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AUTHOR: **JOHN D. MACDONALD**

TITLE: ***Funny the Way Things Work Out***

TYPE: Crime Story

LOCALE: Southern United States

TIME: The Present

COMMENTS: *Sheriff Wade Illigan said, "To get any good out of a Purdley woman, you've got to be meaner than she is." And the Sheriff didn't think Will Garlan was that mean a man . . .*

THE RANGE OF ALL HIS PLEASURES and satisfactions had narrowed in these past years until there were only the smallest things left—like trimming the big pepper hedge, standing on the stepladder before the sun got too high, working the clippers with a slow oiled snick, and making the top of the big hedge flat as a table. He could make the trimming last a long time, pausing to look out across the inlet where the tide ran smooth, where mullet leaped near the green-black shade of the mangrove islands. Afterward he would rake up the cuttings, load them in the old tin wheelbarrow, and take them out to the pile beyond the shed.

He was a big mild man in his middle sixties, his body thickened and slow, his face deeply lined. The fringe of white hair and his pale-blue eyes were in striking contrast to the deep tropic tan. He wore a faded sports shirt and shapeless denim pants. It was a still May morning, full of the first heat of a new summer. He braced himself on the ladder and started working the clippers.

He heard Sue coming toward him across the back yard, coming from the rear of the house. He could hear her, and he guessed the folks in the trailer park could hear her, and the men fishing in the skiffs on the far side of the inlet could hear her.

"Will!" she squalled. "Will Gar-

lan!" After years of experimentation she had learned to pitch her voice at exactly that shrill and penetrating level which he found most distasteful. It made him hunch his shoulders, as though some angry sharp-beaked bird were diving at his head.

He laid the clippers on top of the hedge and turned slowly, careful of his balance, to watch his wife striding toward him, her thin face dull-red with anger, her features pinched into an ugliness of hate. She was a lean woman, forty-five years old. She wore frayed yellow shorts, too large for her, and a grimy white halter. She had fierce gray eyes and a sallowness the sun never touched. Her black hair looked lifeless in the morning sunlight.

She stopped abruptly ten feet from the stepladder. "I tole you and I tole you a hundred times maybe," she yelled, "Don't you never leave this stinkin' smelly thing in the bedroom, you hear?"

She held a shaking hand out, showing him the pipe he had left by accident on his night table.

"Sue, honey," he said humbly, "I guess I just forgot . . ."

"Forgot! You damn ol' man, you oughta be put away some place, the way you getting weak in the head. And this is the last time you get it back. Next time I plunk it right out in the bay, hear?"

As he started to say something, she drew her wiry arm back and hurled the pipe at him with startling force. He tried to duck but it struck him painfully under the left eye. He nearly lost his balance, but saved himself by grasping the top of the ladder. Through the immediate prism of his tears he saw her stalking back toward the house.

Suddenly he imagined himself grasping the wooden handles of the clippers, hurling it at her, saw it turn once, slowly, glinting in the sun, and chunk into her naked sallow back, points first, exactly between the bony ridges of her shoulder blades . . . He felt sweaty and cold in the sunlight. The screen door slammed.

When his vision cleared he got down from the ladder and started looking for the pipe. He looked for a long time. He finally saw it in the pepper hedge. When he reached in for it, the movement of the branches dislodged it and the pipe fell to the ground.

He squatted and picked it up. The grain of the bowl was a dark cherry-red. It had an even cake and a sweet taste, and smoked dry. He oiled the bowl on the side of his nose, burnished it on the faded shirt, put it in his pocket.

He climbed the ladder again and began to clip the tall hedge. Within five minutes he knew it was no good. This pleasure was gone too, like all the others. The thing that he had to do came back into his mind. For a long time it had been something he would think of in the

middle of the night while Sue lay nearby, her breath a rasping, nasal metronome.

Lately it had begun to occur to him during the day. And now, quite suddenly, he knew the day had come.

He left the hedge half done. He put the ladder and the clippers in the shed. He got into the old gray sedan and managed to back it out to the road before Sue came running out of the house.

"Where you goin'?" she yelled. "Where you goin', Will Garlan, damn you?"

He did not answer. He started up. She ran in front of the car to stop him, but he drove directly toward her, not fast. She scrambled back out of the way. He got a glimpse of her face, insane with fury, and heard her incoherent yelpings as he headed toward town.

Center Street stretched wide and sleepy under the heat of May, the parked cars glinting, the few shoppers moving slowly under the awning shade. He parked diagonally across from the Palm County Court House and walked around to the far side, squinting against the glare.

At the high desk a deputy told him that Sheriff Wade Illigan would be back in a few minutes. He sat on a scarred bench and waited. He felt very sleepy. He wondered if the sleepiness was a reaction to the decision he had made. He felt as if he would like to find a bed in some cool place and sleep for a week.

He jumped and opened his eyes when Sheriff Illigan said, "Hey, Will. How you?"

He stood up slowly and said, "Wade, I got to talk to you. You busy? It may take some time."

Illigan looked at his watch. "I got nothing till noon, and that's an hour. That time enough?"

"I think that's time enough, Wade."

They went into Illigan's big cluttered corner office. The Sheriff closed the door. Will Garlan sat in a corner of the deep leather couch. Illigan sat behind his desk, tilted back, and crossed his tough old legs across a corner of the desk.

"You know, Will, we've done no fishing together in one hell of a while. 'Way over a year."

"And we aren't likely to ever go fishing together again, Wade."

Illigan raised grizzled eyebrows. "How so?"

Will Garlan took his pipe out and studied the grain. "Lately I keep thinking how it would be to kill Sue."

"No law against thinking."

"It's a thing I might do. I get a kind of blind feeling, Wade. My ears roar. I could get like that and . . . hurt her. So I want to fix it so I can't. That's why I came in. I think I hate her. That's a terrible thing, I guess."

After a reflective pause Illigan said, "I'll talk straight, Will. Any-

body that knows you two can understand hating that woman. She's plain mean. All those Purdleys have always been mean as snakes. When you married her she was a beautiful girl, and on a girl like that it somehow looks more like high spirits than ugly spirits. When the looks are gone, you can see what it is, plain and clear. Sue hasn't got a friend in Palm County, and that's for sure. I'd say this, Will. If you'd been raised here, you wouldn't have married a Purdley no matter if she did make a fellow's mouth run dry a hundred yards off. But nobody knew you good enough to warn you, and I guess you wouldn't have listened anyhow."

"I wouldn't have listened."

"What I say, Will, you should just pack up and get out. You got good years left, and it just isn't worth it living nestled up to a buzz-saw woman like that making every day miserable."

"You make it sound easy, but it wouldn't be easy. I can't do it that way. I've got to do it my way."

"What have you got in mind?"

"Wade, just what do you know about me?"

"Know about you? You moved down here from the north about . . . let me see . . ."

"Twenty-four years ago last month. I was forty-one years old. What did folks find out about me?"

"Found out you were a well-educated man, and you'd done well in some kind of business 'way up north, and then your wife died and it kind of took the heart out of you, so you retired early, with enough to live on if you took it easy. And there was something about your health being shaky."

"I had to let folks think that so they wouldn't think it strange a man that age doing nothing at all."

"Well, you bought a couple acres of land out there at the inlet, and you built that house all by yourself, learning as you went along, and it must have been a little over a year after you moved down you married Sue Purdley, a girl twenty years younger, a girl been in several kinds of trouble around here, enough so folks figured she made herself a pretty good deal."

"She was the most beautiful thing I ever saw," Garlan said.

"They all got looks when they're young enough," Illigan said. "If she hadn't hooked you, Will, about the only thing left for her would have been some cracker boy from back in the sloughs to keep her swole up with kids, barefoot, and beat the tar out of her every Saturday night."

"If we could have had children, maybe it would have . . ."

"It wouldn't have been a bit different. To get any good out of a Purdley woman, you've got to be meaner than she is, and you're just too gentle a man, Will."

"Know anything else about me?"

Illigan shook his head. "Guess not. You live quiet. You're a good man to go fishing with. You keep

your house and grounds up nice. What is there I should know?"

"I'm a methodical man, Wade. I plan things carefully. I never thought I'd be telling anybody this. I feel scared to tell you now, but I don't know why, because the life I have isn't worth living, and that isn't the way I planned it. 'Way back in 1935 I started planning it all out. And in 1938, ten days before I arrived here, I walked out of a bank in Michigan with a hundred and twenty-seven thousand dollars."

Illigan's feet thumped hard against the floor as he came erect in his chair. "You what!"

Will Garlan stared out the window, his face placid. "I studied the mistakes all the other ones make. They go to foreign places where they stand out like a sore thumb. Or they get to spending too much. Or they have to talk to somebody about it. One thing I decided. You have to have a new identity all ready and waiting. I came down alone in 1937 and got that identity sort of started down here, so it was ready and waiting when I came down. My name isn't Will Garlan, naturally. But I've used it so long it feels like it was. The name I started with feels strange in my mind now. J. Allan Welch. The J was for Jerome. People called me Al. They looked for J. Allan Welch for a long time. Maybe they're still looking. Probably the bonding company still is, anyhow. I guess it was a shock to them."

"Do you know what the hell you're saying, man?"

"I was the Assistant Cashier. There was one little flaw in the way the worn-out money was handled, when we sacked it up to send it back to the Federal Reserve Bank for credit. Everybody checked everybody else, but there was one little flaw, and after I found it, I got them used to seeing me with a big box.

"I used to order stuff to be sent express and pick it up on my lunch hour so I'd have a box around, wrapped in brown paper, tied with cord. Then I made a box. It looked solid and tied, but you could pull one end open—it was on a spring. When it was shut, the cord matched. I had the cord glued on. I cut newspaper into stacks the size of wrapped money and I had it in that box. The other tricky part was the seal on the heavy canvas sack. I figured a way to fix the sack so it would look sealed when it wasn't.

"I had a dummy sack in my cellar at home and I practised until I got the time 'way down. I got it down to where it took me just eighteen seconds to open the sack, exchange the wrapped newspaper for the wrapped money, and reseal the sack the right way.

"I waited until we had the right kind of accumulation—three big sacks for pickup, with one stuffed with nothing but wrapped bundles of twenties and fifties. I rigged the seal on that one. I made the exchange one Friday morning, and

all that day I worked with that parcel of money closeby. I had no cause to worry. The sack was the right shape and heft and I'd sealed it right, and nobody would find out anything until it got to the Federal Reserve Bank and they started to check the amount and denominations against the outside tag and the inside packing slip.

"By then I had a car nobody knew about, registered in Indiana in the name of Will Garlan. I had a wallet full of identification for Will Garlan. I had clothes and everything in that car. When I left work, I didn't even go home. I went right to that car and headed south. I spent all that first night in a tourist cabin going over that money, weeding out everything too badly torn and weeding out gold certificates. I burned all that in a ravine the next day. I had a hundred and twenty-seven thousand left.

"Soon as I settled here, Wade, I got me a post-office box and I sent for a lot of cheap stuff so I'd get on so many mailing lists nobody would notice I wasn't getting any personal mail. Or any money. That's the thing about me nobody has ever seemed to notice much. No investments, Wade. No bank accounts. No social security. I deal in cash. I buy things on time and pay the installments in cash. For twenty-four years, Wade, I've been living directly off the money I carried out of that bank in that box."

"Where do you keep it?"

"When I built that house, I built me a good place."

"How much do you have left?"

"I don't know exactly. I sealed it into fruit jars to keep the dampness and the bugs from getting into it. There's ten jars left and I'd say there's somewhere between five and six thousand in a jar. I've lived small, Wade. It keeps people from wondering."

"Does Sue know about this?"

"What do you think?"

"I'd say she doesn't."

"You're right. That's the one thing I've never let her know anything about. For years she's been at me to find out where the money comes from. She thinks it comes in the mail. I take it out when she's away from the house. Then I make her think I've brought it back from town when I make my next trip. If she ever knew she was living right on top of money like that, she'd find it and start spending like a fool. I wouldn't be able to stop her."

Slowly, wonderingly Illigan shook his head. He made a clucking sound in the silence. "Be damned," he said softly. "Why didn't you just wait one day when she was away from the house and take it all and go some place else?"

"I guess a man can run just one time. I'm settled here. This is my home. I've got no heart for running again, Sheriff."

"Don't you know what I have to do to you?"

"I guess you have to tell those people up there to come and get me. There must be some kind of reward in it for you. And it will surprise them to recover so much of it after so long. I guess I'll go to prison, Wade. And I'd rather go for that than for killing Sue. Or hurting her. Anyhow, none of it has ever been like I thought it would be. There's nothing left. I guess I wouldn't have too bad a time in prison. Maybe they'd give me something to do and leave me alone."

"I don't know what the hell to say, Will. I just honestly don't."

"There isn't anything to say. I suppose you'll want to come out with me and get the money. I could pack a bag and you could bring me back here. I wouldn't want to stay there, Wade. Not another minute." He paused. "I guess I could be charged with bigamy too. But Lillian is dead now. I read it in one of those crime magazines a couple of years ago, about unsolved cases. They wrote about the Welch case, and they said she died in 1954."

"I don't think they'll be concerned about bigamy."

"I guess I'll have to talk to a lawyer. Seeing I'm not legally married to Sue, except maybe common law, I'd like to make sure she gets the house free and clear."

"Were there any children by your . . . other marriage?"

"A boy. He was killed in 1935. On his bike. Then there wasn't any reason for staying."

Illigan shook his head again. "I guess we better go out and get that money, Will. Why do you want Sue to get the house?"

Garlan sighed and shrugged. "I was a fool marrying a young girl because I thought that's what I wanted. So it hasn't been all her fault. I didn't love her, Wade. I just wanted her."

The two men stood up. Illigan came around his desk and said, "Why'd you do it in the first place? Why'd you take all that money?"

Garlan tried to smile. It was a strange and touching grimace. "I had to get away from Lillian. She was . . . a cruel, vicious, domineering bitch. I had to get away from her. She was making my life a living hell. I almost didn't care whether they caught me or not. Isn't that something?" He tried to laugh. "The one thing I always wanted was a sweet loving woman. So after I get away from Lillian, I tie myself to the same . . ."

"What's the matter?"

"I better sit down a minute, Wade. Just for a minute. This has taken a lot out of me."

"Sure. You rest a little, Will."

Garlan flexed his left arm. "I guess I strained my arm a little, clipping my pepper hedge."

"When you feel up to it, we'll go on out there."

"I got so mad at her this morning, it made me feel weak and sick. That's when I finally decided to come on in."

"Can I get you a glass of water?"

"That would be . . ."

He stopped abruptly. He tilted his head as though listening to some sound outside the office. His mouth opened. The color drained out of his face.

When the full shock of the coronary occlusion struck him, he made a mild whimpering noise, dug his fingers into his thick chest, leaned forward, and toppled onto the floor, unconscious, his face muddy-gray and shiny with sweat.

He died as they were easing him onto the stretcher.

Though Will Garlan had been buried only a week ago, Wade Illigan saw the signs of neglect as he parked the county car in the driveway. He got out and looked at the pepper hedge, half neat and half ragged.

As he walked slowly toward the house, Sue Garlan came out onto the small front porch, her thin arms folded, and said, "What the hell do you want, Wade?"

He put his foot on the bottom step and looked up at her and pushed his hat back. "Wanted to see how you're coming, Sue."

"Since when is that any business of yours?"

"Will was one of my best friends. You know that."

"He didn't give a damn who he had for a friend, did he?"

"He had a few. How many you got?"

"One thing I've been fixing to ask you, Wade. What was he doing in your office that morning he keeled over?"

"Just stopped by. We were going snook fishing one night soon."

"The way he went out of here, he didn't act like he was going off to make no fishing date. He tried to run me over with the car. Did you know that?"

"No, I didn't know that."

"Well, he did. That old man was getting meaner every day he lived. Meaner and dumber."

"He took pretty good care of you, Sue."

"Want I should break down and cry about it right here and now?"

"Not likely."

"It sure isn't. I give him the best years, didn't I?"

"You're a sweet generous woman, Sue."

"I get along."

"I wonder how you're going to keep on getting along."

"My, my! I'm touched you should fret about me, Sheriff. Will, he had his income coming in the mail right along. I got the key to the post-office box now, and I expect money will keep on coming in. There was no insurance, and I owe for burying him, so it better be coming in."

"Suppose it don't?"

"Then I'll sell this place off and go live with my sister. It's free and clear and it'll bring a good price, Wade. So don't worry about me a bit. Sam Redlock, owns the trailer

park, he's ready to buy it in a minute. And he's got first call. What are you *doing* coming here anyhow, Illigan?"

"First call, eh?"

"That's right. For a good price."

"Hear you've been going to Mike's Tavern about every night."

"What's that to you! I'm a new widow. I got to keep my spirits up. You want I should crawl in the graveyard with him?"

"Quite a fuss going on at Mike's last night."

"Took you long enough to get around to why you come out here."

"Mary Harn swore out a warrant, Sue. They took six stitches in her mouth."

"She started it, butting in like that on me an' a gentleman friend!"

"No good you yelling. She said who was there. They say it happened like she said. So you get what you need and you come on in with me right now."

She gave him a startled look and bolted into the house. By the time he'd cornered her in the kitchen, trapped her wrists and backhanded her across the face to take the fight out of her, he was winded and she had furrowed the side of his throat with her nails.

He waited while she changed her clothes, packed an overnight bag, and locked the house. She was docile, but her mouth was hard, her eyes bright with compressed fury.

He took her in and booked her, and had her put in the cage in the female wing of the Palm County jail. He let the matron know Sue Garlan had resisted arrest, had been arrested before, long ago, and a little overnight stay wouldn't do her any harm at all.

At dusk he drove out to the Garlan house. The fifth key he tried worked. He was inside the house a little over two hours. From there he drove home. His daughter, Ann, who kept house for him, was mildly annoyed at him for being so late. She had kept his supper warm. She'd eaten with her two children and both kids had gone back to school for some kind of rehearsal. After Ann served him, she walked up the street to visit a friend who had just come back from the hospital with a new baby.

Sheriff Wade Illigan ate, then rinsed his dishes and made two trips from his car to his bedroom. He made certain strategic rearrangements of the varied items in the back of his closet. He made a phone call, left a note for Ann, and drove out to the home of County Commissioner Elmo Bliss on Lemon Ridge Road.

He sat with Elmo in his study, and after some leisurely small-talk, Illigan came to the point. "I changed my mind about what you asked me, Elmo. I don't want to run for Sheriff again."

Elmo Bliss looked startled. "Why, there wouldn't hardly be any contest at all, Wade. It would be yours for the asking. You know that."

"I know. And I'm grateful and all that, but . . . I guess I'm just losing my heart for the law business."

"But don't you have Ann and those grandkids to support?"

"Bud Walther has been after me the last couple of years to go in with him on that marina business. I thought I just might do that when my term runs out."

"Maybe you wouldn't make enough, doing that."

"I got a feeling I'll get along well enough."

Elmo sighed. "Well, I guess it's your choice to make. But it won't be as secure as the sheriff business."

"Maybe I haven't got the right attitude to be a law man, Elmo."

"You been a good one."

"I decided I'd better tell you soon as I had my mind made up."

"Thanks. We'll have to find somebody. Another drink?"

"No, I got to be getting on back home."

"Say, I hear you locked Sue Garlan up this afternoon."

"She didn't take to the idea."

"Didn't take her long to get into trouble again, did it?"

"Not long."

"Isn't she some kind of kin to you, Wade?"

"Not blood kin. It was her half brother, Tod Annison, was married to my Ann. Run off with her."

"Sure. I remember now. I remember she came back with the kids, and later on something happened to him."

"They're good kids," Wade said. "They're bright and they're good and they deserve the best anybody can give them."

"What was it happened to that Annison?"

Wade stood up. "About what you'd expect. A year after he deserted my daughter, he was shot dead while trying to rob a bank up in Waycross, Georgia. But she had her divorce by then."

Elmo walked him to the door. He shook his head musingly. "Funny the way things work out, isn't it? Today you have to jail the half sister of the father of your grandkids." He clapped Wade on the shoulder. "Anything you need, fella, you call on Elmo, hear?"

"Thanks," the Sheriff said. "I think I'll get along pretty good. I got a feeling I'll get along all right from here on."

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a **NERO WOLFE** *complete short novel*

The client was a "probability wizard," whose record for accuracy in predicting everything from the winner of a horse race to the winner of an election was a gaudy 86.3% correct.

But Nero Wolfe barked: "That man couldn't hire me for any conceivable job on any imaginable terms!"

Then the case broke—and with a neat but not gaudy dying message. Did the "wizard's" last message identify his murderer?—or was it, as Nero Wolfe said about something else, "the claptrap of a charlatan"?

THE ZERO CLUE

by REX STOUT

IT BEGAN WITH A COMBINATION OF circumstances, but what doesn't? To mention just one, if there hadn't been a couple of checks to deposit that morning I might not have been in that neighborhood at all.

But I was, and, approving of the bright sun and the sharp, clear air, I turned east off of Lexington Avenue into 37th Street and walked some forty paces to the number. It was a five-story yellow brick. The lobby, not much bigger than my bedroom, had a fancy rug, a fireplace without a fire, some greenery, and a watchdog in uniform who looked at me suspiciously.

As I opened my mouth to meet his challenge, circumstances combined. A big guy in a dark-blue topcoat and a gray Homburg, entering from the street, breezed past me, heading for the elevator, and as he did so the elevator door opened and a dark-haired girl with a fur jacket over her arm emerged.

Four of us in that undersized lobby made a crowd, and we had to maneuver. Meanwhile, I was speaking to the watchdog, "My name's Goodwin and I'm calling on Leo Heller."

His expression changing, he blurted at me, "You the Archie Goodwin who works for Nero Wolfe?"

The girl stopped short and turned, and the big guy, inside the elevator, blocked the door from closing and stuck his head out, while the watchdog was going on, "I've saw your picture in the paper, and, look, I want Nero Wolfe's autograph."

Copyright 1953 by Rex Stout; originally titled "Scared to Death"

It would have been more to the point if he had wanted mine, but I'm not petty. The man in the elevator, which was self-service, was letting the door close, but the girl was standing by, and I hated to disappoint her by denying I was me, as of course I would have had to do if I had been there on an operation that needed cover.

I was actually not on an operation at all. Chiefly, I was satisfying my curiosity. At five in the afternoon the day before, in Nero Wolfe's office on the ground floor of his old brownstone house on West 35th Street, there had been a phone call. After taking it I had gone to the kitchen to get a glass of water. Fritz Brenner, the chef and housekeeper, was boning a pig's head for what he calls *fromage de cochon.* I told him I was going upstairs to do a little yapping.

"He is so happy up there," Fritz protested, but there was a gleam in his eye. He knows darned well that if I quit yapping, the day would come when there would be no money in the bank to meet the payroll, including him.

I went up three flights to the roof, where ten thousand square feet of glass in aluminum frames make a home for ten thousand orchid plants. The riot of color doesn't take my breath any more, but it is unquestionably a show, and as I went through that day, I kept my eyes straight ahead to preserve my mood for yapping intact. However, it was wasted. In the intermediate room Wolfe was glaring at a box of *Odontoglossum* seedlings in his hand, while Theodore Horstmann, the orchid nurse, stood nearby with his lips tightened to a thin line.

As I approached, Wolfe transferred the glare to me and barked savagely, "Thrips!"

I did some fast mood-shifting. There's a time to yap and a time not to yap. But I walked up to him.

"What do you want?" he rasped.

"I realize," I said politely but firmly, "that this is ill-timed, but I told Mr. Heller I would speak to you. He phoned—"

"Speak to me later! If at all!"

"I'm to call him back. It's Leo Heller, the probability wizard. He says that calculations have led him to suspect that a client of his may have committed a serious crime, but it's only a suspicion. He doesn't want to tell the police until it has been investigated, and he wants us to investigate. I asked for details but he wouldn't give them on the phone. I thought I might as well run over there now—it's over on East Thirty-seventh Street—and find out if it looks like a job. He wouldn't—"

"No!"

"My eardrums are not insured. No what?"

"Get out!" He shook the thrips-infested seedlings at me. "That man couldn't hire me for any conceivable job on any imaginable terms! Get out!"

I turned, prompt but dignified, and went. But on my way back down to the office I was wearing a grin. Even without the thrips, Wolfe's reaction to my message would have been substantially the same, which was why I had been prepared to yap. The thrips had merely keyed it up.

Leo Heller had been tagged by fame, with articles about him in magazines and Sunday newspapers. While making a living as a professor of mathematics at Underhill College, he had begun, for amusement, to apply the laws of probability, through highly complicated mathematical formulas, to various current events, ranging from ball games and horse races to farm crops and elections. Checking back on his records after a couple of years, he had been startled and pleased to find that the answers he had got from his formulas had been 86.3 per cent correct, and he had written a piece about it for a magazine.

Naturally, requests had started coming, from all kinds of people for all kinds of calculations. Heller had granted some of them, to be obliging, but when he had tried telling a woman in Yonkers where to look for $31,000 in currency she had lost, and she had followed instructions and found it, and had insisted on giving him two grand, he resigned his professorship.

That had been three years ago, and now he was sitting pretty. It was said that his annual take was in six figures, that he returned all his mail unanswered, accepting only clients who called in person, and that there was nothing on earth he wouldn't try to dope a formula for, provided he was furnished with enough factors to make it feasible.

It had been suggested that he should be hauled in for fortune-telling, but the cops and the D.A.'s office let it lay, as well they might, since he had a college degree and there were at least a thousand fortunetellers operating in New York who had never made it through high school.

It wasn't known whether Heller was keeping his percentage up to 86.3, but I happened to know it wasn't goose eggs. Some months earlier a president of a big corporation had hired Wolfe to find out which member of his staff was giving trade secrets to a competitor. I had been busy on another case at the time, and Wolfe had put Orrie Cather on the collection of details.

Orrie had made a long job of it, and the first we knew we were told by the corporation president that he had got impatient and gone to Leo Heller with the problem. Heller cooked up a formula and came out with an answer: the name of one of the junior vice-presidents, and the junior VP had confessed!

Our client freely admitted that most of the facts he had given Heller for the ingredients of his for-

mula had been supplied by us, gathered by Orrie Cather. He offered no objection to paying our bill, but Wolfe was so sore he actually told me to send no bill—an instruction I disregarded, knowing how he would regret it after he had cooled off. However, he still had it in for Leo Heller. Taking on any kind of job for him would have been absolutely off the program that day or any other day, even if there had been no thrips within a mile of 35th Street.

Back downstairs in the office, I phoned Heller and told him nothing doing. "He's extremely sensitive," I explained, "and this is an insult. As you know, he's the greatest detective that ever lived, and—do you know that?"

"I'm willing to postulate it," Heller conceded, in a thin voice that tended to squeak. "Why an insult?"

"Because you want to hire Nero Wolfe, meaning me really, to collect facts on which you can base a decision whether your suspicion about your client is justified. You might as well try to hire Stan Musial as bat boy for a rookie outfielder. Mr. Wolfe doesn't sell the raw material for answers, he sells answers."

"I'm quite willing to pay him for an answer—any amount short of exorbitance, and in cash. I'm gravely concerned about this situation, and my data are insufficient. I shall be delighted if, with the data, I get an answer from Mr. Wolfe, and—"

"And," I put in, "if his answer is that your client has committed a serious crime, as you suspect, he decides whether and when to call a cop, not you. Yes?"

"Certainly." Heller was eager to oblige. "I do not intend or desire to shield a criminal—on the contrary."

"Okay. Then it's like this: It wouldn't do any good for me to take it up with Mr. Wolfe again today, because his feelings have been hurt. But tomorrow morning I have to go to our bank on Lexington Avenue, not far from your place, and I could drop in to see you. Frankly, I doubt if Mr. Wolfe will take this case on, but we can always use money and I'll try to sell him. Shall I come?"

"What time?"

"Say a quarter past ten."

"Come ahead. My business begins at eleven. Take the elevator to the fifth floor. An arrow points right, to the waiting room, but go left, to the door at the end of the hall and push the button, and I'll let you in. If you're on time we'll have more than half an hour."

"I'm always on time."

That morning I was a little early. It was nine minutes past ten when I entered the lobby on 37th Street and gave the watchdog my name.

I told the watchdog I would try to get Nero Wolfe's autograph for him, and wrote his name in my notebook: Nils Lamm. Meanwhile, the girl stood there, frowning at us. She was twenty-three or four, and

without the deep frown her face would probably have deserved attention. Since she showed no trace of embarrassment at staring fixedly at a stranger, I saw no reason why I should, but something had to be said, so I asked her, "Do you want one?"

She cocked her head. "One what?"

"Autograph. Either Mr. Wolfe's or mine, take your pick."

"Oh. You are Archie Goodwin, aren't you? I've seen your picture, too."

"Then I'm it."

"I . . ." She hesitated, then made up her mind. "I want to ask you something."

"Shoot."

Someone trotted in from the street, a brisk female in mink, executive type, between twenty and sixty, and the girl and I moved aside to clear the lane to the elevator. The newcomer told Nils Lamm she was seeing Leo Heller and refused to give her name, but when Lamm insisted, she coughed it up: Agatha Abbey, she said, and he let her take the elevator.

The girl told me she had been working all night and was tired, so we went to a bench by the fireplace. Close up, I would still have said twenty-three or -four, but someone or something had certainly been harrassing her. Naturally, there was a question in my mind about the night work.

She answered it: "My name's Susan Maturo, registered nurse."

"Thanks. You know mine and I'm a registered detective."

She nodded. "That's why I want to ask you something. If I hired Nero Wolfe to investigate a—a matter, how much would it cost?"

I raised my shoulders half an inch and let them down. "It all depends. The kind of matter, the amount of time taken, the wear and tear on his brain, the state of your finances."

I paused, letting it hang, to return a rude stare that was being aimed at us by another arrival, a thin, tall, bony specimen in a brown suit that badly needed pressing, with a bulging brief case under his arm. When my gaze met his he called it off and strode to the elevator, without any exchange with Nils Lamm.

