenses.

But our money? Not a nickel of it.

We compared notes, padding a little for the sake of pride. It looked as if Agnew Plover had got away with about $3500 in cash.

In a sense, none of us felt too bad. After all, it was a unique experience, one to talk about all our lives. And we *had* been treated to some rare entertainment.

As for me, I finally understood the true meaning of "possession." It was not so much the entering and inhabiting of a living body by spirits from the past. No, indeed. In this case it was the expert, professional way in which Agnew Plover, conman par excellence, had "had" the whole crowd of us, had us and owned us for almost a month back in that hot New York August a couple of years ago.

EDITORS' FILE CARD

AUTHOR: **MICHAEL FESSIER**

TITLE: ***To Die at Midnight***

TYPE: Detective Story

LOCALE: United States

TIME: The Present

COMMENTS: *A prison story in which the warden, convinced that one of his prisoners is innocent, becomes the detective . . .*

GROVER DOANE sat hunched over his scarred mahogany desk, glancing apprehensively at the small clock in front of him. The electrically-powered clock was marking time, not with a friendly ticking, but with a silent, deadly efficiency. Two dainty, golden hands had brushed past the numerals marking the tenth hour since noon and were now progressing noiselessly and irresistibly toward midnight—at which time Daniel Harson, convicted murderer, would die.

Grover Doane was warden of State's Prison. The occasional obligation of putting a fellow man to death was part of Grover's job. He wanted to believe that it was society and not himself who would be responsible for this night's killing, but his logical mind, reviewing past events, denied him this consolation.

Grover no longer considered society responsible for the things he did as warden of State's Prison. He was inextricably a part of society and he accepted the fact that what people do collectively in the name of society they are responsible for individually. Officiating at an execution, he could not escape into the anonymity of the masses; he was the individual personally responsible for taking another's life. And he was obsessed by the fear that he might make a mistake and put an innocent man to death.

The Harson execution, scheduled for midnight, was that mistake, he felt.

Daniel Harson had been convicted by a fair and impartial jury;

the conviction had been sustained by the appellate courts. Already the governor had granted one stay of execution and was considering a second. At any moment the phone would ring, and Grover would learn the governor's decision. If it proved to be as he expected, Grover felt that for this, too, he would be responsible.

As warden of State's Prison, Grover had instituted many reforms. He had been criticized by some citizens who felt that a warden's sole duty is to make his prisoners as uncomfortable as possible, and recently there had been widespread condemnation of the prison.

A small group of incorrigible inmates had vented long-smoldering hatreds in a brief but murderous knife fight. Three convicts were killed, one guard was wounded, and a fourth convict so severely slashed that his death was expected momentarily. During the excitement a prisoner had gone over the wall and had subsequently been shot to death by a posse of irate citizens.

Newspapers and politicians unfriendly to Governor Borden were using the affair to discredit the entire administration. Countenanced by a weak and venal governor, they said, Grover Doane had made a country club of State's Prison. His criminal neglect of discipline had resulted in an orgy of bloodshed and would lead to further outrages unless drastic steps were taken.

The warden's resignation or dismissal was demanded, but the heavy guns were aimed against Governor Borden. The fact that the governor had granted one stay of execution to Daniel Harson was further example of the administration's mollycoddling of criminals. With election time a few weeks off, Grover knew that another stay of execution for Daniel Harson might very well mean the end of Governor Borden's political career.

The phone rang and Grover lifted the receiver. "Warden Doane speaking."

"Borden!" said a crisp voice. "I know how you feel about this thing, Grover, but I simply can't do it. You understand that, don't you?"

"Yes," said Grover wearily. "I understand. That riot. I suppose they're right. I wasn't on the job. Perhaps if I were to resign, Bill—"

"Nonsense! Any jackass knows that when you herd a bunch of criminals together there's bound to be trouble. I'm sticking by you. Anyway, the newspapers haven't scared me into anything. But I'm denying the stay of execution simply because there isn't any reason to grant it."

"But the man's innocent. I know I can't prove it, Bill, but I know he's innocent. Give me one more chance, Bill—something's bound to turn up. Something—"

"No!" snapped the governor. "That's the end of it. And don't try

calling me again tonight. As a matter of fact, I'm going to make sure you can't. I'm leaving my home now and I'm going so far you won't be able to reach me with a bloodhound. Good night!"

Grover slowly placed the phone in its cradle and glanced at the clock. The golden hands were creeping toward eleven o'clock.

He tried to shake off the feeling of guilt. After all, he told himself, he had no valid, tangible reason to believe in Harson's innocence. Harson had entered the small town of Kentville with a sick wife, an infant son, and no money. A once-wealthy old woman, Kate Ransome, had befriended him, allowed him to stay in the guest house in the rear of her large but dilapidated home.

He had rewarded her, the state contended, by entering her bedroom late one night and beating her to death with a carpenter's hammer, which admittedly belonged to him. Police, summoned by neighbors, had found him in the dying woman's room, wild-eyed, half drunk, splattered with blood and clutching the lethal weapon in his hand. The motive for the crime had been established as robbery. Kate Ransome had erroneously been reputed to have a hoard of money.

Harson's defense had been pitifully weak and unbelievable. He had entered Kate's house, he said, to borrow some money so that he could get to a job in a neighboring state. He had been drinking a little, to celebrate, and was confused at the time—which is why he had gone to Kate's house so late.

When he entered the house, he had testified, he heard moans. He went upstairs, to find Kate Ransome lying on the floor in a pool of blood. He had picked her up and placed her on the bed. The hammer he'd recognized as his own, but he didn't know why he'd picked it up.

He wasn't very clear about other events. He admitted that he had fought strenuously with the police and that he had attempted to flee from them. He supposed, he said, it was because he was afraid. Not afraid of being punished for the crime. Just afraid.

Grover knew the testimony almost by heart. He had read a copy of the trial transcript over and over and in it he had found no reason to suppose that Harson was innocent of the murder. He had granted an interview to Mrs. Harson—a frail, delicately beautiful girl of nineteen—and her grief and her utter belief in her husband's innocence touched him.

But it was Daniel Harson himself who made the warden believe he was innocent. Grover had interviewed many convicted men. Some blustered defiantly, others calmly argued their cases with the skill of attorneys. Still others confined their statements to, "I was framed. . . . They can't hang *me*." Each one of

them was secretly convinced that somehow he alone among the other condemned men would escape the noose.

Harson, on the other hand, accepted his execution as inevitable.

"You're going to kill me," he told Grover, his mild brown eyes filled with the awful certainty of death. "For something I didn't do. You're going to take me away from my family—from Evvie and Danny. Evvie was the only good thing that'd ever happened to me. Then Danny came along and I figured no matter how many tough breaks I got, I was the luckiest man in the world. Evvie and I were crazy in love and we wanted Danny and we got him and I started to make plans for him right off the bat. We were going hunting together and fishing together and I was going to teach him how to play baseball and he was going to school and he was going to be a great man. I had everything figured down to the last detail."

He faced Grover, his lean frame shaken with emotion. "Damn it, Warden," he said, "do you think there was enough money in the world to make me risk giving up those plans for?"

Grover said, "I'll do everything I can."

"Sure," said Harson hopelessly. "You'll hang me. Danny and me won't catch those fish and we won't play no baseball and God knows what'll happen to him after his father's hung." Once more a flicker of spirit came into his eyes. "Some day," he said, "you'll find out what you did and it'll be too late. I wonder what'll happen to *you*."

Since that interview Grover's belief in Harson's innocence had persisted, and he had kept his promise. He'd done everything possible for the man, even using his own money to finance a last, futile appeal on Harson's behalf . . .

There was a knock on the office door, and Troy Walker, deputy warden, came in. For some reason Grover had never liked Troy.

"Cal Yancey, that con that got stabbed in the riot, wants to see you," said Troy. "The doc says he's gonna croak any minute now."

Grover rose from his chair—a huge, shaggy man who seemed unbearably weary. "What does Cal want?"

"Maybe he wants you to hold his hand while he croaks," said Troy. "Maybe he wants to confess his sins. Or tell you who stuck that shiv in him. They all turn rat sooner or later."

The footsteps of the two men echoed hollowly down the concrete corridor. Behind the bars the lights were out, but no one slept. Inarticulate sounds of hatred and fear and despair could be head. The prisoners thought that Grover was walking toward the execution chamber. They always behaved this way before a hanging.

Grover and Troy entered the prison hospital ward and the doctor led them to a cot on which lay a once powerful man whose small black eyes gleamed hatefully.

"Doc says I'm dying," he gasped. "I wouldn't believe no prison doc on a stack of Bibles, but this time he ain't lying. I am dying. I know it."

"Who stabbed you, Cal?" Grover asked. "Who was behind that riot in the yard?"

"Go to hell," Cal said, "I didn't send for you for that. It's about that kid—that Harson kid."

"What about Harson?" said Grover sharply.

"Don't think I'd of told you if I didn't know I was dying," said Cal. "I'd of let you hang him without batting an eye if it was between him and me. But now it ain't gonna cost me nothing. Harson didn't kill that old lady. I killed her."

Troy snorted disgustedly. "These apes'll do it every time. They're gonna croak anyway and they haven't got anything to lose—"

"Shut up!" Grover said. He bent over the dying man and spoke with trembling urgency. "Why'd you kill her?" he demanded, "What was the town? What'd you do it with?"

"Kentville." Cal's voice began to weaken to a whisper. "With a hammer I found in back. I'd sold a crop of 'taters and—" Some fierce anger forced him to lift his head for a moment and then he groaned and his head fell back onto the pillow. "—I didn't get enough to pay for the hauling. I was in a bar and I heard 'em say the old lady had a lotta cash hid away—"

His voice stopped suddenly. His eyes closed and his body seemed to sink into the mattress and grow smaller. The doctor leaned over him.

"Dead?" Grover asked.

"Not yet," said the doctor. "But it's only a matter of minutes."

The appearance of weariness left Grover. He moved swiftly from the room and raced down the corridor toward his office. Troy did not catch up with the warden until Grover was in his office, dialing the number of his private secretary.

"Jim," he said tensely as a sleepy voice finally came over the wire. "Jim, I want you to find the governor. I know he won't be home, but you know the places he usually goes to when he wants to hide out. Phone every place you can think of. Tell him to get in touch with me immediately. Another man has confessed to the murder of Kate Ransome!"

"You ain't gonna fall for that old dodge, are you?" Troy stared in amazement at his chief. "Hell, Cal was just having his last joke on you. He's just a hillbilly farmer that killed another guy in a fight over a fat hog and got a manslaughter rap. I'll bet he ain't never been in Kentville. He read that stuff about the hammer in the papers."

"Maybe so," said Grover, "But it'll give the governor an excuse for a stay of execution."

"If the governor's sap enough to fall for it," admitted Troy. "And if he is, nothing'll come of the whole thing and the newspapers'll make damn fools of us all and—"

The phone rang. Grover snatched it up.

"Governor?" he asked. "This you, Bill?"

"This is Aimes," said the voice of the prison physician. "I called to tell you that Cal Yancey just died."

"Thanks," Grover said. "Look, I want this line held open. I want—"

"Before he died," the doctor said, "he momentarily regained consciousness, which isn't unusual. He seemed to think it highly important that Kate Ransome's bedroom was papered with a horseshoe design. I thought you might be interested."

"I am interested," said Grover.

He replaced the receiver and faced Troy. "Cal's been in Mrs. Ransome's bedroom, all right," he said. "He's identified the wallpaper. Horseshoe design."

"God almighty!" exclaimed Troy. "Horseshoes? How do you know he told the truth? Boy! Old Lady Ransome had horseshoes on her wall paper. That's a good one!"

"It's perfect," Grover snapped. "Before he died Colonel Ransome made and lost a fortune with his racing stable. Why shouldn't he have horseshoes on the wall paper?"

"Five'll get you ten if Cal Yancey ain't a damn' liar, living or dead," said Troy. "And anyway what're you gonna do about it? You only got a half hour."

Grover glanced at the clock and the feeling of elation went from him. What could he do?

"Operator," he said into the phone, "get me the information operator at Kentville. Rush it, please."

As he waited for the connection his hands fished frantically through the newspaper clippings on the Harson case until he found the right one.

"Operator," he said as a new voice came onto the line, "I want to speak with anyone in the home of Kate Ransome at 863 North Fairview Lane."

He waited an intolerable moment, watching the golden hands of the clock start their silent progression toward the hour of midnight.

"I'm sorry, sir," came the impersonal voice, "but we have no Kate Ransome listed."

"I know you haven't," said Grover. She's dead. But connect me with whoever *is* living at that address."

"Unless you have the name of the party you wish to speak to, I am not allowed to give you the number."

"Forget your rules," Grover roared. "This is Grover Doane, the warden at State's Prison. It's a matter of life or death. Will you please connect me?"

"Just a minute," said the operator, "I'll have to ask the supervisor."

Grover fumed during the ensuing silence. Troy grinned maliciously.

"How do you know anybody's living there now?" he asked.

Grover scowled. "There's *got* to be somebody there!"

"You party," the operator said suddenly, "is J. P. Pierson and the number is 8492-W. I'll ring your party, sir."

A harsh, grating noise came through the receiver and then the girl's infuriatingly calm voice. "Sorry, sir, the line's busy."

"Break up the conversation then," commanded Grover. "And don't argue, damn it! Put me through!"

"Well, really," said the operator and then, "I'll take a chance—damn it!"

While the operator carried on a brief argument with whoever was speaking on the party line, Grover watched the clock hands reach 11:35.

"Here's your party, sir," said the operator.

Almost immediately a dry, nasal female voice came through. "Eh?" it said, "Hello."

"Is this Mrs. Pierson?" asked Grover.

"Eh?" said the voice and Grover realized that he was speaking to a very old woman. "Eh? No, this isn't Mrs. Pierson. This is Millie, the baby sitter. Mrs. Pierson's gone over to the Holloways.' "

"It doesn't matter who it is," said Grover urgently. "Listen to me, Millie. I'm the warden of State's Prison. Something terribly important depends on this. What kind of paper is on the walls of the left, front bedroom? I mean the design. Is it horseshoes?"

"Eh?" came Millie's cracked voice. "What a question! How would I know about the bedroom mister? I haven't been up there. The baby's crib is here in the living room. Why do you want to know about the wallpaper for anyway?"

"Never mind that," snapped Grover. "Just you run upstairs and take a look. Hurry!"

"Well, I never," came Millie's indignant voice. "Telling an old body like me to run upstairs to look at wallpaper. What's ailing you, mister?"

"Listen, Millie," said Grover desperately, "there's a man here who's going to be hanged unless you find out about that wallpaper. Don't ask questions, Millie. Just do what I say."

"Sounds crazy," said Millie, "but I guess I can."

Grover gripped the phone with sweaty, straining fingers and watched as the hands of the clock touched the numerals marking 11:40. Troy came over and placed a ten-dollar bill on the desk.

"Five'll get you ten there isn't any horseshoes," he said. "Wanna bet?"

Grover swept the money off the

desk and stared at Troy. "Now I know why I never liked you, Troy," he said.

"Really now?" asked Troy insolently. "I never knew you didn't like me. My, my. That's gonna put a different complexion on things. You're gonna need all the friends you can get from now on."

"You've got a face like a weasel," said Grover. "You've got a blood lust like a weasel. You *like* hangings."

"I don't like murderers," said Troy complacently. "I don't hold with pampering crooks, like the papers say you do. I'm gonna tell the papers they're right. I'm gonna—"

Grover struck savagely at Troy's face to silence him as he heard footsteps at the other end of the wire. Then there was the wheezing sound of the old woman's laboring voice.

"You'll be the death of me," gasped Millie.

"What about the wallpaper?"

"Don't shout," said Millie indignantly. "Heavens! I was trying to tell you. The wallpaper's white, with little pink roses. Goodbye."

"Wait a minute, Millie. Don't hang up!"

Troy guessed the news by Grover's expression.

"No horseshoes, eh?" he cackled. "Too bad you ain't a betting man—I coulda used that five bucks."

"Now what, mister?" came Millie's complaining voice.

Grover was recovering from the numbing shock of Millie's information. The wallpaper in the room at the time of Kate Ransome's murder must have been spotted with blood. Therefore, before the house had been rented, the agents might have had it repapered. There was a chance that the new paper had been pasted on over the old.

"Millie," he said urgently, "you've got to do me one more favor. Get a knife. Go up and cut off a piece of wallpaper. See if there isn't another layer of paper beneath it. If that other layer has horseshoes on it, you will save a life, Millie."

"Heavens!" gasped Millie. "You make it sound all-fired important. But I just can't go around cutting up other people's property like that. What'll Mrs. Pierson think?"

"She'll think you're a great and noble and smart woman," said Grover. "She'll thank you. Besides, I'll pay for everything. Hurry, Millie. Please hurry!"

"Well—if you insist," said Millie.

"Boy!" said Troy. "You're sure a stubborn cuss, ain't you? There won't be no horseshoes on that other wallpaper. But if there is, what're you gonna do about it? You can't call off no execution without the governor's say-so. You ain't got the authority."

"Get on the other line," Grover commanded. "Get Jim. Find out if he's traced the governor." As Troy hesitated Grover clenched his huge

fists. "Hop to it!" he roared, "or I'll beat your brains out!"

Troy mumbled something but he picked up the other telephone.

Grover glanced fearfully at the clock. It was now seventeen minutes until midnight. Behind him he heard Troy muttering into the phone and the click of the receiver.

"Jim ain't found any trace of the governor," Troy announced with satisfaction. "The governor's wise to you. He ain't gonna stick his neck out any more for you."

Grover existed in two dimensions of time during the next few minutes. It seemed a century before he heard the returning footsteps of Millie and yet, during that interval, the golden hands had seemed to fly over the surface of the clock.

It was six minutes to midnight when Grover heard Millie's panting voice.

"Well, mister," said Millie, "I hope you're satisfied now. The baby's crying his lungs out and Mrs. Pierson'll be fit to be tied and they's only *one* wallpaper in that room and it ain't horseshoes—it's white with little pink roses."

With that Millie hung up and the line was dead. Grover turned slowly from the desk as a captain of guards came running in.

"They're waiting for you, Warden," he said. "You've just got time to make it." He stared more closely at Grover. "You sick?"

"He ain't got the stomach for his job," said Troy. "He don't like to see murderers get what's coming to 'em. But, if he wants, I'll do it. I got the authority as deputy warden."

"Alex," Grover said to the captain, "You plug a line into the execution chamber. And stand by these phones. If word comes from the governor—"

"Which it won't," said Troy. "Come on, can't keep Harson waiting . . ."

Grover stood apart from the others in the execution chamber, facing the gallows. Along the four walls of the huge room stood the newspaper reporters and those citizens who had managed witnesses' passes to the spectacle. The group started nervously as the silence was shattered by the abrupt opening of a door at the far end of the room.

A black-robed priest entered and headed for the thirteen steps leading to the gallows. Behind him came two guards and each held the sagging body of Daniel Harson by an elbow. The three followed the priest up the steps.

Harson was dressed in blue trousers, white shirt, and gray bedroom slippers. The slippers were bound to his feet with friction tape to prevent him from kicking them off while dangling from the rope beneath the gallows.

As Harson staggered up the stairway it seemed to the warden that, for an instant, the frightened, hopeless eyes of the condemned

man met his and that the blue lips silently formed the words: *"You* are doing this to me."

And the warden thought, "He's alive. He's breathing. He can see us who are about to watch him die. Yet, in a minute, he will be hanging before us with his neck broken and the life gone out of him. We're going to kill him. *I'm* going to."

The two guards dragged Harson to the trap. A third guard stepped forward. Swiftly and efficiently, the guards completed their task. One drew a black hood over Harson's face. A split second later the other placed the noose over the hood and around Harson's neck.

It was all over in a twinkling. The guards now were standing, staring curiously at Grover. The executioner stood quietly, waiting for the warden to raise his hand as a signal to throw the lever which would spring the trap and put an end to Harson's ordeal.

And abruptly Grover heard himself shouting, "Hold it! Stop it! Take him away from there!"

There was a tense, hushed moment during which all eyes turned to the warden. Troy rushed over and shook the warden roughly.

"Are you crazy?" he demanded. "You ain't got the authority to stop an execution. It ain't never been done!"

Troy turned from Grover and shouted up to the guards. "The warden's out of his mind. Go ahead with the execution!"

Grover drove his right fist into Troy's jaw.

"I'm still warden and I'm running this prison," he told the guards. "The execution is off. Take that man to his cell."

Harson gazed unbelievingly at the warden, then collapsed into the arms of the guard. They carried him off and the Latin which the priest now read sounded like a paean of triumph.

Reporters surrounded Grover, demanding to know by whose authority he had halted the execution.

"No comment," Grover told them.

He shouldered his way through the crowd and walked alone out of the execution chamber.

The next day, the newspapers hysterically screamed the unprecedented news. They had the whole story. Troy Walker had told the reporters of Cal Yancey's deathbed confession, and of how this confession had been proved false by the warden himself. And yet the warden had cheated justice and prevented the execution of a convicted murderer.

Why? They asked.

Governor Borden sat with Grover in the prison office and repeated the question.

"For God's sakes, Grover, why did you do this to me? If you, yourself, hadn't proved that Yancey lied, I might have countenanced your action, as illegal, as criminal,

as stupid as it was. But not this, Grover. What good did you do? I'll have to demand your resignation and appoint another warden. Tonight Harson will be hanged. All you've done is to prolong the agony."

"I couldn't kill an innocent man," Grover said. "I know I didn't have the right to stop the execution but I had the power to do it." He placed his head on his huge hands. "I'm sorry I interfered," he said. "You're right. All I did was to prolong the boy's agony."

A guard came in to announce that the anteroom was filled with reporters, demanding a statement from the governor.

"Tell them to wait a minute," said the governor. He turned to Grover. "I hate to do it," he said, "but I'm going to have to throw you to the wolves. I'm not going to mince any words. I'm going to tear the hide off you."