I resumed to Susan Maturo: "Have you got a matter, or are you just researching?"

"Oh, I've got a matter." She set her teeth on her lip, nice teeth and not a bad lip, and kept them that way a while, regarding me. Then she went on, "It hit me hard, and it's been getting worse instead of better. I decided to come to this Leo Heller and see what he could do, so I came this morning. I was sitting up there in his waiting room—two people were already there, a man and a woman—and I felt suddenly that I was just being bitter and vindictive, and I don't think I'm like that."

Apparently, she needed some cooperation, so I assured her, "You don't look vindictive."

She touched my sleeve with her fingertips to thank me. "So I got up and left. Then, as I was leaving the elevator, I heard that man saying your name and who you are, and it popped into my head to ask you. I asked how much it would cost to have Nero Wolfe investigate, but that was premature, because what I really want is to tell him about it and to get his advice about investigating."

She was dead-serious, so I arranged my face and voice to fit. "It's like this," I told her. "For that kind of approach to Mr. Wolfe, with no big fee in prospect, some expert preparation is required, and I'm the only expert in the field." I glanced at my wrist and saw 10:19. "I've got a date, but I can spare five minutes if you want to brief me on the essentials, and then I'll tell you how it strikes me. What was it that hit you?"

She looked at me, shot a glance at Nils Lamm, who couldn't have moved out of earshot in that lobby if he had wanted to, and came back to me. "When I start to talk about it," she said, "it sticks in my throat and chokes me, and five minutes wouldn't be enough. Anyway, I need someone old and wise like Nero Wolfe. Won't you let me see him?"

I promised to try, but I told her it would be a waste of time and effort for me to take her in to Wolfe cold. Though I was neither old nor wise she would have to give me at least a full outline before I could furnish either an opinion or help.

She agreed that that was reasonable and gave me her address and phone number, and we arranged to communicate later in the day. She slipped into her jacket and I went and opened the door for her, and she departed.

On the way up in the elevator my watch said 10:28, so I wasn't on time, after all, but we would still have half an hour before Heller's business day began. On the fifth floor a plaque on the wall facing the elevator was lettered LEO HELLER, WAITING ROOM, with an arrow pointing right, and at the end of the narrow hall a door bore the invitation, WALK IN.

I turned left, toward the other end, where I pushed a button beside a door, noticing as I did so that the door was ajar a scanty inch. When my ring brought no response, and a second one, more prolonged, didn't, either, I shoved the door open, crossed the sill, and called Heller's name.

No reply. There was no one in sight.

Thinking that he had probably stepped into the waiting room and would soon return, I glanced around to see what the lair of a probability wizard looked like, and was impressed by some outstanding features. The door, of metal, was a

good three inches thick, either for security or for soundproofing, or maybe both. If there were any windows they were behind the heavy draperies; the artificial light came indirectly from channels in the walls just beneath the ceiling. The room was air-conditioned. There were locks on all the units of a vast assembly of filing cabinets that lined the rear wall. The floor, with no rugs, was tiled with some velvety material on which a footfall was barely audible.

The thick door was for soundproofing. I had closed it, nearly, on entering, and the silence was complete. Not a sound of the city could be heard, though the clang and clatter of Lexington Avenue was almost next door one way and of Third Avenue the other.

I crossed for a look at the desk, but there was nothing remarkable about it except that it was twice the usual size. Among other items it held a vase of flowers, a rack of books with titles that were not tempting, an abacus of ivory or a good imitation, and a stack of legal-size working pads. Stray sheets of paper were scattered about, and a single pad had on its top sheet some scribbled formulas that looked like doodles by Einstein. Also, a jar of sharpened lead pencils had been overturned, and some of them were in a sort of pattern near the edge of the desk.

I had been in there ten minutes and no Heller, and when, at eleven o'clock by schedule, Wolfe came down to the office from his morning session with the orchids, it was desirable that I should be present. So I went, leaving the door ajar as I had found it, walked down the hall to the door of the waiting room at the other end, and entered.

This room was neither air-conditioned nor soundproofed. Someone had opened a window a couple of inches and the din was jangling in. Five people were here and there on chairs, three of whom I had seen before: the big guy in the dark-blue topcoat and Homburg, the brisk female in mink who called herself Agatha Abbey, and the tall, thin specimen with a brief case.

Neither of the other two was Leo Heller. One was a swarthy little article, slick and sly, with his hair pasted to his scalp, and the other was a big blob of an overfed matron with a spare chin.

I addressed the gathering: "Has Mr. Heller been in here?"

A couple of them shook their heads, and the swarthy article said hoarsely, "Not visible till eleven o'clock, and you take your turn."

I thanked him, left, and went back to the other room. Still no Heller. I didn't bother to call his name again, since even if it had flushed him I would have had to leave immediately. So I departed.

Down in the lobby I told Nils Lamm I'd see what I could do about an autograph. Outside, deciding there wasn't time to walk it, I

flagged a taxi. Home again, I hadn't been in the office more than twenty seconds when the sound came of Wolfe's elevator descending.

That was a funny thing. I'm strong on hunches, and I've had some beauts during the years I've been with Wolfe; but that day there wasn't the slightest glimmer of something impending.

I was absolutely blithe as I asked Wolfe how the anti-thrips campaign was doing, and later, after lunch, as I dialed the number Susan Maturo had given me. I admit I was a little dampened when I got no answer, since I had the idea of finding out some day how she would look with the frown gone.

But still later, shortly after six o'clock, I went to answer the doorbell, and through the one-way glass panel, saw Inspector Cramer of Manhattan Homicide there on the stoop. There was an instant reaction on the lower third of my spine, but I claim no credit for a hunch, since, after all, a homicide Inspector does not go around ringing doorbells to sell tickets to the policemen's annual ball.

I took him to the office, where Wolfe was scowling at three United States senators on television.

Cramer, bulky and burly, with a big red face and sharp gray eyes, sat in the red-leather chair near the end of Wolfe's desk. "I dropped in on the way down and I haven't got long." He was gruff, which was normal. "I'd appreciate some quick information. What are you doing for Leo Heller?"

"Nothing." Wolfe was brusque, which was also normal.

"You're not working for him?"

"No."

"Then why did Goodwin go to see him this morning?"

"He didn't."

"Hold it," I put in. "I went on my own, just exploring. Mr. Wolfe didn't know I was going. This is the first he's heard of it."

There were two simultaneous looks of exasperation—Cramer's at Wolfe, and Wolfe's at me.

Cramer backed his up with words: "For Pete's sake! This is the rawest one you ever tried to pull! Been rehearsing it all afternoon?"

Wolfe let me go temporarily, to cope with Cramer. "Pfui! Suppose we have. Justify your marching into my house to demand an accounting of Mr. Goodwin's movements. What if he did call on Mr. Heller? Has Mr. Heller been found dead?"

"Yes."

"Indeed." Wolfe's brows went up a little. "Violence?"

"Murdered. Shot through the heart."

"On his premises?"

"Yeah. I'd like to hear from Goodwin."

Wolfe's eyes darted to me. "Did you kill Mr. Heller, Archie?"

"No, sir."

"Then oblige Mr. Cramer, please. He's in a hurry."

I obliged. First telling about the phone call the day before, and Wolfe's refusal to take on anything for Heller, and my calling Heller back. I then reported on my morning visit at 37th Street, supplying all details. I did soft-pedal Susan Maturo's state of harassment, putting it merely that she asked me to arrange for her to see Wolfe and didn't tell me what about.

When I had finished, Cramer had a few questions. Among them: "So you didn't see Heller at all?"

"Nope."

He grunted. "I know only too well how nosy you are, Goodwin. There were three doors in the walls of that room besides the one you entered by. You didn't open any of them?"

"Nope."

"One of them is the door to the closet in which Heller's body was found by a caller, a friend, at three o'clock this afternooon. The Medical Examiner says that the breakfast Heller ate at nine thirty hadn't been in him more than an hour when he died, so it's practically certain that the body was in the closet while you were there in the room. As nosy as you are, you're telling me that you didn't open the door and see the body?"

"Yep. I apologize. Next time I'll open every door in sight."

"A gun had been fired. You didn't smell it?"

"No. The room is air-conditioned."

"You didn't look through the desk drawers?"

"No. I apologize again."

"We did." Cramer took something from his breast pocket. "In one drawer we found this envelope, sealed. On it was written in pencil, in Heller's hand, *Mr. Nero Wolfe.* In it were five one-hundred-dollar bills."

"I'm sorry I missed that," I said with feeling.

Wolfe stirred. "I assume that has been examined for fingerprints."

"Certainly."

"May I see it, please?"

Wolfe extended a hand. Cramer hesitated a moment, then tossed it across to the desk, and Wolfe picked it up. He took out the bills, crisp new ones, counted them, and looked inside the envelope.

"This was sealed," he observed dryly, "with my name written on it, and you opened it."

"We sure did." Cramer came forward in his chair with a hand stretched. "Let me have it."

It was a demand, not a request, and Wolfe reacted impulsively. If he had taken a second to think he would have realized that if he claimed it he would have to earn it, or at least pretend to, but Cramer's tone of voice was the kind of provocation he would not take.

He returned the bills to the envelope and put it in his pocket. "It's mine," he stated.

"It's evidence," Cramer growled, "and I want it."

Wolfe shook his head. "Evidence of what?" He tapped his pocket with a fingertip. "My property. Connect it, or connect me, with a crime."

Cramer was controlling himself, which wasn't easy in the circumstances. "I might have known," he said bitterly. "You want to be connected with a crime? Okay. I don't know how many times I've sat in this chair and listened to you making assumptions. Now I've got some of my own to offer, but first here are a few facts: In that building on Thirty-seventh Street, Heller lived on the fourth floor and worked on the fifth, the top floor. At five minutes to ten this morning, on good evidence, he left his living quarters to go up to his office. Goodwin says he entered that office at ten twenty-eight, so if the body was in the closet when Goodwin was there, and it almost certainly was, Heller was killed between nine fifty-five and ten twenty-eight. We can't find anyone who heard the shot, and the way that room is soundproofed we probably never will. We've tested it."

Cramer squeezed his eyes shut and opened them again, a trick of his. "Very well. The doorman always demanded the name of anyone he didn't recognize. We've got a list from him of everyone who entered the place during that period. Most of these callers have been collected and we're getting the others. There were six of them. The nurse, Susan Maturo, left before Goodwin went up, and the other five left later, at intervals, when they got tired waiting for Heller to show up—according to them. As it stands now, and I don't see what could change it, one of them killed Heller. Any of them, on leaving the elevator at the fifth floor, could have gone to Heller's office and shot him, and then gone on to the waiting room."

Wolfe muttered, "Putting the body in the closet?"

"Of course, to postpone its discovery. If someone happened to see the murderer leaving the office, he had to be able to say he had gone in to look for Heller and Heller wasn't there. He couldn't say that if the body was there in sight. There are marks on the floor where the body—and Heller was a featherweight—was dragged to the closet. In leaving, the murderer left the door ajar, to make it more plausible, if someone saw him, that he had found it that way. Also—"

"Fallacy."

"I'll tell him you said so the first chance I get. Also, of course he couldn't leave the building. Knowing that Heller started to see callers at eleven o'clock, those people had all come early so as not to have a long wait. Including the murderer. He had to go to the waiting room and wait with the others. One of them did leave, the nurse, and she made a point of telling Goodwin why she was going. It's up to her to

make it stick under questioning."

"You were going to connect me with a crime."

"Right." Cramer was positive. "First, one more fact. The gun was in the closet with the body, under it on the floor. It's a nasty little short-nose revolver, and there's not a chance in a thousand of tracing it, though we're trying. Now, here are my assumptions: The murderer went armed to kill, pushed the button at the door of Heller's office, and was admitted. Since Heller went to his desk and sat, he couldn't—"

"Established?"

"Yes. He couldn't have been in fear of a mortal attack. But after some conversation, which couldn't have been more than a few minutes on account of the timetable as verified, he was not only in fear, he felt that death was upon him, and in that super-soundproofed room he was helpless. The gun had been drawn and was aimed at him. He talked, trying to stall, not because he had any hope of living, but because he wanted to leave a message to be read after he was dead.

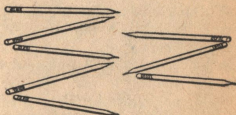
"Shaking with nervousness, with a trembling hand, perhaps a pleading one, he upset the jar of pencils on his desk, and then he nervously fumbled with them, moving them around on the desk in front of him, all the while talking. Then the gun went off and he wasn't nervous any more. The murderer circled the desk, made sure his victim was dead, and dragged the body to the closet. It didn't occur to him that the scattered pencils had been arranged to convey a dying message. If it had, one sweep of the hand would have taken care of it."

Cramer stood up. "If you'll let me have eight pencils I'll show you how they were."

Wolfe opened his desk drawer, but I got there first, with a handful taken from my tray. Inspector Cramer moved around to Wolfe's side, and Wolfe, making a face, moved his chair over to make room.

"I'm in Heller's place at his desk," Cramer said, "and I'm putting them as he did from where he sat. Getting the eight pencils arranged to his satisfaction, he stepped aside. "There it is; take a look."

Wolfe inspected it from his side, and I from mine. It was like this from Wolfe's side.



"You say," Wolfe inquired, "that was a message?"

"Yes," Cramer asserted. "It has to be."

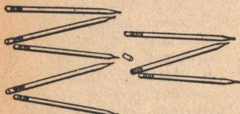
"By mandate? Yours?"

"Blah. You know there's not one chance in a million those pencils took that pattern by accident. Goodwin, you saw them. Were they like that?"

"Approximately," I conceded. "I didn't know there was a corpse in the closet at the time, so I wasn't as interested in it as you were. But since you ask me, the pencil points were all in the same direction, and an eraser from one of them was there in the middle." I put a fingertip on the spot. "Right there."

"Fix it as you saw it."

I went around to Wolfe's side of the desk and did as requested, removing an eraser from one of the pencils and placing it as I had indicated. Then it was like this:



"Of course," I said, "you had the photographer shoot it. I don't say that's exact, but they were pointing in the same direction, and the eraser was there."

"Didn't you realize it was a message?"

"Sure. I thought it was Heller's way of telling me he had gone to the bathroom and would be back in eight minutes. Eight pencils, see? Pretty clever. Isn't that how you read it?"

"It is not." Cramer was emphatic. "I think Heller turned it sideways to make it less likely that his attacker would see what it was. Move around here, please? Both of you. Look at it from here."

Wolfe and I joined him at the left end of the desk and looked as requested. One glance was enough. You can see what we saw by turning the page a quarter-turn counter-clockwise.

Cramer spoke: "Could you ask for a plainer NW?"

"I could," I objected. "Why the extra pencil on the left of the W?"

"He put it there deliberately, for camouflage, to make it less obvious, or it rolled there accidentally. I don't care which. It is unmistakably NW." He focused on Wolfe. "I promised to connect you with a crime."

Wolfe, back in his chair, interlaced his fingers. "You're not serious."

"Who says I'm not." Cramer returned to the red-leather chair. "That's why I came here, and came alone. You deny you sent Goodwin there, but I don't believe you. He admits he was in Heller's office ten minutes. He has to admit it, since the doorman saw him go up and five people saw him enter the waiting room. In a drawer in Heller's desk is an envelope addressed to you, containing five hundred dollars in cash.

"But the clincher is that message. Heller, seated at his desk, sure that he is going to be killed in a matter of seconds, uses those seconds to leave a message. Can there be any question what the message was about? Not for me. It was about the person or persons responsible for his

death. I am assuming that its purpose was to identify that person or persons. Do you reject that assumption?"

"No. I think it quite likely. Highly probable."

"You admit it?"

"I don't admit it, I state it."

"Then I ask you to suggest any person or persons other than you whom the initials NW might identify. Unless you can do that here and now I'm going to take you and Goodwin downtown as material witnesses. I've got men in cars outside. If I didn't do it the D.A. would."

Wolfe straightened up and sighed. "You are being uncommonly obnoxious, Mr. Cramer." He got to his feet. "Excuse me a moment."

Detouring around Cramer's feet, he crossed to the other side of the room, to the bookshelves back of the big globe, and took a book down. He was too far away for me to see what it was. He turned first to the back of the book, where the index would be if it had one, and then to a page near the middle of it.

He went on to another page, and another, while Cramer, containing his emotions under pressure, got a cigar from a pocket, stuck it in his mouth, and sank his teeth in it. He never lit one.

Finally Wolfe returned to his desk, opened a drawer and put the book in it, and closed and locked the drawer.

Cramer was speaking: "I'm not being fantastic. You didn't kill him; you weren't there. I'm not even assuming Goodwin killed him, though he could have. I'm saying that Heller left a messsage that would give a lead to the killer. The message says NW, and that stands for Nero Wolfe. Therefore, you know something, and I want to know what. I want a yes or no to this: Do you or do you not know something that may indicate who murdered Leo Heller?"

Wolfe, settled in his chair again, nodded. "Yes."

"Ah. You do. What?"

"The message he left."

"The message only says NW. Go on from there."

"I need more information. I need to know—are the pencils still there on his desk as you found them?"

"Yes. They haven't been disturbed."

"You have a man there, of course. Get him on the phone and let me talk to him. You will hear us."

Cramer hesitated; then, deciding he might as well string along, he came to my desk, dialed a number, got his man, and told him Wolfe would speak to him. Wolfe took it with his phone while Cramer stayed at mine. I picked up the third phone on the table.

Wolfe was courteous but crisp: "I understand those pencils are there on the desk as they were found, that all but one of them have erasers in their ends, and that an eraser is there on the desk, between the two

groups of pencils. Is that correct?"

"Right." The dick sounded bored.

"Take the eraser and insert it in the end of the pencil that hasn't one in it. I want to know if the eraser was loose enough to slip out accidentally."

"Inspector, are you on? You said not to disturb—"

"Go ahead," Cramer growled. "I'm right here."

"Yes, sir. Hold it, please."

There was a long wait, and then he was back on: "The eraser couldn't have slipped out accidentally. Part of it is still clamped in the pencil. It had to be torn out, and the torn surfaces are bright and fresh. I can pull one out of another pencil and tell you how much force it takes."

"No thank you, that's all I need. But, for the record, I suggest that you send the pencil and eraser to the laboratory to check that the torn surfaces fit."

"Do I do that, Inspector?"

"Yeah, you might as well. Mark them properly."

"Yes, sir."

Cramer returned to the red-leather chair, and I went to mine. He tilted the cigar upward from the corner of his mouth and demanded, "So what?"

"You know quite well what," Wolfe declared. "The eraser was yanked out and placed purposely. It was a part of the message. No doubt as a dot after the N to show it was an initial? And he was interrupted, permanently, before he could put one after the W?"

"Sarcasm don't change it any. It's still NW."

"No. It isn't. It never was."

"For me and the District Attorney it is. I guess we'd better get on down to his office."

Wolfe upturned a palm. "There you are. You're not harebrained, but you are pigheaded. I warn you, sir, that if you proceed on the assumption that Mr. Heller's message says NW you are doomed; the best you can expect is to be tagged a jackass."

"I suppose you know what it does say."

"Yes."

"I'm waiting."

"You'll continue to wait. If I thought I could earn this money"—Nero Wolfe tapped his pocket—"by deciphering that message for you, that would be simple, but in your present state of mind you would only think I was contriving a humbug."

"Try me."

"No, sir." Wolfe half closed his eyes. "An alternative. You can go on as you have started and see where it lands you, understanding that Mr. Goodwin and I will persistently deny any knowledge of the affair or those concerned in it except what has been given you, and I'll pursue my own course; or you can bring the murderer here and let me at him—with you present."

"I'll be glad to. Name him."

"When I find him. I need all six of them, to learn which one Heller's message identifies. Since I can translate the message and you can't, you need me more than I need you, but you can save me much time and trouble and expense."

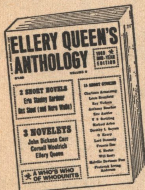
Cramer's level gaze had no trace whatever of sympathy. "If you can translate that message and refuse to disclose it, you're withholding evidence."

"Nonsense. A conjecture is not evidence. Heaven knows your conjecture that it says NW isn't. Nor is mine, but it should lead to some if I do the leading." Wolfe flung a hand impatiently and his voice rose: "Confound it, do you think I welcome an invasion of my premises by platoons of policemen herding a drove of scared citizens?"

Cramer took the cigar from his mouth and regarded it as if trying to decide exactly what it was. That accomplished, he glanced at Wolfe and then looked at me, by no means as a bosom friend.

"I'll use the phone," he said, and got up and came to my desk . . .

(Continued on page 99)



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Alice Scanlan Reach's "In the Confessional" won the Special Award of $500 for the best "first story" in EQMM's 1961 contest. Now Mrs. Reach has taken the chief character of her "first story," Father Crumlish of St. Brigid's Church, and given him another "case"—thus turning him into a series detective. And again the excellent qualities of Mrs. Reach's "first story" are so clearly evident—her understanding of people, her warmth and tenderness, and the appealing human interest in every line she writes . . .

As we said at the end of the editorial introduction to her "first story," and now repeat for her "second story": Congratulations, Mrs. Reach—and please keep on writing!

THE ORDEAL OF FATHER CRUMLISH

by ALICE SCANLAN REACH

PAUSING TO CATCH HIS BREATH ON the top step leading to the Silver Beach Ballroom, Father Francis Xavier Crumlish permitted himself a single, small sigh of relief. His ordeal was almost over. Only one trial remained before blessed deliverance from his private Purgatory, St. Brigid's Annual Field Day Festival.

The thought of what he had endured this steaming July day—as he had endured a similar day each one of his 48 years in the priesthood—brought a silent "Hellfire!" to his lips and made him more conscious than usual of the arthritis gnawing at his bones.

Since early morning he had judged the "Most Beautiful Baby in

St. Brigid's Parish Contest." He had awarded prizes to the perspiring winners of the "Mothers' Egg and Spoon Race." He had suffered through the "Fathers' Potato Sack Race." He had sweltered during the "Boys'-Under-Twelve Swimming Meet." He had consumed dozens of portions of homemade pies, cakes, jellies, jams . . .

For an instant his stomach lurched dangerously, protesting its overload of underdone hot dogs and tepid soda pop, and he was seized with a desperate longing for the cool, calm privacy of his rectory rooms where he could wholeheartedly belch.

But with God's help, he reminded himself once more, it would soon be over. He had only to mount the ballroom stage, twirl the huge silver drum containing hundreds of raffle tickets, extract one, and thereby determine the winner of the new green sedan which had been blighting the lawn of St. Brigid's School for the past four weeks.

Right now he was completely tuckered out and he meant to rest a bit. Wearily brushing at his still-thick, snow-white hair, the priest's dark blue eyes swept a glance over the rapidly filling ballroom.

All summer long the Silver Beach Bathing and Amusement Park attracted hordes of pleasure-seekers. Conveniently located on the soft, silvery sands of the Canadian shore, it was particularly alluring to residents of drab, dust-choked Lake City, the grain-and-steel port sprawled across the lake on the harsh, shale-encrusted American shore. Thus, this day, Father Crumlish and his flock, traveling by car and bus via Overlake Bridge, which linked the two countries, had strained the amusement park's facilities to the bursting point.

Still, it seemed to the priest as he watched from the ballroom doorway, the majority of the youngsters and adults in the dance hall were his Lambs—the faithful and the strays.

Father Crumlish frowned as he caught a glimpse of Mike Hurley in the act of pinching 17-year-old Jeannie Stark. Serves the brazen little flirt right, he thought. But he made a mental note to add five Hail Marys to Mike's penance the next time the repentant reprobate visited the Confessional begging forgiveness for punching Mrs. Mike in the jaw.

Why, Father Crumlish wondered, did any Irishman deliberately choose to drink bourbon?

Well, it was time to take up his cross. Slowly he made his way to the stage. Gazing out over the expectant audience, he felt a sharp twinge of apprehension when he saw young red-haired "Carrot" Mulloy standing by the ticket booth at the doorway. Surely Carrot, whose nickname matched his fiery temper, could stay out of trouble this night, couldn't he?

Quickly the priest spun the silver

drum. He drew out the lucky ticket. God was good! This year, unlike most, the winner was a deserving soul—poor Willie Potter, with an ailing wife, five hungry tykes, and a hooligan younger brother, Luke. Willie had little need for the new car, Father knew. But the cash he'd get for it would be a blessing.

The ceremonies over, Father Crumlish threaded his way toward the doorway where he had arranged to meet Lieutenant Thomas Patrick Madigan of Lake City's police force. "Big Tom" was on schedule. He stood talking with one of St. Brigid's altar boys, 13-year-old Joey Glass, who was scratching the ear of a formidable-looking dog. Father clamped his hand on the Lieutenant's shoulder.

"Who are you arresting, Lieutenant? Joey or Champ?"

Turning at the sound of his pastor's voice, Joey grinned shyly. "Are you kidding, Father? Nobody'd dare lay a hand on me—not with Champ around."

"The boy's right." Madigan agreed. "Even a cop knows better than to tangle with a police dog."

"Ah, now, don't be too harsh on the creature," Father said, fondling the dog's head. "Gentle as a lamb, he is. And reliable too. Many's the morning Mass I've wondered who'll be running up first to meet me at the Sacristy door—Joey or Champ."

"Aw, Father." Joey's slight frame shook with laughter at the priest's jest. But his brown eyes glowed with pride at the indirect praise. "Champ just likes to hang around wherever I am, that's all."

"Loyalty—it's a virtue in man or beast," Father said with a twinkle. "Need a lift, Joey? I've got a fine chauffeur here driving me back to the rectory."

"No, thanks, Father. I'm going with the gang—in the bus."

"Then, Tom, we'll be getting along—"

Father Crumlish broke off in dismay. No doubt about it—someone was calling his name. Hellfire! would there be no merciful end to this day? Well, he supposed there was room enough in his crown for a few more thorns. Resigned, the priest turned his head.

He might have known. Willie and Luke Potter were jostling through the crowd toward him, Willie looking and acting for all the world as if he'd caught up with a leprechaun, and Luke, as usual, leading the way—he might have known.

Dutifully, Father clasped the perspiring palm of Willie's outstretched hand. "They say luck comes to them who tread on shamrocks. Were your toes tickled by them tonight, Willie?"

Willie Potter's response was a shrill, almost hysterical giggle.

"How d'ya like that, Father?" Luke threw a muscular arm around his brother's sparse shoulders. "Never won a cent in his life. Now he cops the big prize."

"The lad deserves it," Father said, looking at Willie and pleased to see his chronically downhearted parishioner in such high spirits. Of the two Potter boys, Willie was the toiler. Whereas Luke . . . The priest was well aware that Luke spun away a goodly number of hours at Patsy's Barber Shop. Father also knew that Patsy frequently interrupted his hair-cut-and-shave business in order to accommodate St. Brigid's horseplayers.

"So we're gonna celebrate, Father." Luke's authoritative voice broke in on the priest's thoughts. "Right, Willie?"

"Huh?" Willie still seemed dazed by the prospect of so much unexpected wealth. "Yeah, yeah," he grinned fatuously. "Sure we are. You too, Father."

"Celebrating now, is it?" Father shook his head. "I've had enough celebrating this day, lads."

Luke waved expansively. "Willie's buying," he said. "Beer for the crowd." He nudged little Joey in the ribs. "And all the coke you can drink, kid."

Thinking to himself that Willie would be better off entirely if Luke would mind his own business, Father decided to call a halt. "Get along now," he said. "The lot of you. Do your celebrating. But mind you," he held up a warning finger, "no shenanigans."

During the drive to Lake City with Big Tom over the sleek, silver span, the heaviness in Father Crumlish's chest persisted. Could it be the hot dogs? Nerves? Perhaps his heart? Finally he spoke.

"It'll be the Devil's own doing back there tonight, I suppose. Now that Luke Potter has started the beer flowing."

"Forget it, Father. Those Canadian Mounties have the joint buttoned up."

"Ever hear the old saying, Tom? 'You never know from where you sit how strong the lemonade will be.' "

Big Tom chuckled. "It's true the punks are out in full force on overcrowded days like today."

The priest stared bleakly through the windshield of the police car. He wished he could quell the uneasy fluttering in his stomach, still the insistent wings beating against his heart.

"They know the Mounties have their hands full just patrolling the park." Big Tom continued. "Best time in the world to run in for some fast bucks."

"Shades of the old rumrunners," the priest murmured.

"Know the hottest items on the market today?"

Father Crumlish shook his head.

"Boat equipment. The kids case every Marina on the American shore. Steal anything they can lift."

"A fine start in life for them."

"They heist a few ten-horsepower outboard motors, load 'em in a boat, and head for Canada. There're all those secluded coves around

Silver Beach. Ideal spots to beach a boat, haul the stuff to a car on a side road, and deliver it to the customers. And don't think there aren't plenty of chiselers who'll jump at the chance to buy a $200 motor at half price or less."

"Later they'll earn their diplomas in armed robbery—or worse."

"You might as well know it, Father," Big Tom said slowly. "We've got our eyes on a few of your boys. Some of them were there tonight."

Father Crumlish clicked his tongue against his upper plate. He had his eye on a few of his boys himself.

"Hellfire!" The word slipped out unconsciously. He glanced sheepishly at Madigan. "Well, with the good Lord's help, St. Brigid's will get through this year's outing in peace and no damage done."

A moody silence prevailed in the police car until it pulled up to the rectory.

"Come in the house, Tom. After all the swill we've consumed this day, we need a little something to settle our stomachs." The priest regarded Madigan out of the corner of his eye. "Ah—maybe a tot of honest Irish whiskey?"

It seemed to Father Crumlish that he had just dozed off when he was roused by the shrill pealing of the telephone at his bedside. Accustomed as he had become through the years to being called to the Lord's work at any hour, he was instantly alert.

"St. Brigid's."

"Sorry to disturb you, Father," came Lieutenant Madigan's voice. "There's trouble. At the Beach."

So it hadn't been the hot dogs, and the Devil *was* about!

"Ten minutes, Tom?"

"Sure, Father."

In even less time the pastor settled himself on the seat beside Madigan, and the police car sped toward Silver Beach.

"What happened, Tom?"

"A knifing. One of your boys."

"Bad?"

"Dead."

"God be with us! . . . Who?"

". . . Joey Glass."

Father Crumlish's reactions to Madigan's terse words was automatic: *It's God's Will.* The priest believed his mission on earth was to meet the Devil head-on. In victory, he humbly knelt to thank Him. In defeat, he prayed for greater strength.

Through the years, in the shrouded hush of the Confessional, he had bent a compassionate but sorrowful ear, patiently listening to the sins and crimes of thousands of penitents—the seven-year-old candy thief and the depraved murderer. Each sad confession convinced him the more that his privileged knowledge of his people must somehow serve to sharpen his sword.

Never had the thought occurred to Father Crumlish that he might

be among the few God had chosen. Father Crumlish had chosen God.

Now, braced for battle, he turned to the policeman.

"How, Tom?" he asked quietly.

"A fight. Around the ticket booth. Right where we stood talking with the poor kid. Only lasted a few minutes, but when it was over—"

"Any idea who did it?"

Madigan cleared his throat. "A pretty good idea."

"Who?"

"You're not going to like this, Father."

Calmly, Father waited.

"Carrot Mulloy."

"Mulloy? Nonsense!" The priest shook his head in firm disbelief. "Mulloy never took a knife to anybody."

"The Mounties say—"

"I don't care what they say," Father cut him off testily. "I say he's innocent. He gave me his word six months ago he'd stay out of trouble and his word is good enough for me."

"Good enough for you maybe, Father, but not good enough for the Mounties—or for me either."

"I can think of quite a few St. Brigid's boys who should be mighty thankful to the Lord someone believed their word," Father retorted tartly. Seeing Big Tom's guilty flush, he was immediately regretful for reminding the policeman of his youthful mistakes.

After a slight silence Tom spoke. "According to the Mounties, this is a typical teenage gang brawl. Only a matter of time before Mulloy breaks and confesses."

"Gang?" Father Crumlish inquired, as if the word were completely foreign to his ears. He knew very well there were teenage gangs in his Parish. He knew very well who they were and that they were up to some unwholesome mischief, whatever it might be. But he had no intention of admitting it—at least, not right now.

"Joey Glass never belonged to any gang. Mulloy did—but he quit."

"You know better than I that Mulloy has been in trouble since he was seven."

"And small wonder! The lad's father is a drinker and his mother —worse."

"Carrot's been keeping his nose clean lately," Big Tom admitted grudgingly. "Ever since his kid sister had a nervous breakdown over the goings-on at home."

The priest was keenly aware of Madigan's probing glance.

"Understand she's in a private nursing home . . . Wonder who's paying the bills?"

Annoyed, Father coughed unnecessarily. "God's help," he said.

Tom remained silent until the car pulled up in front of Mounted Police Barracks. Mindful of his arthritis, Father eased himself out the door, then stopped short when he heard a noise.

"What's that?"

"Champ—the Glass boy's dog. They brought him here and he's been barking his head off."

"Poor creature."

Within minutes, the priest stood waiting in the small, drab anteroom in the barracks. Abruptly the door opened. Mulloy was brought in. Then they were alone. As Father had anticipated, the big, tough 18-year-old was wearing defiance like a shield.

"You didn't have to come, Father," Carrot said tightly, clenching his fists.

"And why wouldn't I? This is my job, lad."

"Well, it won't do any good." Mulloy walked over to the room's lone window. "You kept telling me this would happen." He gave a short, bitter laugh. "So it has."

"Isn't there more to it than that?"

"No." The boy ran a hand through his unruly red hair. "The cops say I was in a fight. Well, for once, they're right. I was."

"If you were in a fight, Robert," Father said carefully, using Carrot's given name, "I'm sure you had good reason for it."

"I had a reason," Mulloy said savagely. "That—" He caught himself. "Mike Hurley was cracking wise." He shuffled his feet self-consciously. "About Ma—"

So that was it. Mike Hurley and his bourbon tongue!

"And where and when was all this?"

"At the doorway near the ticket booth, Father. Right after you left. Luke was rounding up a gang of us to have a drink on Willie."

Father remembered.

"Then Mike—" Carrot halted.

"Go on."

Mulloy turned his belligerent face to the priest. "You know," he said accusingly. "A crowd was around us, the cops came, and Joey —" The boy's lips drew taut. "They say I knifed him."

"Did you?"

Again Mulloy's short, bitter laugh rang out. "What difference does it make?"

"Did you?"

"I'm telling you, Father," Carrot said defiantly. "The cops say I did." He shrugged. "They've got my record, and there's not a damned thing you or I or anybody else can do about it. So will you forget it?"

Pity tugged at Father's heart. Poor lad, he thought, poor tortured lad. "Now see here, Robert," he said firmly but not unkindly. "I know you've had a bad time—for a long time. But with the Lord's help you and I will straighten things out. You gave me your word six months ago you'd stay out of trouble. I believed you and trusted you. Now can't you do the same for me?"

"Belief! Trust!" Mulloy said scornfully. "Are the cops going to believe or trust me?"

"Maybe not, lad—but I do."

Carrot stared at him uncertainly.

"There's just one thing I want from you, Robert," the priest continued sternly, never taking his eyes from the turbulent, strained face. "I want your word, as God is your Judge, that you had nothing to do with this knifing."

Mulloy stood silent. But weren't the tense shoulders, the knotted muscles beginning to sag? Father thought so.

"Your word!"

Mulloy's face crumbled. "My word," he mumbled.

Wearily, the priest straightened. "Then leave the rest to Him, lad."

At the door he turned to give his troubled young parishioner one final reassuring look. "And to me."

A slender pink-tipped finger of light laced the night sky as the police car deposited Father Crumlish at the rectory door. Only a little while remained before the first morning mass. The priest lost no time donning his cassock and making his way through the short twisting alley that connected the rectory with St. Brigid's Church.

Unlocking the Sacristy door, he quickly checked to make sure his vestments for mass were in readiness. Then he opened the door leading to the main altar where, kneeling, he bowed his head in prayer. After a few moments he walked to the Communion Rail, unfastened the gate, and stepped down to the pew level of the church. From a corner near the Confessional he took a long pole and slowly made his way up the aisle, propping open the weather-weary stained-glass windows on his way.

At the rear of the church he unlocked the wide, worn oaken doors, placed the pole in a corner, and sank down against the hard bench in the last pew.

Suddenly he felt old. Terribly old. The events of the past day, of the long, sad night, and the test he knew faced him during the hours of the oncoming new day seemed overwhelming. Tiredly, he began to assemble his thoughts before doing what he always did in such times of stress: talk matters over with his Maker.

Something was very wrong. But the "something" eluded him. That Mulloy was innocent, he was certain. Then who was guilty? And why should Joey Glass be singled out for violence?

The questions whirled unanswered in his mind until, perhaps from their weight, his head nodded, his eyes closed, and he dozed.

He was awakened abruptly by a sound from the street. Soft light shimmered through the windows and from somewhere outside—was it a dog barking? A dog—?

"Glory be to God!" Father Crumlish exclaimed, sinking to his knees.

Surely it was a sign from Heaven pointing the way! Murmuring his thanks, he rose and walked to the Sacristy as rapidly as his arthritis

would permit. As he donned his vestments, he could hear the faint rustling of his early morning parishioners. Reverently he begged forgiveness for what he was about to do: say the fastest mass in all his 48 years as a servant of God.

But surely He would understand there was no time to lose. Else, why the sign? And surely He would know that what Father Crumlish must now do—the subterfuge he must use—was the only way. Wouldn't He?

Throughout the mass the question nagged at the priest as he went about his solemn duties on the altar. A part of his mind was still fastened on his problem, worrying it, turning it over and over. But no matter how hard he strove to arrive at the right decision, the burning issue remained: he must save an innocent soul.

Then, just as he was about to pronounce the concluding words of the mass, the sound—the heavenly sound—again floated through the windows. Once more Father Crumlish heard the dog bark.

"Ite. Missa Est!" It is ended, he said joyously, his doubts vanished. Turning, he made the sign of the cross, giving his parishioners his blessing, and hurried from the altar.

To save time, Father Crumlish carried his morning cup of tea to the rectory telephone table. Seating himself, he dialed headquarters and got the Lieutenant on the wire.

"Could you be doing me a wee favor, Tom?" He took a sip of the strong hot brew, chuckling to himself at the policeman's audible sigh of resignation. Madigan always reacted like that when Father made his mind up to move Heaven and earth—and police lieutenants, if need be—to protect his flock.

"Sure, Father."

"There's a puzzle here, Tom, and I can't quite make it out." While Tom waited for him to continue, he took another sip of tea. "There's something entirely odd about the dog."

"About Champ?"

"Well, look at it this way," Father said. "There's that dog. Gentle and friendly as you please. Devotion itself to Joey. But when his master's in dire danger, where's the dog, Tom? What's the creature up to?"

Father took another sip of tea while Madigan mulled it over.

"You mean you think Champ went after whoever it was who knifed the boy?"

"Ah! I do indeed, Tom. Tooth and claw. Like the Devil himself."

Again Madigan paused. "It would be hard to check on that—"

"Now I'm not so sure," Father broke in. "To tell the truth, that's the favor I want you to be doing me."

"Father, I don't think I quite—"

"What crossed my mind, Tom," the priest hurried on, "was what in the name of Heaven would Champ

ever do if he got another whiff of the fiend?"

"But—"

"So I thought, you and I, we'd try a little experiment, Tom. Just a little experiment."

Madigan sighed once more. "You know I've never turned you down yet, Father. Tell me what you want."

The priest gulped his last spot of tea. "It's an easy thing I want you to do, Tom. Just put a fine story in the newspapers and on the radio and television stations . . ."

Ten minutes later, Father Crumlish hung up the phone and walked thoughtfully to the rectory kitchen where he poured himself another cup of tea. Then he settled himself beside his radio.

It was all of an hour before his vigil was rewarded with the announcement of a special news bulletin. Tensely, he listened to the announcer's voice.

"Police Lieutenant Thomas P. Madigan issued an urgent warning this morning that death may be in store for one or more persons who were present at Silver Beach Ballroom last night when thirteen-year-old Joey Glass was knifed to death. He said the police have reason to believe that the dog owned by the Glass boy may be rabid. If, in an effort to defend his master, the dog bit or scratched anyone at the scene, they are urged to seek immediate medical attention."

The day dragged wearily, slowed by the heat of the summer sun. Equally weary, Father Crumlish prowled the rectory rooms, pausing only to listen again and again to the radio newscasts. Kneading the arthritic joints in his fingers, he kept asking himself over and over: was he wrong?

It was all of four o'clock before the telephone bell shrilled with the answer.

"Your idea paid off, Father." Big Tom said crisply. "Got a call from Frontier Hospital. A guy just checked in. Claims he was bitten by a stray dog."

"Thanks be to God!" Father soaring.

"He's using a phony name—J. Smith," Tom said. "No point in checking our files."

"Don't worry your head about that, Tom," Father said impatiently. "You've got Champ?"

"Right here, Father."

"Then I'll meet you both at the hospital."

"Half an hour, Father?"

"I'll be there, Tom."

Wincing a little from what he assured himself was nothing more than heartburn, St. Brigid's pastor rounded the hospital corridor and saw that Madigan, firmly clasping a leash secured to Champ's collar, had preceded him.

"I hope you're right, Father," Madigan greeted him.

"With God's help—and Champ's

—we'll soon see," Father replied, stretching out a gnarled hand to stroke the dog's head. He glanced obliquely at Big Tom. "Would there be any harm done if I had a few words alone—?"

"Well—" Madigan hesitated for an instant.

"Then you can bring Champ in."

The policeman shrugged, giving in gracefully. "I've gone along with you this far, Father."

Waiting to hear no more, Father opened the door and entered the hospital room.

For a long moment he stared at the figure propped up in the bed, cigarette dangling from a mouth gaping with astonishment at the priest's unexpected appearance. Pity, mingled with sadness, gripped Father as he thought, *There, but for the grace of God*—Wordless, he stood, waiting.

"Father! What—?"

Slowly the priest advanced into the room ."I was praying it wouldn't be you I'd find here."

"Praying—?"

Father Crumlish ignored the feigned bewilderment. "What are you doing here?"

There was a pause, the measure of a deep breath. "Some stray mutt took a nip outa me—couple of hours ago."

"And the false name?"

"Oh—that." A swirl of smoke drifted in Father's direction. "You know Willie. Always fussing. So I thought I'd get fixed up here without his knowing. Less trouble."

Father Crumlish sighed heavily. "You're in as bad trouble as you'll ever be, Luke Potter."

"Not me, Father."

Luke's grin of bravado was pitiful to see, but Father steeled himself and went on sternly. "It started at Patsy's, didn't it, with your betting the horses?"

Deliberately playing for time, Luke flicked ashes on the floor. "Doesn't everybody?"

"Losing—"

"Aw, c'mon, Father—"

"So you had to steal—"

"Hey now! Wait a minute—"

"Joey Glass must have caught you—sometime during the outing—unloading a boat on the beach with something you'd stolen." (What was it Madigan had said?) "Outboard motors, maybe?"

"Listen—" Luke turned from the priest's unrelenting stare, mashed his cigarette in an ashtray, and reached for another.

"And when you saw the lad talking to Lieutenant Madigan—and to me—you were afraid he was reporting you—"

"We were going to celebrate," Luke burst in. "Don't you remember?"

"And I'm not saying you had it in mind all along to do away with the boy. But when Mike Hurley and Carrot Mulloy began to tussle, you saw your chance to save yourself, to knife the poor innocent—"

"Mulloy did it! The cops are holding him for it, ain't they?"

"Unjustly," Father said grimly.

"How do you know?" Luke struck a match, his hand shaking.

Father Crumlish sighed. How did he know? Because he knew his people, he supposed. Because he knew the weak and the strong, recognized their virtues and their faults. Because he knew who was devoted to good and who was capable of evil.

"Because I know you, Luke," Father said. "Joey Glass will never be able to identify you now. You've seen to that." He walked to the door and, hand on the doorknob, turned. "But his dog will."

In the face of Luke's shocked speechlessness, Father Crumlish was reminded of his sacred duty to one and all, rich and poor, sinner and saint. "May the Lord have mercy on you boy," he said sadly.

Quietly he opened the door to admit Champ and Big Tom Madigan. Then, equally quietly, he closed it behind him . . .

St. Brigid's steeple bell was just sounding ten o'clock when Father Crumlish, his final chores for the night completed, climbed the winding steps to the choir loft. He seated himself at the organ and waited for the bell to cease.

It had been a long ordeal. But now it was over, and with the good Lord's help—

The bell sounded its final stroke. Father touched his fingers to the yellowed ivory keys, threw back his head casting his eyes toward Heaven, and, with only the Almighty to hear, poured out his soul in song.

Presently, St. Brigid's rafters rang with the Father Crumlish version of *The Rose of Tralee*.

EDITORS' FILE CARD

AUTHOR:	**EDGAR WALLACE**
TITLE:	***The Ghost of John Holling***
TYPE:	Crime and Detection
LOCALE:	Aboard a transatlantic liner
TIME:	A generation ago
COMMENTS:	*A tale told by Felix Jenks, a steward on the "Canothic," about a series of jewel thefts that plagued his ship—and one of the "old master's" finest stories . . .*

THERE ARE THINGS ABOUT THE sea that never alter," said Felix Jenks, the steward. "I had a writing gentleman in one of my suites last voyage who said the same thing, and when writing people say anything original, it's worth jotting down. Not that it often happens.

" 'Felix,' he said, 'the sea has got a mystery that can never be solved —a magic that has never been and never will be something-or-other to the tests of science.' (I'm sure it was 'tests of science,' though the other word has slipped overboard).

"Magic—that's the word. Something we don't understand, like the mirror in the bridal suite of the *Canothic*. Two men cut their throats before that mirror. One of 'em died right off, and one lived long enough to tell the steward who found him that he'd seen a shadowy sort of face looking over his shoulder and heard a voice telling him that death was only another word for sleep.

"That last fellow was Holling—the coolest cabin thief that ever traveled the Western Ocean. And what Holling did to us when he was alive was nothing to what he's done since, according to certain stories I've heard.

"Spooky told me that when the mirror was taken out of the ship and put in the stores at Liverpool, first the storekeeper and then a

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clerk in his office were found dead in the storeroom. After that it was carried out to sea and dropped into fifty fathoms of water. But that didn't get rid of Holling's ghost.

"The principal authority on Holling was the steward who worked with me. Spooky Simms his name was, and Spooky was so called because he believed in ghosts. There wasn't anything in the supernatural line that he didn't keep tag on, and when he wasn't making tables rap he was casting horror-scopes—is that the way you pronounce it?

" 'I certainly believe in Holling's ghost,' said Spooky, on this voyage I'm talking about now, 'and if he's not on this packet at this minute, I'm no clairvoyager. We passed right over the spot where he died at three-seven this morning, and I woke up with the creeps. He's come aboard—he always does when we go near the place he committed suicide.'

"There was no doubt that Spooky believed this, and he was a man with only one delusion: that he'd die in the poorhouse and his children would sell matches on the street. That accounts for the fact that he hoarded every cent he made.

"Personally, I don't believe in spooks, but I do admit that there is one magical thing about the sea—the way it affects men and women. Take any girl and any man, perfect strangers and not wanting to be anything else, put them on the same ship and give them a chance of talking to one another, and before you know where you are, his wastepaper basket is full of poetry that he's torn up because he can't find a rhyme for 'love,' and her wastepaper basket's top-high with bits of letters she's written to the man she was going to marry, explaining that they are unsuitable for one another, and that now she sees in a great white light the path that love has opened for her.

"I know, because I've read 'em. And the man hasn't got to be handsome or the girl a doll for this to happen.

"There was a gang working the *Mesopotamia,* when I served in her a few years ago, that was no better and no worse than any other crowd that travels for business. They used to call this crowd 'Charley's,' Charley Pole being the leader. He was a nice young fellow, with fair, curly hair, and he spoke London English, wore London clothes, and had a London eyeglass in his left eye.

"Charley had to work very carefully, and he was handicapped, just as all the other gangs were handicapped, by the Pure Ocean Movement, which our company started. Known cardsharps were stopped at the quayside by the company police and sent back home again—to America if they were American, to England if they were English. About thirty of our stewards were suspended, and almost every bar steward in the line, and it looked as

if the Western Ocean was going to be a dull place. Some of the crowds worked the French ships, and nearly starved to death, for though the French are, by all accounts, a romantic race, they're very practical when it comes to money.

"So the boys began to drift back to the English and American lines, but they had to watch out, and it was as much as a steward's place was worth to tip them off. Charley was luckier than most people, for he hadn't got the name that others had got, and though the company officials looked down their noses every time he went ashore at Southampton, they let him through.

"Now the Barons of the Pack (as our old skipper used to call them) are plain businessmen. They go traveling to earn a living, and have the same responsibilities as other people. They've got wives and families and girls at high school and boys at college, and when they're not cutting up human lamb, they're discussing the high cost of living and the speculation in the stock market, and how something ought to be done about it.

"But on one point they're inhuman: they have no shipboard friendships that can't pay dividends. Women—young, old, beautiful, or just women—mean nothing in their lives. So far as they are concerned, women passengers are in the same category as table decorations—they look nice, but they mean nothing. Naturally, they meet them, but beyond a 'Glad to meet you, Mrs. So-and-so,' the big men never bother with women.

"That was why I was surprised when I saw Charley Pole walking the boat deck with Miss Lydia Penn for two nights in succession. I wasn't surprised at her, because I've given up being surprised at women.

"She had Suite 107 on C deck, and Spooky Simms and I were her room stewards—we shared that series—so that I knew as much about her as anybody. She was a gold-and-tortoiseshell lady, and had more junk on her dressing-table than anybody I've known. Silver and glass and framed photographs and manicure sets, and all her things were in silk, embroidered with rosebuds. A real lady.

"From what she told me she was traveling for a big woman's outfitters in Chicago. She had to go backward and forward to London and Paris to see new designs, and by the way she traveled it looked as if no expenses were spared.

"As a looker Miss Lydia Penn was in the *de luxe* class. She had golden hair, just dull enough to be genuine, and a complexion like a baby's. Her eyebrows were dark and so were her eyelashes.

"I admire pretty girls. I don't mean that I fall in love with them. Stewards don't fall in love—they get married between trips and better acquainted when the ship's in dry dock. But if I was a young man

with plenty of money and enough education to pass across the line of talk she'd require, I shouldn't have gone further than Miss Penn.

"But she wasn't everybody's woman—being a little too clever to suit the average young businessman.

"The day before we made Nantucket Lightship, Spooky Simms came to me just as I was going off watch.

" 'Remember me telling you about Holling?' he said.

"As a matter of fact, I'd forgotten all about the matter.

" 'He's on board—saw him last night as plain as you—if it's possible, plainer. He was leaning up against Number Seven boat, looking white and ill. Plain! Why, I can see him now. There will be trouble!'

"And he was right. Mr. Alex McLeod of Los Angeles took his bag from the purser's safe that night to save himself trouble first thing in the morning. He locked the bag in a big trunk and locked the door of his cabin, and wanted to give the key to Spooky, who was his steward. But Spooky was dead-scared.

" 'No, sir, you'd better keep it. And if you'll allow me to say so, sir, I shouldn't leave any valuables lying about tonight if I was you.'

"When Mr. McLeod went to his bag the next morning, three thousands dollars and a gold watch and chain were gone.

" 'Holling,' said Spooky, and you couldn't budge him. He was one of those thin, bald men that never change their opinions.

"The Central Office people investigated the case, but that's where it ended.

"It wasn't much of a coincidence that Miss Penn and Charley were on the ship when it turned round. Charley was on business, and so was she. I saw them together lots of times, and once he came down with her and stood outside her cabin while she dug up some photographs of the South Sea Islands.

"Charley's partner was a fellow named Cowan, a little fellow with the biggest hands I've ever seen. They say he could palm a whole pack and light a cigarette with the same hand without the sharpest pair of eyes spotting it.

"One morning I took Cowan in his coffee and fruit, and I thought he was sleeping, but just as I was going away he turned round.

" 'Felix,' he said, 'who is that dame in the private suite?'

"I told him about Miss Penn.

" 'She's got Charley going down for the third time,' he said, worried, 'and he's side-stepping business. We're eight hundred dollars bad this trip unless somebody comes and pushes it into my hand —and that only happens in dreams.'

" 'Well, it's your funeral, Mr. Cowan,' I said.

" 'And I'll be buried at sea,' he groaned.

"Cowan must have talked

straight to Charley, because that same night the smoke-room waiter told me that Charley had caught an English Member of Parliament for a thousand dollars over a two-handed game that this bird was trying to teach him.

"We got to Cherbourg that trip early in the morning, and I had to go down to lock up the lady's baggage, because she was bound for Paris. She was kneeling on the sofa looking out of the porthole at Cherbourg, which is about the same thing as saying that she was looking at nothing, for Cherbourg is just a place where the sea stops and land begins.

" 'Oh, steward,' she said, turning round, 'do you know if Mr. Pole is going ashore?'

" 'No, Miss,' I said, 'not unless he's going ashore in his pajamas. The tender is coming alongside, and when I went into his cabin just now he was still asleep.'

" 'Thank you,' she said, and that was all.

"She went off in the tender and left me the usual souvenir. She was the only woman I've met that tipped honest.

"There was some delay after the tender left, and I wondered why, till I heard that a certain English marquis who was traveling with us discovered that his wife's jewel-case had been lifted in the night, and about twenty thousand pounds' worth of pearls had been taken.

"It is very unpleasant for everybody when a thing like that happens, because the first person to be suspected is the bedroom steward. After that, suspicion goes over to the deck hands, and works its way round to the passengers.

"The chief steward sent for all the room-men, and he talked straight.

" 'What's all this talk of Holling's ghost?' he said, extremely unpleasant. 'I am to tell you that the place where Holling's gone, money—especially paper money—would be no sort of use at all, so we can rule spirits out entirely. Now, Spooky, let's hear what you saw.'

" 'I saw a man go down the alleyway toward Lord Crethborough's suite,' he said, 'and I turned back and followed him. When I got into the alleyway there was nobody there. I tried the door of his cabin and it was locked. So I knocked, and his lordship opened the door and asked me what I wanted. This was at two o'clock this morning—and his lordship will bear me out.'

" 'What made you think it was a ghost?' asked the chief steward.

" 'Because I saw his face—it was Holling.'

"The chief steward thought for a long time.

" 'There's one thing you can bet on—he's gone ashore at Cherbourg. That town was certainly made for ghosts. Go to your stations and give the police all the information you can when they arrive.'

"On the trip out Miss Penn was

not on the passenger list, and the only person who was really glad was Cowan. When he wasn't working, I used to see Charley moping about the alleyway where her cabin had been, looking sort of miserable, and I guessed that she'd made a hit. We had no robberies, either; in fact, what with the weather being calm and the passengers generous, it was one of the best trips I've ever had.

"We were in dock for a fortnight replacing a propeller, and just before we sailed I had a look at the chief steward's list, and found I'd got Miss Penn again, and to tell you the truth, I wasn't sorry, although she was really Spooky's passenger.

"I don't think I've ever seen a man who looked happier than Charley Pole when she came on board. He sort of fussed round her like a pet dog, and for the rest of the voyage he went out of business. Cowan felt it terribly.

" 'I've never seen anything more unprofessional in my life, Felix,' he said bitterly to me one day. 'I'm going to quit at the end of this trip and take up scientific farming.'

"He was playing patience in his room—the kind of patience that gentlemen of Mr. Cowan's profession play when they want to get the cards in a certain order.

" 'What poor old Holling said about Charley is right—a college education is always liable to break through the skin.'

" 'Did you know Holling?' I asked.

"Did I know him? I was the second man in the cabin after Spooky found him. In fact, I helped Spooky get together his belongings to send to his widow.' He sighed heavily. 'Holling did some foolish things in his time, but he never fell in love except with his wife.'

" 'Have you heard about his ghost?' I asked.

"Cowan smiled.

" 'Let us be intelligent,' he said. 'Though I admit that the way Charley goes on is enough to make any self-respecting cardman turn in his watery tomb.'

"Two days out of New York we struck a real ripsnorting southwester—the last weather in the world you'd expect Holling to choose for a visit. At about four o'clock in the morning, Spooky, who slept in the next bunk to me, woke up with a yell and tumbled out onto the deck.

" 'He's aboard!' he gasped.

"There were thirty stewards in our quarters, and the things they said to Spooky about Holling and him were shocking to hear.

" 'He's come on board,' said Spooky, very solemn.

"He sat on the edge of his bunk, his bald head shining in the bulkhead light, his hands trembling.

" 'You fellows don't think as I think,' he said. 'You haven't got my spiritual eyesight. You laugh at me when I tell you that I shall end my days in the poorhouse and my children will be selling matches, and you laugh at me when I tell you that

Holling's come aboard—but I know. I *absolutely* know!'

"When we got to New York the ship was held up for two hours while the police were at work, for a lady passenger's diamond sunburst had disappeared between seven o'clock in the evening and five o'clock in the morning, and it was not discovered.

"Miss Penn was a passenger on the home trip, and this time Charley wasn't as attentive. He didn't work either, and Cowan, who was giving him his last chance, threw in his hand and spent his days counting the bits of gulf weed we passed.

"As I've said before, there's one place on a ship for getting information and that's the boat deck after dark. Not that I ever spy on passengers—I'd scorn the action. But when a man's having a smoke between the boats, information naturally comes to him.

"It was the night we sighted England, and the Start Light was winking and blinking on the port bow, and I was up there having a few short pulls at a pipe, when I heard Charley's voice. It wasn't a pleasant kind of night—it was cold and drizzling, and they had the deck to themselves, he and Miss Penn.

" 'You're landing at Cherbourg?' said Charley.

" 'Yes,' said Miss Penn's voice, and then, 'What has been the matter with you all this voyage?'

"He didn't answer at once. I could smell the scent of his Havana. He was thinking things over before he spoke.

" 'You generally get off a boat pretty quick, don't you?' he asked, in his drawling voice.

" 'Why, yes,' she said. 'I'm naturally in a hurry to get ashore. Why do you say that?'

" 'I hope Holling's ghost isn't walking this trip,' he said.

" 'What do you mean?' she asked.

"And then he said in a low voice, 'I hope there'll be no sunbursts missing tomorrow. If there are, there's a tugful of police meeting us twenty miles out of Cherbourg. I heard it coming through on the wireless tonight—I can read Morse Code—and you'll have to be pretty quick to jump the boat this time.'

"It was such a long while before she answered that I wondered what had happened, and then I heard her say, " 'I think we'll go down, shall we?'

"It was six o'clock the next morning, and I was taking round the early coffee, when I heard the squeal. There was a Russian count, or prince, or something, traveling on C deck, and he was one of the clever people who never put their valuables in the purser's safe. Under his pillow he had a packet of loose diamonds that he'd been trying to sell in New York. I believe that he couldn't comply with some Customs' regulations and had to bring them back. At any rate, the pocketbook that held them was found empty in the alleyway, and the dia-

monds were gone. I had to go to the purser's office for something and I saw him writing out a radiogram, and I knew that this time nothing was being left to chance, and that the ship would be searched from the keel upwards.

" 'They can search it from the keel downwards,' said Spooky gloomily, when I told him. 'You don't believe in Holling, Felix, but I do. Those diamonds are gone.'

"And then, what I expected happened. The ship's police took charge of the firemen's and stewards' quarters; nobody was allowed in or out, and we were ordered to get ready to make a complete search of passengers' baggage. The tug came up about nine o'clock, and it was crowded, not with French police, but with Scotland Yard men who had been waiting at Cherbourg.

"The police interviewed the Russian and got all they could out of him, which was very little, and then the passengers were called to the main saloon and the purser said a few words to them. He apologized for giving them trouble, but pointed out that it was in their interests as much as in the interests of the company that the thief should be discovered.