The phone rang and Grover picked it up. "Warden speaking." A look of dazed incredulity crossed his face. "Get on the extension."

Governor Borden lifted the receiver of the extension phone.

"Say that again, and slowly, will you, Millie?" Grover said.

"It's like I said," came the old woman's voice. "I read the papers and got to thinking and then I remembered that when I was younger and didn't know any better I used to steam my sister's letters open. So I got to studying that piece of wallpaper I took home from the Pierson's and it seemed kinda thick and it came to me that maybe two pieces of wallpaper were stuck together. So I steamed the piece of wallpaper and it came apart and there was another piece that'd been stuck to it and the other piece had a horseshoe design and now I hope you're happy, mister."

"I am!" Grover grinned. "Very happy! Bless you, Millie."

He replaced the receiver in its cradle and faced the other man. The governor tried to speak, but no words came. He leaped to his feet, crossed the room, and threw open the door.

"So you want a statement, do you?" he said to the gathered newspapermen. "Well, we'll give you a statement. Come on in! Grover's sure as hell got a statement for you!"

The reporters crowded around the desk, waiting for Grover to speak.

"Danny," said Grover, after clearing his throat several times, "is going to fish and hunt with his father. And I'll bet he'll be the damndest ball player ever was!"

Much of what he said didn't make sense for a while, but after he detailed the whole story up to and including Millie's phone call, things were a lot clearer.

TALE OF THE PRETERNATURAL

"It's all gray and nasty-looking like a small elephant and it's bigger than it was in the morning and I'm scared . . ." Finish this story—and we guarantee you'll never completely forget it.

NOBODY WOULD BELIEVE IT

by WILLIAM E. BARRETT

HIS NAME WAS BOB ROBSON. HE was twenty-five and he had a wife named Millicent whom everyone called Millie. He was a chemical engineer. In the modern world, two words are tops: chemistry and engineering. He had both of the words and they were supposed to be keys that opened treasure chests and the doors to castles on a new frontier.

Actually, all that they had opened for him was a bullpen office that he shared with three other junior engineers at the Kim plant. A junior engineer was so low on the Kim totem pole that his face was below ground. Bob Robson had a mediocre house in a new mediocre suburb and he was a happy young man.

One element in the Robson formula for happiness was a basement laboratory: an odorous room with a work table, retorts, test tubes, scales, a variety of bottles, a clutter of miscellaneous objects, and a half oil drum that he used as a trash bucket. The other element was Millie: slim and dark, a junior wife who was still a bit unsure in her job but somebody exciting to have around.

But the two elements were incompatible and their molecules wouldn't unite to form something new and beautiful. Millie hated the basement lab and she swore that the lab hated her.

"It loathes me," she said. "I can feel it sneer when I enter it. It's the only dirty place in my house and I can't do anything with it."

"You're not supposed to do anything with it and you mustn't let your imagination overpower you. It isn't scientific. The lab cannot loathe anybody and it doesn't sneer."

"It does. Some day it is going to explode and blow me up, just for spite. All those smelly chemicals!"

"They won't explode. You know that."

Bob always tried to end such passages of arms on a reassuring note, even if it was often the same reassuring note, made necessary by the failure of his last reassurance. The lab was the only real source of argument that he had with Millie. They were very much in love and they got along. But he wasn't prepared for the phone call at the office on a

Monday afternoon in spring at 4:05. Millie's agitated voice came over the wire.

"Bob, you've got to come right home and tell me what to do. I'm scared."

"About what?"

"That stuff in the laboratory. In the can. It's swelling."

He straightened in his chair. "What do you mean, swelling?"

"It's all gray and nasty-looking like a small elephant and it's bigger than it was in the morning and I'm scared of it."

"You're imagining again. There's nothing like that in the can."

"There is."

"Okay." He sighed. "I'll come right home."

He had to get the approval of two men before he could leave the building in advance of the regular 4:30 quitting time. When they had reluctantly approved his leaving, it was already 4:30. He didn't make fast time driving home in the rush hour traffic but he tried.

Millie was sitting on the single front step of their dream house. She didn't jump up and kiss him as she usually did. Her small mouth was set firmly.

"Either it goes or I go," she said. "I won't stay in the house with it."

"With what?"

"See for yourself!"

She acted as though she intended to stay where she was and she actually gave him a head start, but she was right behind him when he opened the lab door and switched on the light. He stared at the mess in his waste bucket.

Millie hadn't exaggerated this time. There was a grayish mass, dirty and mottled, that filled the can to the brim and slightly overflowed it. There hadn't been anything like that in the can the last time he had looked, only the usual junk that one throws in such a can.

"It's bigger," Millie said. "It was small this morning."

He bent over the can. He could see nothing but the gray mass. It was firm to his touch, a clammy, repellent batch of—of something.

"It couldn't be bigger,'he said.

"It is."

He looked at Millie suspiciously. Was this a practical joke? A maneuver in her war against the lab? Her eyes met his and there was fright in them. Millie wasn't that much of an actress.

"What is it, Bob?" she whispered.

He couldn't say that he didn't know. He was an engineer and engineers were supposed to have answers for things like this. He was an amateur chemist and this was his private workshop. He couldn't afford to be publicly baffled by anything that happened in it, not even if Millie was the only public involved.

He poked tentatively at the mass. It had less give than an old auto tire.

"I'll analyze it after supper," he said.

He was boasting, or at best stalling for time. He wasn't equipped to analyze anything like this and besides, that wasn't his field. He dealt, in a very humble role, with the application of chemical knowledge, not in research.

"It won't explode?"

"No. Of course not."

"If you don't know what it is, how do you know that it won't explode?"

Women, he had discovered in the short span of his married life, were never good at answers but they had a devastating way with questions.

"I know what it isn't," he said with dignity. "It isn't an explosive."

He was merely reassuring her again and, as usual, unsuccessfully. Millie sat on the edge of her chair during supper and there was little conversation. She had a listening expression on her face, straining to hear an explosion before it happened so that she could be prepared. The meal was less than festive and Bob returned to the basement without helping with the dishes.

"I'd rather have you get that thing out of here," Millie said.

The thing was still sprawled in the can and it seemed to have grown slightly larger but that, Bob assured himself, was just his imagination. It looked like a headless, two-tentacle octopus made of reclaimed rubber. The tentacles hung over the edge of the can like two short arms.

"What the hell is it?"

Bob poked tentatively once more at the mottled hide but poking didn't tell him anything. He lifted it and it lifted easily—it was much lighter than it looked; about the weight of the usual assorted debris, which was a frightening thought to a student of chemistry. There was nothing under the thing in the can, not a trace of anything; it was even cleaner than usual.

"The trash has all been absorbed or transformed into this substance," Bob said. "And that's impossible."

He put the thing back and lighted a cigarette, trying to concentrate on a list of the assorted stuff that had gone into the can in the past few days. As the list grew, the existence of the cohesive mass became more fantastic. He decided that he needed help, the two heads that are better than one. He ran hurriedly through the names of engineers whom he knew at the plant, associates or men senior to him. There was, of course, no one junior to him. He mentally crossed out each name as he thought of it.

Most engineers were rigidly respectable in their thinking. They thought by rules. There weren't any rules for a thing like this "octopus." It was the least scientific thing that Bob Robson had ever seen. It was embarrassing. He could not afford to associate himself with it in the presence of other engineers until he could explain it.

He ended up by calling Joe

Howser who lived in a duplicate of this house on the next street. Joe had a typewriter and a desk in his basement instead of a lab. He was writing a play. Joe was in the public relations department of the plant and nothing was less orderly than public relations. Joe had a mind like the lab trash can: everything went into it and almost anything could come out. He wouldn't understand this problem but he wouldn't be astonished at it, either; which was, perhaps, the sane approach.

Joe came over within five minutes. He was short, a bit overweight, bouncy—in contrast to Bob who was tall, thin, deliberative. Bob showed him the thing in the can and told him all that he knew about it.

"Millie says that it was smaller this morning, that it has grown," he concluded.

Joe looked bug-eyed, but he usually did. He had pale eyebrows. "It couldn't, could it?" he said. "I mean, it couldn't *grow*."

"No. Positively not. But it couldn't be here at all, so whether it grows or not isn't important."

"Look!" Joe said. "Is this a joke?"

"No. It certainly isn't a joke."

"And you aren't drunk or anything?"

"No."

"Well, if I were you, I'd forget it. Throw this junk away! You know how they are at the plant."

"I know a lot of ways they are. What were you thinking about?"

"Conservatism. They're sensitive about this stuff that we're making for space exploration. The public doesn't dig high altitude plastics and radiation resistant products and all that jazz. The brass doesn't want any publicity that will start a lot of stupid jerks making jokes."

"This problem of mine hasn't got anything to do with the plant," Bob said patiently. "I don't work with plastics or fibers down here. All that I do in this lab is play around with a few fungicides and herbicides. Kind of hobby. I try to find new ways to kill weeds and bugs in my own garden. That's all."

"And that's how you got this?"

Joe gestured to the can. Bob was beginning to regret that he had brought him into this affair. Ignorance could be just as deadly as knowledge. An engineer would resent the illogical presence of the unexplainable but a public relations man woud insist upon some stupid explanation.

"I don't know how I got this, Joe," he said. "All I can do is tell you what was in the can. There was a lot of scratch paper and about half a sack of potato chips that I let lie around, and a lot of cigarette butts from my ashtrays, and part of a cheese sandwich that I was eating one night, and most of a can of beer that I knocked over and—"

"Edna wouldn't stand for me keeping a sloppy shop like you do," Joe said.

"Millie doesn't stand for it, either. It sort of happens. Anyway, there was some used tinfoil and some Kleenex and a couple of cleaning rags and some weeds that I'd killed with 2,4D and with a preparation of my own."

"What's 2,4D?"

"Dichlorophenoxyacetic Acid."

Joe blinked. "Never mind. Let's stick to the nickname. What is the stuff?"

"It's a synthetic hormone, a growth stimulator. Weeds grow themselves to death, overconsuming their own food supply."

"Ah! There's your answer." Joe Howser visibly relaxed. He seated himself in a straight chair, rocked back, and lighted a cigarette. "That hormone stuff just stimulated everything in the can and it all grew together."

"You can't stimulate growth in inorganic matter with hormones," Bob said curtly.

He was regretting more than ever his folly in asking Joe to come over. He stared moodily at the gray mass. There were times when two heads were not better than one. Some heads had minus signs in front of them and they cancelled other heads out.

"Look!" Joe said. "You've got to get rid of that thing. Telling anybody down at Kim Chemical a screwy story like the one you just told me would get you fired. I don't care if you can prove it by showing them this stuff. Something made accidentally out of garbage isn't going to make a favorable impression. You know that."

"Many great discoveries have been accidents. The Greeks discovered how to make glass when some fool dropped soda in a fire on the sand. Pasteur discovered that microbes fight microbes when he spoiled a mixture during an experiment and let it lie around like that can of mine."

"Okay. Those things made sense. This lump you've got doesn't make any sense at all. Down at Kim Chemical they'd act about it just as they would if I came in and told them that a man from outer space got out of a flying saucer and handed me an order for one of our pressure suits. Even if I brought the little green man with me, I'd get fired."

There was a patter of tiny high heels on the stairs and Bob turned at bay, standing so that his body concealed the can. Millie was coming down and she wasn't alone. After Joe Howser, the one thing that he didn't need was the feminine point of view.

Millie opened the door and Beulah Cumshaw entered the lab with her. Beulah was married to the biggest phoney in the subdivision and she knew everything; a blocky, blonde girl with a protruding face.

"Bob," Millie said excitedly, "I've been telling Beulah about that stuff in the can and she knows what happened."

"I'll bet she does."

"She does. Tell him, Beulah."

Beulah was leaning sidewise, trying to see the contents of the can. She straightened. "Yeast!" she said dramatically. "Somehow you got some yeast into that can. It makes dought swell up and, if you don't watch it, it runs over. Nobody was watching it, so that's what happened."

Bob walked away from the can, counting ten silently. Behind him he heard Beulah's vocal accompaniment to her first look at the thing. There was momentary hesitation in her voice, a split second of diminished cocksureness; but that was it, only momentary and split-second. She was not a faltering woman.

"Oh!" she said. "So, that's it? Well! It's dirty, of course. The dough would be dirty, made out of God-knows-what. But, somehow, all that stuff became dough and the yeast made it swell. That's what happened."

Joe Howser's voice broke in on a note of rising triumph. "How about that? I think she's got something, Bob. The girl's got something. You said yourself that you spilled beer in the can. That's where the yeast came from."

"I didn't know about the beer," Beulah said. "That explains everything."

Bob turned slowly. "Yeast is—"

He stopped. The eyes were the eyes of policemen. Anything that he said would be used against him. The case was solved. He could tell them what yeast is and what beer is, and what dough is; they wouldn't really hear him. He would be somebody trying to talk his way out of the verdict of the majority. He threw up his hands.

"Have it your way," he said.

They were all happy about him then and the two women were particularly nice to him because he had turned out incompetent, in need of feminine intuition and wisdom if he ever hoped to succeed in life.

When they were gone, Millie walked up and kissed him. She suggested cheerfully that they have coffee together. It was all very tranquilizing and she waited until they had finished coffee before she threw any bombs. She looked across the table with her most attractive smile and she was always prettiest when she smiled.

"I'm not worried any more now that I know that thing is just yeast, Bob," she said softly, "but I don't want it around. You've got to get rid of it."

The male wariness that triggered Bob's defenses when he needed them had been lulled. He didn't feel combative. "I want to study it," he said. "It isn't yeast, you know, and yeast hasn't anything to do with it. Beulah is a mental defective."

Millie smiled tolerantly. "I don't care if you don't like Beulah, but you've got to get rid of that stuff, Bob. I couldn't sleep!"

"You mean tonight?"

"Of course!"

She was wide-eyed, incredulous that he should think she meant any other night. There were ways, perhaps, of countering Millie in such a mood as this but he hadn't learned them yet. He was, suddenly, tired of the thing in the can, weary of the whole affair. He rose abruptly, pushing his chair back with more noise than was necessary.

"Okay," he said.

He went down to the lab and reluctance moved in on him. The gray thing reposed there in the can and it was a challenge. He would be cowardly to throw it away without seeking no answer to it. Even if the explanation proved to be as ridiculous as Beulah's yeast theory, he owed Science that explanation.

His reluctance stretched, flexed its muscles, and revealed a two-edged sword. Science wouldn't help him if he went back and argued with Millie—Science wouldn't do a thing for him. He reached for a compromise with which to defend himself.

"I don't need all of it," he said. "All I need is a sample."

He opened a drawer and took out his hunting knife. He never hunted but he had cut into a variety of tough materials in the lab and the knife was a good one. He lifted one of the tentacles of the thing, measured off a reasonable length, and slashed. The hide, or whatever it was, had toughness beyond his anticipation. The knife slashed in but not through. The tentacle seemed to turn in his hand and he released it.

Something chill touched his spine. For a moment he had had the feeling that the thing had winced, moved, recoiled from the knife.

"Let's not be stupid," he said.

He looked at the cut that his knife had made. It was about an inch deep and the inside of the cut was a lighter shade of gray than the outside, and cleaner. It looked like rubber.

It took an effort of will for him to slash again but he did, and he had no recurrence of the wincing impression. Once the outside layer had been penetrated the tentacle cut easily. It was light in his hand, a piece of dirty gray stuff about ten inches long, four inches wide at its thickest point, tapering to a blunt end about an inch and a half across.

"I'll find out what it is," he said.

He tossed the tentacle on the table and took the headless octopus out of the can. Except for the one remaining tentacle, the thing was roughly round, perhaps closer in shape to a turtle than an octopus which, after all, depends upon tentacles for the shape-impression it creates. He wrapped it in a newspaper and carried it upstairs so that Millie could see that he was actually taking it out.

"Take it to the dump," Millie said. "Don't leave it around here."

He took it to the dump. He knew where the dump was because there was a lot of controversy about it. Some sharpshooter wanted to level it and build another subdivision on top of it. It was a little over a mile from Bob's house. He had an odd feeling as he drove that there was a presence in the seat beside him, something with a personality and being, not a mere chunk of matter.

"Nerves," he said.

He approached the dump cautiously, recalling Joe Howser's remark about the little men and space ships. It would be just that bad if some policeman stopped him and asked him what he was tossing in the dump. He would have to say that he didn't know, and policemen didn't like answers like that.

But there was no one in sight and he moved stealthily, carrying the thing, when actually he wanted to drop it and run. He took it far into the tangle of bottles, bedsteads, and broke-niks. Near a mound which he was certain that he could locate again, he abandoned it.

He felt depressed when he returned to the house. Millie was in a thoughtful mood, one of the moods that were least becoming to her. She was wearing his old bathrobe and that wasn't becoming, either. She had robes of her own—nice, frilly, feminine things—but she preferred his.

"Bob," she said, "after what happened tonight, I don't think that laboratory is good for you. I really don't. I think that Beulah's husband, George, has the right idea."

"George Cumshaw never had an idea in his life."

"Don't be prejudiced, Bob. George is very well educated. He's had courses in nearly everything. He's studied psychology."

"He's had a semester each of everything, you mean. He had to keep shopping around on his football scholarship, trying to find something that made sense to him."

Millie looked at him tenderly. She was going to be reasonable because he was so unreasonable. Bob could see that coming, the way a boxer sees a right hand coming over the left that he led too low. It was coming and he couldn't get out of the way.

"I don't care about George, Bob," she said. "I care about you. George says that a man shouldn't make a hobby out of something that he does all day. He says that a man gets a breakdown that way, and he's right. Look at what happened tonight!"

"What happened?" Bob's voice rose and he couldn't pull it down. "I suppose I had a breakdown and imagined that stuff in the can. Who was making all the noise about being afraid of it?"

"Don't shout at me! I won't be shouted at!"

It was a quarrel, the first real quarrel they had ever had. It ended up with Millie not speaking to him, and crying in bed, and shrugging

away from him when he tried to do something about it, and not answering him when he tried to be reasonable.

The next day was just as bad. Millie moved around the kitchen, visibly and determinedly unhappy, visibly and determinedly refusing to permit him to do anything about her unhappiness. Bob Robson not only had a bad morning but a bad day. He couldn't keep his mind on his work. He thought about Millie and he thought of the gray thing; mostly he thought about Millie.

She was still cold and withdrawn when he came home, answering in monosyllables, serving dinner with cold formality. After a few cheerful efforts to thaw the ice, he grew resentful. After all, who had started all this? He had a right to his own hobby. It was a constructive one. It made sense. What would happen if he came home and told Millie that she had to change something that she had, or something that she did, because some other woman he knew thought it would be a good idea? He had to sit quietly with that thought seething in him because he couldn't voice it. When he took the dishtowel, from the rod, to help with the dishes, Millie snatched it from his hand.

"You better go down to your pet," she said. "It's growing."

His heart thudded, almost stopped. "What pet?"

"You cheated. It's there. Another of those things."

"If you stayed out of that lab, you wouldn't know."

He banged out of the kitchen and ran noisily down the stairs, ashamed of his temper but still trembling with it. He snapped on the light in the lab and his anger cooled like a fire doused with water, very cold water.

The tentacle which he had left on the table was no longer a tentacle; it had curled, curved, or folded into the shape of the parent mass, smaller than the first one but larger than the tentacle had been.

He touched it gingerly, then turned it over and righted it again. It was an inert lump of something that looked like dirty rubber and wasn't. Its very existence was an insult to the intelligence, but here it was!

Millie did not relent and neither did he. It was another miserable evening and his mind kept moving between the rift with Millie and the thing in the lab. He needed and wanted a mature opinion, a wiser and more experienced mind than his own to move into this dilemma with him, but he did not want to risk ridicule. He was new at the plant, new in this town, and had as yet formed no close friendships among men in his own field. His neighbors were proven nitwits.

He spent another inefficient day at the plant and came home to find Millie still unrelenting. She was, he thought, waiting for a stronger apology than any he had been able

to make. She thanked him listlessly for the flowers he had sent to her but they, obviously, had not opened any doors.

He was afraid she was waiting for him to capitulate utterly and abandon his lab. He wasn't going to do that, so he was afraid to move into a situation where he would have to flatly refuse to do it. The whole business was unhappy and he had a lost, helpless feeling.

The thing was still there, but it had not grown any larger.

He had gone to an Army surplus store during his lunch hour and purchased a stethoscope. He had no idea how stethoscopes became surplus but they obviously did. He had seen an ad for them several months ago and the surplus store still had an ample supply.

He felt ridiculous, furtively bending over the lump and listening to it front and back with the stethoscope, but he did it. No sound came to him, no hum or tick of life. There couldn't be, of course. He had weighed every possible hypothesis in his mind, including all the wildly fantastic ones; such as the insane thought that some living thing had eaten his hormone-treated weeds, grown enormously, consumed all the trash in sight and resolved itself into a blob.

But now he resigned himself to waiting, not doing anything, merely watching developments. The lump existed. In its future he might obtain a clue to its past.

On Friday evening Millie met him at the door when he came home. She kissed him and there was gayety in her, joy and light and happy conversation. He tried valiantly to come up to it but it was too much. She was too gay, too happy, too bright. There had been no transition period between the doghouse and the throne, so he sat uneasily.

Millie was wearing a yellow dress that made her look like a flower of spring. He didn't remember it and he was fairly certain it was new, but he didn't risk a comment to that effect. This was no time to make a mistake, not until he had figured out what it was all about.

"I'd like to go to a show," Millie said. "Would you like to go to a show?"

"Sure. That is, fine. If you'd like to go to a show?"

He was tired and it had been a week for the dogs, but sitting in a neighborhood movie and looking at almost anything would be better than what he had been going through. Millie acted vivacious about it, as though it had been his idea and she was rising to it. She wasn't like that. Something had happened to her. If he didn't know better, he'd suspect that she was drunk.

He went down to the lab while Millie was fixing dinner. As soon as he flicked on the light he knew that something was wrong with the lump. It was on the table where

he had left it the night before, but it had lost weight. It had a shrunken look.