" 'We shan't keep you long, ladies and gentlemen,' he said. 'There is an adequate force of detectives on board to make the search a rapid one, but I want every trunk and every bag opened.'

"The ship slowed down to half-speed, and then began the biggest and most thorough search I've ever seen in all my experience of seagoing. Naturally, some of the passengers kicked, but the majority of them behaved sensibly and helped the police all they knew how. And the end of it was—not a loose diamond was brought to light.

"There was only one person who was really upset by the search, and that was Charley. He was as pale as death and could hardly keep still for a second. I watched him, and I watched Miss Penn, who was the coolest person on board. He kept as close to the girl as he could, his eyes never leaving her, and when the search of the baggage was finished and the passengers were brought to the main saloon again, he was close behind her. This time the purser was accompanied by a dozen men from headquarters, and it was the Inspector in Charge who addressed the crowd.

" 'I want, first of all, to search all the ladies' handbags, and then I wish the passengers to file out—the ladies to the left, the gentlemen to the right, for a personal search.'

"There was a growl or two at this, but most of the people took it as a joke. The ladies were lined up and a detective went along, opened each handbag, examined it quickly and passed on to the next. When they got to Miss Penn, I saw friend Charley leave the men's side, and, crossing the saloon, stand behind

the detective as he took the girl's bag in his hand and opened it. I was close enough, anyway, to see the officer's changed expression.

" 'Hullo, what's this?' he said, and took out a paper package.

"He put it on the table and unrolled it. First there was a lot of cotton wool, and then row upon row of sparkling stones. You could have heard a pin drop.

" 'How do you account for having these in your possession, madam?' asked the detective.

"Before she could reply, Charley spoke.

" 'I put them there,' he said. 'I took them last night, and placed them in Miss Penn's handbag, in the hope that her handbag would not be searched.'

"I never saw anybody more surprised than Miss Penn.

" 'You're mad,' she said. 'Of course you did nothing of the sort.'

"She looked round the saloon. The stewards were standing in a line to cover the doors, and after a while she saw Spooky.

" 'Simms,' she called.

"Spooky came forward. As he came Miss Penn spoke in a low voice to the detective.

" 'Simms, do you remember that I sent you down to my cabin for my bag?'

" 'No, Miss,' he said, 'you never asked me for a bag.'

"She nodded. " 'I didn't think you'd remember.' And then, 'That is your man, Inspector.'

"Before Spooky could turn, the police had him, and then Miss Penn spoke.

" 'I am a detective in the employment of the company, engaged in marking down cardsharpers, but more especially on the Holling case. I charge this man with the willful murder of John Holling on the high seas, and with a number of thefts, particulars of which you have.'

"Yes, it was Spooky who killed Holling—Spooky, half-mad with the lunatic idea that he'd die in the poorhouse, who had robbed and robbed and robbed, and when he was detected by Holling, who woke up and found Spooky going through his pocketbook, had slashed him with a razor, and invented the story of the face in the mirror. Whether he killed the other man I don't know—it is very likely. One murder more or less wouldn't worry Spooky, when he thought of his children selling matches on the streets. Was he mad? I should say he was. You see, *he had no children!*

"I never saw Miss Penn again until she came out on her honeymoon trip. There was a new gang working on the ship—a crowd that had been pushed off the China route, and weren't very well acquainted with the regulars that worked the Western Ocean. One of them tried to get Miss Penn's husband into a little game.

" 'No, thank you,' said Charley. 'I never play cards these days.' "

Another adventure of James and Bennett, industrial detectives and big-business espionage agents—this time, in the jungle of high (and low) finance connected with real estate—hotels, motels, and (pardon the pun) no-tells . . . By the way, do you know anything about "land assemblages"?

THE BOY WONDER OF REAL ESTATE

by JAMES M. ULLMAN

THE LITTLE MAN WITH THE INtense blue eyes and the unruly shock of white hair said, "I gotta meet a guy in Denver for lunch, see. And another guy in L.A. tonight. So I can't talk long."

Michael Dane James, business and industrial espionage consultant, nodded. It was 9:24 a.m. in New York City. But time and distance meant nothing when you merged the efficiencies of jet air transport with the energies of Fritz Molloy, the Boy Wonder of Finance.

The Boy Wonder, of course, was no longer a boy. Like several other Boy Wonders James had encountered, this one was at least 35, probably older. But he still looked youthful enough to warrant the title in café-gossip columns, where many rumors of his active night life and of his fabulous real estate ventures were chronicled almost daily.

The Boy Wonder was reclining on a chair in James's office, puffing strenuously on a cigar. He drawled, "I want you, Mr. James, to insure secrecy on a project that is so secret I haven't decided myself yet what it's going to be."

"I see," James said dubiously.

"And when I decide on the project," Molloy went on, "I'm *still* not going to tell you what it is. But I don't want any leaks."

James, a broad-shouldered, crewcut man of medium height, thoughtfully rubbed his pug nose. In his late forties, he wore hornrimmed glasses and dressed carefully to hide a growing hint of a potbelly.

"I think," James said slowly, "you'd better explain that."

Molloy glanced at his wrist watch. "I can't just now—I'm overdue at the airport. But you talk to my father-in-law, Ephraim Holt. He's also my bankroll—my biggest investor. He didn't like the idea of me hiring you, but he'll cooperate. Two more things: first, I don't want anyone else in my employ to know I hired you, and second, my father-in-law will give you a list of

some people who work with me. Those are the *only* people connected with my organization you're to investigate. Nobody else, without my express permission. Understand?"

"Well," James said, "I'm a trifle confused, but I'll try to have some kind of report for you in a week. Where will you be?"

"I'm not sure. Miami, Dallas, or New Orleans," Molloy said, rising and starting for the door. "My father-in-law will tell you that, too. But wherever I am, have someone deliver the report to me in person."

A black-haired, black-eyed boy, in blue jeans and a tee-shirt, perched on Ephraim Holt's desk The boy grinned as James entered, jumped down, and said, "I'm Bobby Molloy. I was ten years old last week. Grandpa is gonna take me to *lunch!* And then to the *ball game!*"

Holt, a bald, portly man, fondly patted the boy's head. "This man and I have business, Bobby. Go find Miss Nelson. She'll take you to the Stock Exchange, where you can watch all the crazy men yelling. I'll meet you in the gallery."

The boy ran off.

"Molloy's son?" James asked, shaking hands and then sitting down. "I'd never have guessed it."

"There's no resemblance," Holt said, "because he's adopted. I bet that's a side to Fritz Molloy you didn't know from reading the gossip columns. Fritz is a softie. He spoils Bobby something awful—almost as much as Fritz's father did, when he was alive. But I don't mind. I spoil Bobby something awful, too. You know grandpas."

"Somehow," James confessed, "I never thought of Molloy as a loving father."

"After you work for him a while," Holt said, "you will. Everyone does. He's got a big heart and is always making large donations that never get into the newspapers. He collects unfortunates and gives them sinecures—Eddie Green, a press agent who used to be a drunk; Burleigh Harris, a broken-down pilot who used to barnstorm with Fritz's dad; Mrs. Elliott, a private secretary who was caught embezzling in order to pay doctor bills for a sick child; and plenty of others. That's why I was opposed to Fritz's hiring you. Innocent people might get hurt. Moreover, I don't cotton to the idea of one man in business spying on another."

"It's true," James grinned, "that I *did* engage in a little spying once, when I had a few pressing bills of my own to meet. But since becoming a member of several PTAs and the patron saint of a troop of cub scouts, I've confined my activities to helping men who are being spied *on*."

"Even if you are a rascal," Holt grinned back, "at least, you're personable. And I confess, I'm an old admirer of yours. I saw you in the Polo Grounds, more than a quar-

ter of a century ago, when you made that long run against the Giants. But Fritz engaged you, you know, only because he hasn't learned yet to control his emotions. He lost his temper."

"What about?"

"In 1957 he put together his first big New York deal. He had organized a motel chain and owned other interests, but no single enterprise as big as the one in '57. He assembled all the parcels on a block in Manhattan, tore the old structures down, and put up a hotel. That went fine. Then he assembled another block for a second hotel. No trouble there, either. But last February he tried to assemble a third block for the Molloy Building, and he ran into trouble."

"I thought," James said, "he was going to break ground for the Molloy Building next month."

"Oh, we're going through with it. But we were delayed. And counting the mortgage interest, it may cost us up to a million more than we figured on. All because a chiseler found out about the project before we assembled the land. There are men like that, you know—legal wolves. They move in ahead of you, option as much land that you need as they can, and then try to sell it to you at an enormous profit to themselves. Do you know anything about land assemblage?"

"Not much."

"Well, when Fritz or any other big developer plans a multimillion-dollar project in a city like New York, he assembles the land with the utmost secrecy—he has to. He lets as few people as possible know what's going on, and even they might know only part of the deal. In our business, in fact, land assemblers are sometimes called 'land detectives.' Purchase money is deposited in different banks under different names, and purchases are made under dummy names. Fritz hires separate attorneys and title searchers for each purchase so that nobody can deduce what he's doing by studying the activities of his personal lawyers, or even analyzing the land transfer records. The project itself, and all the parcels, are given code names. When we're actually assembling, the assemblers aren't even allowed to talk to their families—they work day and night. Secrecy and speed are essential, because once the rumor gets out that a developer is buying, every property owner involved will ask three or four times what his property is worth. What's more, the same thing happens to property all around where the developer is buying. A lot of people try to cash in, and get hurt when it turns out the developer doesn't want their land at all. Only the informed chiseler knows how to profit."

"I gather, then," James said, "that Molloy wants me to review his land-assemblage security procedures so that no chiselers can find out about his next big Manhattan develop-

ment, whatever it's going to be. And particularly, to investigate the Molloy Building assemblage—to determine what went wrong."

"Exactly." Holt pulled an envelope from a drawer and handed it to James. "All the Molloy Building assemblers are listed inside, as well as an account of the security procedures we followed. The assemblers are practically the same team that handled the hotel projects. I've known those men for years, and if you ask me, I think you're wasting your time."

"I'd better check them out anyway. Who's the chiseler who held you up on the Molloy Building?"

"Jason Gard, an old pro. He'd never bothered us before. But the Molloy Building—he knew all about it, every detail."

"I'll look into Mr. Gard, too." James opened the envelope. Briefly he studied its contents. "There aren't many names on the list," he observed, "and they're all real estate men, brokers, or people working out of Molloy's New York office. What about the woman who was an embezzler? The old-time pilot? The publicity man, and the other people who follow Molloy around the country?"

"Fritz," Holt said, "never discusses an assemblage except with the men directly concerned. The people around him might guess something big is brewing, but Fritz is more security-conscious than anyone else. The publicity man isn't told any details until the assemblage is completed and Fritz is ready to give the story to the papers. And the others—they read about it in the papers."

Holt paused. Then he added, "Mr. James, although Fritz hired you, I'll warn you now. I'm still going to try to persuade him to forget his anger at what happened on the Molloy Building. If I succeed, don't be surprised if he fires you."

James blinked.

"He's angry," Holt went on, "not because someone chiseled him. Actually, the chiseler cost me more money than he cost Fritz, because I financed the assemblage. He's angry because the Molloy Building was conceived by his father and his father died before the assemblage could be finished."

"Then it's not just a business matter."

"Fritz," Holt said, "has had a lot of sorrow in his life. He doesn't know yet how to live with it. First, his wife—my youngest daughter. A few months after the marriage we learned she had an incurable disease. She did live five years, and the devotion between them was pathetic. Having little Bobby around gave her an extra year or two of life, I'm sure. She'd wanted a child so badly, and Fritz's father went out west and arranged for the adoption of an infant. And two years ago Fritz's father suffered his first heart attack. Before that he'd been a dynamic man, a big spender

who loved life. He was an ace in the first World War; he barnstormed almost up to the second one. He managed an aircraft plant and then went into real estate, making a lot of money in Oklahoma and Texas. But the heart attack left him weak and frightened. Fritz turned the company plane over to him so that Burleigh could fly the old man wherever he wanted to go. Old Molloy still loved flying as much as he loved Bobby and his own son's success. But toward the end—Old Molloy died in April—he didn't even want to see Fritz. He was a proud man, perhaps ashamed of his infirmity. He traveled right up to the last, until a week before he passed away at his home in Tulsa. And that's why Fritz was furious—because he wasn't able to go to his father with a big clipping from a newspaper and say, 'Here it is, Pop. *Your* building. We're ready to put it up.' "

James pushed his chair back. Genially he said, "Well, I appreciate your frankness, Mr. Holt—about not liking my job. But I may need your help anyhow."

"Oh, I'll play square with you," Holt smiled. "Any information you want on Fritz's operations, I'll get it. If it's just routine office records, call my secretary direct. She's usually a sphinx, but I told her you're an efficiency expert."

"Where will I find Molloy a week from now? He asked me to send him my first report by agent."

"I'll see him for lunch in Chicago on Thursday. He'll know then, and I'll let you know when I get back."

"Tell Molloy," James said, "that my agent's name is Ted Bennett. For security's sake, Ted will introduce himself as a potential real estate investor from Spokane."

"Is Fritz to pretend Bennett is an old friend?"

"No. Bennett will manage an introduction. He's very good at insinuating himself into other people's company."

Ted Bennett, whose bank balance totaled less than $4000, kept a straight face with difficulty as he said, "Burleigh, I might invest a few hundred thousand with this boss of yours. But no more."

"Don't apologize," Burleigh Harris replied. "With the mortgage leverage, it can do the work of a milion." Harris, big, heavy-set, and balding, downed the rest of his drink, swiveled on his stool, and nodded to a group of people who had just entered the lounge, one of the most fashionable in Miami Beach. "There he is now. Greatest guy in the world. He put me in the air again, and flying is what I live for. Come on, I'll introduce you."

Bennett, a tall, thin man in his late thirties, rose. Harris had already stepped away from the bar, so Bennett paid for the drinks. As a matter of fact, he had paid for the two previous drinks, and also for Burleigh's dinner. It was obvious

that Burleigh was an expert at ducking checks. Michael Dane James wasn't going to like this expense account one bit.

Bennett followed Harris through the dim room. The Boy Wonder, surrounded by his retinue, was slipping into a reserved booth. The retinue consisted of four other men and two women. One of the women was middle-aged, obviously the wife of one of the men. The other woman, an attractive, long-legged brunette in her late twenties and a few inches taller than the Boy Wonder, clutched Molloy's arm and snuggled against him.

Harris pulled Bennett forward. "Fritz, this is Ted Bennett, from Spokane. He owns factories or something out there. Ted, this is Fritz Molloy."

Molloy looked up, cigar jutting from his mouth, and nodded. "Sit down and join us, Mr. Bennett. My associates—Mr. Green, Mr. Steelman, Mr. Earle, Mr. Rogers. And Mrs. Rogers and Miss Rogers."

Bennett shook hands and murmured the proper nothings. Miss Rogers winked and smiled at him, an action Mrs. Rogers noted with disapproval.

"You have business interests in Florida?" Molloy asked.

"Just looking around," Bennett said. "I was thinking of diversifying into real estate."

Green, a short, pudgy man of about forty, howled. "Oh, brother! You came to the right guy!"

"Don't let Eddie scare you," Earle smiled. "Fritz isn't after your bankroll. He's already loaded with investors."

"Another never hurts," Molloy said cordially. A waiter came and took orders. Eddie Green, the ex-alcoholic, asked for tea.

"Seriously," Bennett said, "I *would* like to learn more about real estate."

"Then stick around," Molloy grinned. "That's all we talk. Excuse me." A band began to play, and Molloy turned to Miss Rogers. "C'mon," he invited. "Let's twist."

Molloy and Miss Rogers climbed out of the booth. Mr. and Mrs. Rogers joined them, Mr. Rogers somewhat reluctantly.

"Bennett, here," Harris said to the table in general, "touted me on some real wild stocks. I think I'll keep my serious money with my poor man's wildcat Oklahoma oil wells. But maybe he can make all you rich guys richer."

Bennett laughed. "If I could really beat the market, I wouldn't be thinking of buying land."

"You could do worse," Green said, nodding at Molloy, now barely visible behind Miss Rogers, "than to tie up with him. He's a straight shooter. Just because I did him a favor once, he hired me as his public relations man, not that he needs one. He's sharp and tough, but he's more than fair with his investors."

"He likes to live it up, doesn't

he," Bennett observed. "Not that I object."

"I'll tell you something," Steelman said. "No matter how late he stays out, he's dressed and through with breakfast by eight and going over a balance sheet. He's no loafer. And confidentially, in his business you make as many deals in a night club as you do in an office."

"Sandra Rogers," Earle said, "sure has her eye on Fritz. She and her parents have been following him around for nearly a year."

"Ah, he'll never marry her," Eddie Green said. "He loved his wife too much. And don't think Sandra doesn't know it. She'd be glad to settle for any decent-looking guy with some dough." Green turned to Bennett. "Say, buddy," he ventured. "You married?"

"No," Bennett said.

"Then," Green advised happily, "watch out!"

Bennett stepped into a Miami Beach pay booth at two in the morning. He broke open a roll of quarters, set them on the shelf, and placed a long-distance call to a suburban residence near New York City.

After four rings a man answered with a sleepy "Yah?"

"Hello, Mickey?"

"Lucky for you it is," James replied. "Anyone else might resent being hauled out of the sack before dawn. But me, I love it."

"Sorry," Bennett said. "I thought you ought to know. I've made personal contact with the Boy Wonder, but there were too many people around and I couldn't give him the report or discuss it with him. He invited me to fly to Dallas with his party a few hours from now, for the grand opening of one of his motels, where supposedly he's going to tell me all about real estate investments."

"How'd you meet him?"

"His pilot is a penny-ante plunger in the stock market. He was hanging around a brokerage office in the hotel lobby, so I struck up an acquaintance by giving him a few tips. The pilot steered me to Molloy."

James groaned. "Good grief. When those stocks go down, you'll be exposed. Who's with the Boy Wonder?"

"Eddie Green, his press agent; a lawyer named Steelman; an architect named Earle; and a substantial investor named Rogers. Rogers' wife and daughter are along. The daughter wants to marry the Boy Wonder. But late in the evening the Boy Wonder got to talking business with Steelman, and Sandra started cuddling up to me. I told her some O.S.S. stories from the war."

"That's just great. You study our report again on the flight down there?"

"I did. And it still doesn't add up."

"This whole affair," James said,

"is a puzzle. The men on the list of names the Boy Wonder provided are all clean—every single one of them. And except for a few minor flaws his security procedures are excellent. But the Boy Wonder's father-in-law, who is also his biggest investor, doesn't want anyone nosing around the organization for one minute. And the Boy Wonder himself won't let us investigate anyone whose name *isn't* on his list—which includes everyone who travels around with him. The pilot, the press agent, the in-and-out investors like Rogers—the works. The only people on his list are New York real estate men. It's as though the Boy Wonder was working against us, too. Screwy is the name for it, Ted. What did you learn about Molloy and his friends during your carousing?"

"To begin with," Bennett said, "Molloy is a softie . . ."

"I've heard that before. But go on."

"He really is," Bennett persisted. "He pays his pilot ten grand a year, lets him eat and drink on the cuff all over the country, and gives him the run of Old Molloy's home in Tulsa whenever he isn't flying the plane, which is often, because Molloy prefers to go by jet. All because the pilot was once a barnstormer with Old Man Molloy, and the old man found Burleigh on the skids, dealing poker in El Paso, in 1953. The old man persuaded Fritz to buy a company plane and make Burleigh the company pilot. Fritz pays his broken-down press agent fifteen grand to follow him around and arrange interviews with reporters who want to interview him anyway. The press agent used to be a real estate reporter for a New York paper. He once held back an exclusive story that would have hurt Molloy, when Molloy was just starting. Molloy found Green in a drunk tank years later, sobered him up, and put him on his payroll. And he pays his secretary, the ex-embezzler, twelve grand so she can take care of the sick child. The secretary isn't even with him this trip. Molloy gave her a month off to visit the kid."

"Where'd you learn all those salaries?"

"From Miss Rogers. While we were twisting."

"Who's that girl's father?"

"A retired securities underwriter. Sandra says he's worth a couple of million dollars."

"Now I understand," James said, "what you see in that girl. Ted, I know Molloy didn't authorize it, but you start looking into all those people as discreetly as you can. There's something going on—some important fact being concealed from us." James paused. "It occurs to me," he went on slowly, "that Molloy was probably jumping all over the country last February, just before the assemblage, just as he is now. Why don't I have an agent get copies of this chiseler

Gard's home and office telephone bills for February? We'll see if Gard placed any long-distance calls to cities where Molloy happened to be at the same time. I'll compile an itinerary from his office files. I'll mail copies of that stuff to you, too. Show it to Molloy, and see if it rings a bell with him. I'll send it special delivery to the motel in Dallas. You should get it day after tomorrow. So long."

Bennett strolled out of the motel and down to the pool, the latest report from Michael Dane James folded in his breast pocket. Sandra Rogers, clad in a red bikini, cavorted in the pool's shallow end, giggling and kicking her feet while holding a rubber float. The Boy Wonder sat at a pink table shaded by a pink umbrella. The Lieutenant-Governor, the Mayor, and two Texas oil tycoons shared the table with him. Other freeloading guests from Texas social and business circles, not to mention opinion-molders from the Texas press, ringed the pool at other pink tables. The motel was still closed to the public. Molloy was giving this all-day party for the publicity and good will.

Bennett glanced briefly at Molloy, who nodded. Then he sat at a table occupied solely by Mr. Earle, the architect. A girl wearing an abbreviated cowboy costume and carrying a tray laden with drinks walked by and Bennett grabbed a martini. He sipped.

"There's Sandra," he remarked, putting the glass down. "But where are our other friends from Miami?"

"Burleigh flew Steelman to Oklahoma City this morning—to settle some zoning problem," Earle said. "Then Burleigh said he was going to Tulsa, but I think he's really going to Little Rock. He's got a woman there. Eddie Green's in town, trying to line up some television interviews for Molloy. And the Rogers drove into town, too. Mrs. Rogers wants to shop at a certain department store."

"I think Eddie was right about Sandra," Bennett said. "Molly doesn't really go for her much—except as a sort of shield maybe, to keep serious gold diggers away."

"You've hit it," Earle said. "How about you? When you and Fritz had that long talk yesterday, did Fritz sell you on a deal?"

"Not yet."

Molloy rose a few minutes later. He glanced at Bennett and then started toward the motel.

"Excuse me," Bennett said, getting up and following Molloy who walked around the building and waited for Bennett.

"Well?" Molloy asked.

Bennett pulled the report from his pocket and handed it over. "Here it is. But Mickey already checked it against your itinerary. I'm afraid Gard didn't call a single city that you visited during February."

Molloy began unfolding the re-

port. "Another bust, then. Like your first report. The one telling me that although three of my assemblers drink too much, and two of them bet on horses, and one maintains a mistress a block from his office, they're all honest men. And that my office manager consults a psychiatrist. And that my phones aren't tapped and my office isn't bugged. When will you tell me something I *don't* know?" He started to read.

"Gard did do a lot of out-of-town calling," Bennett observed. "Six to Chicago, five each to Boston and Philadelphia, three to Providence, and plenty of singles. As well as three collect ones—from San Diego, Las Vegas, and Tucson."

"Um," Molloy said. He went on reading. He shook his head. Then he folded the paper—rather abruptly, it seemed to Bennett—and handed it back. "Junk, Mr. Bennett. That's all you guys give me. I've just made a decision. You're fired. And so is Mr. James. Tell him I'll pay the full fee I promised, plus all expenses, and to forget everything."

Molloy turned and strode back toward the motel.

Bennett watched him go. He studied the report again. He then started toward the motel himself. As he reached the driveway he saw the Boy Wonder pull away from the curb in a white Thunderbird. Bennett broke into a trot, heading for a line of parked rental cars. But two husky young men—the motel's recreation director and the lifeguard—intercepted him.

"Mr. Molloy," the lifeguard enunciated carefully, one hand on Bennett's shoulder and another on his arm, "said he wanted you to go on enjoying yourself here today. Everything is still on the house."

Bennett considered a maneuver that would have resulted in the lifeguard's suffering a broken arm. Then he realized he'd never catch up with the Boy Wonder anyway. He watched glumly as the Thunderbird turned toward Dallas.

The lifeguard took his hands away. Bennett shrugged and walked on into the motel. He handed a girl at the desk a five-dollar bill. "Change, please."

As the girl began counting silver, a bellboy said to an assistant manager, "You know what? Mr. Molloy just took that Colt .45 off the wall display and drove off with it. We got another one?"

"Was it a real gun," the assistant manager asked, "or one of those dummies?"

"A real one," the boy said.

Bennett pocketed his change and walked outside to a public telephone booth. He called Michael Dane James.

"This is Ted," he announced when the connection was completed. "We've been fired."

"Something tells me," James began, "you didn't handle the Boy Wonder properly. Me, I got along with him fine."

"There's more to it than that. This is serious, Mickey. He fired us after taking one look at Gard's February telephone bills. He said he'd pay full fee and all expenses. Then he walked into the hotel, lifted a gun off the wall, got into an automobile, and drove away. And he detailed two guys to keep me from following him."

"In that event," James said thoughtfully, "Molloy probably fired us because, as far as he's concerned, we solved his case. And now he's angry enough to shoot someone. I think we better go on working for Molloy. Got any ideas?"

"There's one key man," Bennett said, "who's *not* on Molloy's list—and who isn't working for Molloy, either."

"You're so right. I'll check him out and call back in thirty minutes. You in a booth?"

Bennett read off the telephone number.

"Stand by."

Bennett stepped out of the booth and glanced toward the pool. Sandra Rogers, standing poolside, spotted him and waved. She filched two martinis from a passing cowgirl and walked toward Bennett.

At least, Bennett reflected, the wait would be a pleasant one.

The cab pulled into the driveway and stopped behind the white Thunderbird. Bennett handed the driver some bills.

"Here," he said. "But hold it just a minute."

Bennett walked to the porch and rang the bell. A few moments later the Boy Wonder himself opened the door.

Molloy's eyes were ringed. His face was haggard, and he was in shirt sleeves, with his tie pulled loose. But he managed a weak smile.

"You guys," he said slowly. "I guess you *do* know your business. I thought I fired you, but if you got this far, you're hired again."

Bennett turned to the cab driver. "Okay, buddy, shove off."

Bennett followed Molloy into the house. The Colt Peacemaker lay on a coffee table, unloaded. Six cartridges lay beside it.

"Don't worry," Molloy said. "I've changed my mind. You don't have to prevent a murder. I've done a lot of thinking, and I've decided not to shoot anyone."

"He's not in Tulsa, you know," Bennett said. "We checked some airports. Burleigh Harris flew your plane to Little Rock."

Molloy nodded. "I don't care about Burleigh any more." He sat down in a big chair and lit a cigar. "I'm sorry, by the way, that I asked those two fellas to stop you back in Dallas. They didn't hurt you, did they?"

Bennett flopped onto a sofa. "Not a bit."

The Boy Wonder looked up, eyes suddenly alert and cautious. "Ex-

actly how much have you and Mr. James figured out? Since I just put you back on my payroll, I'd appreciate a complete answer."

"Well," Bennett said, "when you hightailed it from the motel after looking at the list of Gard's long-distance calls, I telephoned Mickey. We'd already deduced there was one person—*not* on the list you provided—who knew all about the Molloy Building and who wasn't in your employ. That would be your late father."

"That's right," the Boy Wonder said. "It was Dad's building, and I told him everything."

"So Mickey checked your father's movements during February—a simple matter, since all it involved was a check on the movements of the company plane. And sure enough, the company plane was in San Diego, Las Vegas, and Tucson on the same days that Gard got the long-distance, collect calls. It was almost as obvious to us then as it was to you."

"But why did you peg Burleigh Harris? I never told Harris about my real estate assemblages. And my father was a real estate man himself—he *knew* the need for secrecy."

"Quite a few things. Minor item: Harris is tight-fisted. I can personally attest to that. I bought him a dinner and three drinks. Your late father was known to be a big spender. The three calls to Gard were collect. Another minor item: Harris invests in oil wells, an expensive hobby for a man on his salary who also keeps a woman in Little Rock. But biggest item of all: it hardly seemed likely that your father would betray you *willingly*. Someone must have blackmailed him into doing it. By arranging a few facts, we came up with a theory that would most certainly give Burleigh Harris a hold over your father."

"Go on," the Boy Wonder said.

"The theory involves Bobby," Bennett said, avoiding Molloy's eyes and staring at the table. "And it explains why your father-in-law—and even you, to an extent—had reservations about hiring James in the first place. Why you didn't want the people around you—that would include Harris—investigated. Bobby's adoption was supposedly arranged ten years ago by your father, who went 'out west' and came back with an infant. But what legitimate adoption agency would put a child out under those circumstances—to a mother afflicted with an incurable illness?

"More than likely, your father obtained the child through some illegal source. Arranged, let's say for the sake of theory, by his old flying buddy, Burleigh Harris, who was on the skids in El Paso in those days, and on the fringe of an underworld crowd that would know how to manage those things, since dealing poker is hardly legal there. Because what happened to Burleigh Harris in 1953, less than a

year after the adoption? His old pal Molloy 'persuaded' his son—you—to buy a company plane and make Harris the pilot. Was it really persuasion? Or was Harris being rewarded for his role in the illegal adoption by being given the flying job he yearned for, and with it, a sinecure for the rest of his life?

"Let's suppose the latter was the case. And that, as the years pass, Harris gradually gets over his gratitude for these favors and takes his new life for granted. Sure, he lives off the cuff wherever he goes. But he's forever rubbing elbows with people who have *real* money. He develops a greed for some himself. Who wouldn't? He's been hanging around you long enough to know that if a man can get inside information on a major land assemblage and act quickly, he can reap big profits. And long enough to hear of professional chiselers like Gard.

"Everyone in your organization knew you were going to put up a Molloy Building somewhere in New York. So Harris goes to Gard and they make some kind of deal. And then Harris puts the screws to your father, who by now loves Bobby only as much as a grandfather can, which is all the way. And whose confidence and strength have been shattered by illness. He forces your father to tell him about the Molloy Building assemblage, on the threat of exposing the illegal adoption, perhaps even having Bobby taken away."