He examined it closely. It was no longer the heavy gray of an old auto tire: it was lighter in color, more the weak gray of putty. He went upstairs and he knew that he had to risk his new-found happiness. He risked it.

"Look, Millie," he said. "Have you been in the lab today?"

Her eyes widened. "No."

"You didn't do anything to that lump?"

"No. Oh, no! I wouldn't go near it."

"Honest? Your word on it?"

She raised one small hand. "I swear."

Millie kept her bright look through dinner and she threw in a lot of happy talk. He did his best but he knew that he wasn't fielding her remarks very well. As soon as dinner was over, he hurried downstairs again.

The lump seemed to have shrunk a little more during his absence. Very definitely, something was happening to it. He picked it up and it felt lighter in weight, limp, no longer solid.

He went back to Millie, just in time to dry the last few dishes.

"Do you mind very much if I don't go to a movie tonight?" he said.

Her bright look was strained but she kept it on. "No. Not if you don't want to go."

"I have to be in the lab a while."

"The lab?" Her smile was slightly twisted. "Well, that's all right. Of course. I mean, I don't mind."

"Thanks."

He didn't understand her. Nothing was normal in his house, upstairs or down. He hurried back to the lab. It seemed to him as he entered that the lump moved. He hesitated then crossed the room to the table. There was no question about it now. The thing did move. It seemed to partially lift itself, or swell, then sink back.

There was sweat on Bob's forehead. He could feel it there. He got his stethoscope and, foolish or not, he held it against the lump, listening. He heard a sound like a weak bubbling. His hands trembled and he looked at the thing helplessly.

It moved again.

"It wants something," he said, "or needs something."

The idea of this blob being capable of a want was too extreme, but the need was obvious. The thing was collapsing. He got the idea that it was starving to death. When the idea persisted he looked around desperately. It had fed and grown in this lab but he did not know on what.

Then he remembered the beer that had spilled into the can and which might have been the catalyst. He went upstairs to the refrigerator and got a can of beer. Millie called to him and he tried to say something reassuring. She came out into

the hallway and saw him with the can.

"Just some beer," he said self-consciously. "A can of beer."

"Oh! Yes. I see."

He hurried down and the lump had changed shape slightly. There was a small spool-shaped hump on its back. He opened the can and poured some of the beer on it. The beer ran off the sides and down onto the table. There was not any absorbent quality in the hide.

He turned the thing over and poured beer on its belly, with the same result. There was nothing else that he could do. There was no way of feeding something that had no mouth or veins or means of absorption. When he placed the lump rightside up again on the table, it has another paroxysm, trembling. The hump on its back increased in size.

Bob Robson knew then that he was watching something die. He had a panicky feeling about it. He wanted to call Millie, to have her with him, but he shrank from the task of putting the idea over to her. At 9:28 the lump died.

He knew the moment it went. It seemed to sag inward, the whole surface collapsing as though it covered nothing but air space. The hump sank down into the limp blob which was suddenly shapeless, robbed of every clearly defined line. Bob shook his head.

"Nobody would believe it," he said.

He took a large paper sack from a cupboard in the corner and scooped the lump into it. He felt shaken and he drank the small amount of beer left in the can. He slipped out of the house without seeing Millie. Joe Howser emerged from the shadows as he was getting into his car. Joe got in with him.

"I was hoping that I would see you alone, Bob," he said. "After all, men have to hang together."

"Or hang separately," Bob said mechanically. "Who's hanging us?"

"You. Not us! Beulah Cumshaw has been selling your wife a theory. I got it from my wife. It frightened me. No man could fight it alone."

"What theory?"

"She's got it figured out that your lab is a sex symbol. She says that you turn to it because Millie isn't wife enough for you."

"Millie isn't?"

Bob Robson's mind stopped against the stone wall of an astonishing hypothesis. In a flash he saw Millie's yellow dress, the way she acted tonight, the idea of a show. Incredibly, she had believed that dimbrain, Beulah, against an awful weight of evidence. She had been trying to seduce him. Millie!

"Look!" he said. "That's something that I can do something about. What has me on a mental flying trapeze is that lump. It just died."

"Died! You mean that garbage with the yeast in it?"

"You're Beulahized. It wasn't

yeast and it wasn't garbage—and it wasn't a sex symbol, either."

In terse, clipped sentences he told Joe Howser about the severed tentacle, the second lump, and the death struggle. After all, he had to tell somebody.

"It starved," Bob said. "It needed something. I don't know what."

Joe Howser moved slightly away from him, gazing apprehensively toward the back seat where the bundle was. "You can't go around talking like that, Bob," he said. "It isn't just your job. The boys with the butterfly nets will be after you."

They had reached the dump and Bob took the wrapped lump in his arms. Joe Howser hesitated, then followed Bob as he walked through the bottles, the cans, the bedsprings, and the whatnots to the mound where he had left the first lump. It was where he had left it and, like its offspring, it was dead: collapsed, sunken-in, disintegrated. Bob's heart hammered, looking at it.

Surrounding the lump was a ring of rats. They, too, were dead.

Bob moved his flashlight over the stiff rodents. There were eleven of them, some of them enormous as dump rats often are. They were facing the lump and they had died in charging attitudes. One of them had his sharp nozzle a fractional inch from one of the tentacles, his teeth bared.

The light beam moved slowly over the lump. It was decomposing, partly liquid, but on the surviving surface Bob could see no trace of teeth marks.

"What do you make of that?"

Joe Howser was staring popeyed. "The Thing put up a hell of a fight, didn't it?" he said.

That was the obvious, the inevitable, the inescapable fact. Joe Howser, who did not believe in the lump, believed in the fight because the evidence of it was before him.

Bob picked up a stick and reluctantly turned a rat over, examining it carefully under the full impact of the light beam. There was no mark of violence on it, no clue to how it had died. He forced himself to examine three more. They were dead but the manner of their dying was a mystery.

"Poison," he thought. "The stuff was poisonous. Or was it something else?"

He examined the lump again. There was not much of it left. The rats could have bitten it. He didn't know. At that moment he wanted a post mortem on a rat more than he wanted anything else in the world. He wasn't capable of performing it. He didn't know anyone who was. He couldn't imagine telling his story to a stranger.

"Let's scram out of here," Joe Howser said.

Bob laid his bundle down, the second lump, feeling inadequate. There should be more than a mere laying down; but what? He walked away from it and Joe Howser walked faster than he did.

Beside the car they paused. Once away from the evidence of his senses, Joe was his own man again. He laid a fatherly hand on Bob's shoulder.

"You've got to put this stuff out of your mind, Old Man," he said. "You've been working too hard. You've got nerves. There may not be anything in what Beulah said about the lab and sex symbols and all that stuff, but you can't have people talking. You've got to pay more attention to Millie."

"Sure."

Bob got into the car and he drove. His mind was filled with that picture in the dump—the lump at bay and the eleven dead rats. The analogy that came to him was Custer's last stand.

He, Bob Robson, had had wonder in his hands, a glimpse of the long future of science, a discovery for the ages. He had been on the edge of tremendous knowledge and his tiny laboratory had been only one step away from the immortality of future text books.

Paracelsus! Priestly! Boyle! Pasteur! *ROBSON!*

It would never be now. He would never be able to duplicate the contents of that can again. There was no second chance. He had just plain missed. Nature had dropped the curtain back in place, concealing her secrets. The night was heavy with sadness. He turned into his familiar street.

"How about a beer?" Joe said.

EDITORS' FILE CARD

AUTHOR: **CATHARINE BOYD**

TITLE: ***An Accident of Time***

TYPE: Suspense Story

LOCALE: United States

TIME: The Present

COMMENTS: *Mary, a spinster with very little to look forward to, thought she knew her brother well. But had marriage to Ann-Marie changed him that much?*

MARY STOOD BY THE WINDOW OF her father's bedroom, waiting for the nurse to finish his morning care. The sadness of the day seemed to slow things down—the flight of a bird from tree to tree, the sound of church bells, the back and forth motion of the swing on the porch below where nine-year-old Chigger, her brother's stepson, sat royally, being pushed by a friend. Chigger always took the first turn, twenty pushes.

"Yep, when the old man dies my Daddy will get his money. And then when *my* Daddy dies I'll be good and rich," Chigger was saying.

"Ah, he isn't even your real father," the friend scoffed. "*Nineteen*—he only married your mother!—twenty. Now you push me."

Chigger got up coolly and walked away.

No, he isn't your real father, Mary thought—thank heaven for that. He never heard of you till a year ago. Nor of your darling mother. And you, believe me young man, are your mother's son.

Mary had never expected to dislike anyone as much as she disliked Ann-Marie, her brother's wife. Mary was loving and comfortable by nature, and for a long time, since her mother's death, she and her father and brother had lived in this house together in reasonable peace. The door was always open, and through the years Bill's girls were welcomed warmly, even hopefully.

Then last summer Bill had found Ann-Marie, and proudly brought

her home. She was a brave little thing, alone with her son, living on scraps and bits of insurance payments, soon to expire. She had clover-honey hair, and wide blue eyes, and a pink mouth busy with sweetness. Oh, she enchanted them all, as pretty as fine spun glass! With glinting edges that didn't show up till later—and never to Bill.

About the time of the wedding Mary began to feel twinges, which she was quick to hide. There were little things—like the way Ann-Marie kept taking off her ring, to see how large the diamond was underneath . . . but who was Mary to judge? An old-maid sister, jealous of losing her brother?

So she kept reminding her father what a wonderful thing that Bill loved Ann-Marie enough to accept her little boy, the child of a previous marriage. And wasn't it time Bill married, almost thirty years old? And if he was happy taking care of Ann-Marie, didn't that prove she was the right one?

After the wedding the couple moved to a town sixty miles away where Ann-Marie wished to live, and rented a house till they could find something nicer. Bill took pleasure in buying his bride cultured pearl necklaces and silver bowls and amethyst bracelets, and dozens of lesser trinkets she seemed to admire. And although he willingly traveled by turnpike to work every day, the distance between the two towns in other respect depended on Ann-Marie's whims—they were not so close that Bill was able to spend much time with his father, but close enough so that Chigger was frequently brought to Mary to care for.

"Since you're not working or anything, dear, such a life of leisure," Ann-Marie would smile, setting the boy's suitcase down, "And Chigger just loves to stay here, you're always so *sweet* . . ." She had a way of appraising Mary's rooms with darting eyes, squinting now and then at a certain treasure. "Why, there's that little Spode vase I've heard Bill mention! Do you mind if I just take it home to surprise him?"

Mary had the feeling that Chigger did not love to be here, and she was certainly not always sweet, especially when the child was insolent to her father. But she agreed to keep him from time to time, for her brother's sake. This time was spring vacation from school, and he'd been here a week. In spite of her father's illness . . .

Mary heard the nurse speak her name, and she turned away from the window and languidly crossed the room. It was very warm for April.

"I think the doctor had better come soon," the nurse said gently. "I think I'll call him, if you don't mind."

Mary's breath caught and her eyes flooded with tears, so that the

bed and the frail figure on it were only a haze.

"—and your brother," the nurse continued, "As soon as he can."

After the nurse had talked to the doctor, Mary picked up the phone, and soon she heard Ann-Marie's dulcet voice in the receiver.

"Why, I'll get Bill to leave right away, Mary dear, he's mowing the lawn . . . I'm sorry I can't come myself, I have company . . . Now you be brave dear, Bill will be there soon. We have to remember that this is really a blessing."

Mary hung up and heartily blew her nose. Is it ever a blessing? Unless you're thinking—already—about the money?

Until the day Ann-Marie married Bill the money had never mattered, although the sum of it was fairly substantial. But once the three of them became four, in some peculiar way the money sprang into focus. Ann-Marie overflowed with innocent questions, and constantly marveled that they were all so generous and kind, and shed a few soft tears to think they'd made her one of the family, a helpless widow with a baby to raise!—Chigger a *baby?*

Well, perhaps it had been for the best; the three had been so secure with each other that their plans for inheritance had been rather vague. So father, son, and daughter finally met with a lawyer and made the formal arrangements, and afterward Ann-Marie joined them at a restaurant where they had dinner.

Dinner was cheerful—certainly no talk of wills; but Ann-Marie, deliciously fragrant and flowery, was also noticeably restless. She hurried with her dessert, and scalded her tongue a bit speeding through her coffee. It was obvious to Mary and her father that she could hardly wait.

The arrangements were simple. All the money was in the father's name, and Bill and Mary insisted it stay that way. On his death one-third should go to Mary, with the house, and two-thirds to Bill. This seemed only just, since Bill would doubtless have children of his own, and it was not very likely that Mary, unmarried at thirty-five, would ever have any.

"But one thing sure—" the old man added, "unless I have grandchildren of my own, my interest ends with my children. I want it clear if Bill dies first, Mary gets it all. Understand?"

"Why, yes," Bill agreed, "that's fair enough. But you know about my will—Ann-Marie's the sole beneficiary. I mean, if the money's already mine when I die it will go to her."

"Of course, Bill," Mary said. "That's the way it should be."

Yes, it was well they had settled things when they did. For soon after Christmas their father was taken ill, very ill indeed, and here he had lain in his bed ever since, growing steadily weaker.

"How sad we'll soon be, dividing things," Ann-Marie had sighed last week when she came to leave Chigger. "I don't suppose all the furniture goes with the house . . ."

The doctor arrived, and word slipped around the neighborhood that the old man was dying. Chigger disappeared into the house next door, and Mary found several friends in her kitchen still in their church clothes, brewing coffee and iced tea in case she wanted either.

Then, as Mary walked up the stairs, the nurse leaned over the railing and clasped her hand and said it was over, and somebody else said that it was noon, exactly noon, and all that Mary could think was: Oh, Father always felt the heat so! The hottest part of the day.

There was a good deal of hushed confusion, and it was sometime later before Mary suddenly realized that Bill hadn't come. Surely he'd had time—hadn't Ann-Marie told him? Oh, she must have, he'd never forgive her, she was smarter than that!

Then why wasn't he here, where he belonged? Why hadn't he hurried? Sunday traffic, a warm day, the turnpike crowded . . . No, there was no excuse, he should have been here. Oh, Bill, Bill! The doctor's filled me with tranquilizers, I can't make sense of their questions . . . When are you coming?

She signed a paper obediently, and stared at some men who came in with a stretcher, and listened to the comfort of friends, and when the telephone rang she brushed the others' hands away and picked it up herself.

She recoiled from the high, hysterical voice at the other end of the wire, and she almost cast the phone aside before she recognized the undertones of Ann-Marie's sweetness.

"Mary, it's Bill, it's Bill!" the voice sobbed. "He was on the turnpike! I don't know what happened, he must have been speeding . . . it must have been awful! They say . . . Mary—he's *dead!*"

"No," Mary said, and sat down, "Ann-Marie, no."

"I had to tell you, somebody had to. How can I stand it—" the voice babbled on, and Mary held the receiver heavily; she could feel the weight of it all the way to her elbow. "—and here I am, a widow again, so soon, with a helpless child!"

Why, you were scarcely a wife, Mary thought aimlessly. You didn't have time to know him.—And thank you, God, for one thing; he never had time to know you.

"And once we're over the shock we can figure things out," the voice was rambling, "Whether it's yours or mine, you know, the last thing I'd think of . . . depends on the time. Bill—Bill's accident was halfpast twelve. I wonder—" The voice paused delicately. "When did your Daddy—?"

"Noon," Maary said numbly. "The hottest part of the day."

"Then Bill was half an hour later," Ann-Marie murmured, "Not that it matters—not that it matters a bit, at a time like this!"

Oh, but it does matter, Ann-Marie. You know the terms of the will. You and Chigger can have it, for all of me. Think of the goodies you can have, without even wasting a smile! An accident of time, and the money's yours. By half an hour.

Mary was still in a state of immediate shock, gripped by an armor of artificial calm, but even so she could feel the irony of it. Bill on the turnpike at half-past twelve, speeding to get to his father . . . and his father already gone.

But why had Bill left so late? What had kept him from starting out instantly when she phoned? Had he let Ann-Marie beguile him into changing his clothes, and having a snack, and stopping to kiss her a while? How could he have let his father wait for Ann-Marie? She knew her brother well—had he changed so much?

And then she remembered. A small detail that had slipped her mind—and that set everything straight.

"I think my father was the survivor, Ann-Marie," she said with care, holding the mouthpiece so close it was cold against her lips. "I think the half hour was the other way."

"Mary, how can you! How can you argue such things at a time like this! When I'm entitled—" Ann-Marie cried. "There isn't a court —"

"That will give you a penny," Mary said clearly. "Did you forget? You changed your clocks last night to Daylight Saving. Here we didn't. Our town's the only town in the county on Standard Time."

She didn't wait to hear the sound of collapse, like shattering glass. She knew that Bill had hurried after all, and she burst into tears.

CURRENT MYSTERY AND SUSPENSE HARDCOVERS

AUTHOR	TITLE	PUBLISHER	PRICE	ON SALE	
Crane, Frances	THE AMBER EYES	Random House, Inc.	$3.50	6/26/62	O
Garve, Andrew	PRISONER'S FRIEND	Harper & Bros.	3.50	6/20/62	O
Gilbert, Michael	DOORS OPEN	Walker & Company	3.50	6/25/62	O
Halliday, Brett	MURDER BY PROXY	Torquil Press	3.50	6/18/62	O
Knox, Bill	LITTLE DROPS OF BLOOD	Doubleday & Co. Inc.	3.50	6/1/62	O
MacKinnon, Alan	CORMORANT'S ISLE	Doubleday & Co. Inc.	3.50	6/15/62	O
Marsh, Ngaio	ANOTHER THREE ACT SPECIAL	Little, Brown & Co.	4.95	5/9/62	R
Monteilhet, Hubert	THE PRAYING MANTISES	Simon & Schuster	3.50	6/8/62	O
Munslow, Bruce	NO SAFE ROAD	Walker & Company	3.50	6/21/62	O
Procter, Maurice	A BODY TO SPARE	Harper & Bros.	3.50	6/6/62	O
Sherry, Edna	GIRL MISSING	Dodd, Mead & Co.	3.50	6/18/62	O
Stein, Aaron	HOME AND MURDER	Doubleday & Co. Inc.	3.50	6/1/62	O

CURRENT MYSTERY AND SUSPENSE PAPERBACKS

AUTHOR	TITLE	PUBLISHER	PRICE	ON SALE
Christie, Agatha	A HOLIDAY FOR MURDER	Bantam Books	40¢	6/2/62
Copp, DeWitt	THE PURSUIT OF AGENT M	Popular Library	35¢	6/5/62
Fenisong, Ruth	BUT NOT FORGOTTEN	Ace Books	50¢	6/10/62
Fenisong, Ruth	THE SCHEMERS	Ace Books	50¢	6/10/62
Marlowe, Stephen	JEOPARDY IS MY JOB	Gold Medal	35¢	5/29/62
Prather, Richard S.	FIND THIS WOMAN	Gold Medal	35¢	5/29/62
Queen, Ellery	HALFWAY HOUSE	Pocket Books	35¢	June
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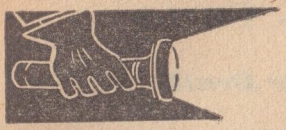
Queen, Ellery	THE SPANISH CAPE MYSTERY	Pocket Books	35¢	June
Queen, Ellery	THE ROMAN HAT MYSTERY	Pocket Books	35¢	June



BEST MYSTERIES OF THE MONTH

recommended by ANTHONY BOUCHER

The year's top awards for crime fiction went to three novels highly esteemed by this department; if you've missed them, put them on your imperative summer reading list. Mystery Writers of America, Edgar for best novel: J. J. Marric's GIDEON'S FIRE (Harper, $3.50). MWA, Edgar for best American first novel: Suzanne Blanc's THE GREEN STONE (Harper, $3.50). Crime Writers Association (London), best novel: Mary Kelly's THE SPOILT KILL (British Book Centre, $3.25). And MWA's special Grand Master Award went, unarguably, to Erle Stanley Gardner—whose latest, TRY ANYTHING ONCE (by "A. A. Fair," Morrow, $2.95) displays many of the innumerable reasons therefor.

★★★★ **SHERLOCK HOLMES OF BAKER STREET, by William S. Baring-Gould** (Potter, $5)

Neither fiction nor criticism, but a serious formal biography, this "life of the world's first consulting detective" sums up 60 years of Irregular research in one entrancing narrative.

★★★★ **THE D. I., by Jeffrey Ashford** (Harper, $3.50)

Detective Inspector Don Kerry, X division, ——shire, is a pro worthy of the company of Gideon and Martineau, starring in one of the best-constructed narratives of the English documentary school.

★★★ **WITCHES' SABBATH, by Paula Allardyce** (Macmillan, $2.95)

Another award winner (and justly): Romantic Novelists Association (London), best romantic novel of 1961—and a strong suspense story, too, by a pseudonym of Charity/Lee Blackstock.

★★★ **THE TURNS OF TIME by Pierre Audemars** (Harper, $3.50)

First novel in U.S. by recent (May) EQMM contributor reveals smooth charm and a likable new detective: M. Pinaud of Sûreté.

EQMM made a clean sweep of MWA's short story awards: Edgar to Avram Davidson's adroit variations on a theme by Kipling, *The Affair at Lahore Cantonment* (June, 1961), and scrolls to the runners-up: ELLERY QUEEN'S 1962 ANTHOLOGY (Davis, $1) and Robert Wallsten's *The Children of Alda Nuova* (August, 1961).

EDITORS' FILE CARD

AUTHOR: **CHARLES B. CHILD**

TITLE: ***The Caller After Death***

TYPE: Detective Story

DETECTIVE: Inspector Chafik

LOCALE: Baghdad, Iraq

TIME: The Present

COMMENTS: *An interesting case about the Iraqi Inspector of Police who had the disconcerting habit of talking to himself . . . and of the warning cry.*

THE early sun of Baghdad, focused on the wrought-iron grille of the window, cast a curious, patterned shadow over the body on the bed. The Inspector was moved to say, "I trust this is not an omen."