The Boy Wonder said, "That's the way it must have been. You're right about Bobby and the adoption. My dad, my father-in-law, Burleigh, and me—we were the only ones who knew. And that's the *only* threat that would have caused my father to tell Harris about the assemblage. Harris would never try to brace *me* with a blackmail scheme, or my father-in-law, either. We'd jail him and fight tooth and nail to keep Bobby. But my father—sick and scared, alone with Burleigh all the time—he'd give in."

"It also explains," Bennett said, "why your father didn't want to see you those last few weeks. He was afraid to face you. Undoubtedly, Harris threatened to expose the adoption anyway if your father ever told you the truth."

"And that," Molloy said, "is why I was sore enough to want to kill Harris, after I saw Gard's list of calls. I knew where my father had been in February because I talked to him on the telephone every day. It was easy to guess the rest. I wanted to murder Burleigh Harris for what he did to my dad. And when I got here, to my Dad's old house, I went through Burleigh's things upstairs and found an envelope in a drawer. From Gard's real estate firm. The kind of envelope that checks come in. If Harris had walked in at that moment, I *would* have killed him."

Molloy stubbed his cigar out.

"I guess it's time," he went on

slowly, "for the Boy Wonder to grow up. If I'd killed Burleigh Harris in a rage, I'd not only have ruined myself, I'd have pulled all the others down with me. Bobby, my father-in-law, the investors, the people who work for me—I'd have hurt everyone, just because I personally hate a guy. I'll go on hating him. But I won't kill him. I'll just fire him and try to forget him."

He rose and went to a mirror, straightening his tie. "Get on the phone," he ordered. "Find a locksmith and order new locks for all the doors, so Burleigh Harris can't get back in here. Then call the Little Rock airport and tell 'em to impound my airplane."

Bennett started for the telephone. "Are we going back to New York City?"

"Not immediately," the Boy Wonder said, reaching for another cigar. "While you're telephoning down here, I'm going upstairs and call my father-in-law and have him get some lawyers to setting that adoption business straight, publicity or no publicity. Then I'm going to dump all Burleigh's junk on the sidewalk. Then you and me, we'll drive to the airport and catch a plane to Phoenix. I may buy twenty per cent of a desert out there. The Rogers' will be waiting. Sandra likes you, and it will be a relief, getting someone to take her out nights, so I can get some more sleep. If your Mr. James complains about the extra time you're taking, tell him I've given you a special new assignment, for which he'll get his usual fee. Tell him the assignment is so confidential you can't even discuss it."

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THE EXPENSE OF JUSTICE

by LEO TOLSTOY

NEAR THE BORDERS OF FRANCE AND Italy, on the shore of the Mediterranean Sea, lies a tiny little kingdom called—well, let us call it Monado. Many a small country town can boast more inhabitants than this kingdom, for there are only about seven thousand of them all told, and if all the land in the kingdom were divided, there would not be an acre for each inhabitant. But in this toy kingdom there is a real kinglet, and he has a palace, and courtiers, and ministers, and generals, and an army.

It is not a large army—only sixty men in all; but still it is an army. There were also taxes in this kingdom, as elsewhere: a tax on tobacco, and on wine and spirits. But though the people there drink and smoke as people do in other countries, there are so few of them that the King would have been hard put to it to feed his courtiers and officials and to keep himself, if he had not found a new and special source of revenue.

This special revenue comes from a gaming house, where people play roulette. People play, and whether they win or lose the keeper always gets a percentage; and out of his profits he pays a large sum to the King. The reason he pays so much is that, at the time of this story, it is the only such gambling establishment left in Europe.

Some of the little German sovereigns used to keep gaming houses of the same kind, but a few years ago they were forbidden to do so. The reason was that these gaming houses did so much harm. A man would come and try his luck; he would risk all he had and lose it, then he would even risk money that did not belong to him and lose that, too; and then, in despair, he would drown or shoot himself. So the Germans forbade their rulers to make money in this way; but there was no one to stop the King of Monado, and he remained with a monopoly of the business.

So now everyone who wants to

gamble goes to Monado. Whether they win or lose, the King gains by it. "You can't earn stone palaces by honest labor," as the proverb says; and the Kinglet of Monado knows it is a dirty business, but what is he to do? He has to live; and to draw a revenue from drink and tobacco is also not a nice thing.

So he lives and reigns, and rakes in the money, and holds his court with all the ceremony of a real king. He has his coronation, his levees; he rewards, sentences, and pardons; and he also has his reviews, councils, laws, and courts of justice—just like other kings, only all on a smaller scale.

Now it happened some years ago that a murder was committed in this King's domain. The people of that kingdom are peaceable, and such a thing had not happened before.

The judges assembled with much ceremony and tried the case in the most judicial manner. There were judges, and prosecutors, and jurymen and barristers. They argued and judged, and at last they condemned the criminal to have his head cut off as the law directs. So far so good. Next they submitted the sentence to the King. The King read the sentence and confirmed it. "If the fellow must be executed, execute him."

There was only one hitch in the matter—they had neither a guillotine for cutting heads off nor the executioner.

The Ministers considered the matter, and decided to address an inquiry to the French government, asking whether the French could not lend them a machine and an expert to cut off the criminal's head; and if so, would the French kindly inform them what the cost would be. The letter was sent.

A week later the reply came: a machine and an expert could be supplied, and the cost would be 16,000 francs. This was laid before the King. He thought it over. Sixteen thousand francs! "The wretch is not worth the money," he said. "Can't it be done, somehow, cheaper? Why, 16,000 francs is more than two francs a head on the whole population. The people won't stand for it, and it may cause a riot!"

So a Council was called to consider what should be done; and it was decided to send a similar inquiry to the King of Italy. So the letter was written, and a prompt reply was received.

The Italian government wrote that they would have pleasure in supplying both a machine and an expert, and the whole cost would be 12,000 frances, including traveling expenses. This was cheaper, but still it seemed too much. The rascal was really not worth the money. It would still mean nearly two francs more per head on the taxes.

Another Council was called. They discussed and considered how it could be done with even less expense. Could not one of the

soldiers, perhaps, be got to do it in a rough and homely fashion? The General was called and was asked: "Can't you find us a soldier who would cut the man's head off? In war they don't mind killing people. In fact, that is what they are trained for."

The General talked it over with the soldiers to see if one of them would undertake the job. But none of the soldiers would do it. "No," they said, "we don't know how to do it; it is not a thing we have been taught."

Again Ministers considered and reconsidered. They assembled a Commission, and a Committee, and a Sub-Committee, and at last decided that the best thing would be to alter the death sentence to one of imprisonment for life. This would enable the King to show his mercy, and it would come cheaper.

The King agreed to this, and so the matter was arranged. The only hitch now was that there was no suitable prison for a man sentenced for life. There was a small lock-up where people were sometimes kept temporarily, but there was no strong prison fit for permanent use.

However, they managed to find a place that would do, and they put the young fellow there and placed a guard over him. The guard had to watch the criminal, and had also to fetch his food from the palace kitchen.

The prisoner remained there month after month until a year had passed. But when a year had passed, the Kinglet, looking over the account of his income and expenditure one day, noticed a new item of expenditure. This was for the keep of the criminal; nor was it a small item either.

There was a special guard, and there was also the man's food. And the worst of it was that the fellow was still young and healthy, and might live for fifty years. When one came to reckon it up, the matter was serious. It would never do.

So the King summoned his Ministers and said to them, "You must find some cheaper way of dealing with this rascal. The present plan is too expensive."

So the Ministers met and considered and reconsidered, until one of them said, "Gentlemen, in my opinion we must dismiss the guard."

"But then," rejoined another, "the fellow will run away."

"Well," said the first, "let him run away, and be hanged to him!"

So they reported the result of their deliberations to the Kinglet, and he agreed with them. The guard was dismissed, and they waited to see what would happen. All that happened was that at dinner-time the criminal came out, and, not finding his guard, he went to the King's kitchen to fetch his own dinner. He took what was given him, returned to the prison, shut the door on himself, and stayed inside.

The next day the same thing occurred. He went for his food at the proper time; but as for running away, he did not show the least sign of it!

What was to be done? They considered the matter again.

"We shall have to tell him straight out," they said, "that we do not want to keep him."

So the Minister of Justice had him brought before him.

"Why do you not run away?" said the Minister. "There is no guard to keep you. You can go where you like, and the King will not mind."

"I daresay the King would not mind," replied the man, "but I have nowhere to go. What can I do? You have ruined my character by your sentence, and people will turn their backs on me. Besides, I have got out of the habit of working. You have treated me badly. It is not fair. In the first place, when once you sentenced me to death, you ought to have executed me; but you did not do it. I did not complain about that. Then you sentenced me to imprisonment for life and put on a guard to bring me my food; but after a time you took him away and I had to fetch my own food. Again I did not complain. But now you actually want me to run away! I can't agree to that. You may do as you like, but I won't run away!"

Once more the Council was summoned. What course could they adopt? The man would not leave. They reflected and considered. The only way to get rid of him was to offer him a pension. And so they reported to the King.

"There is nothing else for it," they said; "we must get rid of him somehow." The sum was fixed, and this was announced to the prisoner.

"Well," he said, "I don't mind, so long as you undertake to pay it regularly. On that condition I am willing to go."

So the matter was settled. He received one-third of his annuity in advance, left the King's dominion, and settled just across the frontier, where he bought a bit of land, started market-gardening, and now lives comfortably. He always goes at the proper time to draw his pension. Having received it, he then goes to the gaming tables, stakes two or three francs, sometimes wins and sometimes loses, and then returns home. He lives peaceably and well.

It is a good thing that he did not commit his crime in a country where they do not grudge expense to cut off a man's head, or to keep him in prison for life.

EDITORS' FILE CARD

AUTHOR:	**BRYCE WALTON**
TITLE:	***Case History***
TYPE:	Crime Story
LOCALE:	Alabama
TIME:	The Present
COMMENTS:	*The narrator, an academic type with an appropriately pedantic style, is a man of questionnaires and forms, accumulating data on the family backgrounds of murderers . . . Do* you *believe in statistics?*

As my final hour of retribution approaches, I look back with what I hope is a scientific interest on when it really began for me. I can still see myself with amazingly objective clarity as, on that Monday morning, I stepped briskly along a rutted, muddy bypath toward the murderer's house.

With the knowledge of hindsight, I see myself with a kind of pitying fear, as Dr. Jekyll undoubtedly must have glanced back at the inescapable shadow of Mr. Hyde. But then there was not, of course, any conscious awareness of my own lurking repressions.

I appeared quite normal, if somewhat bedraggled, in my limp seersucker suit and carrying my larger leather brief case. I seemed to feel only a mild irritation at the muggy heat and the gnats and mosquitoes that swarmed about me. The growing pressures of my work were still nothing more than a tightening challenge.

As for that nasty letter from my wife that I had received on Saturday at my hotel in Mobile, I had dismissed it completely from my mind. Her querulous demands for more money, her shrill threats to get a divorce if I didn't come home to New Jersey and drop my "silly" low-paying work, get a decent steady job, forget my ambitious goal of a Ph.D. in sociology from Columbia—all these complaints no longer intimidated me.

I had simply written back to Lucille that I loved her, and that if she loved me she would continue to exercise patience and understanding.

After glancing back at my muddy station wagon (furnished by the Goronstein Foundation for which I worked), I pushed on under the Spanish moss. It swayed in the morning mist, and for some odd reason it suggested the beards of dead men. My shoes and lower trouser-legs were soon wet from the dewy grass as I probed on along the path called Bayou Road and presently entered a forest of jackpines. The air was not unpleasantly scented with turpentine, and the ground was matted with red needles. Then there was mud, rotting grass, and after that—the murderer's house.

I hesitated. I felt a special uneasiness, although I was used to seeing the impoverished backgrounds from which murderers grow like mushrooms in dark cellars. My research work had taken me into the most dismal and depressing environments throughout Southern United States. This was no worse than many of the other breeding places of violence. But for a long moment I was gripped by an anxiety I did not then understand.

There was no breeze. There was no sound but the sliding rustle of 'coon or 'possum, the faint whistling of muskrat across a pond. I looked into the muddy clearing surrounded by the blackskirt of pines at the two-roomed shack made of green lumber scraps that had warped. The pale wood had the dry shine of bleached bone, and there were holes in the palm-thatched roof and two old rattan rocking chairs on the sagging porch.

An alligator roared and the sound impelled me quickly toward the shack. As I neared the porch steps, I noticed an old wagon out back that had fallen apart, and on my left a tree from which dangled a child's play swing made of rope and an old auto tire.

I paused and again there was an inexplicable tightening in my stomach, and I thought for a moment of the murderer once playing and laughing in that swing as a child. No one would have guessed then that the little boy would one day stab his wife seventeen times with a butcher's knife. The little boy would have been least aware of the destructive germ of frustration that had been planted in him and nourished during his tender years by such a home and family.

A scrawny red hounddog barked abruptly, then slid grinning toward me from under the porch. Then a gaunt woman in a gray sackdress and gray tangled hair came out onto the porch and squinted at me.

I doffed my straw hat and smiled up at her. She stared back with the flat, tired suspicion of her kind, and I began to smell sideporek frying inside the shack and hear the sniffling and whining of kids whose pinched faces began to appear fearfully in the doorway and windows.

"You're Mrs. Ruskin?" I inquired as pleasantly as I could.

She nodded with the quick jerky motions of a bird. "What's it to yuh?"

As usual, before an interview, I had familiarized myself with all the background information on the case in the Goronstein Foundation's official files. It was necessary, of course, to know the first names of the murderer and his control brother, to know all the particulars of the crime, and so on. A few of the murderers had killed members of their own families. Obviously, it was important to know these details before approaching the mother of a murderer.

I followed my customary procedure, and Mrs. Ruskin's reactions were much the same as those of other mothers—I mean, the mothers of killers. I explained in careful, easy-to-understand language that I was a sociologist or researcher, and that "we are doing a study of why boys get in trouble with the law." There was never any direct reference to murder. Then I would say to the mother, "Would you mind talking for a little while about your son?"

There was none of the resistance one might expect. On the contrary, as with most mothers of murderers, Mrs. Ruskin's eyes brightened. She was suddenly very friendly. She asked me to sit in the rocking chair as it was crowded in the shack, then ran inside. I heard shrill admonitions and slaps, the whines of the children as they were herded out the back door and driven into the woods; then Mrs. Ruskin brought out a wooden stool and sat on it awaiting my questions eagerly.

I already had my clipboard and questionnaire out and my poised ball-point. I had jotted down the usual descriptive notes on the physical and geographical environment, and on Mrs. Ruskin. She was in her middle forties, but looked twenty years older. Several of her front teeth were missing.

In case you wonder about the eagerness with which the mothers of murderers welcomed my questions, it would seem that they unconsciously sense that such talk will provide them with a catharsis. They usually harbor guilt feelings about their son's behavior. I'm sure they welcome a return to the limelight. The only time Mrs. Ruskin, for example, had ever been out of the swamp and in the public eye, the only time she had ever escaped the empty drudgery of her existence and received any special attention, had been during the murder trial of her son, Jed. Naturally she was glad to be in the spotlight again.

This was psychologically understandable, but as I looked at Sarah Ruskin's bright eyes and the color returning to her citric cheeks, I felt an almost uncontrollable resentment. It occurred to me, with a sudden surprise, that I despised her, that I had grown to loathe the families of

murderers, especially the mothers. And at this moment, Mother Ruskin in particular. But I also knew that a researcher must always be dispassionate.

I was there only to get the facts, to collect data that would be added to a vast file of data piling up in the offices of the Goronstein Foundation. That data would be evaluated later, and no doubt put to much needed purpose in a country in which the homicide rate is one of the highest in the world and increasing 10% a year . . .

But as the hot muggy hours of questioning continued, I found myself being more, not less, irritated by Mrs. Ruskin's answers and her eager nostalgia concerning Jed's dismal history. Jed might have been an Olympic hero, a man who had become a Hollywood movie star, instead of a murderer who had paid for his—or rather his parents'—crimes by having been electrocuted.

I was aware of my growing nervousness, my tendency to dwell on answers pointing up her own delinquency, my impulses to tell her exactly how ignorant and disgusting a witch she really was.

But I had to maintain a proper scientific detachment. I had to keep reminding myself that Sarah Ruskin was also a victim of her own sordid family background, which in turn had been a product of earlier family disease, and so on back to Adam and Eve—or more scientifically, back to the first blob of protoplasm that began to evolve as a man.

So I simply forced myself to remain objective as I checked her answers against information already obtained from prison records. This was always done in order to determine the honesty of the person being interrogated. There was no doubt of Mrs. Ruskin's honesty. Indeed, she was exuberantly honest, anxious to tell everything.

Nor was my detachment cooled by Mrs. Ruskin's frequent dashes through the house and into the back where again I heard the sound of blows and the agonized yells of children.

"Is that really necessary?" I finally asked, although it wasn't on the questionnaire.

"Sure is," she said. "Meanest little brats in the county, I reckon. Won't mind for nothin'."

"What is it that they're not minding now?" I asked.

"Don't want 'em pesterin' around during our talk. Anyways, they got to stay in the woods or they're gonna wake up their Daddy."

"Their Daddy is in there still sleeping?" I asked.

"Sleeps his no-good life away, that man does. Sleepin' off a drunk most of the time, like now."

This was appropriate to the questionnaire, so I went back to it, but I noticed that my hands were shaking slightly.

"How have you and your husband got along, Mrs. Ruskin?"

She gave a cackling laugh. "We can't rightly stand each other, can't hardly bear the sight or sound of one another. But the Lord intended it, so here we are. Sam, he had to marry me on account he got me with Jed. But I can't stand the man."

"Why not?"

"Drinks and gets meaner'n a bull. Always has. Reckon he's not so bad when he's sober, but that ain't often enough to count."

"This was how he was when Jed was a boy?" I asked.

"Always was. I'm used to it now, him drinkin', beatin' up me and the kids. I try to keep myself an' the kids out of his way. 'Course I got to slap 'em around myself to keep 'em in line." She cackled again.

"Sort of a vicious circle," I commented. "Did your husband beat one of the kids more than the others?"

"Jed, he beat him the most. Jed was the oldest and he never liked Jed one bit. Why he used to beat that pore little Jed blue. Once he beat Jed so bad with a board the boy was blind, couldn't see nothin' for weeks."

I felt a headache growing behind my eyes, and several times I had the extraordinary desire to reach out and take hold of Mrs. Ruskin's throat. I was sweating profusely, and I kept fighting down the intruding fantasy of beating Mrs. Ruskin with a board . . .

Further questions concerning the head of the family elicited the information that Jed had developed a phobia regarding his father and was terrified of him.

"Did Jed start doing bad things before he ran away from home?"

"He was always mean, no good. Started stealin' and runnin' off all the time. I'd jaw him out good, tell him he was no son of mine. Didn't do a bit of good. I'd lose my temper, fly off, take a stick to him."

I remember that I was staring at her face and that it seemed to swell and waver like something seen underwater; another time it looked like a pale balloon suspended in midair.

"Ain'tcha listenin' no more?" I heard her ask, anxiously.

"Oh, yes, of course I'm listening," I heard myself answer. And I remember that the sun had become a red smear over the swamp . . .

I continued asking the proper questions. I jotted down the answers, hardly conscious of what I was doing, but acting mechanically from having been through the same ritual so often before.

"How did you feel when he was arrested for what he did to his wife?"

"It just made me mad, I reckon. But then I allus knowed he'd get into bad trouble."

"You never went to see him in prison, did you?"

"Me, go see him? Oh, no, I figgered if that was the kind of thing he was going to do, he could pay for his sins alone. He was always causin' me trouble and pain since he was born, if you know what I mean. Ought to have been drowned in the rain barrel afore he got his eyes open like a pup."

I don't remember what happened during the next few moments. In retrospect, I know that some reservoir of hate exploded inside. Perhaps there was a vengeful, fierce revelation in me of earth's iniquities that suddenly broke through all my restraints. I was snapped back to sanity by a shrill and prolonged shrieking, like that of some obscene tropical fowl.

Evidently I had chased Mrs. Ruskin around in back of the shack and even as I regained some insight into my behavior, I was striking her again and again with my brief case.

She went down sprawling and screeching. She lay there with her fear-ridged body curled up like a bag of bones and her eyes bulging up at me in terror. I felt rather pleased for a moment, before I suddenly became horrified at what I had done, and then became aware of ten or twelve kids ranging from a toddler to a hulking brute about six feet tall all staring at me, their mouths gaping.

There was nothing I could say by way of explanation or apology. I knew that my only sensible course of action was to get out of there as quickly as possible.

As I started to back away from the prostrate form of Mrs. Ruskin, she began to shriek again, and this time the name "Sam!" kept repeating itself on a rising scale.

I turned and ran sliding through the mud toward the side of the shack, noticing a number of sheets of questionnaire paper fluttering around the yard. I was wondering how I would ever explain all this to the Foundation when Sam Ruskin came out of the rear door and ran in front of me, snorting and wheezing and shaking his fists in the air.

I then understood all too well Mrs. Ruskin's reference to him as a bull. He was huge and mostly torso, and he lurched toward me with his massive arms extended and his fingers flexing. He was shirtless, his skin wet and shining like a fish's belly. Then he paused, and sneered at me as he hitched up a pair of ragged coveralls over his hanging belly.

He blinked at me with bloodshot eyes, then at Mrs. Ruskin, then back at me with dumb puzzlement. Then he kneaded the dough-white wrinkles of flesh around the back of his thick neck.

"You all molestin' mah woman," he roared, his outraged instinct tinged with incredulity.

I mumbled something about there having been a mistake, that it was because of the excessive heat, and perhaps a few dollars would—

Sam Ruskin's bare feet dug into the mud and he lunged for me. I tried to run in the slippery mud but the biggest of the Ruskin children tripped me. Sam was on me then, one knee in my stomach, a hand gripping my shirt. His face came down close to mine and he grinned.

"We gonna teach you some manners now, city boy," he said.

For some reason, the Ruskins considerately threw both me and my brief case into the station wagon. They were also considerate enough to have left me physically intact enough to drive back to my hotel in Mobile. I had to stop several times along the way, once at the home of a country doctor. He found me suffering from contusions, abrasions, a lacerated scalp, and a closed left eye; he also found several leeches clinging to my skin which he had to burn off with a lighted cigar.

No bones were broken, he said, so far as he could see, but as I drove on into Mobile I knew that it's what one can't see that really hurts. Something was broken inside me, and it wasn't anything that could be detected, even under a microscope, nor measured by any device known to medical science. It was that finely balanced thing known as the socially adjusted personality; it was that delicate mechanism in the human being which prevents most people's resentments from erupting into insane violence, which causes a few to express their years of accumulated rage in the act of murder.

For there was no doubt in my mind that I had wanted to wring Mrs. Ruskin's vulturous neck. True, many innocent people have such desires on occasion, but few lose their will and attempt to put such thoughts into action. I knew I had tried to murder Mrs. Ruskin.

I had only the vaguest memory of the red fury that had swept over me when Sam Ruskin and his clan went to work on me. It had taken the best efforts of the lot of them to beat me down, and several of them, including Sam himself, wouldn't soon forget the cost.

I also knew that my feelings were totally irrational—especially for me, a student with ambitions to become a cool, impersonal specialist in the field of scientific research. To blame Jed for what he had done to that woman, to blame his family for what they had done to Jed, was not only an irrational distortion on my part, it was a scientific crime.

A terrible suspicion was growing in me as I drove back to Mobile, garaged the car, went to my room, and broke open a fresh fifth of Old Kentucky bourbon. I had been drinking a great deal during the past few weeks. I recalled that when I first started out as a researcher for the Foun-

dation, I hardly drank hard liquor at all. This, too, was statistically significant, I thought, as I sat stiffly on the bed and poured another double shot of Old Kentucky.

There was another air-mail letter from my wife, Lucille, but I didn't even bother to open it. I knew what it said—to drop this silly research and come home at once and assume my proper obligations, to get a steady job and forget all that nonsense about working my way through Columbia by interviewing murderers and their families for the Goronstein Foundation.

I sat sipping bourbon and mulling over the suspicion growing in my mind. Many disturbing elements had come out of that interview with Mrs. Ruskin. But as I sat there thinking back, I realized that during every interview I had had with the acquaintances, mothers, families of murderers, and with the murderers themselves, a certain number of statistics had always emerged—which were pertinent to me.

But perhaps I was only indulging my wild imagination. So I zipped open my brief case and got out all the data I had accumulated in months of research.

I went through the data slowly, carefully, with systematic thoroughness. Now and then I stopped to take the dryness from my mouth with bourbon and thus ease the persistent pressure behind my eyes . . .

I might interject here that relatively little research on murder has been done. Of course, magazines, popular books, newspapers pay a lot of attention to crime. But very little scientific work has been done to try to understand why some people commit murder, and others do not.

What work is being done in this field is of two types: the psychological studies which attempt to probe into the internal dynamics of murderers' personalities, and the sociological studies of the characteristics and group experiences of murderers. The Goronstein Foundation's approach was strictly of the latter type, restricting itself to an exhaustive gathering of statistics rather than to analyzing cause.

Cause, it was felt, could be arrived at later by studying the accumulated data. Already, according to a brochure put out by the Foundation, sufficient data was available to permit police departments to identify with fair accuracy those who were potential murderers.

I had been a top student and passed the necessary tests with flying colors—the tests that permitted me to be an interviewer for the Foundation. As a legman for the Foundation, I tried to approach the phenomenon of murder with an open mind, to banish preconceptions I might have had about the possible influences leading to murder.

I had studied all available research on murder provided by the Foun-

dation, including numerous biographies and autobiographies of murderers. Then came the interviews. There had been hundreds and hundreds of such interviews, all very intensive, including long sessions with twelve convicted murderers. I had tried to get the feeling of their personalities and of the prior experiences that had shaped them.

Without my being aware of it consciously, a terrifying conviction had been growing inside of me. And now I worked for hours in my hotel room, going back over all the data and statistics. I also worked out some graphs and tables of my own.

Thus the exact statistical picture of the typical murderer emerged from my study. Who was he? What was he? Data and statistics do not lie.

In every case he had led a dismal, unappreciated, frustrated life.

He was a citizen of the United States, boasting the highest murder rate in the world outside of Ceylon and the Italian provinces of Sardinia, Sicily, and Calabria.

Large cities have a higher murder rate than small cities and rural areas.

Men commit four to five times as many known murders as women.

Most murders are committed during the hot summer months.

Known murder rates are higher in the southern states than in any other region of the United States. And among the southern states, Alabama has the highest urban rate of murder of any state.

The vast majority of murders are committed by individuals who are nonprofessionals—that is, they do not kill as a business.

The murderer is rarely of the professional burglary or holdup type and usually kills an acquaintance or a relative during a heated argument.

Most murderers have a history of excessive frustation since childhood with no adequate outlet. Usually the potential murderer builds up aggression during an argument with acquaintance, wife, or other relative, then suddenly kills with either his bare hands, club, or any weapon conveniently at hand.

Males tend to use firearms, women prefer knives.

The average age of murderers at the time they commit their crime is twenty-three years old.

Their fathers are usually passive men given to occasional outbursts of aggression.

Murderers' parents usually conform rigidly to moral codes, and are extremely strict. The father tends to lose his temper and beat up the kids. The potential murderer is usually beaten much more as a kid than the others.

There was more data—an inescapable accumulation of statistics.

I went over it three times, cross-checking my conclusions.

There was no mistaking it, there was no possibility of doubt.

The typical murderer emerging from all these statistics was—me.

I went back through it all as I sat in that dark hotel room sipping Old Kentucky bourbon. Every time I had interviewed a murderer, and more often his mother, I had been stung by the resemblance to my own impoverished, frustrating, utterly dismal childhood. Severe discipline at home. Physical beatings. Traumatic incidents outside the home. Social difficulties in school . . . The classical pattern.

If the Foundation had learned anything at all from the statistics, it was that frustration must lead inevitably to aggression. The greater the frustration, the greater the aggression. If a man is undersocialized, he directs his aggression outward, at others; if he is oversocialized, he directs his aggression inward, to himself—and commits suicide.

I was definitely undersocialized. I had always tended to get into trouble, to be rebellious, to be a nonconformist.

The murderer's crust of socialization is of sufficient strength to restrain him from committing most antisocial acts; but if potential murderers have been severely frustrated early in life, they always carry with them a deep reservoir of repressed aggression.

I poured another double shot of Old Kentucky.

The walls of my reservoir had buckled and burst. There was no doubt whatever about that. Even without my inner knowledge, those masses of statistics would have condemned and convicted me.

There was not a single statistic in which I did not conform to the hypothetical typical murderer built up by all that unassailable data.

I knew that sooner or later I was certain to murder someone. I was sure to do it in a burst of temper, in a fit of uncontrollable rage. It would be a

near relative or an acquaintance. But I had no idea when, how, or who.

Then I remembered that it would by my twenty-third birthday in two weeks. Statistically, then, this was my year. And this was the hottest part of the summer in Alabama.

At that moment—giving me the eerie feeling that I was the dreamer and she was the dream—Lucille walked in.

I was lonely and in need of moral support and would have welcomed Lucille with open arms—but she wasn't so glad to see me.

Why hadn't I met her at the airport?

It turned out that the unopened letter from her had told me she was flying down to Mobile. She berated me with the most outrageous suspicions as to why I had not opened the letter or come out to the airport.

Her face was twisted with jealousy, which seemed a contradiction since she also conveyed to me in no uncertain terms how despicable I was. She had come from a good family in Boston and she couldn't understand why she had ever married a stupid product of an Alabama cracker family like me.

I tried to reason with her. After a while I sat there silently, just looking at her. She was lovely to look at, sinuous and leggy. She was even lovelier when she was angry. And she was angrier there in my hotel room than I had ever seen her before. She kept clenching her fists and calling me an amazing variety of insulting epithets.

There were all the old ones, of course, as well as her favorite, "irresponsible." There were some new ones inspired by my physical appearance and the almost empty bottle of bourbon, which I proceeded to empty further as she glared at me. Not only was I irresponsible, she insisted, but I had obviously degenerated into a stewbum.

"What's happened to you?" she almost screamed. "You look half dead and utterly horrible!"

I told her exactly what had happened to me. But she didn't believe it. I realized then that she had never believed me, that to her I had always been an irresponsible liar. My grueling months of research in the pits of homicide had only been a mere pretext for my goofing off and having sordid affairs.

"So you got drunk. Somebody caught you with his wife and beat you up!" She said it and laughed. It was slightly hysterical, but it was laughter just the same. And I have never enjoyed being laughed at. "Or have you just become a filthy falling-down drunk?"

"Neither," I said.

"You don't love me, you never loved me," she declared. "You couldn't love me and keep up this childish business of going around talking to

idiots and psychopaths! And I don't even think you're conducting any sincere research—it's just an excuse, just an excuse to stay away from me, to avoid your responsibilities as a husband."

I looked at the bottle. Then I casually poured out the one shot of bourbon remaining in it. With calm deliberation I tossed it off, then looked across the room at my devoted wife.

"Lucille," I said. "Where did you get the money to fly to Mobile?"

"I took it out of the bank!" she screamed. "I took every cent out of the bank, do you hear me?"

"Indeed I do. And I'm sure half the population of Mobile can hear you."

"And what I haven't already spent I'm going to spend damned fast. I've been living like a nun trying to be the economical scholar's wife. Well, I need clothes. I want to have some fun. And if you don't come home with me right now and start a sane life, I'm getting a divorce and you'll pay later, pay plenty."

She wasn't laughing now.

"That was all the money I had saved to get us through the summer," I said. "There's nothing left, not even to pay the rent."

"So you'll get a job," she said. "And stop running around making like a scholar. You, a scholar? You're a bum! You came from a long line of Southern cracker bums. So why don't you stop kidding yourself you'll ever be an egghead. I'll tell you what kind of head you've got, junior. Bone! Solid, all the way through!"

I remember with such clarity the way I stood up and walked toward her—the purely hypothetical and typical murderer walking up out of a mass of incontrovertible statistics. That was how I felt—the perfect scientist in action, cool, objective, obeying the dictates of proved data. I fitted the demands of the data all along the line, from the day of my birth. I would kill during a moment of hot argument, without premeditation, compulsively, out of a deep reservoir of accumulated frustration.

It would be a near acquaintance or a relative. And then I remembered it with icy clarity:

Of those murderers in the group who are married at the time they kill, a majority kill their wives.

There was the blinding fury of release . . .

Then I bent over her with the shattered whiskey bottle in my right hand. I remember that she was looking up at me in a strangely serene

and fearless manner—as if I might have been some species of bug. A humorous species of bug, because she still seemed to be smiling.

Smiling . . . and it was only then then that I realized she was dead . . .

Perhaps Lucille was so serene because she too realized something—that she was also a mere statistic.

Statistically, for every murderer there must be a victim.

I tried to explain that to the Warden.

"Don't feel bad about it, Warden," I said. "Like me and Lucille, you too are only a statistic . . . Statistically I had to murder Lucille. Statistically you now have to murder me in the electric chair. You don't want to do it, but you have to, Warden. That's how it is after you've studied the data: you can't do anything about it."

I don't know if the Warden understood what I was getting at, but it doesn't matter. He's still only a statistic, whether he understands or not.

Actually, the Warden belongs to a different set of statistics. After all, he's one of the professionals. He murders as a business. And I was an amateur, belonging to that far larger group of which I had made such an exhaustive study—the compulsive murderer.

Incidentally, a point of interest in passing:

A few years from now approximately 12% of those executed will be proved to have been innocent of the crimes for which they were gassed, hanged, or electrocuted.

I assure you I'm not one of *those* statistics.

This is the 248th "first story" to be published by Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine . . . a story based on a familiar theme—but caveat lector.

The author submitted her first effort at fiction with "great trepidation." We quote further from Mrs. Sears's letter: "I started reading Ellery Queen when I was ten years old. One of the stories gave me quite a turn when I was 12—the one with numerous crosses (occupied). So I stopped reading mysteries until the age of 21 or so. My favorite Queen story is now CAT OF MANY TAILS *. . . I discovered John Dickson Carr when I was 23 . . . but for the past couple of years I've had a crush on Margery Allingham's Mr. Campion."*

And so to writing her own mysteries . . .

YOU NEVER CAN TELL ABOUT PEOPLE

by SUSAN SEARS

MRS. WHITSON'S HOUSE WAS THE third one down the lane, bounded on one side by elm trees and the minister's home, and on the other by a row of privet and an apple orchard. The house was referred to as "Mrs. Whitson's." Mr. Rufus Whitson, long since gone, was now resting in the sunny cemetery that accommodates most of the respectable and well-to-do dead of Willow Corners.

His widow Anne, née Briggs, from Little Falls, had mourned her husband's death honestly and long. Rufus Whitson had been a good man, good to her, but in time the scent of her grief faded.

Anne Whitson wished to mourn longer, to honor her husband's absence with some tangible token of sorrow. She scratched about the shreds of her bereavement, like a furious cat chasing a wilfull feather, but she found that little feeling remained. In vain she dreamed of her own death, of slowly wasting languor and then a service at North Congregational. But her heritage was against her. Amelia Briggs, her mother, had risen at five every day of her eighty-seven years, and had reluctantly died of a stroke on a bright June morning while weeding the flower garden.

Mrs. Whitson was resigned to her inevitable longevity. So the Whitson house became "Mrs. Whitson's" and Anne Briggs Whitson became a sturdy old woman who whiled away

her days at knitting and bedeviling her unmarried and only child, Martha. At this moment, she sat rocking in her favorite chair by the window, trying to think of a sensible way to murder her daughter's suitor.

Not that he really could be called a suitor, she thought. Gardeners just don't fall into that category. But poor Martha, forty-two years away from her infancy and still unloved, was now at the age where any man would suit. Heaven knows, there had been few enough swains—a situation quite to Mrs. Whitson's liking, for she needed Martha and did not relish the prospect of spending her last years alone, attended by a stranger. But as Martha grew older she did not grow less hopeful. The dreams of a maiden still pulsed gently through her veins, easily discernible to the other ladies of Willow Corners.

It is especially discernible, mused Mrs. Whitson, to Raymond, who does not pity her, or want her, but does want *my* money. Oh, he's smart, she thought, very smart. Dark and foreign, he swung over Mrs. Whitson's well-ordered horizon like a pirate ship, flapping the skull and crossbones, and threatening to send her domestic bark to the bottom of the sea.

She stirred restlessly in her chair. And I'm not missing anything, she told herself. When he comes into the kitchen, Martha turns pink as a schoolgirl, and he sits himself down as if he *owns* the place—for all the world as if he owns the place. Well, he never will. The rocking chair creaked in anger.

Martha appeared at the door. Her mother gazed at her irritably. "I said, where's my milk?"

Martha scuttled into the room, her gray eyes blinking. "But, Mother, it's not time for it yet." Her soft hands fretted nervously with the rickrack on her apron pocket.

"Well, I want it now."

Martha scuttled out to the kitchen. She poured the milk into a pan to warm and returned to her stool by the kitchen window. Raymond was crossing the lawn, swinging a pair of shears. She ducked her head again, blushing at her thoughts.

Mrs. Whitson sat, rocking steadily. "I never had to do anything like this before," she said to herself. "How do you go about it?"

Martha came back into the room with a tray.

"Martha," said her mother, "You're all pink."

"It's warm in the kitchen, mother." She fitted the tray over her mother's lap.

The devil it is, thought Mrs. Whitson.

The devil take her, thought her daughter.

"This milk isn't nearly warm enough. Take it back."

Martha took the glass from her mother and again left the room. She poured the milk back into the pan, and once more perched herself

on the stool, kicking her heels angrily against the rungs. She looked out the window.

The beautifully kept lawn, green as love, was empty. How can I do it, she thought. She knows every single one of my thoughts. He said it would be easy. She's an old, old lady—one push, and down the stairs, and over she goes. Martha grinned, remembering the masterful gestures that had illustrated his lecture. One push, easy, and—she laughed.

The strange sound reached Mrs. Whitson.

"Martha!"

"Right away, Mother."

Raymond clipped a rose from the rosebush and tucked it into the buttonhole of his workshirt. He looked up at the house. Its rich white serenity pleased him, its many windows glinting like diamonds in the sun. A nice house, thought Raymond, a real nice house.

"It's traditional for a woman to use poison, I suppose," Mrs. Whitson meditated. "But I don't have any. Oh, I do wish Rufus were here."

Only one push, thought Martha.

"Martha, is that *you* whistling," shouted her mother. "Stop it—*please*. I can't hear myself think."

She tucked her afghan higher around her knees. No, poison wouldn't do. She thought wistfully of a certain blunt instrument, then realized she couldn't lift it. Rufus had always said, "Look for the Achilles heel, and you've got your man." Of course he was talking about customers. Mrs. Whitson settled back and considered Raymond's character.

He was vain, he used scented hair cream, he smoked cigars, he was not Anglo-Saxon—hardly a clue in any of those. And he did have his good points. He worked hard, supported his brother Louis and his old father, the first a wild one, always in trouble, the second a cripple, and he worked for little pay. It's a shame, she thought. If only he didn't have to run after Martha. He's neat and steady in his habits. She remembered the day she inspected his room over the garage. Why, he had a vase of flowers on the orange crate, and no objectionable pictures that she could find anywhere. Of course he did get drunk on Saturday nights but nearly all the men in Willow Corners did that. Raymond, at least, was always back by one o'clock. Probably dead to the world in five minutes, dead to . . .

"I never did like that garage," Mrs. Whitson announced to the daguerreotype of her grandfather Briggs on the wall. "I always told Rufus I'd burn it down if I had my way."

Martha was hard at work polishing the banisters on the second-floor landing. She rubbed the cloth over and over the wood, until the banister shone like a mahogany eel. She looked down at the stairs, at

the stair carpet, lushly oriental with its intertwining designs. Maybe she'll fall all by herself, she thought. Maybe we'll be lucky.

Raymond was snipping away at the privet. He was thinking of his brother Louis. Ever since he's a kid, I take care of him. Now he's a big man all of a sudden. He don't listen to me no more. Only money talks to him . . . Little dark-green leaves fell about his feet as he worked his way down the hedge into the shadows that had begun to darken the lawn. Mrs. Whitson's house threw the largest shadow.

When she retired that Saturday evening Mrs. Whitson set her clock-radio for midnight . . .

It was early Sunday morning when Mrs. Whitson returned to her room. She got into a fresh nightgown. It had gone off quite simply. Murder, she thought, buttoning herself up, was not difficult at all. She mentally added snoring to her list of objections about Raymond—although this time the sound of snoring had been a reassurance instead of a grievance.

Setting fire to the garage had been easy. No one would ever guess. The old structure would go up like tinder. The Reverend Blount and his populous brood next door had been in bed by nine thirty, as usual, and Martha by ten. I will have to wake her soon, the old lady thought, and then we must summon the volunteer fire department. By the time *they* arrive it will be too late.

Mrs. Whitson stared fiercely at the glowing garage. Yes, it was time to wake Martha.

She disheveled her hair, rubbed her eyes, and proceeded at a suitably frantic pace down the hall to her daughter's room. She knocked once, then twice. "Martha!" She threw open the door in irritation. There was no one in the room.

Sudden tears blurred her vision as the awful thought of Martha's possible whereabouts swam in her brain. "Oh, Rufus," she moaned. Mrs. Whitson pulled her kimono about her and ran to the staircase. She must go back to save Martha . . .

Mrs. Whitson's body was discovered by the firemen who, of course, did come too late. She lay at the foot of the stairs. The heel of one of her slippers lay incongruously on the second-floor landing—like a blue satin cupcake on the rich frosting of the carpet. One of the volunteer firemen was sick—two bodies in one evening had been too much for that gentle man.

"Poor old lady," said the Reverend Blount to his wife. "If her daughter hadn't been off gallivanting by the river with that wild young fool, Louis, Mrs. Whitson would be alive today. Martha will marry that boy, too, you mark my words. I tell you, Janet," the Reverent Blount said ominously, "You never can tell about people."

IMPORTANT ANNOUNCEMENT

. . . from this issue on, EQMM will be bigger and better than ever —32 extra pages *in every issue,* at the new price of 50 cents per copy. These *32 added pages every month* will bring you the highest possible quality of mystery fiction—from stories of pure detection (amateur, armchair, and official) and probing studies of crime (psychological, psychiatric, and Robin Hoodish) to tours de force of suspense, surprise, and even the supernatural.

One of the new features of the bigger-and-better EQMM will be the inclusion, in nearly every issue, of a *short novel*—superlative works by the Grand Masters of Mystery, including such celebrated detective writers as

Erle Stanley Gardner
Rex Stout (about **Nero Wolfe**)
Cornell Woolrich
William Irish (including the famous *Rear Window*)
Hugh Pentecost
Patrick Quentin
the **Gordons**
Anthony Boucher
Victor Canning
Kelley Roos
Philip Wylie
Roy Huggins
Neil Paterson (a modern classic)
Rufus King
Ellery Queen

Be sure not to miss a single issue—you will never forgive yourself! These first fourteen short novels, each about 20,000 words—over a quarter million words in short novels—together with three-quarters of a million words in short stories, or more than *one million words* of the best reading this side of paradise!—constitute a library of larceny . . . the créme du crime, the diamonds of detection, each worth a King's (or a Queen's) ransom.

This is the 249th "first story" to be published by Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine . . . Well, dear reader, here's a "cutie" if you ever saw one! Please read the story carefully . . .

The author was "born in the Army (Fort Ward, Washington) in 1918. Married in the army (to then Sergeant Cliff Jackson, now Lt. Col., AUS, Ret.) in 1942. Had two sons in the army—Tom, born at Ft. Meade, Md. in 1947, and Kelly, born at Mitchell Field, L.I., in 1953." The United States Army can be proud of Mrs. Jackson and her family!

We wish we had space to quote Mrs. Jackson's letters in toto—they are absolutely delightful, and living in the Jackson household sounds like great fun. We'll only quote the following: at the end of the letter accompanying a revision of her story she wrote: "New drapes coming up, I hope." And in the letter acknowledging our acceptance of her "first story" she wrote: "When I told the local hairdresser that I'd sold a story, she asked, 'What's it about, Marge?' 'Oh, on how to murder your husband and get away with it,' I answered. Whereupon the hairdresser said, 'Say, there's a great market for that!'"

DEAR MR. QUEEN, EDITOR

by MARGE JACKSON

Ellery Queen, Editor
Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine
505 Park Avenue
New York 22, New York

Dear Mr. Queen,

For his school last Fall, my oldest son sold subscriptions to your magazine along with others by the same publisher. He needed one more sale to win a fountain pen, so like the good mother I pride myself on being, I bought a subscription, and chose your magazine as a matter of personal interest.

The issues started coming early this year, and I must say that I've enjoyed them. Of course, I know the stories aren't really true, but some of them sound as though they really *could* have happened. You can't pick up a newspaper these days without reading accounts of tragedies, and some of the reports raise just a shadow of a doubt in my mind. I can't help wondering if Fate was nudged a little in some instances.

There was a case in this small town a couple of years ago that I can't get out of my mind. It was accepted as an accident at the time, but I wonder if future events will cause people to remember and reconsider. At any rate, I thought you might be interested.

Here's what happened:

The doctor was called early one morning to the Nellis home for Ted, who had been stricken during the night. He was rushed to the hospital but died late that afternoon. His wife, Lucille, had a simple explanation: "It must have been the mushrooms," she said.

Investigation revealed that it was their custom to gather mushrooms from the local woods, and that Lucille had prepared pizza pie for supper the night before. Although she had used a few of the mushrooms in the pie, which both she and the children ate, she had fixed her husband a hamburger, and had sautéed separately a generous amount of mushrooms for him.

What was said in the town?

"A tragic accident!"

"How fortunate Lucille and the children escaped being poisoned!"

I did hear several people remark that you just should not gather mushrooms unless you are positive you can identify them. And the local weekly carried an article in its next issue on how to distinguish edible from non-edible mushrooms.

Now the Nellis family had moved here only a year before Ted's death from mushroom poisoning. Besides Ted and Lucille, there were four children. Tim was thirteen, Mike eight, and the twin girls were just past two when the family settled here. Ted had been a Lt. Colonel in the army and had retired after completing twenty years of active duty, and they came here so he could attend the nearby State Teacher's College on the G.I. Bill. He was a handsome man in his early forties, in apparent excellent health, and everyone liked him right away. Lucille established herself as a Sunday School teacher in the Community Church and became a den mother in Cub Scouts. They were both active in the PTA, and Ted joined the local Lion's Club.

Despite their acceptance into the social pattern of the town, Lucille suffered a deep depression over the money problems she was encountering

for the first time in her life. It seemed that she was just unable to manage on an income that was only half of what it had been.

For one thing, they were "insurance poor." I know Ted had increased his insurance through the years to $30,000, primarily at Lucille's insistence. He had started twenty-year endowment policies on the boys shortly after their birth, to assure each of them a college education. They had lived up to their income with each advancement in rank during their army years, so the insurance represented their entire savings. Ted talked some of dropping part of his coverage to reduce the cost of premiums, but Lucille would not hear of it. She permitted mortgage payments on their house to fall behind and other bills to accumulate, but those insurance premiums were always met on time. As the stack of unpaid bills mounted higher and higher, Lucille became more and more depressed and more and more irritable.

Then came the accident.

Lucille had her hands full with the boys for a while and, of course, with the funeral and all, but she lost no time in settling all of Ted's insurance claims. She paid off the mortgage on the house, bought lovely new drapes, and a newer model second-hand car. Most of all, her depression and irritability vanished.

I know she misses Ted and sometimes finds the going a little lonely. He was a good husband and a wonderful father to the children. Do you think, as I do, that the knowledge of all that insurance was just too much for her?

Tim is sixteen now, Mike eleven. The twins are ready for kindergarten. They still have the insurance policies Ted bought for the boys—$6000 each, with Lucille as beneficiary if the boys should die before the policies mature.

Perhaps some kind of boating accident would be best. The boys don't seem to care much for mushrooms any more.

Very truly yours,

Lucille Nellis

Ellery Queen's
Mystery Magazine

Mrs. Lucille Nellis,
Lyndale, Washington

Dear Mrs. Nellis,

Your story has caused considerable discussion in our office—we've all been arguing about it for days!

There is one thing we can't agree on—or explain: Why should a self-

confessed murderess (who, moreover, seems to be planning at least two more murders!) write to the editor of EQMM and not only "confess" but without the slightest reluctance sign her name to the "confession"? How could our readers—granting that they will be surprised when they see the name at the end of your letter—believe that Lucille Nellis would write such a letter to Ellery Queen?

We look forward eagerly to hearing from you.

Sincerely,

Ellery Queen

EDITORS' NOTE: The original envelope containing Ellery Queen's letter to Mrs. Lucille Nellis was returned unopened by the Post Office in Lyndale, Washington. The front of the envelope was rubber-stamped in red ink, and read as follows:

RETURNED TO WRITER

REASON CHECKED

Unclaimed ....Refused ....
Unknown ....
Insufficient address ....
Moved, Left no address ....
No such post office in state ....
Do not remail in this envelope ....

There was a bold check mark on the fourth line.

Plainclothes cop McGarry at the annual convention of the Fraternal Order of the Noble Sons of the Great White Father—and clear evidence why McGarry has been one of the most popular fictional characters ever to appear in "This Week" . . .

McGARRY ON THE WARPATH

by MATT TAYLOR

GIVING HIM THE FISHY EYE THAT usually means more-trouble-for-Dan, the Inspector tells Dan McGarry, the plainclothes cop, "Our city will be host next week to the annual convention of the Fraternal Order of the Noble Sons of the Great White Father."

"I hear about it," Dan says sadly. "Two thousand jokers from all over the country will bust into town and parade around for three days dressed up like cigar-store Indians. It is a pity," he adds, "that they do not play their silly games in some other city."

The Inspector gets red. "Moron!" he roars. "There is nothing silly about the Noble Sons of the Great White Father! It happens that I am the Past Exalted Brave and Daring Warrior of the local lodge. If you had the brains you were born with, you would apply for membership yourself, although it wouldn't do you any good because I'd personally see to it you are blackballed."

"Yes, sir," says Dan meekly. "I guess I ain't worthy. I'm not noble enough."

"You certainly are not!" the Inspector agrees heartily. "However, in the interests of law and order, I will make you a temporary member and you will attend the powwow. We have trouble at all our conventions with pickpockets. They dress like us Noble Sons and mingle with us, and many a wallet is snatched and hotel room pilfered. You know most of the successful dips in town. You will recognize them, even with their war paint. I would suggest," he adds, "that you use the Superba Costume Rental Service."

"Yes, sir," Dan says. Then it penetrates. "You mean I got to be an Indian, too?"

"Naturally," says the Inspector. "Just as you know the pickpockets, they know you. You will have to be well disguised in headdress and war paint or you won't pick up a single one of them."

"So be it," sighs Dan. "I will do my best to see that the sons do not get relieved of their wampum illegally."

"You'd better!" the Inspector says

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grimly. Then, as Dan turns to go, he clears his throat. "There is—ah—one small favor you can do for me, McGarry, while performing your official duties. At the powwow the Noble Sons will elect their Supreme Exalted High and Mighty Chieftain for the coming year. I believe my name has been mentioned for this great honor. You understand that I—ah—am not an active candidate. However, if the convention sees fit to draft me . . . If you—ah—find an occasion to mention to the various delegates that I am available . . ."

"I will beat the drum for you like mad," Dan says.

The Inspector beams. "Splendid! But be sure to use my lodge name."

"Which is that?" Dan asks.

"Running Red Deer," says the Inspector. "And now, if you will sit down we will—ah—map out our strategy to make sure I am drafted against my will."

Dan drops into his mouse Kitty's house that afternoon and he is so upset he kisses her only once. Then he sinks into a chair. "Maybe I could switch over to the fire department," he says.

"What is it this time, Danny boy?" Kitty says cheerfully. "The Inspector again?"

Dan nods. "Next week I will be an Indian," he says mournfully. "I will be running interference for the Inspector, who will be another Indian named Running Red Deer. My own name will be Laughing Antelope."

"How wonderful!" cries Kitty. "May I call you Ante? Or do you prefer Lope? And now, can I have it from the beginning?"

So Dan tells her all and he says, "It is a tough assignment. The Inspector will be awful mad if any of the Noble Sons are nicked for as much as a buck. And he will be madder still if he isn't elected Supreme Exalted High and Mighty."

"But it's so exciting!" Kitty says. "Imagine mixing politics and con games."

"That's new?" Dan says wearily.

"Is there a Squaw's Auxiliary I could join?" Kitty asks.

"You can sit in the balcony of the Grand Ballroom in the hotel and watch, the Inspector says," Dan tells her. "Now we may as well go get my costume. I hope I don't look too silly."

This turns out to be a false hope indeed. The feathered headdress Kitty picks out for him hangs down his back to his waist, the leather jacket is fringed at the bottom and studded with thumbtacks, and the moccasins are brightly beaded. But the crowning insult, when she helps him dress for the opening session, is the war paint.

"I have decided," she tells him happily, "on a broad streak of lipstick down your nose—"

"Never!" Dan yelps.

"But you have to be well disguised," she reminds him. "Do you

want the pickpockets to recognize you?"

"I'll be wearing dark sunglasses."

"Don't be ridiculous! It's raining. Now hold still . . ."

Dan squats on the floor of the taxi all the way to the hotel. In the lobby there are Indians all over the place, waiting to register. They are standing around in small groups, talking excitedly and laughing happily, practically asking to have their pockets picked.

Dan circulates through the crowd, being careful not to look at himself in any wall mirrors. Within 20 minutes he spots a paunchy Indian whose face looks familiar.

Dan eases up to him. "What are you doing here?" he asks.

"I am Chief Lazy Beaver from Wichita, Kansas," the Indian says.

"The hell you are!" says Dan. "You are Fingers MacDougall from Tenth Avenue. If you will come with me, I will frisk you and see how many wallets you have lifted already."

It turns out Fingers does very well for himself. He has three wallets with a total take of $700 in them, which is certainly a nice score for half an hour's work. Dan phones into headquarters, and when the Sergeant arrives he turns over Fingers and also the three wallets to be held as evidence; and Fingers is marched off to be the first Indian to be thrown into the local pokey in a hundred years.

Half an hour later Dan puts the finger on the High-Neck Kid, who is a cinch to spot because he is about seven feet tall. The High-Neck Kid does not do as well as Fingers—he has only two wallets on him and his profit is a paltry $300. Then, before the opening session is announced at noon, Dan picks off Summertime Sammy, who has a wallet in each moccasin.

In the convention hall Dan pushes his way to his seat in the rear. He sees Kitty in the front row of an upper box above his head and waves to her, and then someone in the balcony throws a switch that turns on the floodlights and the microphone, and the chairman bangs his gavel and bellows for order.

At this point Dan is poked in the back. He turns and sees an Indian with a green and red face and a long war-bonnet that trails the floor like a bride's veil. If it weren't for the card pinned on his jacket that has Running Red Deer printed on it, Dan would never recognize the Inspector.

"How are we doing?" the Inspector asks anxiously.

"Not bad at all," Dan says proudly. "I have already sent in three of our better-known thieves to be booked."

"Very gratifying, of course," snaps the Inspector, "but what about my campaign? How many delegates have you lined up?"

"I have been kept sort of busy," Dan says.

"There's no time to waste," the Inspector says. A lot of spadework has to be done. Concentrate on the California delegation."

"Yes, sir," Dan says. "I will do all I—Excuse me! I see Louis the Lug."

The rest of the afternoon and all during the opening banquet Dan does not have any luck at all. But in the evening, as he ambles from one hotel room to another, he finds his old pal Acey-Dacey sitting in on a four-man poker game, and in front of Acey-Dacey are six stacks of chips about eight inches high.

"Pardon the intrusion, gentlemen," Dan says in a loud voice. "You are being taken by the slickest crooked cardplayer in town. Stand up and take off your blanket, Acey. Let's see how many aces you have stashed away."

"I do not recognize you with your red nose, McGarry," Acey says sadly. "This is certainly most annoying." He stands up and takes the Ace of Diamonds and the Ace of Spades from his Indian blanket. "I wish you had kept your big nose out of here for another ten minutes. I would have cleaned these suckers. They are the dumbest Indians since those poor clucks who sold Manhattan Island for twenty-four bucks."

"Turn back the gentlemen's money and scram, Acey," Dan says. "And if I find you around again I will take you in."

The three other players slap Dan on the back and shake his hand.

"Think nothing of it," Dan protests. "It is a great pleasure to spoil Acey's fun. I hope you will all vote for my good friend Running Red Deer for High and Mighty Chief."

"Tell Running Red Deer he can count on eighteen votes from Texas," one guy says.

"And eight from North Dakota," says another.

"It'll be Running Red Deer by a landslide," says the third.

The next morning there is a parade, and the Noble Sons march and do war dances down the main drag for five miles. Then comes the afternoon session and Dan hits for five more pickpockets.

The next morning the officers are to be elected, and Dan figures business will taper off by then because the word will have gone out over the grapevine that McGarry the plainclothes cop is playing Indian and that it is much safer for all prudent pickpockets to lay off until the Elks come to town.

The election begins with the usual windy speeches, but when the voting starts things liven up fast. Despite Dan's campaigning, the Inspector does not get a majority; and it develops into a three-cornered fight among the Inspector, a guy from Connecticut who calls himself Black Wolf, and another from Iowa known as Swift Horse.

After four ballots the delegates are indeed weary and ready to call it quits, because their feet hurt from

marching and there have been too many smoke-filled rooms too late at night.

Before the fifth ballot starts, the poker player from Texas gets the floor. He goes to the microphone at the speaker's platform, which is the only mike in the hall, and he states, "We are hopelessly deadlocked and we may be here voting all night. And this I do not want to happen, because if I do not get home like I promised I will be in very bad trouble with my missus. So I want to nominate a compromise candidate. He has done a great service to many of us here. He has locked up eight or ten goons who snatched our wallets and he has saved some of us from being gypped by a card-playing smoothie. Gentlemen, I give you that grea-e-at American, Dan McGarry, known affectionately to all of us here as Laughing Antelope!"

Dan turns pale. He jumps to his feet and waves his arms, but in all the cheering and stamping that is going on no one even notices him.

"Voting will begin," the chairman says into the mike.

A guy steps quickly to the speaker's platform. "Alabama gives its twelve votes to Dan McGarry," he says into the mike.

A tall, windburned chap shows up next. "Arizona gives six votes to McGarry."

Another guy takes his place immediately. "Arkansas gives its ten votes to McGarry," he states.

The parade to the mike keeps moving fast. "California—twenty-two votes for Dan McGarry."

"Colorado wants to go home, so it casts nineteen votes for McGarry."

By this time the Inspector is standing in front of Dan, his neck as red as his war paint. He shakes a fist under Dan's nose.

"Snake-in-the-grass!" he yells. "Stabber-in-the-back! Double-crossing traitor!"

"But I don't want to be elected," Dan moans.

He now hears from the balcony some loud female yoo-hooing, and he looks up to see Kitty above him, yelling at him. "Withdraw, Dan!" she shouts.

"Withdraw?" the Inspector shouts back at her. "It's too late for that now! He'll have a majority before he can get to that mike on the speaker's platform. And that will do it, because the delegates will rush out of here to go home. Eligible or not, he'll be elected!"

"I can have a try at it, anyway, Inspector," Dan says.

He gets moving fast, pushing and straight-arming his way down the crowded aisle. But it looks that this is one race Dan cannot win.

Ohio is moving to the mike to give him its votes and put him over the top when all of a sudden the floodlights fade away and the mike goes dead and there is so much hubbub and confusion that no one can make out what Ohio is saying.