He looked at his sergeant, a dour and excellent man, who said seriously, "No, sir—it is murder!"

Inspector Chafik did not smile, for it would have embarrassed his subordinate, but the Inspector's thin and swarthy face softened as he turned away. He was a small man conservatively dressed in a cool white suit and meticulously groomed. A black *sidarah* crowned his sleek head, proclaiming his Moslem faith.

"How cosmic is the sunrise!" Chafik said. "Really, so inconsiderate of Mr. Kedayer to present himself as a corpse when Baghdad has made herself up for him! How did he die, Abdullah?"

"Sir, he died by the knife," the sergeant said. "A clean job—one flick! I do not remember a neater throat-cutting."

"And what motive is there for this murder?"

"None is apparent, sir. Revenge is a possibility. The deceased was a very hard man," said the sergeant.

Inspector Chafik nodded. "Kedayer, named Yusif," he said. "Age about sixty. Wealthy. Estates near Lake Habaniya. A parliamentary deputy. Three unsuccessful marriages. At present married to Nadra, daughter of Sheik Saadi al-Kifri, deceased. Yes, yes, I know much about Mr. Kedayer!" Then for the first time he went and studied the corpse, and after a moment said briskly, "Well, Abdullah? What evidence have we got?"

"Nothing but a cry, sir. And a very remarkable cry, so I am told!"

"The deceased could have uttered no cry," said the Inspector.

"But observe his eyes are open, sir! He saw his assassin. I submit that as the knife was drawn, he—"

"Observe the reposed position of the body and the hands," Chafik said. "This man died too quickly to voice protest. Whoever shouted, it was not he."

"There was a cry," said Sergeant Abdullah stubbornly.

Shortly thereafter the sergeant produced a witness. The man's name was Murad, and he was the night guard of Kedayer's house on the riverbank. Murad stood with his rifle at his side as he said, "I was his slave."

Chafik replied, "The days of slaves are over; nevertheless, I will note your loyalty on your dossier. Now report to me, as you would have done to your master, about the night."

"Excellency, it was moonless and very still," Murad said. "I killed two scorpions in the garden and one snake. I did my patrols and returned to the foot of the stairway that leads to my lady's rooms. There I keep constant watch."

"Why?"

"The master's orders."

The Inspector looked closely at the bearded old man. What he saw in the round dark eyes caused him to say absently, "Middle-aged husbands of young wives too often dream of young men prowling." He heard himself and, as always, was annoyed by his habit of thinking aloud. "Come to the dawn hour," he said brusquely.

"At that hour an evil jinni made my eyes heavy."

"Perhaps it was your years," Chafik said in a kinder voice. "What awakened you?"

"The cry."

Sergeant Abdullah's mahogany-colored face broke into a triumphant smile. Irritated, Chafik said, "So there *was* this cry, was there? What was it like?"

"A high shout, Excellency. Like a trumpet sounding. I went to investigate. There was an odd shadow perched on the garden wall—"

"*How* odd? What did it resemble?"

A great bird. I challenged and fired, and when it leaped from the wall I saw it was man-shaped. Alas! I am no longer the marksman I once was!" the old guard said sadly. "Otherwise, surely I would

have killed that thieving nomad."

"To what nomad do you refer?" asked the Inspector.

"The one that killed my master, Excellency! A few days ago people came and camped within our shadow. They were tribeless wanderers, the kind that come with the swallows, plant their crops, harvest, and are gone. Bedouins!" Murad said with a city man's disgust, and he spat.

Chafik nodded. These fleeting visitors came to Baghdad in the spring of the year, and their crude shelters mushroomed overnight. They would turn their cow or goat to craze on the grass that sprang from the rain-fed dust, and plant crops on the islands of silt that appeared when the river went down after the floods; the fertile soil was considered a gift from God, and so was legally free.

"What happened to thse unfortunates?" the Inspector asked the witness.

"The master asked me to drive them away."

Murad went to the window and pointed. Beyond the garden was the parapet of the river wall and a thirty-foot drop. The waters of the Tigris had receded and left a beach. Here a few boats were drawn up, and there was the wreckage of a lean-to and other signs of habitation including the vines of a bean crop recently torn up and destroyed by fire.

"It is my work to drive them away," said the old man without pride.

"Your master was indeed hard."

"Yes, Excellency. Always he would clench his fists at these landless ones. I remember long ago when we lived on the estates at Lake Habaniya, there were just such nomads, and— It does not matter now," Murad said abuptly, dismissing unwelcome throughts. "The ones I drove from our walls yesterday killed my master!"

The old man's voice was hard and flat. His hand tightened on his rifle, and Chafik thought of what must have happened on the estates at Lake Habaniya. He said sharply, "did you pursue the shadow you saw last night?"

"I could not, Excellency. My shot disturbed the household, and the lady came, and I—"

Murad glanced away, then suddenly stiffened. Inspector Chafik stepped quickly between the corpse on the bed and the woman who stood in the doorway. "You should not be here, Madame Kedayer!" he chided.

"I am not afraid to look on my dead," the widow said. She was young and dark, and the looseness of her gown did not hide that she was with child. Her pride denied grief, and the Inspector was reminded that she was of the tents, a Bedouin daughter of a desert prince. He salaamed out of respect.

Her self-control of grief distressed the Inspector. He was a

man who cried when he was sad and laughed when he was happy. "Madame," he said. "Sometimes when our river is heavy with flood it is wise to break the levees to reduce pressure."

"You mean I should waste tears?"

"Madame!"

"Tears do not bring vengeance," said Madame Kedayer.

The Inspector frowned. The code of these desert people was earthly, and recognized by the legal statutes of the country. He checked his own distress and said officially, "Very well, then. Help me fill the gaps in the evidence your husband's guard has given me. Did you hear the cry that Murad talks about?"

He was sure she hesitated before she answered. "I heard only the shot."

"You didn't see the shadow?"

"I saw nothing—nothing!"

Her voice was shrill and he noted the way her hands were clenched—as if she held a secret, he thought. Aloud he said, "Had your husband enemies?"

"A man without enemies is not a man," Madame Kedayer said.

"Then that makes me all man!" Chafik said wryly. "So many hate policemen!"

Madame Kedayer did not smile. "Yes, they hated him. He was a hard man," she said wearily.

"He drove away the strangers who camped under your wall?"

"Murad told you that? It was not a nice thing; they were such sad people. And it was so distressing for our guest—"

"There is a guest here? Why was I not told?" The Inspector looked angrily at his assistant.

"Sir! I was never told there was a guest!" Sergeant Abdullah protested.

"Do not blame your man," said Madame Kedayer. "The guest was Mr. Hindawi, a gentleman from Jordan. He had been with us two days when my husband ordered Murad to drive out the strangers. It distressed Mr. Hindawi and he left us. I think he went to the Regent Hotel."

"Was that the only reason the guest left?" Chafik asked, and then said quickly, "A thousand apologies, Lady! My very detestable profession makes me so suspicious that I cannot even assure myself you didn't hear the cry and see the shadow! Ah, what a cesspit I have up here!" He struck his forehead with his knuckles.

Madame Kedayer drew a fold of her robe over the lower part of her face. It was not usual for a princess of the tents to veil, and Chafik was concerned because she was so obviously disturbed. He remembered she would soon bear a child, and he said with tenderness. "You have a brother—isn't his name Raouf? I advise you to send for him at this difficult time."

The young widow's eyes widened. "Raouf must not come here!"

she cried. "Not here!" she repeated, and fled.

Inspector Chafik watched her go. "Chafik J. Chafik, may you be forgiven for the pain you have unwittingly given her!" he said in the humble voice he used when he talked with his God in the mosque.

Chafik sat in the back of the police car that returned him to the city. "Yes, yes, she has a brother!" he muttered to himself as he flicked ash from a cigarette. "Name, Raouf. Only son of Sheik Saadi al-Kifri. Raouf is nineteen and she's older. He's a difficult, troublesome young man and a bit of a political firebrand—suspended from law school because of some speeches he made. What do you think of him?"

The driver of the car, who was newly assigned to Inspector Chafik, replied, "Sir, I don't know much about these matters."

"What matters? I did not speak!" Chafik snapped.

A moment later he announced, "And Raouf was at loggerheads with his sister's husband. All Baghdad knows that—didn't you?"

The police driver said, "Where may I take you, sir?"

Inspector Chafik squared his shoulders. "When I ask to go to the Regent Hotel, I expect to be delivered there with less grinding of gears," he said. At once he added sheepishly, "So I've been talking again? My foolish voice is not always intended to be heard."

They stopped at the hotel on Rashid Street and the Inspector inquired for the man who had been Kedayer's guest. Mr. Hindawi was dark and bearded and wore the yellow *kuffia* that was the headdress of his country; otherwise he was in European clothes. "I was informed about what happened. I expected you," he said gravely.

"I always come after death has called," Inspector Chafik said apologetically.

They sat in the garden and looked at the river. Terraces went down to water's edge, and there were neat lawns and many flowers. The sun shone behind groves of date palms, and the day was not yet too hot.

"It is very pretty here," remarked Mr. Hindawi.

"For the moment," Chafik said.

"One is reminded," continued Mr. Hindawi, "of those early hours, and of the night when it covers with darkness, and of the Lord who has not forsaken you, nor has become displeased—"

"You quote," said Inspector Chafik, "from the Koran. The passage goes on: 'And surely the future shall be better for thee than the present.'"

"So you, too, are a theologian," said Mr. Hindawi, smiling.

"Alas! I am first a policeman," Chafik said, and began to question the witness concerning his visit to the Kedayers.

Mr. Hindawi explained he was a

cattle dealer and had come to Iraq to arrange for the purchase and transfer of herds to Jordan. Kedayer had been famous as a breeder of the humpbacked Brahmans, which, as Mr. Hindawi pointed out, could sustain themselves on the almost waterless plains of the Middle East.

"You understand well the problems of the Bedouins, do you not?" Chafik asked.

"I myself came from the tents," admitted the witness.

The profile he turned was like that of a hawk, and the Inspector thought: Yes, a Bedouin, but he no longer enjoys the simplicity of that way of living.

"I was told that you were present when Mr. Kedayer dismissed some nomads who had camped under his walls," Chafik said.

"It was not a gracious act," said Mr. Hindawi. "Nor a wise one," he added thoughtfully.

"You mean it provoked murder?"

"I mean it was cause for a judgment!"

"I am not an expert there: my concern is only with Kedayer's body," Chafik said. "Do you think these nomads were capable of killing him?"

"They were so poor and helpless they even apologized to live! But surely they had the right."

"What right? No man has the right to kill another!"

"Then you have forgotten your Koran," said Mr. Hindawi severely.

He rose and paced slowly with hands clasped before him. Although a big man, he had the noiseless grace of a cat. His voice was deep and resonant as he quoted: "Retaliation for bloodshedding is prescribed to you—"

Chafik stopped him, saying, "As a policeman on duty I am unclean, and my ears are therefore profane. So, sir, speak the Word only to yourself."

"You are right," agreed Mr. Hindawi. The resonance went out of his voice and he said flatly, "I am afraid I cannot help you, Inspector. I did not know the Kedayers until I came to Baghdad."

"But perhaps you have met Madame's brother, Raouf?"

The witness shook his head. "It is strange you should ask, for so did Kedayer's lady, and it caused a most unpleasant scene."

"In what way?"

"The man used very harsh words about his brother-in-law, although the Koran tells us to be generous with our near of kin and the orphans and the needy and—" Mr. Hindawi stopped and then said sternly, "Oh, surely there was a judgment on Kedayer!"

The day was at its hottest when the Inspector returned to his office, and he felt relief as he closed the door. Grass mats covered the windows and were kept moist by a sprinkler system.

"I almost got involved in a theological argument," he confessed to Sergeant Abdullah. "The witness turned out to be one of those pietists, and thick-headed at that!"

Chafik hung up his coat and sat at his desk to read the various reports on the case. The pathologist, he said, had confirmed his belief Kedayer had died too suddenly to have uttered the cry that had awakened the guard.

"Possibly a night bird," suggested Sergeant Abdullah.

"A very coincidental and raucous bird to disturb the slumbers of an old man like Murad," Chafik said. "I am convinced, too, that Madame heard it, although she will not say so. What about those nomads?"

"We search, sir. The party is described as a man, emaciated; two women, one decrepit; three small children, all sickly; one goat, mangy; and a few chickens. It would appear—"

"Mr. Hindawi was right about them, then," interrupted Chafik. "Nevertheless, a desperate man, however emaciated, can use a knife. The party must be traced. I also wish to see Madame's brother, Raouf."

Sergeant Abdullah said grimly, "I have a report about him here, sir. It was not passed to us earlier because it was considered routine."

"More political trouble?"

"Domestic, this time. Three nights ago Raouf created a scene at his sister's house, and Mr. Kedayer had the local police remove him. The reporting officer states violent words were exchanged."

Chafik sat and twisted the heavy signet ring on his little finger, his expression remote. "Your thoughts are noisy, Abdullah," he said at last. "Go find Raouf—and tell Records to send me everything they have about Kedayer."

"Kedayer, sir?" asked the sergeant.

"I cannot interrogate his corpse," the Inspector said dryly. "This is the only way I can find out about his life. Death sometimes has roots in the rotten soil of old years."

The records department of the Baghdad police provided a mountain of papers that concerned the dead man, and Chafik worked through the rest of the day. A pyramid of cigarette butts built up in the ashtray at his elbow, and his incoherent voice buzzed in the room like bees.

"So many enemies, so many reasons for killing," he announced.

Sergeant Abdullah, who had just returned, said, "Sir?"

"What? Are you still there?" shouted Chafik as he looked up. "I told you bring me Madame Kedayer's brother!"

"That was seven hours ago," said the sergeant. The room was dark and he turned on the lights. "As for Raouf, sir, I had trouble tracing him. He fled Baghdad . . ."

Chafik was not listening. He

jabbed at the papers on his desk. "This Kedayer was not a nice character, and reading his life story has distressed my stomach. There is a report here about what happened."

The sergeant persisted. "Sir! You asked me to find the brother of the dead man's lady and I have—I found him in Baquba. He does not come willingly to the interview and is very arrogant. In his formative years, the parental hand was not applied to his understanding."

"What? Oh, yes. But you forget, Abdullah, the father died when Raoul was a child. Bring him in."

The sergeant ushered in a tall youth with a thin dark mustache. He was in a temper and struck the Inspector's desk and shouted. "Why am I dragged here like a common criminal?"

"*Are* you a criminal?" Chafik asked mildly. He offered Rouf a cigarette and stood to light it. "Where were you last night?"

"You ought to know everything!" the youth said contemptuously.

"Alas! Only God is infallible. Tell me why you are frightened."

"Frightened? What makes you think I'm frightened?"

"Your arrogance," said Chafik. "It is often a shield an unsure man raises to cover the chink in his armor." He stood on tiptoe to match the young man's height. "And if you weren't frightened, why did you run away at a time when your sister needed you?"

The Inspector was shocked by the way Raouf's sullen, small-boy face crumpled. Tears filled his soft eyes, so much like those of Madame Kedayer; he stumbled to a chair and sat with his face in his hands. "Nadra won't see me!" he said in a muffled voice.

"Why?"

"I don't know! I don't know!" The youth looked up, lost and terrified. "She wants me to go away—never wants to see me again! My sister—all I have! She's all I've ever had. I don't remember my father and mother. I've never had anybody but Nadra. And he—took her from me!"

"You mean your brother-in-law? Was that why he ordered you from the house? Kedayer told you to leave Nadra alone, didn't he? Not to get her mixed up in your political intrigues, eh?"

"He poisoned her mind against me! I'm glad he's dead!" A childish cruelty and spitefulness were reflected in the young man's face.

Chafik frowned. "This brother-in-law took your political effervescings too seriously," he said with compassion.

"An excuse!" cried Raouf. "An excuse to separate Nadra from me! He said I had clung to her all my life. He said it was time I stood alone. He said Nadra would soon mother his child, and it was time she stopped mothering me!" The young man's mouth trembled. "I hated him! I hated him!"

"Perhaps you *did* cling to your sister too much, and perhaps she did spoil a boy left without parents. Yet your hatred is understandable—Kedayer had no milk of kindness in him," said Chafik. Then he added softly, "I do not like your Mr. Kedayer."

"He was a beast!" Raouf's dark Bedouin face flushed with rage. "He set Murad as watchdog over my sister—that old man was his slave! But nothing will stop me from seeing Nadra. Not even Kedayer's ghost!" the youth finished shrilly.

He turned to run from the room and Chafik signaled Abdullah to let him go. "Even passion must sometime stop running to catch breath," Chafik said.

When Raouf had gone, Chafik lighted a cigarette and picked up the report he had been reading when the young man arrived. The papers were yellow with age; he glanced at them and pushed them away distastefully.

"Abdullah," he said, "when we were interrupted I was telling you about this—the story of what happened at Lake Habaniya twenty years ago. You remember the guard, Murad, referred to it when giving evidence this morning?"

"I remember something historical, sir," the sergeant said.

"It concerns a party of Bedouins who trespassed on Kedayer's estates on Lake Habaniya," Chafik went on. "There was a man, his wife, an aged male retainer, and a small boy. They tried to water a flock. Kedayer ordered them off and they wouldn't go. Is it necessary to continue?"

"Who died in this uneven battle?" Abdullah asked grimly."

"The man and his servant. The woman, who was ill, died later."

"And the boy, sir?"

"He was adopted by a tribe going up into the western desert. The report is sketchy—it was all hushed up. Kedayer had friends in high places."

"A shocking story, sir!"

"An example of Kedayer's ruthlessness, and why the youth who has just left is not unpitied by either of us. But this Raouf must be watched!"

"Yes, sir," said the sergeant.

"He too is a Bedouin, like those of long ago—and those driven from the river wall the day before yesterday. There is a surfeit of Bedouins in this case," the Inspector said. "These desert people are fierce in defense of family, Abdullah."

The inspector took his *sidarah* from a peg, set it squarely on his sleek head, adjusted his polka-dotted tie, and went home.

He lived on the Street of the Scatterer of Blessings in a small honey-colored house that overlooked the river. His well-loved wife, Leila, and their adopted son awaited him, but this night he saw them as shadows. He took off his shoes, put them under the hall table, and went, as was his wont, on

stockinged feet to his chair. So enthroned, they fed him and he remained silent and eventually went to bed.

The telephone called him in the very early hours. He heard a nightingale trilling in the garden as he lifted the receiver, and he said to the voice that greeted him. "You do not sing like a nightingale."

"No, sir," agreed Sergeant Abdullah.

"For whose death do you croak this time?"

"For the old man who was guard at the house of Kedayer. Murad, sir—he too had a slit throat!"

Chafik was silent. Then he said, "Alas, for that too-faithful servant! And now what else, Abdulah?"

"The patrol that watched outside the house took a lurking man—"

"His name?"

"Raouf, sir," the sergeant said in a voice of doom.

Another day was ended and Inspector Chafik sat once more in his chair in the house on the Street of the Scatterer of Blessings. He had been through so much that Leila had sent their small and dynamic son, Faisal, to friends.

Leila, who had understood her husband for twenty years, arranged a cushion for his head and said softly, "You are tired, my man."

"It is my lot," he said and sighed heavily.

"And mine!" Leila murmured and went on hastily, "I quite understand you are not happy about catching Mrs. Kedayer's brother, yet it was a dreadful thing he did! And all because he was stopped from seeing his sister, and he loved her, and—"

"And? And? You talk like our son, wife!"

Crouching on the stool at his feet, Leila said, "I try to help."

"And you do!" Chafik exclaimed and touched her dark head. "And now, madame," he continued formally, "about this Raouf. I cannot make a true case against him without the confession so essential to our law. He does admit he was near the house at the time of both killings, but he claims he was there only to try to see his sister."

"And what does Mrs. Kedayer say?" Leila asked.

"I could not interrogate her. Two killed on successive nights—it was too much for her in her delicate condition. But obviously she thinks Raouf is guilty. She tried to send him away and denies she heard the cry. It was heard again last night when Murad was killed, and now we know what it was."

Leila waited.

"One of my officers who watched the house is a man of the tents. He recognized it and called it the Bedouin death chant."

"And what is that, my man?" Leila asked.

"Madame, these medieval desert people have a curious code of honor," Chafik explained. "They can-

not kill a sleeping enemy, so they warn the victim with a shout before they draw the knife."

"Horrible! So Mrs. Kedayer thinks her brother obeyed the law of their people and cried the warning before he killed her husband?"

"Yes, and the guard."

Chafik became lost in thought for several moments. Presently he said, "If Raouf thought Murad had seen him, he would have returned to kill again, to protect himself. Oh, it makes a shocking case! That poor lady, has she not suffered enough? Must it be her brother—"

"Hush, my man," Leila said soothingly. "What about those people wo camped under Mr. Kedayer's wall? They were Bedouins and they had reason to kill him. Haven't they been found?"

"No, but they will be," said Chafik. "Nobody can escape my good Abdullah—a perfect example of the American machine age, or possibly a reincarnation of the jinni that sprang from Aladdin's lamp!"

Leila smiled. "Come, my man," she said, and coaxed her husband to bed.

He woke in the night and said, "As Hindawi says, there was a judgment on Kedayer. But who shall judge a simple old servant whose master's word was law?"

"Who is this Hindawi?" Leila asked.

"A would-be saint," Chafik said. "He comes from beyond the western desert, from Jordan."

"He is in Baghdad?" she asked.

"Yes. He leaves tomorrow."

"And he said what?" said Leila.

"Oh, things that annoyed me! Such a rigid mind—he takes the Koran too literally. He even built up a case for killing, based on the passage that says: 'Retaliation for bloodshedding is prescribed to you —'"

The Inspector's voice faded. Suddenly he sat bolt upright.

"Husband! What is it?" Leila demanded.

He did not answer. He got out of bed and stood with arms swinging at his sides, a ridiculous figure in a long nightgown. And then he began to chant: "O believers! retaliaon for bloodshedding is prescribed to you: the free man for the free, and the slave for the slave, and the woman for the woman . . .'"

The Inspector turned to his wife; his face was expressionless. "Don't you understand?" he shouted.

"My man! You terrify me! You —"

"Didn't Murad describe himself as Kedayer's slave? And haven't we had the master—the free man—killed first, and then the servant? The way it happened at Habaniya twenty years ago! And *he's* a Bedouin too, and—" Chafik struck his forehead. "I forgot the rest of it—'the woman for the woman!' A woman!' A woman died then, so now—and he goes away tomorrow! That means— Leila! My shoes!"

The Inspector threw on his

clothes and rushed from the house. His wife went to the window and watched with frightened eyes as the car vanished in a cloud of dust.

Chafik forgot caution as he drove, cut corners and slammed by the occasional carriage that failed to get out of his way. His lips moved, sometimes in prayer, sometimes in a curse.

It was almost dawn when he reached the house of Kedayer. He was challenged there by a patrol and so met Abdullah, who was on an inspection tour. The sergeant saw his superior's face and was alarmed. "You are ill, sir?"

"Ill with apprehension, Abdullah! The truth just came to me. I am afraid for Madame Kedayer!"

"She is safe enough, sir. I have personally kept watch, and nobody has gone in or out of that house."

"The one who may have passed you walks like a cat and is cloaked with night. Even Death is less silent," said Chafik. "We are going in. I do not need the men—the clump of their boots would disturb him. Hurry, Abdullah!"

They ran to the house and silently climbed the wall into the garden. Frogs croaked in the irrigation ditches and awakening birds chirped in the trees.

Chafik led the way to the stairs that went to Madame Kedayer's rooms. An archway opened onto a gallery, and here he stopped with his hand on the sergeant's arm.

They saw the shadow and heard the click of the opening door. The beginning of the dawn was reflected in the blade of the knife.

Abdullah felt for his gun, but Chafik stopped him. In silence the Inspector reached to the shoulder holster under his left arm and took out the automatic he so rarely used.

Then the Inspector threw back his head and gave an extraordinary cry, high and thin—a warning and a challenge.

Inspector Chafik shot Mr. Hindawi as he turned.

Then Chafik was kneeling by the dying man. The house blazed with lights, the police hammered at the gates, and Sergeant Abdullah went about his business. Chafik was aware of nothing but the graying face and whispering voice of the dying man.

"So proper!" gasped Mr. Hindawi. "So proper—to warn me!"

"Your interpretation of the Koranic law was not accurate," Chafik said quietly. "However, that will be explained to you in another place. Just now, tell me one thing: Were you the boy who was left orphaned at Habaniya twenty years ago?"

Mr. Hindawi nodded.

"I do not believe in coincidence," said Chafik. "Did you come here to kill Kedayer?"

The man nodded again, and then forced himself to speak. "I waited my chance—all these years I thought of nothing else. But then I

found that his lady was good, and I thought perhaps I would not take my just revenge, but he—" Hindawi struggled for strength to go on. "I saw Kedayer drive those poor people away—knew he hadn't changed—as the judgment decreed he had to die . . ."

"So you left Kedayer's house because you couldn't be the guest of the man you intended to kill?"

"It would have been improper, dishonorable."

"Ah, you Bedouin!" said Chafik.

He bent to listen as the whispering voice came again. "You remember the garden of the hotel, where we met? I was reminded of the night when it covers with darkness, and of the Lord, who—Speak to me the words that follow!" gasped Mr. Hindawi.

Chafik put his lips to the man's ear. " 'The Lord hath not forsaken thee . . . And surely the future shall be better for thee than the present . . . ,' " he chanted.

"There is so much comfort int he Koran," the Inspector said then, as he covered Mr. Hindawi's face.

DEPARTMENT OF "FIRST STORIES"

This is the 231st "first story" to be published by Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine . . . a sensitive, compact, terrifyingly realistic story, its title recurring like a Greek chorus . . .

The author is in his late thirties. He is married, has three children, and lives in Brooklyn. His "hodge-podge" work-background includes having been a delivery boy, shipping clerk, leather cutter in a handbag factory, and encyclopedia salesman; he is now a printer and assistant foreman in the Composing Room of the "New York Post"—working nights to support his family, working days at his typewriter to—shall we say, support his soul.

Actually, "Go Play With Your Sister" is the 10th story Mr. Goldstein wrote, and the first to sell. But after EQMM purchased this "first story" in May 1961, Mr. Goldstein sold his second—in September 1961 to "Bluebook." It is therefore possible (as so often happens) that the author's second story will have been published first—ahead of this, his true "first story." Either way, Mr. Goldstein is definitely and deservedly on his way!

GO PLAY WITH YOUR SISTER

by HERB GOLDSTEIN

I WENT TO THE STATUE OF LIBERTY today, Mom. With Freddie's mother and my teacher. Freddie's mother fell off the boat and drowned."

A small hand tugging at her apron and the shrill voice accompanying it added to Elizabeth's harried sense of racing on a treadmill. The roast lay uncooked on the kitchen work-table. The dining-room floor had yet to be washed. A million details waiting for her attention, and here it was already three o'clock! Lord, where did the day go! Soon Arthur would be home from work and supper wasn't even started.

"Don't bother me now, Bobby. Mommy's busy. Go out and play with your sister until supper time."

Her son's voice droned on in that flat, high-pitched, barely registering tone that seemed to fill the air of their apartment all the time. Like a washing machine in operation or the fan buzzing, it blended with the too-high level of sound and was lost.

"She screamed and screamed, but nobody heard her except Freddie and me. And after a while she just

sunk down under the water for about a mile."

The six-year-old's words finally came through—some of the really startling things he said sometimes did—and Elizabeth answered without looking up.

"Bobby! Must you always make up such ridiculous stories? In the first place, Freddie's mother is in the hospital. She's bringing home her new baby tomorrow. And in the second place, you won't even have a teacher until you're six and a half and start school! Now go outside to play and let me finish my work before Daddy comes home and finds his supper still raw."

That child! Elizabeth placed the roast on its rack in the oven and turned the heat-control dial to 350 degrees. She opened the broom closet and took out a mop. In the background Bobby's voice continued with only an occasional phrase breaking through.

"And then the car crashed into a whole bunch of people who were crossing the street in the middle of the block . . . Freddie doesn't want a new baby in his house, Mom. I told him it's not so much fun . . . The man in the cellar was so big he almost reached the ceiling with his head, and he was carrying a big black bag over his shoulder . . . Mister Kelly at the butcher shop says he shoots bears on Sunday and sells them all week. Buy some bear meat, Mom . . . Is Daddy coming home early tonight, Mom? I want to tell him about a new swap I made."

"Your father will be home at the time he usually gets here. Now, why don't you be a good boy and go downstairs and play with your sister. You're supposed to be minding her, you know!"

Water dripped from the mop as she wrung it out over the sink and shooed Bobby out of her way. "Into the next room, young man. I'm mopping up in here now."

"Daddy's a good salesman, isn't he, Mom? I mean, he always sells everything he wants to, doesn't he? When I grow up I want to be a salesman, too! Like Daddy."

Elizabeth unscrewed the mop from its handle and held it under the faucet. The sound of running water drowned out Bobby's voice for a blissful moment, and she thought of the apartment. Only the four of us, and if I'm not constantly sweeping and cleaning it looks like a pigsty!

"Why was the man in the cellar, Mom?" Bobby's little voice droned on. She had forgotten he was still there.

"What man, Bobby?" she asked without thinking, then immediately regretted it. Now he'd talk for hours about an imaginary man in the cellar! In an apartment house occupied by fifty families there was always a garbage collector or meter reader or repairman prowling around the basement.

"He had a big black beard, Mom,

like that bad guy on television, and his arms reached almost as far as from one side of the kitchen to the other!"

Another of Bobby's stories! Elizabeth's ears automatically shut off. Now, what time was it when I put that roast up?

"Why do I have a sister, Mom? None of my friends have baby sisters. She's a pain in the neck."

It's no use! Elizabeth thought. There was no way to completely shut out Bobby's voice.

"Your friends are jealous because they don't have a little sister like you have, that's all. So why don't you go downstairs and play with her? You can't very well keep an eye on Sally for me while you're standing here talking my ear off. Go ahead, youngster! Downstairs with you!"

Elizabeth patted her son lightly on the seat of his pants and turned him gently toward the door. "Out! I'll call when Daddy gets home."

"When I grow up will Daddy get me a job where he works? Selling the same as he does, Mom? I'm a good salesman already, you know. Yesterday I sold Freddie three of my picture cards for his rabbit's foot on a chain. That's a good deal, isn't it, Mom?"

"Yes, dear," she answered absently. The child was getting more like his father every day! Sometimes he even looked like Arthur when he talked about the swaps he was forever making. Turning to leave the kitchen she almost stumbled over Bobby. "Young man, will you *please* get out from under my feet so I can finish today? For the last time —go downstairs and take care of your sister!"

The doorbell rang and Elizabeth forgot her son. "It's about time," she said, opening the door to find the grocer's delivery boy waiting.

She gave the boy a dime he didn't deserve, the way he dawdled about, and ushered him out after placing the package on the sink. Returning to the kitchen, she found Bobby hunting through the bag.

"Leave those cookies alone! You'll never be able to eat supper if you have a cookie now. Go on! Outside and play with your sister before I get really angry!"

Bobby walked to the door, but stopped when his mother turned away. He slipped back into the room and climbed on a chair. His feet didn't reach the floor, nor did his elbows come high enough to really lean on the table, but his voice was a good imitation of his father's.

"Mom, how much did I cost you?"

Elizabeth barely heard the question, but answered, "Too much! Are you still here?"

"If I'm going to be a salesman like Daddy, I have to know the prices of all kinds of things, don't I? You don't want me to get cheated, do you? When I sold Freddie those picture cards I got his rab-

bit's foot. And Larry gave me a tennis ball for one of my old comic books. Did I make good deals, Mom?"

"Yes, you're a wonderful salesman, Bobby." Elizabeth tore open the package of cookies and spilled them into the empty cookie jar. At least two pounds of cookies a week and the jar was always empty!

"Can I have a cookie, Mom? I won't be eating supper anyhow."

"You'll have supper with the rest of us," Elizabeth snapped. "Now for the last time, go downstairs and play!"

She crumpled the paper bag from the groceries and brushed crumbs into the garbage can. Returning to the sink, she wiped a smudge of chocolate from its surface with a towel. Now where in the world did chocolate come from? She hadn't ordered any from the grocer.

"Bobby, have you been eating chocolate?"

She turned and looked at her son, seated in the too-big chair, and for the first time noticed his brown-smeared face.

"How many times must I tell you *not* to eat junk between meals?" she said, exasperated. "And where did you get the candy anyway?"

He squirmed in his seat and answered, "I'll tell you when Daddy gets home. I want him to hear, too."

The child's grandmother, of course! She was forever slipping the children nickles and dimes when she visited. There were coins in odd hiding places all over the apartment—Elizabeth usually found at least fifteen cents every time she cleaned thoroughly.

"I suppose you gave Sally candy, too! As if it isn't enough trouble getting her to eat her meals! Bobby, you run downstairs this minute and call your sister. Maybe she hasn't eaten it yet. Hurry, now!"

"But I don't have a sister."

"Look, my fine young man, I'm not playing games! I told you to call your sister. Go downstairs and bring her back up here!"

"But I don't have a sister."

"All right, Mister Bobby, if you don't have a sister, who is that pretty little girl who sleeps in the other bed in your room? Who do we call Sally around here? What do you call that little girl you were playing with today until you came up to drive me crazy?"

"My sister."

"All right then. Go tell her I want her!"

"But I told you, Mom. I don't have a sister any more."

Elizabeth's legs suddenly felt weak, and she sat down across from her imaginative little son. As she watched, he took from his shirt pocket the remains of a pound-sized bar of chocolate.

"Where in the world did you get so much candy?" she asked.

For the first time that day he had all her attention.

"From the man in the cellar, like I told you before. Weren't you

listening? The man in the cellar gave it to me."

She clutched the edge of the table with both hands and forced herself to ask the next question.

"Why? Why did the man give you all that chocolate?"

"I traded him."

"What, for heaven's sake? What could you give him for such a big bar of candy?"

Elizabeth's voice balanced on the rim of hysteria.

Bobby hooked his hands in his belt, the same as Daddy did when telling of a particularly smooth sale. His face was a shrewd caricature of Arthur's—wise, knowing —and his voice was Arthur's voice when he answered:

"The only thing I had that he wanted, Mom."

Elizabeth pushed her chair back and stood on shaking legs. Her eyes opened wide as she stared at her six-year-old son, all of Arthur's shrewdness concentrated in his smooth, shining face. Slowly, her numb legs twisted and she turned to the window.

Leaning far out, she examined the scurrying dots five stories below, searching hopelessly for a tiny blonde head, a wispy blue dress.

"Sally!" she screamed. "Sally, where are you!"

DEPARTMENT OF "FIRST STORIES"

This is the 232nd "first story" to be published by Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine . . . a delicate, touching story, with two finely drawn characters, and genuine pathos . . .

The author is in his mid-thirties. He was born in Baltimore, Maryland, had an unhappy childhood (Mr. Stone's own phrase), spent ten years in McDonogh Military School, then went to Yale, and was graduated in 1958—all the details of which, the author says, "might go together to make up another of those terrible, trite novels about our latest lost generation." We wonder . . .

Since Yale: several seasons of summer stock; marriage to a dancer and musical comedy performer; affiliation with Jerome Robbins and his Ballets; tour of 16 countries—the tour sponsored by the State Department; Dallas Civic Opera Company; American Shakespeare Festival—and in the midst of such a busy career, he continues to write . . . The prospects for Mr. Thomas P. Stone are tremendously bright!

A TIME FOR TEA

by THOMAS P. STONE

BOTH MISS MILDRED BONNER AND her sister Emily overslept their time that day. The noon sirens woke them—woke Mildred, anyway—with their ear-splitting whine. Em moaned but didn't move; deafness was only half the reason. In her simple way she had always been beyond intrusion, like a child or porcelain doll. Her sister had never doubted that Em could pass through Hell and think it was Heaven.

Mildred sighed and slipped into her robe. It seemed absurd that they should sleep so late; this day demanded strength and here was old age creeping up on them, obstructing resolution. With Em no help, Mildred would have to carry things through alone, and then, with all that to burden her, there wasn't enough time. Noon already, and tea only five hours away.

She shuffled out front to the shop, a tiny place, no larger than a cigar store, with an atmosphere suitable to Greenwich Village. The shop was quaint and cluttered, most of its available space taken up by bric-a-brac: spinning jennies, gas lamps, tiered tables, chandeliers, pastoral paintings, a tiny secretary bulging with bills, and several small, glass-

fronted display cupboards for jewelry. Even with half of this in crates and cardboard boxes, the shop's ancient charm still survived, and it was impossible to move, much less to find anything, especially now that so much had been disturbed.

Mildred hovered uncertainly for a moment in the center of the room, searching for their teapot—Emily had obviously forgotten again and put it on display. She finally found it and was about to return to the bedroom where a sign on the front window, barely noticeable through the mélange, caught her eye.

!EGALLIV EHT EVAS, it said, backwards, and on a hastily applied although dramatic diagonal.

Mildred shuffled quickly to the bedroom and exchanged her robe for an overcoat and her slippers for a pair of thick-heeled walking shoes. She grabbed a spatula from the wall, returned through the shop, unlocked the front door, and went out onto the street.

BONNER'S ANTIQUES, Bought and Sold, said the sign over the window, in fancy, gold, early American lettering. And beneath it, pasted on the pane itself, was the alien notice, *SAVE THE VILLAGE!*

Mildred removed it with the spatula as quickly and as thoroughly as she could and re-entered the shop. There was a chill in the early spring air—no weather for an old woman dressed so scantily; it had rushed up under her overcoat, penetrating to the marrow of her bones, and every breath had augmented ridiculous notice! What good would it do anyway? She muttered her way back to the bedroom.

"What's wrong, dear?" said Emily, having at last been aroused by Mildred's activities. Em's gray head and blue, watery eyes peeked over the edge of the quilt. It was a Lillian Gish face that finally emerged, soft, round, and agelessly lovely. Mildred had recently unearthed some old brown photographs of her sister and Richard, taken at Newport near the turn of the century; sixty years had hardly changed Emily, and senility had served only to heighten her glow of pure innocence—a glow which had survived Richard's death and seemed even able to persist on such a day as this.

"Oh, it's those darn sign stickers again," said Mildred, struggling with both her overcoat and the clumsiness of her heavy, stubborn body. "You'd think they'd learn to leave people in peace. The buildings are going to be torn down anyway."

Emily considered for a moment. "What sign stickers, dear?"

Mildred looked at her sister and shook her head sadly. A long time ago she had envied Emily her age and experience. Now she was grateful for the seven years which separated them. Someone had to handle things.

"Those 'Save the Village' people,"

Mildred answered. "You remember, the ones who went to see the Mayor about preserving the houses on our block."

"How nice of them," said Emily.

Mildred sighed. "Oh, I suppose so. But you'd think they'd have the decency to wait until we've left before posting their notices. One doesn't have to be reminded of it."

"Yes, dear."

"At least they haven't started painting those awful white X's on the windows."

Emily's wrinkles emerged with an effort of deep concentration. "They're going to do that soon," she said, and her expression became sad as she remembered. "Tomorrow."

"Yes, and I suppose that real estate man will be around again this afternoon." Mildred put a pot of water on the stove for their eggs and tea.

"I don't know what he expects," said Emily, pulling up her knees and using them to rest her chin. "We're doing the best we can."

"Like all of us," Mildred said, "he expects not to be unnecessarily bothered."

"Oh, my goodness!" said Emily, leaping—if that could describe her slow descent from the bed to the floor—out of bed. "It's past noon!"

"Yes, Em."

"And on this day, too! Imagine! And I almost forgot."

"I know dear."

Emily disappeared into the bathroom to begin her half-hour toilette, and Mildred sighed and took the water off the stove.

Later that afternoon most of the arrangements were completed. Mildred and Emily had packed away the shop's most treasured items—those which they had never intended to sell in the first place—wrapping them carefully in newspaper and excelsior. The rest—that part of the inventory which they had collected with the thought that it might appeal to prospective customers—they left cluttering the walls and floor, to be destroyed with the building.

The real estate man arrived about three thirty and was pleased with their progress.

"Tomorrow's the day, you know," he said, symbolically spreading his cigar ashes over the floor.

"We're quite aware of that," said Mildred.

"Yes," said Emily, with indignation.

"Well, if there's anything I can do to help . . ."

"Thank you," said Mildred, "but you've succeeded in making that an impossibility."

"Yes," said Emily, "and besides, we've made our own arrangements, thank-you-very-much. We've managed alone most of our lives. I suppose we can do it now."

"Now, ladies!" said the man, a pained expression on his face.

"Please! I'm not the one who makes the decisions."

"We know that, young man," said Mildred, "but you certainly have a hand in their execution."

"A flunky," said Emily, her eyes shining.

"Oh, my God!" said the man, backing toward the door. "There's one in every block!"

"Two here," said Emily, "and don't swear around us, young man!"

"Yes, m'am," he said and retreated out onto the street, walking away and shaking his head.

"Oh," said Emily, sighing, "I wouldn't have given up this day for anything! It's been so exciting!"

"Now relax," said Mildred. "Remember, you're not as young as you used to be."

"Yes, dear," said Emily quietly. "We don't want to go spoiling things now."

"No, dear. But he was so funny. He didn't know what to do! I do feel sorry for him, though. Think of how terrible his job must be, having to tell all those people that their homes are going to be demolished."

"I'm sure it doesn't bother him in the least."

"Not in the least?"

"No."

Emily sighed again. "Oh, perhaps not." She looked around at the huge clock in the corner. "It's almost four."

"And a lot still to be done."

Both of them turned back to their work, and after a moment of rustling through the excelsior, Emily said, "What do you suppose they'll be building here?"

"A brand-new, air-conditioned, twenty-story luxury apartment building," said Mildred, having read the sign on the corner a dozen times.

"But didn't they just build one up the street?"

"Yes."

"Where do you suppose they find all the people who can afford to live in such places?"

"I don't know."

"And they're tearing down that nice little grocery store on the corner, and the Mercer's Pharmacy?"

"Yes."

"Poor things! What do you suppose they'll do?"

"Go on to another place."

"Oh, and it was so nice here! I'll bet things would've turned out differently if Richard were alive."

Mildred stood up. "Now, Emily, we agreed that there wouldn't be any wishful thinking—about *anything*."

"I'm sorry, dear."

"After all, Richard passed away twenty years ago. And as you yourself just said, we've managed perfectly well alone. You can't go on wishing Richard were here."

"I haven't been, Milly."

"Well," said Mildred, "now is not the time to start being nostalgic. We have enough on our minds."

"Yes, dear," said Emily.

The clock finally struck five.

Mildred looked around the room. There were still some things left to be packed, but not enough to worry about. Besides, the ache in her back had become unbearable, and Emily, poor thing, had long since sat down to rest in the rocker, and was now fast asleep.

"Emily," said Mildred softly, gently touching her sister's shoulder. "Wake up. It's time for tea."

Emily opened her eyes and looked at her sister for a moment before smiling. "Oh," she said, "so soon?"

"Yes, dear."

Emily sat up. "My goodness, you certainly have done a lot of work. I'm sorry I fell asleep. I've been like an old cow today, haven't I?"

Mildred smiled. "Well, you can make up for that by fixing us a wonderful tea."

"Do you really think I can?" asked Emily, looking earnestly at her sister.

"Of course. Remember, we wrote the whole thing down, and besides, you know you brew the best tea in the world."

"All right," said Emily, "I'll try." She stood up. "Shall we have it here, or in the back?"

"Here, I think. It would be nicer. Now let's go and clean up a little first."