Dan runs up the platform steps

and pushes Ohio back against Oklahoma. He grabs the mike and starts to speak, and for some odd and happy reason the floodlights light up again and the mike functions perfectly.

"It is sure nice of you guys to want to elect me," Dan says, and his voice comes through loud and clear, "but I got to withdraw because I am only a temporary member of the Noble Sons, and also because I do not do you such a service. It is true I put the finger on some guys who lift your bankrolls, but the man who is smart enough to put me on the job is none other than the Inspector. So I want to withdraw in favor of that really gre-e-eat American, the Inspector, known to you affectionately as Running Red Deer!"

"Here we go again!" says the chairman.

The parade to the microphone starts. "Alabama casts twelve votes for the Inspector."

"Arizona switches its six votes to the Inspector."

"Arkansas gives ten votes to the Inspector and reminds the chair it's time for lunch.'"

"Colorado still wants to go home. Nineteen votes for the Inspector."

By the time Dan gets back to his seat the Inspector has made a clean sweep through Illinois. "I'm in, I'm in!" he shouts at Dan. "You did it again!"

"Not me," Dan says. "What made the mike go dead?"

"How should I know?" the Inspector says.

"I have a hunch," Dan says, "that the main switch box is somewhere up in the balcony. If you'll excuse me, I have to find a mouse named Kitty."

Fifteen minutes later Kitty joins him in the hotel lobby. Dan kisses her heartily. "You are the fastest-thinking little mouse in all the world," he says.

"I had to do something," Kitty says. "Do you think I want to be married to a politician? And an Indian politician, at that! I noticed that switch box when I went to the opening session."

Dan kisses her again. "You threw the key block that let me make my touchdown run," he says. "This is sure going to put me in right with the Inspector. He must be the happiest guy in town."

"Here he comes now," Kitty says. "He doesn't look too happy."

The Inspector barges up to them, grim and scowling. "You should be suspended for neglect of duty, McGarry!" he barks.

"What did I do now?" Dan asks sadly.

"You're here to spot pickpockets, aren't you?"

"Yes, sir. And I picked up eight."

"Then pick up one more and be quick about it!" snaps the Inspector. "You're going to be in bad trouble, McGarry, if you don't find the guy who lifted my wallet!"

THE ZERO CLUE

by REX STOUT

(Continued from page 30)

With three of the six scared citizens, it was a good thing that Wolfe didn't have to start from scratch. They had been absolutely determined not to tell why they had gone to see Leo Heller, and, as we learned from the transcripts of interviews and copies of statements they had signed, the cops had had a time dragging it out of them.

By the time the first one was brought to us in the office, a little after eight o'clock, Wolfe had sort of resigned himself to personal misery. Not only had he had to devour his dinner in one-fourth the usual time; also, he had been compelled to break one of his strictest rules and read documents while eating—and all that in the company of Inspector Cramer, who had accepted an invitation to have a bite.

Of course, Cramer returned to the office with us, and called in, from the assemblage in the front room, a police stenographer, who settled himself in a chair at the end of my desk. Sergeant Purley Stebbins, who once in a spasm of generosity admitted that he couldn't prove I was a hoodlum, after bringing the citizen in and seating him facing Wolfe and Cramer, took a chair against the wall.

The citizen, whose name was John R. Winslow as furnished by the documents, was the big guy in a dark-blue topcoat and Homburg who had stuck his head out of the elevator for a look at Archie Goodwin. He was one of the three who had tried to refuse to tell what he had gone to Heller for; and considering what it was I couldn't blame him much.

He started in complaining: "This is unconstitutional! Nero Wolfe is a private detective and I don't have to submit to questioning by him."

"I'm here," Cramer said. "I can repeat Wolfe's questions if you insist, but it will take more time."

"Suppose," Wolfe suggested, "we start and see how it goes. I've read your statement, Mr. John Winslow, and I—"

"They had no right to let you! They promised me it would be confidential unless it had to be used as evidence!"

"Please, Mr. Winslow, don't bounce up like that. A hysterical woman is bad enough, but a hysterical man is insufferable. I assure you I am as discreet as any policeman. According to your statement, today was your third visit to Mr. Heller's office. You were trying to

supply him with enough information for him to devise a formula for determining how much longer your aunt will live. You expect to inherit a considerable fortune from her, and you wanted to make plans intelligently based on expectations. So you say, but reports are being received which indicate that you are deeply in debt and are hard pressed. Do you deny that?"

"No." Winslow's jaw worked. "I don't deny it."

"Are your debts, or any part of them, connected with any violation of the law? Any criminal act?"

"No!"

"Granted that Mr. Heller could furnish a valid calculation on your aunt's life, how would that help you any?"

Winslow looked at Cramer, and met only a stony stare. He went back to Wolfe: "I was negotiating to borrow a very large sum against my —expectations. There was to be a certain percentage added for each month that passed before repayment was made, and I had to know what my chances were. It was a question of probabilities, and I went to an expert."

"What data had you given Heller as a basis for his calculations?"

"I couldn't . . . all kinds of things."

"For instance?" Wolfe insisted.

Winslow looked at the police stenographer and me, but we couldn't help. He returned to Wolfe. "Hundreds of things. My aunt's age, her habits—eating, sleeping—the ages of her parents and grandparents when they died, her weight and build—I gave him photographs —her activities and interests, her temperament, her attitude to doctors, her politics—"

"Politics?"

"Yes. Heller said her pleasure or pain at the election of Eisenhower was a longevity factor."

Wolfe grunted. "The claptrap of the charlatan. Did he also consider as a longevity factor the possibility that you might intervene by dispatching your aunt?"

That struck Winslow as funny. He did not guffaw, but he tittered, and it did not suit his build.

Wolfe insisted, "Did he?"

"I really don't know, really," Winslow tittered again.

"From whom did your aunt inherit her fortune?"

"Her husband, My uncle Norton."

"When did he die?"

"Six years ago. He was shot accidentally while hunting. Hunting deer."

"Were you present?"

"Not present, no. I was more than a mile away at the time."

"Did you get a legacy from him?"

"No." Some emotion was mobilizing Winslow's blood and turning his face pink. "He left me six cents in his will. He didn't like me."

Wolfe turned to speak to Cramer, but the Inspector forestalled him:

"Two men are already on it. The shooting accident was up in Maine."

"There was no mystery about my uncle's death," Winslow said. "My aunt would be amused, as I am, at the idea of my having killed him, and she would be amused at the idea that I might try to kill her. As a matter of fact, I wouldn't mind a bit having her know about that, but if she finds out what I went to Leo Heller for—heaven help me." He gestured in appeal. "I was promised, absolutely promised."

"We disclose people's private affairs," Cramer rumbled, "only when it is unavoidable."

Wolfe was pouring beer. When the foam was at the rim he put the bottle down and resumed: "I have promised nothing, Mr. Winslow, but I have no time for tattle. Here's a suggestion: You're in this pickle only because of your association with Mr. Heller, and the question is, was there anything in that association to justify this badgering? Suppose you tell us. Start at the beginning, and recall as well as you can every word that passed between you. Go right through it. I'll interrupt as little as possible."

"You've already seen it," Cramer objected. "The transcript, the statement. Why, have you got a lead or haven't you?"

Wolfe nodded. "We have a night for it," he said, not happily. "Mr. Winslow doesn't know what the lead is, and it's Greek to you." He went to Winslow, "Go ahead, sir. Everything that you said to Mr. Heller, and everything he said to you."

It took more than an hour, including interruptions. The interruptions came from various city employees who were scattered around the house working on other scared citizens, and from the telephone. Two of the phone calls were from homicide dicks who were trying to locate a citizen who had got mislaid—one named Henrietta Tillotson, Mrs. Albert Tillotson, the overfed matron whom I had seen in Heller's waiting room.

When Purley Stebbins got up to escort Winslow from the room, Wolfe's lead was still apparently Greek to Cramer, as it was to me. As the door closed behind them Cramer spoke emphatically, "It's a farce. I think that message was NW, meaning you, and you're stalling for some kind of a play."

"And if so?" Wolfe was testy. "Why are you tolerating this? Because if the message did mean me I'm the crux, and your only alternative is to cart me downtown, and that would merely make me mum and you know it."

He drank beer and put the glass down. "However, maybe we can expedite it without too great a risk. Tell your men who are now interviewing these people to be alert for something connected with the figure six. They must give no hint of it, they must themselves not men-

tion it, but if the figure six appears in any segment of the interview they should concentrate on that segment until it is exhausted. They all know, I presume, of Heller's suspicion that one of his clients had committed a serious crime?"

"They know that Goodwin says so. What's this about six?"

Wolfe shook his head. "That will have to do. Even that may be foolhardy, since they're your men, not mine."

"Winslow's uncle died six years ago and left him six cents."

"I'm quite aware of it. You say that is being investigated. Do you want Mr. Goodwin to pass this word?"

Cramer said no thanks, he would, and left the room.

By the time he returned, citizen number two had been brought in by Stebbins, introduced to Wolfe, and seated where Winslow had been. It was Susan Maturo. She looked fully as harassed as she had that morning, but I wouldn't say much more so. There was now, of course, a new aspect to the matter: Did she look harassed, or guilty?

If Heller had been killed by the client whom he suspected of having committed a crime, it must have been a client he had seen previously at least once, or how could he have got ground for suspicion? According to Susan Maturo, she had never called on Heller before and had never seen him.

Actually, that eliminated neither her nor Agatha Abbey, who also claimed that that morning had been her first visit. It was known that Heller had sometimes made engagements by telephone to meet prospective clients elsewhere, and Miss Maturo and Miss Abbey might well have been among that number.

Opening up on her, Wolfe was not too belligerent, probably because she had accepted an offer of beer and, after drinking some, had licked her lips. It pleases him when people share his joys.

"You are aware, Miss Maturo," he told her, "that you are in a class by yourself. The evidence indicates that Mr. Heller was killed by one of the six people who entered that building this morning to call on him, and you are the only one of the six who departed before eleven o'clock, Mr. Heller's appointment hour. Your explanation of your departure as given in your statement is close to incoherent. Can't you improve on it?"

She looked at me. "I've reported what you told me," I assured her. "Exactly as you said it."

She nodded at me vaguely and turned to Wolfe: "Do I have to go through it again?"

"You will probably," Wolfe advised her, "have to go through it again a dozen times. Why did you leave?"

She gulped, started to speak, found no sound was coming out, and had to start over again. "You

know about the explosion and fire at the Montrose Hospital a month ago?"

"Certainly. I read newspapers."

"You know that three hundred and two people died there that night. I was there working, in Ward G on the sixth floor. In addition to those who died many were injured, but I went all through it and I didn't get a scratch or a burn. My dearest friend was killed, burned to death trying to save the patients. Another dear friend is crippled for life, and a young doctor I was engaged to marry—he was killed in the explosion. I don't know how I came out of it without a mark, because I tried to help, I'm positively sure of that—but I did. That's one trouble, I guess, because I couldn't be glad about it—how could I?"

She seemed to expect an answer, so Wolfe muttered, "No. Not to be expected."

"I am not," she said, "the kind of person who hates people."

She stopped, so Wolfe said, "No?"

"No, I'm not. I never have been. But I began to hate the man, or the woman, who put the bomb there. I can't say I went out of my mind, because I don't think I did, but I felt as if I had. After two weeks I tried to go back to work at another hospital, but I couldn't. I read all there was in the newspapers, hoping they would catch him. I couldn't think of anything else. I even dreamed about it every night. I went to the police and wanted to help, but of course they had already questioned me and I had told them everything I knew. The days went by and it looked as if they never would catch him. I had read about that Leo Heller, and I decided to go to him and get him to do it."

Wolfe made a noise, and her head jerked up. "I said I hated him!"

Wolfe nodded. "So you did. Go on."

"And I went, that's all. I had some money saved and I could borrow some, to pay him. But while I was sitting there in the waiting room, with that man and woman there, I suddenly thought I must be crazy. I must have got so bitter and vindictive I didn't realize what I was doing. I wanted to think about it, so I got up and left.

"Going down in the elevator I felt as if a crisis had passed—that's a feeling a nurse often has about other people—and then as I left the elevator I heard the names Archie Goodwin and Nero Wolfe. The idea came to me—why not get them to find the person who planted the bomb? So I spoke to Mr. Goodwin, but I couldn't make myself tell him about it. I just told him I wanted to see Nero Wolfe to ask his advice. Mr. Goodwin said he would try to arrange it, and he would phone me or I could phone him."

She fluttered a hand. "That's how it was."

Wolfe regarded her. "It's not incoherent, but neither is it sapient. Do you consider yourself intelligent?"

"Why—yes. Enough to get along. I'm a good nurse, and a good nurse has to be intelligent."

"Yet you thought that by some hocus-pocus that quack could expose the man who planted the bomb in the hospital?"

"I thought he did it scientifically. I knew he had a great reputation, just as you have."

"Good heavens!" Wolfe opened his eyes wide at her. "Well, what were you going to ask my advice about?"

"Whether you thought there was any chance—whether you thought the police were going to find him."

Wolfe's eyes were back to normal, half shut again. "This performance I'm engaged in, Miss Maturo—this inquisition of a person involved by circumstance in a murder—is a hubbub in a jungle; at least, in its preliminary stage. Blind, I grope, and proceed by feel. You say you never saw Mr. Heller, but you can't prove it. I am free to assume that you had seen him, not at his office, and talked with him; that you were convinced, no matter how, that *he* had planted the bomb in the hospital and caused the holocaust; and that, moved by an obsessive rancor, you went to his place and killed him. One ad—"

She broke in: "Why on earth would I think he had planted the bomb?"

"I have no idea. As I said, I'm groping. One advantage of that assumption would be that you have confessed to a hatred so overpowering that surely it might have impelled you to kill if and when you identified its object. It is Mr. Cramer, not I, who is deploying the hosts of justice in this enterprise, but no doubt two or three men are calling on your friends and acquaintances to learn if you have ever hinted a suspicion of Leo Heller in connection with the hospital disaster. Also, they are probably asking whether you had any grudge against the hospital that might have provoked you to plant the bomb yourself."

A muscle at the side of her neck was twitching. "Me? Is that what it's like?"

"It is, indeed. That wouldn't be incongruous. Your proclaimed abhorrence of the perpetrator could be simply the screeching of your remorse."

"Well, it isn't." Suddenly she was out of her chair, and a bound took her to Wolfe's desk and her palms did a tattoo on the desk as she leaned forward at him. "Don't you dare say a thing like that! The six people I care for most in the world—they all died that night! How would you feel?" More tattoo. "How would anybody feel?"

I was up and at her elbow, but no bodily discipline was required. She straightened and for a moment stood trembling all over. Then she

got her control back and went to her chair and sat.

"I'm sorry," she said in a tight little voice.

"You should be," Wolfe said grimly. A woman cutting loose is always too much for him. "Pounding the top of my desk settles nothing. What were the names of these six people who died?"

She told him, and he wanted to know more about them. I was beginning to suspect that actually he had no more of a lead than I did, that he had given Cramer a runaround to jostle him loose from the NW he had fixed on, and that, having impulsively impounded the five hundred bucks, he had decided to spend the night trying to earn it.

The line he now took with Susan Maturo bore me out. It was merely the old grab-bag game: Keep her talking, about anything and anybody, in the hope that she would spill something that would faintly resemble a straw. I had known Wolfe, when the pickings had been slim, to play that game for hours on end.

He was still at it with Susan Maturo when an individual entered with a message for Cramer which he delivered in a whisper. Cramer got up and started for the door, then thought better of it and turned.

"You might as well be in on this," he told Wolfe. "They've got Mrs. Tillotson and she's here."

That was a break for Susan Maturo, since Wolfe might have kept her going another hour or so. As she arose to go she favored me with a glance. It looked as if she intended it for a smile to show there were no hard feelings, but if so it was the poorest excuse for a smile I had ever seen. If it hadn't been unprofessional I would have gone and given her a pat on the shoulder.

The newcomer who was ushered in was not Mrs. Tillotson but an officer of the law, not in uniform. He was one of the new acquisitions on Homicide and I had never seen him before, but I admired his manly stride as he approached and his snappy stance when he halted and faced Cramer.

"Who did you leave over there?" Cramer asked him.

"Murphy, sir. Timothy Murphy."

"Okay. You tell it. Hold it." Cramer turned to Wolfe: "This man's name is Roca. He was on post at Heller's place. It was him you asked about the pencils and the eraser. Go on, Roca."

"Yes, sir. The doorman in the lobby phoned up that there was a woman down there that wanted to come up, and I told him to let her come. I thought that was compatible."

"Go ahead." Wolfe grimaced.

"She came up in the elevator. She wouldn't tell me her name. She asked me questions about how much longer would I be there and did I expect anybody else to come and so on. We bantered back and forth, my objective being to find out who she was, and then she came

right out with it. She took a roll of bills from her bag. She offered me three hundred dollars, and then four hundred, and finally five hundred, if I would unlock the cabinets in Heller's office and let her be in there alone for an hour. That put me in a quandary."

"How did you get out?"

"If I had had keys to the cabinets I would have accepted her offer. I would have unlocked them and left her in there. When she was ready to go I would have arrested her and taken her to be searched, and we would have known what she had taken from the cabinet. That would have broken the case. But I had no keys to the cabinets."

"Uh-huh. If you had had keys and had unlocked the cabinets and left her in there, and she had taken something from a cabinet and burned it up, you would have collected the ashes and sent them to the laboratory for examination by modern scientific methods."

Roca swallowed. "I admit I didn't think about burning. But if I had had keys I would have thought harder."

"I bet you would. Did you take her money for evidence?"

"No, sir. I thought that might be instigation. I took her into custody. I phoned in. When a relief came, I brought her here to you. I am staying here to face her."

"You've faced her enough for tonight. Plenty. We'll have a talk later. Go tell Burger to bring her in."

Although my stay in Heller's waiting room that morning had been brief, I have long been trained to see what I look at and to remember what I see, and I would hardly have recognized Mrs. Albert Tillotson. She had lost five pounds and gained twice that many wrinkles, and the contrast between her lipstick and her drained-out skin made her look more like a woman-hater's pin-up than an overfed matron.

"I wish to speak with you privately," she told Inspector Cramer.

She was one of those. Her husband was president of something, and therefore it was absurd to suppose that she was not to expect privileges. It took Cramer a good five minutes to get it into her head that she was just one of the girls. It was a shock that she had to take time out to decide how to react to it.

She decided on a barefaced lie. She demanded to know if the man who had brought her there was a member of the police force. Cramer replied that he was.

"Well," she declared, "he shouldn't be. You may know that late this afternoon a police officer called at my residence to see me. He told me that Leo Heller had been murdered, and wanted to know for what purpose I had gone to his office this morning. Naturally, I didn't want to be involved in an ugly thing like that, so I told him I hadn't gone to see Leo Heller, but he convinced me that that wouldn't do, so I said I had gone to see him, but on an

intimate personal matter that I wouldn't tell . . . Is that man putting down what I'm saying?"

"Yes. That's his job."

"I wouldn't want it. Nor yours, either . . . The officer insisted that I must tell why I had gone to see Heller, and I refused. When he said he would have to take me to the District Attorney's office, under arrest if necessary, and I saw that he meant it, I told him. I told him that my husband and I have been having some difficulty with our son, especially his schooling, and I went to Heller to ask what college would be best for him. I answered the officer's questions within reason, and finally he left. Perhaps you knew all this."

Cramer nodded. "Yes."

"Well, after the officer had gone I began to worry, and I went to see a friend and ask her advice. The trouble was that I had given Heller many details about my son, some of them very intimate and confidential, and since he had been murdered, the police would probably go through all his papers. Those details were private and I wanted to keep them private. I knew that Heller had made all his notes in a personal shorthand that no one else could read; anyhow, he had said so, but I couldn't be sure. After I had discussed it with my friend a long time, I decided to to to Heller's place and ask whoever was in charge to let me have any papers relating to my family affair, since they were not connected with the murder."

"I see," Cramer assured her.

"And that's what I did. The offificer there pretended to listen to me, he pretended to be agreeing with me, and then suddenly he arrested me for trying to bribe an officer. When I indignantly denied it, as of course I did, and started to leave, he detained me by force. He actually was going to put handcuffs on me! So I came with him, and here I am. I hope you realize I have a complaint to make and I am making it!"

Cramer was eyeing her. "Did you try to bribe him?"

"No, I didn't!"

"You didn't offer him money?"

"No!"

Purley Stebbins permitted a low sound, half growl and half snort, to escape him. Cramer, ignoring that impertinence from a subordinate, took a deep breath and let it out again.

"Shall I take it?" Wolfe inquired.

"No, thank you," Cramer said acidly. He was keeping his eyes on Mrs. Tillotson. "You're making a mistake, madam," he told her. "All these lies don't do you any good. They just made it harder for you. Try telling the truth for a change."

She drew herself up, but it wasn't very impressive because she was pretty well fagged after her hard day. "You're calling me a liar," she accused Cramer, "and in front of witnesses." She pointed a finger at

the police stenographer. "You get that down just the way he said it!"

"He will," Cramer assured her. "Look, Mrs. Tillotson. You admit you lied about going to see Heller until you realized that the doorman would swear that you were there not only this morning but also previously. Now, about your trying to bribe an officer. That's a felony. If we charge you with it, and you go to trial, I can't say who the jury will believe, you or the officer, but I know who I believe. I believe him, and you're lying about it."

"Get him in here," she challenged. "I want to face him."

"He wants to face you, too, but that wouldn't help any. I'm satisfied that you're lying, and also that you're lying about what you wanted to get from Heller's files. He made his notes in a private code that it will take a squad of experts to decipher, and you knew that. I do not believe that you took the risk of going there and trying to bribe an officer just to get his notes about you and your family.

"I believe there is something in his files that ran easily be recognized as pertaining to you or your family, and that's what you were after. In the morning we'll have men going through the contents of the files, item by item, and if anything like that is there they'll spot it. Meanwhile, I'm holding you for further questioning about your attempt to bribe an officer. If you want to telephone a lawyer, you may. One phone call, with an officer present."

Cramer's head swiveled. "Stebbins, take her to Lieutenant Rowcliff, and tell him how it stands."

Purley arose. Mrs. Tillotson was shrinking, looking less overfed every second. "Will you wait a minute?" she demanded.

"Two minutes, madam. But don't try cooking up any more lies. You're no good at it."

"That man misunderstood me. I wasn't trying to bribe him."

"I said you may phone a lawyer—"

"I don't want a lawyer." She was sure about that. "If they go through those files they'll find what I was after, so I might as well tell you. It's some letters in envelopes addressed to me. They're not signed, they're anonymous, and I wanted that Heller to find out who sent them."

"Are they about your son?"

"No. They're about me. They threatened me with something, and I was sure it was leading up to blackmail."

"How many letters?"

"Six."

"What do they threaten you with?"

"They—they don't exactly threaten. They're quotations from things. One of them says, 'He that cannot pay let him pray.' Another one says, 'So comes a reckoning when the banquet's o'er.' The others are longer, but that's what they're like."

"What made you think they were leading up to blackmail?"

"Wouldn't you?" 'He that cannot pay let him pray.' "

"And you wanted Heller to identify the sender. How many times had you seen him?"

"Twice."

"Of course you had given him all the information you could. We'll get the letters in the morning, but you can tell us now what you told Heller. As far as possible, everything that was said by both of you."

I permitted myself to grin, and glanced at Wolfe to see if he was properly appreciative of Cramer's adopting his approach, but he was just sitting there looking patient.

It was hard to tell, for me at least, how much Mrs. Tillotson was giving and how much she was covering. If there was something in her past that someone might have felt she should pay for or give a reckoning of, either she didn't know what it was, or she had kept it from Heller. Or if she had told him she certainly didn't intend to let us in on it.

Cramer played her back and forth until she was so tied up in contradictions that it would have taken a dozen mathematical wizards to make head or tail of it.

Wolfe finally intervened. He glanced up at the wall clock and announced, "It's after midnight. Thank heaven, you have an army to start sorting this out and checking it. If Lieutenant Rowcliff is still here, let him have her and let's have some cheese. I'm hungry."

Cramer, as ready for a recess as anybody, had no objection. Purley Stebbins removed Mrs. Tillotson and I went to the kitchen to give Fritz a hand, knowing that he was running himself ragged furnishing trays of sandwiches to flocks of homicide personnel distributed all over the premises.

When I returned to the office with a supply of provender, Cramer was riding Wolfe, pouring it on, and Wolfe was leaning back in his chair with his eyes shut. I passed around plates of Fritz's *il pesto* and crackers, with beer for Wolfe and the stenographer, coffee for Cramer and Stebbins, and milk for me.

In four minutes Cramer inquired, "What is this stuff?"

Wolfe told him. "*Il pesto.*"

"What's in it?"

"Canestrato cheese, anchovies, pig liver, black walnuts, chives, sweet basil, garlic, and olive oil."

"For Pete's sake!"

In another four minutes Cramer addressed me in the tone of one doing a gracious favor. "I'll take some more of that, Goodwin."

But while I was gathering the empty plates he started in on Wolfe again. Wolfe didn't bother to counter. He waited until Inspector Cramer halted for breath and then growled, "It's now nearly one o'clock and we have three more."

Cramer sent Purley for another scared citizen. This time it was the thin, tall, bony specimen who, entering the lobby on 37th Street that

morning, had stopped to aim a rude stare at Susan Maturo and me. Having read his statement, I now knew that his name was Jack Ennis, that he was an expert diemaker, at present unemployed, that he was unmarried, that he lived in Queens, and that he was a born inventor who had not yet cashed in. His brown suit had not been pressed.

When Cramer told him that questions from Wolfe were to be considered a part of the official inquiry into Leo Heller's death, Ennis cocked his head to appraise Wolfe as if deciding whether or not such a procedure deserved his okay.

"You're a self-made man," he told Wolfe. "I've read about you. How old are you?"

Wolfe returned his gaze. "Some other time, Mr. Ennis. Tonight you're the target, not me. You're thirty-eight, aren't you?"

Ennis smiled. He had a wide mouth with thin, colorless lips, and his smile wasn't especially attractive. "Excuse me if you thought I was being fresh asking how old you are. I know you're right at the top of your racket, and I wondered how long it took you to get started up. I'm going to the top too, before I'm through, but it's taking me a long time to get a start. How old were you when you first got your name in the paper?"

"Two days. A notice of my birth . . . I understand that your call on Leo Heller was connected with your determination to get a start as an inventor?"

"That's right." Ennis smiled again. "Look. The cops have been at me now for seven hours, and where are they? What's the sense in going on with it? Why would I want to kill that guy?"

"That's what I'd like to know."

"Well, search me. I've got patents on six inventions, and none of them is on the market. One of them is not perfect—I know it's not, but it needs only one more trick to make it an absolute whiz. I can't find the trick. I've read about this Heller, and it seemed to me that if I gave him all the dope, all the stuff he needed for one of his formulas, there was a good chance he would come up with the answer.

"So I went to him. I spent three long sessions with him. He finally thought he had enough to try to work up a formula, and he was taking a crack at it. I had a date to see him this morning and find out how it was going."

Ennis stopped for emphasis. "So I'm hoping. After all the sweating I've done and the dough I've spent, maybe I'm going to get it at last. So I go. I go upstairs to his office and shoot him dead, and then go to the waiting room and sit down and wait." He smiled. "Listen. If you want to say there are smarter men than me, I won't argue. Maybe you're smarter, yourself. But I'm not a lunatic, am I?"

Wolfe's lips were pursed. "I won't

commit myself on that, Mr. Ennis. But you have by no means demonstrated that it is fatuous to suppose you might have killed Heller. What if he devised a formula from the data you supplied, discovered the trick that would transform your faulty contraption into a whiz, as you expressed it, and refused to divulge it except on intolerable terms? That would be a motive for murder."

"It sure would," Ennis agreed without reservation. "I would have killed him with pleasure." He leaned forward and was suddenly intense. "Look. I'm headed for the top. I've got what I need in here"—he tapped his forehead—"and nothing and nobody is going to stop me. If Heller had done what you said I might have killed him, I don't deny it, but he didn't."

He jerked to Cramer: "And I'm glad of a chance to tell you what I've told those bozos that have been grilling me: I want to go through Heller's papers to see if I can find the formula he worked up for me. Maybe I can't recognize it, and if I do I doubt if I can figure it out, but I want to look for it, and not next year, either."

"We're doing the looking," Cramer said dryly. "If we find anything that can be identified as relating to you, you'll see it, and eventually you may get it."

"I don't want it eventually, I want it now. Do you know how long I've been working on that thing? Four years! It's mine, you understand that; it's mine!" He was getting upset.

"Calm down, bud," Cramer advised him. "We're right with you in seeing to it that you get what's yours."

"Meanwhile," Wolfe said, "there's a point or two: When you entered that building this morning, why did you stop and gape at Mr. Goodwin and Miss Maturo?"

Ennis' chin went up. 'Who says I did?"

"I do, on information . . . Archie. Did he?"

"Yes," I stated. "Rudely."

"Well," Ennis told Wolfe, "he's bigger than I am. Maybe I did, at that."

"Why? Any special reason?"

"It depends on what you call special. I thought I recognized her, a girl I knew once, and then saw I was wrong. She was much too young."

"Very well. I would like to explore my suggestion, which you reject, that Heller was trying to do you out of your invention as perfected by his calculations. I want you to describe the invention as you described it to him, particularly the flaw which you had tried to rectify."

I won't attempt to report what followed, and I couldn't anyhow, since I understood less than a tenth of it. I did gather that it was a gadget intended to supersede all existing X-ray machines, but beyond that I

got lost in a wilderness of cathodes and atomicity and coulombs.

If talking like a character out of space-science fiction proves you're an inventor, that bird was certainly one. He stood up to make motions to illustrate, and grabbed a pad and pencil from Wolfe's desk to explain with drawings. After a while it began to look as if it would be impossible to stop him. They finally managed it, with Sergeant Stebbins lending a hand by marching over and taking his elbow.

On his way out he turned at the door to call back: "I want that formula, and don't you forget it!"