Emily had arranged things beautifully. Their little table was covered by a fine cloth of antique lace, and she had unpacked a lovely set of gold and white Meissen china. There was even a flower and two little pastries.

"I went down to the corner while you were in the bath," she said, a little apologetically. "I thought it would be nice to have a little flower, and also something to eat in case the tea tasted different."

"It's lovely," said Mildred. "Thank you. And I'm sure the tea will be just fine."

It was, and Mildred relaxed in her chair, sipping the tea slowly. She had been so afraid that something would go wrong, and now that it hadn't, she felt exhausted, absolutely exhausted. Their last day in the shop had been a long one.

The two of them sat without speaking. It was odd, now that the window had been somewhat cleared, to be able to see so much of the street, and from the darkness of their little shop, seated far at its rear, Mildred watched curiously as the people hurried by, many of them studying their reflections in the glass as they passed. It was almost as though the sisters were looking through a two-way mirror, watching people who were unable to see them.

They remained silent until they had almost finished the entire pot of tea. Both felt a slight drowsiness.

Mildred wondered if there wasn't something she should say, but the

effort seemed too great. It was Emily who finally spoke.

"Mildred, dear," she said, her voice a little troubled, "don't you think we ought to write something? I mean, isn't that usual?"

Mildred turned to smile consolingly at her poor, older sister, looking at her for the first time since they had begun their tea; she saw lovely Emily, whose face was smoothed of wrinkles in the soft, golden light filtering through the window, lovely Emily Howard, wife of Richard; and at that moment, inconsiderately and in spite of all precautions, something did slip out of life to sit at tea between them.

"To whom should we write, Emily, dear?" said Mildred sadly. "To whom?"

Here is the case that Watney considered Mr. Schlock Homes's most successful, and surely it is one of The Great Detective's most subtle and amusing . . .

THE ADVENTURE OF THE MISSING PRINCE

by ROBERT L. FISH

IT WAS A BRIGHT THURSDAY MORNING in May, in the year of '48. I had come into the breakfast room of our quarters at 221B Bagel Street to find my friend Mr. Schlock Homes in the process of lighting his after-breakfast hookah, a gift from the Sultan of Swat, the former Bey Beruit.

After exchanging our usual morning courtesies, I sat down to eat, selecting one of the journals from a pile by the desk, and perusing it intently as I attacked my first kipper. A moment later my thoughts were disrupted.

"I should not even think of the tweed, my dear Watney," Homes remarked, a mischievous smile lighting his face.

"On the contrary," I replied absently, and then looked up in startled amazement. "Really, Homes! I fail to see . . ."

"Precisely, Watney," my friend interjected. "And yet it is neither mind-reading nor legerdemain. You have a set method of attacking your *Daily Times*. You begin by reading the headlines of the extreme right-hand article; your eye then travels to the left-hand article, and you finally concentrate on the centre article. The right-hand article in today's *Times* deals with a red-petrol case, which held no interest for you. On the left you found a column-head concerning a state visit of an African potentate and his retinue who are here for conferences and to enjoy the theatre season. When this proved of no interest to you, you continued to the centre. Here you read that a stock merger was to be effected, and your eyebrows lifted in interest. As you continued further into the article, a smile appeared upon your face. Obviously the merger will affect your holdings, small as they are, and you wondered at this point if you might afford some small extravagance. Your eye then travelled speculatively to the wardrobe chest. I recall that a few days ago we paused at a window in Regent Street and you commented upon a tweed suit you saw displayed there. Therefore my remark."

"It does seem simple after you ex-

plain it," I admitted, my original annoyance abating a bit. "Actually, however, this is the *Herald Press* in my hand, and I have been reading, with pleasure I admit, an article on the advantages of passing one's holidays on our lovely English rivers. I had more or less decided on the Tweed, and was wondering if my wardrobe still contained the straw floater I won on Boat Race night in '14, when you spoke."

Homes hid his chagrin by returning to his hookah.

"Incidentally," I added smugly, "I see that you have another case coming up, which should be a lucrative one. The person coming to see you should be here very soon, if he is not already overdue."

"Excellent, Watney! You are improving! It would be interesting to learn the reasons for your statement."

I shifted in my seat, imitating the pedantic tones of my colleague. "You have preceded me to breakfast, which indicates to me that you have an appointment, obviously an early one. Your selection of costume informs me that the person is an important one, since you often receive your brother Criscroft and others in your dressing-gown. Hence a lucrative case."

"But why a case at all, my dear Watney?" asked Homes, his eyes twinkling. "Certainly in our many adventures we have made sufficient acquaintances, many of high rank, so that one might be calling for no reason other than to extend his regards."

"That was the simplest of all deductions," I answered dryly. "To be frank, your good humor this morning is a welcome change from the irritability which has had you in its grip for the past week. Only a new case could have wrought this change in your behaviour."

Homes laughed aloud in pure enjoyment. "Actually," he said, copying my tones with a faithfulness that was characteristic of his great histrionic ability, "I had a dentist's appointment this morning, and dressed accordingly. Then, one half-hour ago, I received a telegram cancelling it, as my dentist himself has been taken severely with toothache. Hence, as you say, my good humour."

To hide my chagrin, I ate another kipper. Homes arose and laid his arm in a kindly fashion across my shoulders. "At least, Watney," he said, smiling in a friendly style, "we are free of other appointments today. Possibly we can spend the afternoon at the concert hall. Joshua Lowfitz and his Trumpeters are doing the Waltz of Jericho, and I understand their performance brings the house down."

"I should like that, Homes," I said, rising to my feet. But our plans for a musical afternoon were not to be realized, for at that moment there came the sound of a carriage-wheel scraping against the kerb,

and we looked out of the window to see a heavily veiled woman descend and enter our doorway.

As we waited for her arrival, Homes stared in frowning concentration at the coat-of-arms emblazoned on the carriage below. A moment later our page ushered in our visitor, who was followed by a liveried footman carrying a small bundle.

"Mr. Schlock Homes?" The voice was musical, but taut with suppressed emotion.

Homes bowed slightly, moving his hand in a gentlemanly gesture toward a chair. The veiled woman seated herself on the very edge as she spoke.

"Mr. Homes, believe me when I say that the secrecy of any of your past endeavors is as nothing to the confidential nature of the case which I now bring you. Because of the eminent position of the family which I represent, even the little information I am able to give you must be treated with the utmost circumspection."

She paused, as if seeking further words, and then with a muffled sob she fumbled in her reticule and withdrew an envelope which she handed to Homes.

He withdrew from the envelope a wrinkled sheet of paper, perused it quickly, his eyes glittering with excitement. I passed to his side and read the message over his shoulder. It was printed in crudely formed letters, and read:

"No sens lookin under the bed or wistlin. We got him. If you wanna see him agin put eleven millun quid in a shu-box. Give it to the cooks boy he nose wat to do with it. Dont tell the busies or you wont never see him no more.

(sined) The Gang

"Ps. if you cant raise that much you kin put in less but dont go under five quid or you really wont see him no more.

"Pss. Better put in some toffies to, it can do no harm."

Homes was breathing heavily with excitement as he finished the note. He folded the wrinkled paper carefully, and laid it upon the desk before turning back to our distrait visitor.

"Can you give me a description of the little fellow?" he asked softly.

There was another muffled sob from behind the veil. "He is about eight years old," she said, "with long silky hair, black eyes, and the cutest pointed ears! And his nose is long and square and all speckled."

"And the family wants him back?" I asked in amazement.

"Desperately," she said simply. She turned back to Homes. "When he was taken, they also took his little blanket. However, I brought with me the little blanket that was his father's when he was small. I did not know if it would help, but they are identical, and I felt I should bring anything that might prove to be of use."

She took the bundle from the footman behind her and placed it in Homes's hands. His eyes lit up as he saw the word *Rex* embroidered in gold thread in one corner.

"Of course!" he muttered audibly. "I should have recognized the crest on the carriage! It is Prince . . ."

"Hush!" commanded the veiled figure. "No names!" She rose and walked to the door. "Time, Mr. Homes, is of the essence!"

"I swear I shall not rest until I resolve this," Homes promised fervently. "If your Ladyship could call at this hour to-morrow, I hope to have a definite answer for you."

"Oh, pray heaven that you shall!" came the muffled reply, and with no further word she passed through the door, to be followed immediately by the silent, liveried servant.

As soon as the sound of the carriage had died away in Bagel Street, Homes fell into a chair and began studying the note with fierce concentration. I stood behind him and also reread it, but it provoked no startling ideas.

"Do you suspect it of being in code, Homes?" I asked, watching his frowning features carefully.

"No, no, Watney!" he replied impatiently. "It is precisely what it purports to be—a note demanding ransom. Still, a fairly clear picture of the writer begins to emerge from his note."

I studied the wrinkled paper in his hand once again. "But I see nothing in it to give any clue whatsoever as to its author," I objected.

Homes laughed shortly. "Do you not? Really, Watney, there are times when I despair of you! Certainly it should be evident to all that the writer of this note comes from a tropical climate, is visiting London for the first time, and is a great admirer of George Bernard Shaw!"

"Now really, Homes!" I cried. "This is a serious case! You gain nothing by levity at a time like this."

"Oh, I am quite serious! In time you shall know all, Watney, but at the moment, there is little time to lose." He sprang from his chair, beginning to undo his cravat. "It is essential that I got out for a few hours. If you would be so kind as to arrange a hansom for me, I shall hurry and change into more suitable vestments."

"But, Homes," I said, studying his neat clothing with surprise, "There is nothing wrong with your present costume."

He smiled enigmatically and disappeared into his room. I sent our page to flag down a passing cab, and he managed to have one waiting at our portal when Homes emerged once again. I gaped in astonishment; for had it not been for the familiar grin of my old friend, I should have sworn that I was facing the actress, Diana Dors.

"Homes!" I cried in astonishment.

"Later, Watney," he chuckled,

and with the supreme artistry that marked every detail of his incredible impersonations, he rearranged his features and minced from the room.

It was dusk before Homes returned. His high heels tapped quickly up the steps, and once in the room he removed his spiked shoes, slipped off his blonde wig, and flung himself into a chair.

"It is as I suspected," he said. "An inside job! However, I have the miscreants located, and to-night we shall see the end of this foul plan! I suggest, Watney, that we have a bite of supper, for we must go out again tonight. And you had best arrange a bull's-eye lantern and also take along your pistol, for I know not what deviltry we may encounter."

"You mean . . ." I began.

"Yes," he said. "Our case is nearly finished. To-night, I hope to effect the rescue. But now, if you will call for Mrs. Essex, I suggest we satisfy the inner man, for I have gone without lunch, and we have a long night ahead of us."

He refused to speak further until our supper had been placed upon the table, and then the only words he offered was a curt request for the salt. It was not until our supper was represented by soiled dishes that Homes leaned back and sought solace from his hookah. Another person might have appeared ridiculous sitting there in a low-cut dress sucking on the curved pipe, but Homes appeared quite natural.

"Well, Homes," I said, leaning back in surfeit, "if we have time I would certainly appreciate an explanation of this very odd affair."

"Certainly, Watney," he replied, his eyes twinkling. "Actually, we have several hours until we must leave." He laid aside his hookah, and reaching for the note which he had left upon the desk.

"There are several things which are evident from this note, Watney. First, you may note that they request eleven million pounds to be placed in a shoe-box. It should have been apparent to you at first glance that this amount of money, even in the maximum of denomination, is far too great for the capacity of even the largest shoe-box; hence the deduction that the writer was unfamiliar with shoe-boxes, and therefore, with shoes. The only conclusion one could logically draw was that he came from a tropical climate where shoes were not a necessity.

"Then, too, you will note his instruction to pass the money to one of Cook's boys. It is evident that the writer of the note did not realize that Thomas Cook have eleven branches in London, or he would have been more specific. From the fact that this was unknown to him, it must be deduced that this was his first visit to London."

"But his admiration for George Bernard Shaw?" I cried.

"That was the most simple of all deductions," Homes replied. "Surely you must have noted that the ransom note was written in reformed spelling!"

I sat in silent admiration of this masterful analysis. "But even knowing all this, Homes," I finally said, "I fail to see how you were able to locate the miscreants."

Homes reached over and took the *Daily Times* from the pile in the corner. "You have a short memory, Watney," he said, smiling briefly. "Do you not recall that just this morning I mentioned an article regarding the visit of an African potentate and his retinue? In that retinue there are bound to be some who are visiting London for the first time; moreover, they come from a climate where shoes are unnecessary; and among other things, they came to enjoy the theatre season. I would wager that Shaw was their first choice!"

"And from this you deduced an inside job?"

Homes nodded. "They are guests at the Palace," he said. "I know it is difficult to pass the Palace guards at any time. Surely any attempt to take a small boy past—a boy who would certainly be recognized, or who might attract attention by screaming—that is quite impossible. No, Watney, there is no doubt. He is being held in the Palace itself."

"In their quarters?"

Homes shook his head. "I do not believe so. With the consultant presence of upstairs maids and housekeepers, it would be extremely dangerous. I should imagine they have him locked in one of the unused basement rooms—possibly one of the coal-cellars, since in this weather they would be unused."

He arose, and stepping into his high-heeled shoes, adjusted his wig. "But it is getting onto the hour for our departure. I suggest you arrange your accoutrements, for we must be on our way."

Moments later we were seated in a cab heading for the Palace. I had slipped the bull's-eye lantern under my cape, and my pistol was concealed in my waistcoat pocket.

"But are you familiar with the room arrangement at the Palace?" I asked, as our cab clattered over the cobbled pavement along Piccadilly.

"I spent the afternoon there," replied my friend simply. "The guard allowed me, as a returning celebrity, to visit my humble old aunt, who is housekeeper in charge of the royal linens. And I explained, as I left, that I would be coming back tonight with an aged uncle to have one last chat before sailing for the colonies." He turned to me seriously. "In the course of searching for the powder-room, I was able to make a complete search of the premises. When we arrive, I suggest you allow me to do the talking, as I made, I believe, quite an impression upon the guard!"

Our hansom drew up to a back

entrance of the great, ornate building, and moments later we found ourselves inside, in a long, empty corridor.

"This way, Watney!" Homes whispered in great excitement, once the outer door had closed behind us.

He drew me by the hand to a staircase in one corner, leading downward. The lower level was dark, and I handed him the lantern. Removing the cover, he sent the light flickering over a series of cellar doors.

We made our way silently along the narrow passageway, as Homes paused at each door, listening intently. Suddenly he raised his hand for complete quiet, and turned to me with triumphant satisfaction engraved in every line of his face.

"In here, Watney!" he whispered. "Come, we must break it down!"

Making as little noise as possible, we placed our shoulders to the door and heaved with all our might. The door sprang open, with a clatter that we feared might bring our adversaries down upon us, but apparently the heavy floors and thick walls of the Palace contained the sound, for there was no outcry.

Homes immediately swung the lantern about the small room, and there in one corner, as he had so accurately predicted, was the figure of a small boy hunched back in terror on a pile of coal. At his feet was a dog who came bounding up, licking our hands.

"There, there!" said Homes soothingly, drawing the terrified boy to his breast. "It is all right—we are friends."

He stroked the boy's silky hair as I inspected the young lad. It was true that his ears were slightly pointed, but the smear of coal dust across his face prevented me from noticing any speckles on his nose. The small figure clung to Homes, weeping copiously.

"There is nothing to fear, your Highness," Homes said in a kindly voice. "Come, let us take you to your suite. I am sure that no further attempt will be made against your person."

He led us from the cellar, up the stairway to the upper corridor, with the dog following behind, trying to lick our heels. Once in the upper reaches, however, the boy suddenly broke away, and dashed down the corridor and out of sight. I began to follow, but Homes laid a restraining hand upon my arm.

"Let him go his way alone," he said, a happy smile creasing his face. "It will be a nice surprise for their Majesties!"

He turned to the door, with the little dog following us.

"But what shall we do with the dog, Homes?" I queried.

He paused in thought. "Why, Watney," he finally said, "we have long needed a mascot. Let us take him home with us, in memory of a case where we have been able to serve our country!"

I lifted the little creature, placing him under my cape for warmth, and we made our way back to our cab.

Although our activities the previous evening had consumed many hours normally devoted to sleep, the following morning found us both dressed and at breakfast at 8 o'clock, prepared to welcome the veiled emissary from the Palace. Our little mascot lay quietly at our feet, while Homes fed him scraps from the table.

At the sound of the carriage below, the great detective quickly arose and opened the door to our quarters, and before anyone could stop him, our little mascot had sprung outside and was racing down the steps.

"After him, Homes!" I cried, jumping to my feet.

"Not now," Homes replied. "We cannot keep a messenger from her Majesty waiting."

There appeared to be a commotion in the street, but we waited patiently at the door. Moments later, the sound of footsteps came hurrying up, and the lady from the carriage stood before us. Her veil was tossed back from her radiant face, and her eyes glowed.

"Mr. Homes!" she cried. "You have done it! You have found him!" She was clasping the dog tightly as she lifted her shining eyes to his in profound gratitude.

"It was really nothing," Homes said modestly, although the sparkle of satisfaction gleamed in his eyes.

She pressed a signet ring firmly into his hand. "This is in gratitude from an appreciative country," she said, and without another word, turned and left our quarters.

The impression of the signet ring is still there, and Homes often looks at it in contemplation on those long winter evenings when we sit about the fireplace and recall his most successful case.

EDITORS' FILE CARD

AUTHOR:	**GERALD KERSH**
TITLE:	***A Deal in Overcoats***
TYPE:	Crime Story
CRIMINAL:	Karmesin
LOCALES:	Paris, etc.
TIME:	Who knows?
COMMENTS:	*The overcoats were, in fact, coats of paint, and the cloth was old canvas . . . the tale of a colossal art fraud told by Karmesin, the "greatest crook or the greatest liar the world has ever known."*

IN ANY CIRCUMSTANCES MY FRIEND Karmesin is rather better than life-size, but when the weather turns chilly and he puts on his winter overcoat, passers-by sometimes run around the block to see him again, advancing in all his outrageous majesty. For in this coat, which is of some moth-eaten blackish-gray fur, with his great red face and his mustache which, like the philosopher Nietzsche's hangs down in corkscrew curls, he has the air of a hard-up Jove wrapped in his last leaky thundercloud.

"Oh, let people look," he said to me, "they will never see a coat like this again. It is the last."

"Too bad," I said.

"Yes. It is made of the fur of the Mongolian Syrax. This pelt was taken off an extinct beast found frozen along with the mammoths in the Siberian snows." He shot his cuffs. "You know, considering it is forty-seven thousand years old, it is not very much the worse for wear."

Now Karmesin has been described as either the greatest crook or the greatest liar the world has ever known. But how is it possible to reconcile the evident penniless-ness of this remarkable man with his accounts of his unfailing success as a master thief? And, if you know Karmesin, you ask yourself, "How is it possible that such a man could condescend to lie?"

Mongolian Syrax, for example! There was no mention of any such beast, extinct or otherwise, in any available reference work. No furrier had ever heard of such a creature. Yet I still feel in my heart that somehow or other the authorities must be wrong. "Look at the Piltdown Skull," I say to myself. "Oh, surely, there must have been one—just *one*—Mongolian Syrax!"

Such is the power of the man.

He rolled himself a cigarette fat as a cheroot, and put it between his lips. Under that portentous mustache it looked no bigger than a thermometer.

He said, "I once made a little money out of a kind of overcoats. I cannot bother to recall the exact amount. Tens of thousands—there are people nowadays to whom it would be a small fortune, I hear. Offer me a cup of coffee and I will tell you about it."

In the café Karmesin settled himself comfortably, pocketed four lumps of sugar and some toothpicks, and went on:

The overcoats to which I refer (said Karmesin) were, in fact, coats of paint, and the cloth was secondhand canvas. Yes, they were pictures, supposed to be the work of the French artist Paul Gauguin. Even the likes of you, my friend, will have heard of Gauguin, since I am told both Mr. George Sanders and Sir Laurence Olivier portrayed him in *The Moon and Sixpence.*

As a character, Gauguin cannot miss with the general public: he deserted his family, swindled his friends, thrashed his mistresses, and (to paraphrase Mr. Longfellow) departing left behind him toothmarks in the hands that fed him.

But he painted some quite decorative pictures in the South Seas. They make suburban homes look artistic, especially in light oak frames. And although he was poor in his unsavory lifetime, some time after his death his pictures became immensely valuable. So, since his brushwork is not too difficult to imitate, the faking of Gauguins was, until recently, something like a little industry in itself.

For example, I knew an innkeeper near Arles who made twenty million francs by selling a Gauguin portrait of his grandfather, purported to have been left by the painter in lieu of cash for an unsettled bill. The innkeeper sold two hundred and eighty of these "originals" before he retired—used to buy them by the dozen from a dealer in Marseilles; nail one over a hole in the chicken coop, and wait for a tourist to "discover" it.

You see, even if your sucker can be persuaded that he has been caught, he can generally be relied on to keep his mouth shut. He loathes being revealed as a fool. That is why so few clever fakers of works of art are exposed in their lifetimes.

But by about 1945 mere copies of

famous paintings by Paul Gauguin became a drug on the market. By that date, it has been calculated, more than five million dollars had been spent on spurious originals of one canvas alone, the one named *Te Po.* It was necessary to discover a hitherto unheard-of Gauguin picture.

I gave only a passing thought to the matter, being occupied with more lucrative affairs just then. But as luck would have it, I ran into an impecunious painter named Molosso—and here, if you like, was an extraordinary type! He was, in a way, a little like the Dutch hero, Van Meegeren, who painted pictures alleged to be by old Dutch masters with such consummate skill, and such scientific meticulousness, that he fooled all the German experts, and got undisclosed millions out of such collectors as the Reichsmarshal Goering.

Van Meegeren reproduced the same pigments that the old masters had used, ground out of identical earths and jewels in the same kind of mortars with exactly similar pestles; and he applied his paint with hair-for-hair reconstructions of the old brushes, upon genuine but worthless contemporary canvases, copying the strokes of the great artists to the tiniest capillary, with an exquisite perfection of microscopic skill that has never been equaled.

Or perhaps it has? What Van Meegeren did, might not someone else have done? Da Vinci's *Mona Lisa,* in the Louvre, is alleged by some experts to be a fake. Believe me, my young friend, some strange stories might come out if some of our famous art galleries were carefully examined today!

Well, my little Molosso was a lesser Van Meegeren. I really marvel at this kind of man—I am lost in wonder, that one who can paint a new picture as superbly as, say, Vermeer would have painted it if he had chosen the subject, should not elect to be a great genius in his own right. Why didn't this titanic faker Van Meegeren cry, "But *I* am the master!"

I can only assume that his genius was not strong enough; it had its rotten spot, and poverty found it, so that he argued, "Why should I go hungry as Van Meegeren, when I can drink champagne by pretending to be Vermeer?" So he faked, and it was a great joke. But it was also a pitiful tragedy, an Allegory of Genius Strangled by Greed.

Little Molosso started to paint with a high spirit and a light heart. But your true artist must be made of tough stuff, and Molosso wanted heart. A great man can whitewash a barn for a bit of bread without losing the glory and the dream; but when Molosso learned that the world preferred to spend its money on greeting cards rather than canvases, he drifted into the position of a disgruntled mediocrity who enjoyed being what they call "misunderstood."

He would have gone to the dogs completely but for his wife, a cheerful little woman, who adored him and took his ill-treatment of her as a matter of course. And in abusing her Molosso could feel as a hungry genius is romantically supposed to feel—that if he had been a man like Gauguin, with spirit enough to leave her abruptly with a parting punch in the jaw, he might have been recognized as great. As it was, he was kind enough to stay married to her and let her work for him.

For her sake I decided to make Molosso rich.

The idea came to me suddenly one evening after I had walked home with him from the printer's office at which, I being there on business, he had scraped an acquaintance with me. I was amused by his preposterous virulence—it broke out when we were passing a printseller's shop. Rembrandt painted with mud, he shouted, Da Vinci was a plumber, Van Gogh painted in Braille for the blind, and as for Gauguin—*bah!*—he, Molosso, had painted better when he was eighteen!

"And if you don't believe me, come upstairs and I'll prove it," he said.

Having time to kill, I went to see what he had to show. And indeed, Molosso really did have a most peculiar talent. Alas, it was a talent without soul! He was so empty of original spirit that he almost frightened me.

How shall I put it? If you asked him to depict, for instance, a landscape he had seen, he would stand helpless, paralyzed, while the paint dried on his palette. But if you said, "Molosso, paint me a landscape as Salvator Rosa, or Turner, or Van Gogh *might* have painted it," why, then he would go to work at once, with tremendous energy, and the results would have been astonishing—if he had not tired of the game in the middle.

Since we had been talking of Gauguin, he pulled out a half-finished canvas, saying, "There. Painted when I was eighteen. I'd thought of passing it off as genuine to some fat pig of a collector, just to show my disdain for collectors in general, and that leprous charlatan of a Gauguin in particular. But I thought, oh, what the devil, they are beneath my contempt! But look—there's your precious Gauguin in every stroke, every line, every vulgar splash of eye-catching color. It was to have been a variation on one of that ham-fisted stockbroker's Polynesian themes. I was going to call it *Oalámaóa.*"

"Meaning?" I asked.

"Meaning simply *Oalámaóa*—men, pigs, women, hibiscus, and bananas. What else is there in the Pacific?"

I looked closely and long. And it was then that my scheme sprouted, swelled, and blossomed to perfection like one of those Japanese paper flowers in warm waters.

Now, as I was about to speak, Molosso's wife came in, carrying a package of groceries and three bottles of wine. He did not even say "Hello" to her—simply jerked a thumb in her direction and said to me, "That's Lucille, the cross I have to bear."

I said, "Madame, I am most impressed by your husband's work, and propose to offer him a commission worthy of his brush."

"What does she know?" cried Molosso. "She sews buttons on rich women's drawers in a lingerie shop in the Rue de Miromesnil. But are you serious, sir? A commission?"

"If you are free," I said.

"Free! I wish I were!" said Molosso, with a bitter look at his nice little wife. "But sir, I'd do anything in the world rather than continue to paint sickening cherubs and nauseating roses for Minard's Hand-Painted Greeting Cards."

"Work for me for six months, then," I said, "and I will pay you one thousand dollars American every month. All your expenses will be paid. At the end of our association, I will pay you thirty thousand dollars in cash. Well?"

Well! So began what must be the neatest piece of polite skulduggery that even the rare picture business has ever known. And these, my friend, are very strong words indeed.

So. A few months later I called on no less a person than Mr. Egon Mollock, in his suite at the Crillon. He had come to Paris for his usual annual visit, seeking what he might devour, for he was a multimillionaire and a collector. Of what? Of anything that nobody else had, of anything any other collector would give his ears for.

He was not a lover of beauty; only of rarity. If wart hogs had been scarce he would have collected wart hogs. As it was, he went after original works of art, which he kept locked up in his mansion in Connecticut.

To this loveless jailer of the beautiful, I said, "I have news for you, in confidence, Mr. Mollock. Imogene Grible wants to sell a Gauguin."

"Very likely," said he. "But I happen to know that the Gobseck Collection is entailed."

"Exactly. That is why I am empowered to speak to you—in the strictest confidence."

I should explain, here, that Lucian Gobseck was one of those mystery men of money whose histories always have to be hushed up. He came up overnight like a toadstool, and helped to finance Louis Napoleon's *coup d'état*; had a long, murky career as company promoter, moneylender, and unofficial pawnbroker to the great, and died in 1899, leaving a colossal fortune and an art collection which hardly anyone has ever been allowed to look at.

The collection is entailed—in oth-

er words, it is an heirloom; it may be inherited, but never sold. And such an inheritance, nowadays, is the legatee's nightmare. There is many a proud inheritor who, ruined by death taxes and insurance premiums, prays day and night for a good hot fire fanned by a hard dry wind.

Gobseck's only child, a girl, reversed the accepted order of things. Generally, it is an American heiress who marries a penniless Frenchman. She married a cowhand out of Buffalo Bill Cody's Wild West Show, named Boscobel, said to be the most optimistic poker player on earth.

But even so, their daughter Imogene brought a large fortune to her husband, a Bostonian named Gribble, who abhorred gambling and invested only in sure things at twelve-and-a-half per cent. Thus, when he passed on—Bostonians never die, they simply pass on—Imogene was left with only about $25,000 a year, and this incubus of a Gobseck Collection to keep up and pay insurance on.

I said, "The Tonkin Necklace has been broken up and replaced with a paste replica these five years. So has the Isabella Tiara. Morally, Imogene Gribble is justified; in law, she is culpable. I feel that I am no more a purveyor of stolen property in offering *Oalámaóa,* than you would be a receiver of it if you bought it. This kind of technically illicit deal is less reprehensive than, say, smuggling a bottle of cognac. Nobody is the loser, but everyone gains. A copy of *Oalámaóa* molders in the dark instead of the beautiful original; Mrs. Gribble has some money, which she needs; I draw my commission; and you have the joy of possession—"

"—*Oalámaóa?* I never heard of it," he said.

"Neither had I until I first saw it," I told him. "It is possible that old Gobseck foresaw Gauguin's value, and bought some unheard-of canvases. Who knows?"

"I have met Imogene Gribble," said Mollock, looking at me with that unpleasant smile of his, which has been so aptly likened to a tired earthworm trying to bite its other end. "What is to prevent my dealing with her directly?"

"If the lady chose to deal directly, I imagine she would not have employed me as a go-between," I said with some coldness. "Mrs. Gribble mentioned three of her acquaintances whom I might approach in this matter: Karyatidis the shipowner, Gregor Dreidl the theatrical man, and your good self."

"Why did you come to me first—if you did come to me first?"

"Because," I said with a shrug, "Karyatidis is on his yacht, Dreidl is in New York, and you happen to be in Paris."

"Well," he said, grudgingly, "I'll look at the picture."

I had it with me. Mollock, who had done so much under-the-coun-

ter buying in his time, remarked on the fact that the canvas was still stretched in its framework. He had rather expected it to be rolled up in a cardboard tube.

I reminded him, "This is not a stolen canvas, my dear sir, cut from its framework with a razor blade. Why mar it even that little, therefore?"

"This is no Nineteenth Century canvas," he said.

"Of course not. It is very much older. The art dealer, Père Tanguy, from whom most Parisian artists of Gauguin's time got their supplies, had a considerable stock of perfectly good canvases painted by unheard-of mediocrities of every century. The pictures were worthless; the canvases were excellent. So impecunious painters often bought them for a few francs, cleaned them, and painted over them. This you must know. Ah . . ." I said with a sigh, ". . . whoever sold Gauguin that bit of canvas it still whistling for his money, I'll wager, wherever he is!"

"But what a blaze of color!" he exclaimed.

So it was. There was something stunning in the impact of the color of *Oalámaóa* as it hit your eye. Little Molosso, in his vanity and his spite, had out-Gauguined Gauguin, so to speak.

The central figure was a golden-skinned woman, nude, walking as if under a spell, followed by a group of young men wearing lavalavas of different tints but all marked with the same meandering tantalizing design. They were coming out of a jungle flaring with flowers. To the right, in the foreground, a black-and-white pig rooted among the shrubs.

I said, "He must have enjoyed himself, that man, painting this picture."

Mollock nodded. "I wonder what that pattern means, there on the cloth."

"Some Polynesian ideograph, no doubt," I said.

"And how much does Imogene Gribble want for this?" he asked.

"One hundred and fifty thousand dollars," I said.

"Like hell she does," said he. "Do you realize that if I don't buy, a word dropped by me will make the sale of this picture to anybody else absolutely impossible?"

"Sir," said I, "in naming you, Karyatidis, and Dreidl, Mrs. Imogene Gribble referred only to the three most respectable of her list of potential buyers."

I will not bore you with an account of the negotiations that followed. They started before lunch, and ended at cocktail-time. Mollock wheedled me. Mollock tempted me, and at last I fell. With an air of shame I accepted $105,000 as the "official" price paid for *Oalámaóa* in this highly unofficial deal, and an extra fifteen thousand dollars strictly off the record as my price for underselling my employer.

Mollock was very good at figures. He put it to me, "Say I pay a hundred and thirty-five thousand for *Oalámaóa.* Your dealer's commission, twenty per cent, amounts to twenty-seven thousand dollars, and that is that. But say I pay only a hundred and five thousand, and give you a private honorarium of fifteen thousand, you make thirty-six thousand and I save fifteen."

You can't argue with arithmetic. An expert having, after a secret examination of the picture, pronounced it "The Gauguin to end all Gauguins," I took my money and Mollock sailed for America. My little game was well begun.

. . . Yes, you heard me correctly —*begun.* Do you think a man like me expends such creative planning and precise administrative work for a wretched $120,000? Do you take me for a common crook?

To proceed: as soon as he got home, Mollock had his new acquisition suitably framed and lighted, and gave a select little dinner for a few of the collectors he hated most, and *Oalámaóa* was unveiled. The effect was all he had hoped it might be; Mollock savored to the full the joy of seeing the unfeigned admiration of his guests for the picture, and their ill-disguised envy and loathing for himself.

Dreidl, the theatrical man, offered him $180,000 for the picture, on the spot. This finagler had turned himself into something called a Fine Arts Development Corporation, among other slippery things, and could somehow elude the tax collectors in his artistic sidelines by pretending to be a dealer. But our Mr. Mollock would not sell. He wanted to gloat. *Oalámaóa* was his alone!

I let him wallow in his base triumph for several days. Then I sent one of my friends to Mollock in the guise of a visiting French expert. This reliable man, whom I had most thoroughly drilled in his role, looked at the picture, did what the theatrical people call a double-take, and burst out laughing.

"Why!" he cried. "Bless my soul, but what a clever little rascal Molosso turned out to be, after all! I never thought he had it in him to stick to one thing for so long, though."

"What are you talking about? And who is Molosso?"

"A painter of greeting cards for Minard, in Paris. You have probably seen his signature on the more expensive kinds of birthday felicitations, wedding congratulations, et cetera, et cetera. You may certainly see his highly noticeable signature—he is a vain little fellow—in all its glory on this excellent fake. Why, the rogue has had the consummate impudence to paint his name openly—but openly—all over it!"

And he pointed out that interesting meandering design on the men's draperies in the picture—the very design Mollock had been the

first to point out, and which I had said might be some Polynesian ideograph.

"See, sir—you need no magnifying glass—this is simply Molosso's regular signature over and over again. See? *Molossomolossomolosso,* with the loops filled in. But oh, what a beautiful joke!"

I need scarcely tell you that Mollock failed to see the beauty of it. But he was a hard man, and a ruthless man, and a quick-thinking and a persuasive man. He talked to my friend the "expert"; he wheedled him, he tempted him, and, like me, my friend fell. He agreed, for a consideration—$5000 down, and $5000 more on completion of the deal—to sell *Oalámaóa* to the Greek magnate Karyatidis.

First, Mollock let it be rumored that on account of some unfortunate speculations in Africa he might be compelled to sell part of his collection. It was not true, of course—the man was a born liar. And then Karyatidis was delicately approached in the matter of the *Oalámaóa.*

Mollock knew his brother art-graspers: if he owned a picture and Dreidl desired it, then Karyatidis would stop at nothing to get it. Then he wrote us an ambiguously worded authority to act for him in the sale of his recently acquired canvas, *Oalámaóa.* "Gauguin never painted better," he said in the note. But he did not say that Gauguin had painted *Oalámaóa.*

And Karyatidis bought the picture for $210,000, to hang in the saloon of his yacht. Of this not untidily round sum, I sent Mollock not one penny. And when he began to act in a generally offensive, resentful manner, I took little Molosso to see Karyatidis, and I said, "M. Karyatidis, you have nothing to fear from Mollock. His hands are tied and his lips are sealed. You have only to threaten him with criminal proceedings for trying to sell you a fake Gauguin."

"What fake Gauguin?"

I pointed out the cunning device of Molosso's signature. I presented Molosso, saying, "Here is the man who painted the picture entitled *Oalámaóa,* which now adorns your saloon."

Karyatidis had not risen from fig-packer to multimillionaire by being easily surprised. He rubbed his chin, and looked me up and down, and said, "What's your angle? Make it good."

"Why," I said, "M. Molosso was employed to paint over the original Gauguin, so that the canvas might not fall into enemy hands during the war. The true *Oalámaóa* is underneath the one you see. M. Molosso will clean the canvas, and you will be the possessor of the original after all. Only Molock will be out of pocket. I, sir, am the thief here, and nobody else."

"And what is the subject of the picture underneath?" asked Karyatidis.

"Oalámaóa," I said, "but without Molosso's signature on the draperies."

"All right," said Karyatidis. Then he went on to indicate, in a soothing voice, that if I double-crossed him I would soon wish I had never been born; the ocean beds, from Alexandretta to Caracas, were white with the bones of men who had tried to double-cross Karyatidis. It was not the money, he said, but the principle.

I told him point-blank that I had double-crossed better men than he when he was unhygienically boxing figs for his living in Istanbul.

"I know," he said. "You must have something up your sleeve, or why come to me at this point, when you could be far away with two hundred and ten thousand of my money? You must know you'll never get another penny out of me."

"Perhaps you will get a penny out of me," I said. "I mean, at the expense of someone you don't like."

"Ah, that! An enemy's penny brings good luck," he said. "I like you. I could use a man like you in my business."

"Compliment for compliment, I could use a man like you in mine," I told him.

Well, then Molosso went to work: off came *Oalámaóa*'s top coat, and there was a similar picture underneath; only, as I had said, the pattern of the embroidery was different, on the man's garments. Molosso's signature was gone.

"The difference is obvious, now," said Karyatidis.

"Isn't it?" I said. "And here is your enemy's penny." I gave him an envelope. "This," I told him, "contains a sheet of white paper bearing a perfect impression of Molosso's right thumb in ivory black. Look carefully at the lower right-hand corner of *Oalámaóa,* and you will see, deep in the original paint, an identical thumbprint."

"Are you telling me *this* is a fake, too?"

"Absolutely. But wait. You do not like Mr. Dreidl, I believe? Well, he will come to you and beg you to sell this *Oalámaóa,* and you will let him have it at a profit. And I will take dealer's commission."

With this, I left him; he was absolutely bewildered, perhaps for the first time in his life.

So I went to visit Gregor Dreidl in his indecently voluptuous office, and I told him, as one crook might tell another, of the whole affair, and he was tremendously amused. But he stopped laughing when I said, "The cream of the jest is, that underneath this second *Oalámaóa* —*THERE IS A THIRD!* And this one at the bottom is the genuine one!"

And after so much tedious palaver that to give you a mere précis of it would make me so hoarse that I should be compelled to ask you for more coffee, Dreidl went to Karyatidis and bought *Oalámaóa* for $225,000 and one cent. The

Greek insisted on that penny; had to have it brand-new, too. Later, I heard, he had it mounted in diamonds and used it for a scarf pin.

I took my twenty per cent, and, having grown bored with the affair, concluded it in the following manner:

I went to Mollock, who, to put it mildly, upbraided me. That *Oalámaóa* he had paid good money for was a fake, he cried. I said yes, I knew, and I was much to blame; for the fake had been deliberately overpainted on the original. But this, I said, was not the worst of it. *Paul Gauguin himself had perpetrated a kind of fake!*

"I mean," I said, "That Gauguin was paid to disguise an immensely valuable old master with a comparatively worthless original of his own—oh, Mr. Mollock, Mr. Mollock—that *Oalámaóa* was painted over *The Stoning of St. Stephen,* by El Greco, and I would give my right arm to get it back!"

Dazed, he said, "Somebody painted a fake Gauguin over a real Gauguin, who painted over a genuine El Greco?"

"Yes, yes! The existence of the Gauguin was known, and it was covered with a replica of itself. But nobody knew until now that Gauguin himself had been hired by Gobseck to cover the *St. Stephen.* Here is a letter to prove it. It was written in Paris after Gauguin's last exhibition there in 1893, at Durand-Ruel's. To old Camille Pissarro, who wanted money. Look!"

It was a rambling letter, written in that violet ink which, with the pinpoint pen-nib, used to be at the service of the patrons of most French cafès. It was a very good letter—the man I paid to write it could copy a $20 bill line-for-line in five hours with pen and brush. The cogent passage, freely translated, ran:

. . . The exhibition at Durand-Ruel was a bloody fiasco, a catastrophe. Bah! To the critics I say, "Shut your mausoleums, you penny-a-liners—the bones stink!" As for money, what does one use for it? How I hate Paris and the Parisians! I earned myself a species of dishonest penny the other day, and oh my friend, the irony of it!

That bloated swine of a Lucien Gobseck got hold of a daub by that maudlin skeleton-man El Greco, of the Stoning of St. Stephen—stolen, of course, from the Kuwalsky-Brzesky mansion. And for 1500 francs I was commissioned secretly to paint "something of my own, just anything" over it.

I must admit that it gave me a certain pleasure to smother one of Theotocopouli's maudlin Saints. And so my dreamy Oalámaóa's pagan nudity smothers the Cretan priest's boy's sheet-tin-draped, angular, tubercular visions. There is a melancholy satisfaction in this . . .

"It breathes the very spirit of Gauguin," I said; and I should have known, for I composed it myself. "It was for a long time among Pissarro's papers. Nobody seemed to know what Gauguin was talking about. But now we know. And here is the point—no El Greco is listed in the Gobseck inventory, so Imogene Gribble will be free to sell in the open market. Three hundred thousand dollars would not be too much for a new El Greco!"

"You did right to come to me first with this letter," said Mollock. "I take it as an act of good faith. I hold you entirely innocent in that other unfortunate affair. Let's talk about this . . ."

He plied me with wine, he charmed me, he put the matter in a kaleidoscope of different colors and a conjurer's cabinet of angles—and at last he got that letter out of me for $5000 down and a verbal promise of "a percentage of assessed values to be mutually agreed upon."

And after that, I suppose, he went to work on Dreidl: it must have been like an apache dance of mud-wrestlers. I simply disappeared. If anybody ever scraped the third *Oalámaóa* off that tormented canvas, I can tell you what they found: an execrably daubed *Cupid and Psyche,* painter unknown, dated 1610.

"What happened to Molosso and his wife?" I asked, as Karmesin casually pocketed my cigarettes.

"The inevitable. As soon as I paid him his ninety thousand dollars he ran away with a big blonde. I had saved ten thousand for his wife. She divorced him and married a man who has a restaurant at Nogent-sur-Marne. She is happy, and has two children. Molosso had to marry the big blonde, who beats him unmercifully whenever he misbehaves. My mission was accomplished."

"And Mollock was the main victim, really?"

"Yes. He was not a gentleman. He wounded my sensibilities. He tried to bribe and corrupt me," said Karmesin. "Still, all weighed and paid, I suppose I cleared about two hundred thousand dollars, give or take a thousand."

And, having emptied the sugar bowl, he rose and left the café.

ADVENTURES OF NICKY WELT, ARMCHAIR DETECTIVE

THE MAN WITH THE TWO WATCHES

by HARRY KEMELMAN

ALTHOUGH IT WAS MORE THAN TWO years since I had left the Law Faculty to become County Attorney, I still maintained some connection with the university. I still had the privileges of the gymnasium and the library, and I still kept up my membership in the Faculty Club. I dropped in there occasionally for a game of billiards, and about once a month I dined there, usually with Nicholas Welt, the Snowden Professor of English Literature.

We had finished dinner, Nicky and I, and had gone to the Commons Room for a game of chess, only to find that all the tables were in use. So we joined the group in front of the fire where there was always interminable talk about such highly scholarly matters as to whether there was any liklihood of favorable action by the trustees on an increase in salary schedules or whether you got more miles per gallon with a Chevrolet than you got with a Ford.

This evening as we joined the group, the talk was about Professor Rollins' paper in the *Quarterly Journal of Psychic Research* which no one had read but on which everyone had an opinion. The title of the paper was something like "Modifications in the Sprague Method of Analysis of Extra-Sensory Experimentation Data," but the academic mind with its faculty for generalization had quickly gone beyond the paper and Rollins' theories to a discussion as to whether there was anything in "this business of the supernatural."

Professor Lionel Graham, Associate in Physics, asserted that "of course, there couldn't be when you considered the type of people who went in for it, gypsies and whatnot." And gentle, absent-minded Roscoe Summers, Professor of Archeology, maintained doggedly that you couldn't always tell by that and that he had heard stories from people whose judgment he respected that made you pause and think a bit.

To which Professor Graham retorted, "That's just the trouble. It's always something that happened to somebody else. Or better still, something that somebody told you that happened to somebody *he* knew." Then catching sight of us he said, "Isn't that right, Nicky? Did you ever hear about anything supernatural as having happened to somebody you yourself knew and whose word

and opinion you could rely on?"

Nicky's lined, gnome-like face relaxed in a frosty little smile. "I'm afraid that's how I get most of my information," he said. "I mean, through hearing about it at third or fourth hand."

Dr. Chisholm, the young Instructor in English Composition, had been trying to get a word in and now he succeeded. "I had a case last summer. I mean I was there and witnessed something that was either supernatural or was a most remarkable coincidence."

"Something on the stage, or was it a seance in a dark room?" asked Graham skeptically.

"Neither," said Chisholm. "I saw a man cursed and he died of it." He caught sight of a pompous little man with a shining, bald head and he called out, "Professor Rollins, won't you join us? I'm sure you'd be interested in a little incident I was about to tell."

Professor Rollins, the author of the paper in the *Quarterly,* approached and the men sitting on the red-leather divan moved over respectfully to make room for him. But he seemed to sense that he was being asked to listen as an expert and he selected a straight-backed chair as being more in keeping with the judicial role he was to play.

I spent my summer vacation (Chisholm began) in a little village on the Maine coast. It was not a regular summer resort and there was little to do all day long except sit on the rocks and watch the gulls as they swooped above the water. But I had worked hard all year and it was precisely what I wanted.

The center of the town was inland, clustered about the little railroad depot, and I was fortunate in getting a room 'way out at the end of town near the water. My host was a man named Dobie, a widower in his forties, a decent quiet man who was good company when I wanted company and who did not obtrude when I just wanted to sit and daydream. He did a little farming and raised some chickens; he had a boat and some lobster pots; and for the rest, he'd make a little money at odd jobs. He didn't work by the day but would contract for the whole job—which put him a cut above the ordinary odd-job man, I suppose.

Ours was the last house on the road and our nearest neighbor was about a hundred yards away. The neighbor's house was a large Nineteenth Century mansion, set back from the road, and decorated with the traditional fretsaw trim and numerous turrets and gables. It was owned and occupied by Cyrus Cartwright, the president of the local bank and the richest man in town.

The banker was a brisk, eager sort of man, like the advertisement for a correspondence course in salesmanship, the type of man who carries two watches and is always glancing at his wrist watch and then checking it against his pocket watch.

(Chisholm warmed as he described Cyrus Cartwright—the result of the natural antipathy of a man who spends his summer watching seagulls for the type of man who weighs out his life in small minutes.)

I saw Cartwright only once. I had come in town with Dobie and before going home, he stopped in at the bank to see if Cartwright was still interested in making some change in the electric wiring system in his house—a project they had talked about some months ago. It was typical of Dobie that he should only now be coming around to make further inquiry about it.

Cartwright glanced at the radium dial of his wrist watch and then tugged at his watch chain and drew out his pocket watch, squeezing it out of its protective chamois covering. He mistook my interest in the ritual for interest in the watch itself and held it out so that I could see it, explaining with some condescension that it was a repeater—a five-minute repeater, he was at some pains to point out; then he proceeded to demonstrate it by pressing a catch so that I could hear it tinkle the hour, and then in a different key, tinkle once every five minutes after the hour.

I made some comparison between the man who carries two watches and the man who wears both a belt and suspenders. But though he realized I was joking, he said with some severity, "Time is money, sir, and I like to know just where I am with both. So I keep accurate books and accurate watches."

Having put me in my place, he turned to Dobie and said crisply, "I don't think I'll bother with it, Dobie. It was Jack's idea having the extra light and switch in the hallway and now that he's gone into the service, I don't think I'll need it. When it gets dark, I go to bed."

Once again he glanced at his wrist watch, checked its accuracy against his pocket watch as before, and then he smiled at us—a short, meaningless, businessman's smile of dismissal.

As I say, I saw him only that once, but I heard a great deal about him. You know how it is, you hear a man's name mentioned for the first time and then it seems to pop up again and again in the next few days.

According to Dobie, Cartwright was a tight-fisted old skinflint who had remained a bachelor, probably to save the expense of supporting a wife.

When I pointed out that paying a housekeeper to come in every day was almost as expensive as keeping a wife, and that in addition he had brought up his nephew, Jack, Dobie retorted that nobody but Mrs. Knox would take the job of Cartwright's housekeeper and that she took it only because no one else would take her. She was almost stone-deaf, and general opinion was that her wages were small indeed.

"As for Jack," he went on, "the old man never let him see a penny more than he actually needed. He never had a dime in his pocket, and when he'd go into town of an evening he'd just have to hang around —usually didn't even have the price of a movie. Nice young fellow too," Dobie added reflectively.

"He could have got a job somewhere and left," I suggested.

"I suppose he could've," Dobie said slowly, "but he's the old man's heir, you see, and I guess he figured it was kind of politic, as you might say, to hang around doing any little jobs at the bank that the old man might ask of him."

I was not too favorably impressed with the young man's character from Dobie's description, but I changed my mind when he came down a few days later on furlough.

Jack Cartwright turned out to be a decent chap, quiet and reserved, but with a quick and imaginative mind. We grew quite close in those few days and saw a great deal of each other. We went fishing off the rocks, or lazed around in the sun talking of all sorts of things, or shot at chips in the water with an old rifle that he had.

He kept his gun and fishing rod over at our house. And that gives some indication of the character of Cyrus Cartwright and of Jack's relations with him. Jack explained that his uncle knew that he wasn't doing anything during this week of furlough and didn't really expect him to, but if he saw him with the fishing rod, that traditional symbol of idleness, it would seem as though he were flaunting his indolence in his face. As for the gun, Cyrus Cartwright considered shooting at any target that could not subsequently be eaten as an extravagant waste of money for shells.

Jack came over every evening to play cribbage or perhaps to sit on the porch and sip at a glass of beer and argue about some book he had read at my suggestion. Sometimes he spoke about his uncle and in discussing him, he was not bitter—ironic, rather.

On one occasion he explained. "My uncle is a good man according to his lights. He likes money because it gives him a sense of power and accomplishment to have more than anyone else in town. But that alone doesn't make him a hard person to live with. What does make him difficult is that everything is set in a rigid routine, a senseless routine, and his household has to conform to it.

"After dinner he sits and reads his paper until it gets dark. Then he looks at his wrist watch and shakes his head a little as though he didn't believe it was that late. Then he takes his pocket watch out and checks the wrist watch against it. But, of course, even that doesn't satisfy him. So he goes into the dining room where he has an electric clock and he sets *both* watches by that.

"When he's got all timepieces perfectly synchronized, he says, invariably, 'Well, it's getting late,' and he goes upstairs to his room. In about fifteen minutes he calls to me and I go up to find him already in bed.

" 'I forgot to fix the windows,' he says. So I open them an inch at the top and an inch at the bottom. It takes a bit of doing because if I should open them a quarter of an inch too much, he says he'll catch his death of cold, and if it is short of an inch, he's sure he'll smother. But finally I get them adjusted exactly right and he says, 'My watch, would you mind, Jack?' So I get his pocket watch that he had put down on the bureau while undressing and I place it on the table near his bed.

"As far back as I can remember, I've had to do that little chore. I am sure he insists on it so as to fix our relations in my mind. While I was away, he must have remembered to do it for himself, but the first day I got back I had to do it."

(Chisholm looked from one to the other of us as if to make sure that we all understood the characters and their relations with each other. I nodded encouragingly and he continued.)

Jack was scheduled to leave Sunday morning and naturally we expected to see him Saturday, but he did not show up during the day. He came over in the evening after dinner, however, and he was hot and angry.

"The hottest day of the Summer," he exclaimed, "and today of all days my uncle suddenly finds a bunch of errands for me to do. I've been all over town and I couldn't even take the car—no sense in wasting gas, he said, when there's nothing wrong with my feet. I'll bet you fellows were lying out on the beach all day. How about going in for a dip right now?"

Well, of course, we had been in and out of the water all day long, but it was still hot and muggy, and besides we could see that he wanted very much to go, so we agreed.

We took some beer down and we didn't bother with bathing suits since it was already quite dark. After a while, however, it began to get chilly. It had clouded up and the air was oppressive—as though a storm were impending. So we got dressed again and went back to our house.

The atmosphere had a charged, electric quality about it, and whether it was that or because he was leaving the following day, Jack was unusually quiet and conversation lagged. Around half-past eleven he rose and stretched and said he thought he ought to be going.

"It's been good meeting you," he said to me. "I didn't look forward to this furlough particularly, but now I'm sure I'm going to look back on it."

We shook hands and he started for the door. Then he remembered about his fishing rod and his rifle and came back for them. He seemed

reluctant to leave us, and Dobie, understanding, said, "We might as well walk home with you, Jack."

He nodded gratefully and all three of us strolled out into the darkness. We walked along slowly, Jack with his fishing rod over one shoulder and his gun over the other.

I offered to carry the gun, but he shook his head and handed me the rod instead. I took it and walked on in silence until we reached the gate of his uncle's house. Perhaps he misinterpreted my silence and felt that he had been ungracious, for he said, "I'm a lot more used to carrying a rifle than you are." And then, in case I took his remark as a reflection on my not being in the service, he hurried on with, "I'm kind of fond of this gun. I've had it a long time and had a lot of fun with it."

He patted the stock affectionately like a boy with a dog and then he nestled the butt against his shoulder and sighted along the barrel.

"Better not, Jack," said Dobie with a grin. "You'll wake your uncle."

"Damn my uncle," he retorted lightly, and before we could stop him, he pulled the trigger.

In that silence, the crack of the rifle came like a thunderclap. I suppose we all expected one of the windows to fly up and to hear the irate voice of old Cartwright demand what was going on. In any case, instinctively, like three small boys, we all ducked down behind the fence where we could not be seen.

We waited several minutes, afraid to talk lest we be overheard. But when nothing happened, we straightened up slowly and Dobie said, "You better get to bed, Jack. I think maybe you've had a little too much beer."

"Maybe I ought at that," Jack answered and eased the gate open.

Then he turned and whispered, "Say, do you fellows mind waiting a minute? I think I may have locked the door and I haven't a key."

We nodded and watched as he hurried down the path to the house. Just before he reached the door, however, he hesitated, stopped, then turned and came hurrying back to us.

"Could you put me up for the night, Dobie?" he asked.

"Why, sure, Jack. Was the door locked?"

He didn't answer immediately and we started down the road to our house. We had gone about halfway when he said, "I didn't check to see if the door was locked or not."

"I noticed that," I remarked.

There was another silence and then as we mounted the porch steps, the moon, which had been hidden by clouds, suddenly broke through and I saw that he was deathly pale.

"What's the matter, Jack?"

He shook his head and did not answer. I put my hand on his arm and asked again, "Are you all right?"

He nodded and tried to smile.

"I've—I've—something funny happened to me," he said. "Did you mean what you said the other day about believing in spirits?"

At first I could not think what he was referring to, and then I remembered having argued—not too seriously—for belief in the supernatural during a discussion of William Blake's *Marriage of Heaven and Hell* which I had lent him.

I shrugged noncommittally, wondering what he was getting at.

He smiled wanly. "I didn't really have too much beer," he said and looked at me for confirmation.

"No, I don't think you did," I said quietly.

"Look," he went on, "I'm cold sober—believe me, I am. And I was sober a few minutes ago when I started for my uncle's house. But as I came near the door, I felt something like a cushion of air building up against me—to block my progress. And then, just before I reached the front door, it became so strong that I could not go on! It was like a solid wall ahead of me." He shuddered. "But it was more than an inanimate wall. It did not merely block me, it seemed to be pushing me back—as though it had a will and intelligence of its own . . . It frightened me and I turned back. I'm still frightened."

"Your uncle—" I began.

"Damn my uncle!" he said vehemently. "I hope he falls and breaks his neck."

Just then Dobie's kitchen clock chimed twelve. Coming just as Jack finished, it seemed to stamp the curse with fateful approval.

It made us all a little uncomfortable. We didn't seem to feel like talking, and after a while we went to bed.

We were awakened the next morning early by someone pounding on the door. Dobie slipped his trousers on and I managed to get into my bathrobe. We reached the front door about the same time. It was Mrs. Knox, Cartwright's housekeeper, and she was in a state of considerable excitement.

"Mister Carterwright's dead! There's been an accident."

Since she was so deaf, it was no use to question her. We motioned her to wait while we put on our shoes. Then we followed her back to the house. The front door was open, just as she had left it when she had hurried over to us. And from the doorway we could see the figure of Cyrus Cartwright in an old-fashioned nightgown, lying at the foot of the stairs, his head in a dark pool of blood.

He was dead all right, and looking up we could see the bit of rumpled carpeting at the top of the stairs which had probably tripped him and catapulted him down.

He had died as he had lived, for in his right hand he still clutched his precious pocket watch. The watch he was wearing on his wrist, however, had smashed when he fell and thus gave us the time of death.

The hands of the wrist watch pointed to just before twelve, the precise time as near as I could judge, that Jack had uttered his curse!

There was a minute of appreciative silence after Chisholm finished. I could see that no one's opinion had been changed materially by the story. Those who had been skeptical were now scornful and those who were inclined to believe were now triumphant; but we all turned to Professor Rollins to see what he thought and he was nodding his head portentously.

Nicky, however, was the first to speak. "And the pocket watch," he asked, "had that stopped, too?"

"No, that was ticking away merrily," Chisholm replied. "I guess his hand must have cushioned it when he fell. It had probably been badly jarred though, because it was running almost an hour ahead."

Nicky nodded grimly.

"What about Jack? How did he take it?" I asked.

Chisholm considered for a moment. "He was upset naturally, not so much over his uncle's death, I fancy, since he did not care for him very much, but because of the fact that it confirmed his fears of the night before that some supernatural influence was present." He smiled sadly. "I did not see him much after that. He had got his leave extended, but he was busy cleaning up his uncle's affairs. When finally he went back to the army, he promised to write, but he never did. Just last week, however, I got a letter from Dobie. He writes me occasionally—just the usual gossip of the town. In his letter he mentions that Jack Cartwright crashed in his first solo flight."

"Ah." Professor Rollins showed interest. "I don't mind admitting that I rather expected something like that."

"You expected Jack to die?" Chisholm asked in amazement.

Rollins nodded vigorously. "This was truly a supernatural manifestation. I haven't the slightest doubt about it. For one thing, Jack felt the supernatural forces. And the curse, followed almost immediately by its fulfillment even to the manner of death, is most significant. Now, of course we know very little of these things, but we suspect that they follow a definite pattern. Certain types of supernatual forces have what might be called an ironic bent, a sort of perverted sense of humor. To be sure, when Jack uttered his fervent wish that his uncle fall and break his neck, he was speaking as a result of a momentary exasperation, but it is the nature of evil forces to grant just such wishes.

"We meet with it again and again in folklore and fairy tales, which are probably the cryptic or symbolic expression of the wisdom of the people. The pattern is familiar to you all, I am sure, from the stories of your childhood. The wicked character is granted three wishes by a

fairy, only to waste them through wishes that are just such common expressions of exasperation as Jack used. You see, when supernatural forces are present, a mere wish, fervently expressed, may serve to bring the forces into focus, as it were. And that is what happened at the Cartwright house that fateful evening."

He held up a forefinger to ward off questions.

"There is another element in the pattern," he went on soberly. "Whenever a person does profit materially through the use of evil supernatural forces, even though unintentionally on his part, sooner or later the forces turn on him and destroy him. I have no doubt that Jack's death was just as much the result of supernatural forces as was the death of his uncle."

Professor Graham muttered "Rubbish."

Rollins, who could have gone on indefinitely, stopped and glared.

But Professor Graham was not one to be silenced by a look. "The young man died as a result of a plane crash. Well, so did thousands of others. Had they all been granted three wishes by a wicked fairy? Poppycock! The young man died because something went wrong with the motor—or some such reason. As for the old man, he tumbled down the stairs and cracked his skull or broke his neck, whichever it was. You say his nephew's curse must have been uttered about the same time. Well, even granting that by some miracle Dobie's kitchen clock was synchronized to Cartwright's watches, that would still be nothing more than a coincidence. The chances are that the young man uttered that same wish hundreds of times. It was only natural—he was the heir and besides, he didn't like the old man. Now on one of those hundreds of times, it actually happened. There's nothing supernatural in that—not even anything out of the ordinary. It makes a good story, Dr. Chisholm, but it doesn't prove anything."

"And Jack's sensing of a supernatural force," asked Chisholm icily, "is that just another coincidence?"

Graham merely shrugged. "That was probably just an excuse not to go home. He was probably afraid he'd get a dressing down from his uncle for shooting off the rifle in the middle of the night. What do you think, Nicky?"

Nicky's little blue eyes glittered. "I rather think," he said, "that the young man was not so much afraid of his uncle asking him about the rifle as he was that he would ask him what time it was."

We all laughed at Nicky's joke. But Professor Graham was not to be put off.

"Seriously, Nicky," he urged.

"Well then, seriously," said Nicky with a smile as though he were indulging a bright but impetuous freshman. "I think you're quite right in calling the young man's

death an accident. Parenthetically, I might point out that Dr. Chisholm did not suggest that it was anything else. As for the uncle's death, I cannot agree with you that it was merely coincidence."

Professor Rollins pursed his lips and appeared to be considering Nicky's cavalier dismissal of half his theory, but it was obvious that he was pleased at Nicky's support of the other half. I could not help reflecting how Nicky automatically assumed control over any group that he found himself in. He had a way of treating people, even his colleagues on the faculty, as though they were immature schoolboys.

Professor Graham, however, was not yet satisfied. "But dammitall, Nicky," he insisted, "a man trips on a bit of carpet and falls downstairs. What is there unusual about that?"

"In the first place, I think it is unusual that he should go downstairs at all," said Nicky. "Why do you suppose he did?"

Professor Graham looked at him in aggrieved surprise—like a student who has just been asked what he considers to be an unfair question.

"How should I know why he went downstairs," he said. "I suppose he couldn't sleep and wanted a snack, or maybe a book to read."

"He took his pocket watch."

"Well, according to Chisholm he was always checking his wrist watch against it."

Nicky shook his head. "When you're wearing two watches, it's almost impossible not to check the other after you've glanced at the one —just as we automatically glance at our watches when we pass the clock in the jeweler's window even though we might have set it by the radio only a minute or two before. But for Cyrus Cartwright to take his pocket watch downstairs with him when he had a watch on his wrist is something else again. I can think of only one reason for it."

"And what's that?"

"To see what time it was on the electric clock in the dining room downstairs."

I could understand something of Graham's exasperation as he exclaimed, "But dammit, Nicky, the man had two watches. Why would he go downstairs to see the time?"

"Because in this case, two watches were not as good as one."

I tried to understand. Did he mean that the supernatural force which had manifested itself to Jack Cartwright that night and had prevented him from entering the house had tampered with the watches?

"What was wrong with them?" I asked.

"They disagreed."

Then Nicky leaned back in his chair and looked about him with an air of having explained everything. There was a short silence and his expression of satisfaction changed to one of annoyance.

"Don't you see what happened?" he demanded. "When you wake up in the middle of the night, the first

thing you do is look at the clock on the mantelpiece or your watch on the night table in order to orient yourself. That's precisely what Cyrus Cartwright did. He woke up and glancing at his wrist watch saw that it was a quarter to twelve, say. Then quite automatically he reached for his pocket watch on the night table. He pressed the catch and the chiming mechanism tinkled twelve and then went on to tinkle half or three-quarters past. He had set the watches only a few hours before and both of them were going, and yet one was about an hour faster than the other.

"Which was right? What time was it? I fancy he tried the repeater again and then tried to dismiss the problem from his mind until morning. But after tossing about for a few minutes he realized that if he hoped to get back to sleep that night, he would have to go downstairs to see what time it really was."

Nicky turned to Chisholm. "You see, the jar from the fall would not have moved the watch ahead. A blow will either stop the movement or it might speed up or slow down the escapement for a few seconds. But a watch with hands so loose that a jar will move them would be useless as a timepiece. Hence, the watch must have been moved ahead sometime before the fall. Cyrus Cartwright would not do it, which means that his nephew must have, probably while moving the watch from the bureau to the table."

"You mean accidentally?" asked Chisholm: "Or perhaps to annoy his uncle?"

Nicky's little blue eyes glittered. "Not to annoy him," he said. "To murder him!"

He smiled pleasantly at our stupefaction. "Oh, yes, there's no doubt about it," he assured us. "After arranging the windows to his uncle's satisfaction and putting the pocket watch on the night table, Jack bade his uncle a courteous good night. And on his way out he stopped just long enough to rumple or double over the bit of carpet at the head of the stairs. There was no light in the hallway, remember."

"But—but I don't understand. I don't see—I mean, how did he know that his uncle was going to wake up in the middle of the night?" Chisholm finally managed.

"Firing off his rifle under his uncle's windows insured that, I fancy," Nicky replied. "And now you understand, I trust, why he could not enter his uncle's house that night. He was afraid that his uncle, awake now, would hear him come in and instead of going downstairs himself, would simply call down to him to ask what time it was."

This time we did not laugh.

The silence that followed was suddenly broken by the chiming of the chapel clock. Instinctively, we glanced at our watches, and then realizing what we were doing, we all laughed.

"Quite," said Nicky.