The female of an executive type was still in mink, or, rather, she had it with her, but she was not so brisk. As I said before, that morning I would have classified her as between twenty and sixty, but the day's experiences had worn her down closer to reality, and I would now have put her at forty-seven. However, she was game. With all she had gone through, at that late hour, she still let us know, as she deposited the mink on a chair, sat on another, crossed her legs, that she was cool and composed and in command.

My typing her as an executive had been justified by the transcripts. Her name really was Agatha Abbey, and she was executive editor of a magazine, *Mode,* which I did not read regularly.

After Cramer had explained the nature of the session, including Wolfe's status, Wolfe took aim and went for the center of the target: "Miss Abbey. I presume you'd like to get to bed—I know I would—so we won't waste time flouncing around. Three things about you."

He held up a finger. "First: You claim that you never saw Leo Heller. It is corroborated that you had not visited his place before today, but whether you had seen him elsewhere will be thoroughly investigated by men armed with pictures. They will ask people at your place of business, at your residence, and at other likely spots. If it is found that you had, in fact, met him and conferred with him, you won't like it."

He raised two fingers. "Second: You refused to tell why you went to see Heller. That does not brand you as a miscreant, since most people have private matters which they innocently and jealously guard; but you clung to your refusal beyond reason, even after it was explained that that information had to be given by all six persons who called on Heller this morning, and you were assured that it would be revealed to no one unless it proved to be an item of evidence in a murder case. You finally did give the information, but only when you perceived that if you didn't there would be a painstaking investigation into your affairs and movements."

He raised three fingers. "Third: When the information was wormed

out of you, it was almost certainly flummery. You said that you wanted to engage Heller to find out who had stolen a ring from a drawer of your desk some three months ago. That was childish nonsense. I grant that even though the ring was insured, you may have been intent on disclosing the culprit, but if you have enough sense to hold a well-paid job in a highly competitive field, as you have, surely you would have known that it was stupid to suppose Heller could help you. Singling out a sneak thief from among a hundred possibilities was plainly an operation utterly unsuited to his technique, and even to his pretensions."

Wolfe moved his head an inch to the left and back again. "No, Miss Abbey, it won't do. I want to know whether you saw Leo Heller before today, and in any case what you wanted of him."

She answered in a controlled, thin, steely voice. "You make it sound overwhelming, Mr. Wolfe."

"Not I. It *is* overwhelming."

Her sharp, dark eyes went to Cramer. "You're an Inspector, in charge of this business?"

"That's right."

"Do the police share Mr. Wolfe's —skepticism?"

"You can take what he said as coming from me."

"Then, no matter what I tell you about why I went to see Heller, you'll check it?"

"Not necessarily. If it fits all right, and if we can't connect it with the murder, and if it's a private, confidential matter, we'll let it go at that. If we do check any, we'll be careful. There are enough innocent citizens sore at us already."

Her eyes darted back to Wolfe. "What about you, Mr. Wolfe? Will you have to check?"

"I sincerely hope not. Let Mr. Cramer's assurance include me."

Her eyes went around. "What about these men?"

"They are trained confidential assistants. They hold their tongues or they lose their jobs."

The tip of her tongue came out and went in. "I'm not satisfied, but what can I do? If my only choice is between this and the whole New York detective force pawing at me, I take this. I phoned Leo Heller ten days ago, and he came to my office and spent two hours there. It was a business matter, not a personal one. I'm going to tell you exactly what it was, because I'm no good at ad-libbing a phony."

(Continued on page 153)

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The hero-villain of modern espionage's most fantastic episode tells (with the aid of Hans Nogly) his own incredible true story.

PROOF OF THE PUDDING (1945; Norton, $2.95) inaugurates a reissue of Phoebe Atwood Taylor's long-absent Asey Mayo mysteries. It has lost nothing of its cheerful absurd charm; may the reissues be many—and include the even funnier work of Miss Taylor's other self, Alice Tilton.

A new writer to reckon with

Last year, in the August 1961 issue of Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine, we published Mrs. Behney's "first story"—"On the Road to Jericho." It was, you will recall, an impressive "first," with sharply delineated characters and subtle, emotional overtones. Now we bring you a group of stories by this new author—and to the best of our recollection, this is the first time in the 22-year history of EQMM that we have included three stories by the same author in a single issue . . .

The author tells us that everything she writes "deals of necessity with everyday people." She claims to know nothing about "society people, or wealthy people, or highly cultured people." She was raised on a small farm, and has always lived in the country. When she was a child, "even staying overnight at a friend's house in a nearby, sleepy, one-horse town was a great adventure."

So now you know what to expect—and know what we had in mind when we decided to give a generic, unifying title to Mrs. Behney's three stories—"Tales from Home." You will find the three stories entirely different from one another—and yet they are interrelated and intertwined in a curious way, and as homogeneous as if they were cut from the same bolt of cloth—as indeed they were, the bolt of cloth being Mrs. Behney's mind, her remembrance of things past.

We think you will find both sensitivity and texture in these three short stories—a moving and perceptive quality, rich in detail, that has the pulse and bitterness and impact of realism. And you will find all three stories intensely American—yet the people are as universal as the sun and the earth. In the first story, for example, you will observe the daily mosaic, piece by piece, of the work and chores of an American farm woman—but couldn't Marcy Bayliss be any farm woman in any land, or for that matter, in any time?

TALES FROM HOME

by L. E. BEHNEY

I: The Day of the Fair

MARCY WAS PUTTING ON HER PINK GINGHAM BEST DRESS WHEN SHE HEARD the truck start. Her fingers hurried with the row of white pearl buttons down the front of the dress. It was like Joe to try to scare her like that. She shouted, "I'm coming!" Thrusting her bare feet into her good black shoes and snatching up her purse and her hairbrush she ran through the kitchen and out onto the front porch.

The truck was already moving. She ran after it, despairing and then crying. She could see the back of Joe's fat red neck through the rear cab window. The kids were looking back at her, their faces pale and frightened.

The truck picked up speed. Through a cloud of dust it roared down the lane, up the long hill on the other side of the draw, and then disappeared from sight among the scrub pine and chaparral.

Marcy dropped to the dry grass beside the road. She was sobbing breathlessly. He didn't have to leave her, she wouldn't have been any trouble to him. It wasn't right, it wasn't fair. She had wanted to go so badly. She and the kids had planned this day for weeks. It had to be a Saturday so they would be out of school and it had to be a day when Joe was home so he could take them. Marcy could drive the truck, but the red Ford was Joe's proudest possession and he would sooner Marcy and the kids walked all the way to the city than let her touch it.

She had managed to get him to promise to take them by being mighty nice to him and fixing all the things he liked to eat and never saying a mean word back to him no matter what he said or did. Keeping a cage on her tongue hadn't been easy. He wasn't an easy man to be married to, Joe Bayliss wasn't. Lazy and mean he was. Gone off most of the time with his friends, leaving the farm work to her and the kids.

Gary was twelve, big for his age, and near as much help as a man. Kathy was nine and blonde and cute and she helped out a lot too, mostly with the housework. She was getting to be a real good cook. Danny was only six, but he could hoe weeds and pick up apples and gather eggs and dry dishes. They were wonderful kids, and that was why she had wanted to go to the County Fair so much. Just to see them enjoy themselves without a worry but to have a good time . . .

Marcy Bayliss stood up and brushed the dust and grass from her best dress. She took off her shoes and walked back to their weathered cabin, her feet scuffing in the soft red dust. She stood on the porch and felt the cool of the roof shade on her back and the splintery boards under her feet. She listened a long minute: maybe Joe might come back after her. He might have been teasing her. Just like him to joke so mean.

A jaybird scolded in the orchard and the hens were singing busily around the yard. It was the first week of October. The sun still burned with summer's heat but the sky had a soft haze and the distant back-country peaks were a deep violet-blue. Near at hand the willows in the creekbeds were starting to change from silver-green to pale gold. The fields and hillsides wore tawny lion-colored pelts of dry grass. The air hung hot and still, and the red truck had vanished as though she had only dreamed of it.

Marcy sighed. She went into the silent house. "Busy, busy, busy," her mother used to say, buzzing her swift tongue with the sound of bees. "Git busy if you're hankerin' fer the time to git by." Marcy went into the bedroom and took off her good clothes. She put on a pair of clean but much mended levis and an old shirt and hung up her dress carefully. She brushed her shoes and put them away on a shelf.

In the kitchen she put two small sticks of wood in the firebox of the old black range and put the dishwater on to heat. She started to clear the breakfast table. There in the middle of the table, hidden behind the syrup jug, was her money can. She snatched it up. Empty. Joe had taken her money. It had taken her a whole summer's careful scrimping to save that $20. She had saved it for a special treat for the kids. Together they had decided it was to be one big wonderful day at the County Fair.

Marcy stared at the empty can. She had told Joe about the money when he had growled that he was broke and couldn't afford to take them. Joe was using the money for the things they had planned. What if she *wasn't* there? Pretty soon the kids would be home full of excited talk and she could listen and imagine that she had been along to share their fun. Joe would surely be good to them—he sometimes was. Sometimes, when he had been lucky in a card game, he would come home with armloads of expensive gifts for the kids.

Marcy did the dishes. Then she made the beds, swept the house, filled the woodbox beside the range, and carried water from the spring for the washing. She filled the copper boiler on its fireplace in the back yard and started a pine fire under it. She filled the rinse tubs on the back porch beside the old gasoline-motor washing machine. She was proud of the old machine. It beat hand-scrubbing all hollow and it was a present to her from Gary. The boy had worked all last summer piling brush for a logging

crew to make money enough to buy it for her. He was a fine boy and not one little bit lazy or mean like his Pa.

While the water heated, Marcy carried the soiled clothing out to the back porch and sorted it and went through the pockets. Once she had found a live frog in one of Danny's pants pockets. Today he had two marbles and a dead beetle. In Joe's clothes she found a woman's lace handkerchief. It smelled of cheap perfume and was stained with lipstick. Tight-lipped, Marcy threw it into the fire. In the first years of their marriage she would have fought with Joe about it, been hurt and bitter. Now it didn't matter. Except for an inexpressible disgust.

By noon she had the washing done and hung out on the line. She ate a slice of bread and drank a glass of milk, went out to the hillside pasture, and caught the horses. She hitched them to the disk plow and worked the orchard and the garden plot below the spring. She loved to work with the big, slow-moving team. There was something so good, so satisfying, about the powerful way they moved. She liked their smell and the way they whickered at her and the way their great, shining eyes watched her.

She liked the feel of the cool ground against her feet and the clean smell of the fresh-turned earth. She had been raised on a farm on Stony Ridge and had shared the outside work with her brothers. Her Pa used to say, "Marcy's as good a man as any of you fellers." She'd been proud even if she wasn't as pretty as her sisters. Maybe that was why Joe Bayliss had come courting her. He was so all-fired lazy he'd figured on getting his farm worked without having to pay a hired man's wages.

The sun was nearing the top of Deadwood Mountain when Marcy finished the disking. She turned the team out to pasture and started the chores.

The farm was hidden in cool shadow when she finished tending the chickens, milking the cows, and feeding the stock. She strained the milk into big shallows pans and set it to cool in the cellar. She sorted the bucket of eggs and packed them into cartons. She gathered in the dry, sun-smelling clothes. The house, still warm from the afternoon's heat, was lonesome-feeling in the dark.

Marcy shivered. She lighted both kerosene lamps but the dim, golden lampglow only made the house seem more empty, more forsaken. Listening, Marcy peered out into the dusk. In the west the sky was still pale and in the east a full moon was rising like a great, round, yellow eye. There was no sound of Joe's truck. The paper down at the store had said there would be fireworks on Saturday and Sunday evenings. The Fair people wouldn't be firing them off until it got good and dark. Maybe Joe and the kids decided to stay and watch.

Marcy started a fire in the range and heated a bucket of water. She car-

ried in a tub from the back porch and took a bath in the corner behind the stove. The lamplight glistened on her flat hard body and on her long muscular arms. When she finished bathing she dressed in clean underclothing and her pink gingham dress. She brushed her short, sun-streaked hair and used her lipstick. She thought, when she peered at herself in the cracked mirror above the kitchen worktable, that she looked right nice.

She carried out the tub of bathwater and mopped up the splashed floor. The clock on the shelf over the stove said 8:30. She'd have to wait a time yet, but it shouldn't be too long. It took about an hour to drive home from the Fair and they ought to be home by ten, maybe a little after. Marcy felt that if she sat down to wait she'd go plumb crazy.

She sorted the clean clothes, dampened the clothes to be ironed, and put the others away. Oakwood was best for a long-burning hot fire. She put a big chunk in the firebox and set her heavy irons on the front stove-lid. When the irons sizzled at the touch of her wet finger she got out her ironing board and began to press the clothes. Homemade shirts for the boys, feed-sack school dresses for Kathy, Joe's fancy store-bought shirts . . .

The waiting was so hard. Maybe they'd run off of the road, or got hit by a log truck. She strained to hear every sound. Again and again she went out to the front porch to listen. In the bright moonlight she could see her work-rough hands twisting in the folds of her pink gingham skirt.

The slow hands of the clock reached and passed eleven o'clock. Then Marcy heard the sound of the truck. They were coming at last!

Thankfully she rushed about putting away the pressed clothes and the ironing board, setting the table with her best cloth and plates, bringing in fried chicken and cake from the water cooler on the back porch, slicing fresh bread and tomatoes. She put a pitcher of milk and a pat of butter on the table and checked the coffee pot on the stove.

The truck came into the yard and stopped. Joe came in grinning at her. The children stumbled after him, Gary carrying his sleeping brother, Kathy sleepily clinging to his arm. Marcy hugged the children all at once. Gary looked away from her with a queer, ashamed look.

"I got a bite of supper all fixed for you," Marcy said. "Come and eat a little and tell me about everything."

"We're not hungry," Gary said and pulled roughly away from her. He carried his small brother into the bedroom. Kathy trailed unsteadily after him, rubbing her tear-stained eyes with a grubby fist.

Joe had seated himself at the table and loaded his plate with food. He ate noisily, stuffing his big mouth and smacking his thick lips. The fat bulk of him filled the chair. He was in a good mood and between bites he grinned at Marcy derisively.

Nothing was the way she had thought it would be. The kids hadn't said one word about the Fair. Of course they were tired—just plumb beat out.

She asked Joe, "How was the Fair?"

"Best fair I ever seen," he said, grinning slyly at her.

"Why did you leave me, Joe?" The words had burst out.

"Learn ya to be so slow. Nag an' tease a man for weeks, and then keep him waitin'."

"I was coming," Marcy said numbly.

Joe ate a slab of cake. He shoved his chair back and stood up. His small eyes surveyed her. "Come on to bed, Marcy. Ya look real cute tonight."

He swaggered across the kitchen to their bedroom. The curtain that covered the opening closed behind him. She heard him sit on the creaking bed, heard his heavy boots hit the floor, heard his bulky stirrings—and then silence.

"Hurry up, ol' woman."

"In a minute," she called evenly. She slid her feet out of her shoes, turned out one lamp, and carried the other one into the children's room.

Danny and Kathy were asleep in their bunks, looking like smudged angels, but her older son's eyes were dark and troubled in the lamplight. She stood beside his bed, leaned down and kissed him softly on the forehead. His hard young hand caught her arm.

"Ma?" It was a tortured whisper.

"Yes, Gary?" Marcy set the lamp on the dresser and knelt beside the bed.

"I'm sorry about this morning, Ma. I should've—should've made him stop. I tried. Honest I did."

"I know. Don't be blaming yourself, Gary. You couldn't make your Pa do nothing he didn't have a mind to."

"Some day I'll be big enough."

The boy's thin body was tense as a newly stretched wire fence, his lips taut, his dark eyes staring past her.

Marcy touched his cheek. "How was the Fair? Don't matter I wasn't there. I do truly hope you had a fine time. All the things to see . . . Did Kathy and Danny get to ride the merry-go-round all they wanted? Did you all have candy apples and spun sugar candy on a stick and ride the Ferris wheel and see the clowns and the whole building full of fruit and vegetables in baskets and the cattle all fixed up pretty and fancy? Did you get to see all that?"

The boy's young face twisted as he fought against crying. His worried eyes searched her shadowed face. "Pa said we weren't to tell you, said he'd skin us if we did. But I never did lie to you, Ma."

"No, son." Marcy felt a sudden cold fear.

"Pa said to tell you we went to the Fair, all of us. But we didn't. He gave Kathy a dollar and she and Danny went. They were waiting right at the gate when we got back. Kathy was crying but she was all right."

"Where did you go, Gary?"

"I don't know—some place on the west side of town. Pa said it was time I started living like a man. He didn't want any sissy sons, he said. We went to a place, sort of in back of a store, I guess. Anyway, it was a big room and a lot of men were there and some women, too. There was a jukebox and it was kind of dark and funny-smelling. Everybody seemed to be having a real good time. They danced some and talked loud and laughed a lot. Everybody liked Pa and he took me around and told everybody I was his son. They were real friendly. Pa started playing cards with some fellows. One of the ladies brought me some cookies and a sandwich and something to drink—soda pop, it was. It was sort of smoky in there and I got to feeling sick and after a while I went to sleep. Then Pa woke me up and said it was time to go home."

Marcy was so quiet and motionless that the boy finally touched her face. "Ma, please don't be mad at me."

"I love you," said Marcy Bayliss fiercely. "I love you and Kathy and Danny so much I can't find words enough to tell you how much. You know that, Gary?"

"Sure, Ma."

"Then don't you worry any more. Everything's going to be all right." She rose and picked up the lamp. "Go to sleep," she whispered, and stroked his tangled dark hair.

The boy's tense body relaxed. His face lighted with a brief smile. He turned on his side and his eyes closed heavily. Marcy smoothed the quilt over him.

Then, moving as silently as the monstrous black shadow that followed her along the rough board walls, she went into the kitchen. Her strong hand closed on the bone handle of a kitchen knife. The long blade was worn to a thin point, razor-sharp, gleaming in the yellow lamplight. She carried the lamp in her left hand, the knife in her right. She brushed aside the curtain and entered the bedroom.

Joe lay on his back, one arm stretched out across her pillow. His naked chest, thickly matted with black hair, rose and fell with his breathing. He looked at her and his eyes shone, catlike, in the lamp's dim glow. "Come on, Marcy," he said. "Hurry up, ol' woman."

She set the lamp on the packing case that served as a table beside the bed. She leaned over him and with both hands and all her strength she drove the knife into his chest clear to the handle.

He made a hoarse sound and struggled to sit up. His fingers fumbled with the knife. He stared at her with horrified unbelief. He coughed and blood gushed down his heaving body. Then he fell back on the bed.

Marcy turned down the lamp wick and blew out the flame. The small room flooded with the black and silver of the moonlight. The woman leaned against the bed frame. Now that it was done she was trembling and sick, but she was glad. The children were hers—she had born them, she had raised them . . .

Slowly her strength came back to her and her hands were steady as she changed to her work clothes. She went out to the toolshed in the back yard and got a shovel. She dug a grave for Joe beneath a young Black Twig apple tree in the orchard. The ground was hard and the grave deep so that the night was almost over when she had finished.

She wrapped the body in the stained bedclothing and dragged it out through the house, across the back porch, and across the yard to the grave. When she had tumbled it in, she stood gasping for breath. Joe was a big man and heavy. The moon, low in the west, gave an eerie unearthly look to the dark bulk of the familiar mountain ridges, and its pale light made weblike shadows of the tree branches in the lifeless grass. Only the brightest of the stars blazed with chill, diamond brilliance in the black velvet sky. It seemed a time set aside for death.

Marcy shivered. She hurried back into the house and brought out the clothes Joe had worn. Sitting on the mound of fresh earth, she searched his pockets—some of her $20 might be left. She found the keys to his red Ford truck and a roll of bills. She counted the money—nearly $200! No wonder he had come home in such a good humor—the card game had been lucky for him.

Marcy dropped Joe's clothes into the grave and then quickly filled it in. She smoothed the ground and spread the extra dirt into the freshly disked orchard rows. She cleaned the shovel and put it away and washed her face and hands in the spring's icy overflow.

The eastern sky was growing light with the coming of the sun when Marcy Bayliss finally sat on her front-porch step. A rooster crowed in the hen house and a coyote sang in the dark canyon below the house.

Marcy smiled. The eastern sky faded into gold and palest blue. It was a new day—a fine new day to go to the County Fair.

II: Cross My Heart . . .

Louise lay flat on her stomach on the lumpy bed under the poplar tree in the back yard of her home. She lay with her knees bent and her calloused bare feet twined and twisted with a snaky life of their own as she looked at the bright-colored pictures in an old Montgomery Ward catalogue. She removed one grimy hand from her chin as she turned a page. Behind her thick-lensed, black-rimmed glasses her dark eyes were glassy with longing. She leaned on her elbow and stabbed at the pages with a grimy forefinger.

"I wish I had that," she said. "And that—and that—and that—"

Above her head the heart-shaped poplar leaves hung limp and dark, unstirring in the morning's oppressively humid heat. Her mother's White Leghorns car-r-rked lazily as they dusted themselves in the powdery dirt of the chicken pen. Bees hummed sluggishly in the alfalfa patch beyond the unkempt yard. Over the flat fields the sun flung a pale, wavering haze of moisture drawn from the irrigation ditches and the soaked earth. The hot air smelled of steaming plant growth and stagnant water.

Louise turned on her back. Her eyes stared sightlessly up into the inert dark leaves. She felt herself sinking delightfully into her own inner world where she seemed to hang suspended in space, cushioned in the softest down, caressed tenderly by unseen hands.

She closed her eyes and waited breathlessly. Silken billows lifted her and she saw herself standing on a stage in front of a huge audience. The people in the audience were indistinct mouths smiling at her and shining eyes looking at her with love. She stood apart and saw herself and she was beautiful with a skin like ivory satin and a little red mouth and great dark eyes. And her dress felt light as a moonbeam and was of palest rose chiffon.

There were jewels in her ears and around her throat. She stretched out her arms to the people, a hush fell on the audience, a crescendo of violins played—and she sang. Her voice was clear and true and incredibly sweet. She sang and sang and when she had finished the audience stood as one and shouted and cried and rained flowers on her—all but two who crouched, black as vultures, in the wings of the vast stage.

Louise tried to hold onto the wonderful dream but the two evil figures tore her away from all the beauty and warm delight. Their faces grew and swelled until they were close, staring at her, pointing their long clawlike fingers . . . The faces belonged to Miss Miles and Miss Henderson.

Louise had been in the cloakroom that last week of school in June. The children were supposed to play outside during recess, so she had stepped back into a corner behind an old coat when she heard the thump of sen-

sible heels on the board floor. Then they had come into the room, Miss Miles and Miss Henderson, who taught Louise's sixth-grade classes.

Miss Miles said to Miss Henderson, "What do you think of that Carter girl?" Her voice sounded funny as if she were speaking about something unclean.

Miss Henderson said, "I never saw such a thoroughly unattractive child." Her voice had the same sound as Miss Miles's voice.

"I know it," said Miss Miles. "I can't bear to have her close to me. I know I shouldn't feel that way, but she makes my skin absolutely crawl!"

"I wonder," began Miss Henderson thoughtfully. "It's an odd thing—"

She and Miss Miles talked some more, but they began to use big words.

The rest of the week Louise had kept as far away from her teachers as she could. But in her mind, with dreadful relish, she had destroyed them a hundred times.

Now, as she lay quietly on her back under the old poplar tree, she ran them down with her powerful red sports car. It wasn't as gruesome as some of her other methods of destruction, but it had its juicy points. The two teachers were walking down a steep banked road in a dark forest—Miss Miles, round and fat, Miss Henderson, thin and flat. They heard her coming—the deadly whirr of the powerful engine, the vengeful scream of the racing tires on the rough pavement. They looked back over their shoulders. Their eyes grew wide. They looked funny—Miss Miles, her round face like a pale sugar cookie with raisin eyes, and Miss Henderson, her long face like a slab of colorless cheese with a carrot nose. They ran. They screamed. They clawed at the steep bank, but it didn't do them one bit of good. Louise ran over them and over them and over them until they looked like printed linoleum rugs, one round and one long and narrow.

"Louise! Louise!"

The girl heard the voice faintly.

"Louise, you lazy good-for-nothin'! If I have to yell once more, I'll come over there an' swat you good!"

The dream burst into a thousand crimson bubbles that floated into the dark forest and vanished.

The girl opened her eyes and saw the leaves of the poplar tree and the shattered glass sparkles of the sun. She moved her head. "What d'ya want?"

Her mother stood on the back porch of the old frame house. She was a tall graying woman in a faded housedress. She was all angles and flat unyielding planes. A sour and bitter defeat shone in her tired eyes and in the bitter harshness of her mouth.

"Rosellen's come over to play," she said. "And you play nice with her or I'll whale the livin' tar out of you."

"Like fun you will," the girl said under her breath. Aloud she said, "Sure, Ma."

The woman went back into the house slamming the door behind her. The girl lay quietly, her thin body flat and shapeless on the worn quilt that covered the bed. She became aware of the sounds and the heat of the day. In the mesh-fenced pen a hen sang proudly of a newly laid egg. Across the fields drifted the somnolent purr of a moving machine and the irritating monotonous chir-r-r of cicadas in the dry grass.

Around the corner of the house a small figure appeared picking its way along the overgrown path. Rosellen was a tiny, exquisitely fashioned child with vacant, round blue eyes and curly blonde hair. Louise despised her for many reasons, and her dislike was mixed with a hopeless envy. For her part, Rosellen's somewhat simple mind couldn't conceive that in all the world there was a person who did not like and admire her. She lived in a large, beautifully kept house close to the road and her father was the Carters' landlord. She seldom came to see Louise and when she did, the older girl's sullen dislike was so apparent that Rosellen went home puzzled and unhappy—which alarmed Louise's parents so much that they threatened her with dire punishment if she didn't behave more civilly.

Louise watched her small visitor approach with coldly impassive eyes. Rosellen was wearing a blue-and-white checked pinafore. Her hair was slicked into two braids tied with blue ribbons and she wore tiny white sandals. She carried a long flat box.

"Hello," Rosellen said, looking down at Louise with a tasty superiority.

"Hello," said Louise flatly.

The blonde child fidgeted. "Mama said I was to go play and leave her alone. Annie's gone and Laura's gone and Sally went to the coast with her mama, so I came over here. Do you want to play paper dolls? I brought mine."

"They stink, stink, stink!"

The round blue eyes stared. The childish red lips pouted. "They don't either! If you don't play nice with me I'll tell your mama on you."

Rosellen leaned forward and set the flat box on the bed. She tugged open the lid. As she did so, Louise saw a heavy gold chain around her visitor's slender neck and a heavy something that swung below it.

"Whatcha got on the chain?"

The blue eyes widened self-consciously. A small dimpled hand touched the lumped pinafore. "That's a secret," said Rosellen mysteriously. "I got it out of Mama's jewel box." Defensively she added, "Mama never told me I *couldn't* wear it."

"Lemme see it."

The blue eyes regarded Louise with a cool importance. "You got to promise you won't tell anybody."

"I promise, lemme see it."

"Mama'd be awful mad if she knew."

"Thought you said she let you wear it."

"N-no—she let me look at it though. Daddy doesn't even know she's got it. She said he'd be mad and make her send it back."

"I bet! You're making up stories, Rosellen. It's some ole dime store junk somebody gave you."

"It is not!" The blonde child flushed. "A nice man my mama used to know sent it to her from South America."

"Quit making up stories. Ole brass chain—turn your ole neck all green!"

Rosellen pulled the heavy chain out from the front of her pinafore. "There, see! It's not any ole junk! It's a real ruby! Mama said so!"

The jewel at the end of the chain was the most beautiful thing Louise had ever seen. It was a deep-red stone as large as a sparrow's egg, surrounded by clear brilliants and smaller red stones, all intricately wrapped in fine gold wire.

"Oh-h-h-h!" Louise sat up straight. Her eyes glowed. Never in all her life had she seen anything so beautiful or envisioned anything so desirable, even in her most precious dreams. The red gem glowed at her like a beckoning ember.

Rosellen smiled proudly. "It's terribly valuable," she said with insufferable self-importance. "It's a real, real gen-u-wine ruby. I bet you never saw one before, did you?"

"I bet it's nothing but glass," Louise said automatically. She put out her hand to touch the wonderful red stone.

Rosellen jerked away from her. "You'll get it all dirty putting your fingers on it."

"I just want to see it a minute."

The blonde little girl dropped the jewel down the front of the dress. "If you aren't going to play with me, I'm going home."

Louise caught her arm. "Don't leave yet," she said. "Let me just put it on a minute. Then I'll play anything you like."

"I've got to go home," said Rosellen uneasily.

"No, you don't. Just let me wear it a *little* while. I'll play dolls with you an' I'll be real nice."

"Give it right back?"

"I promise."

"Well—all right. You've got to take it off when I say so. You promised."

The chain was unsnapped from the slender white neck and clasped around the bony dark one. The gem seemed to burn Louise's skin as she slid it down inside the open collar of her old shirt. It settled and seemed to be at home between the swelling bumps of breasts.

She held her hand over it and through the thin fabric of her shirt and the blood-red web of her fingers it seemed to glow with a marvelous and sinister light. Her thoughts folded in on it. It would be her lucky talisman, her protector, her friend. Something really truly would happen to old Miss Miles and old Miss Henderson—something awful, much worse than she could ever imagine. She felt her whole being transformed and made beautiful by the miraculous presence of the jewel against her body.

Rosellen laid her paper dolls out on the bed. She hummed to herself with housewifely zeal. "You can have Maria for your mama," she said brightly, "and Kathy and Dora for your children. I'll take Debbie for my mama and Alice and Susan for my little girls."

She spread the brightly colored dolls and sorted out a pile of elegant paper clothing for each one.

Louise sat silently, her hand clutching the stone beneath her shirt, her thin, ugly face translucent with an inner light.

Rosellen said importantly, "I'm all ready, Louise. You can come visit my house first." She stared doubtfully at the darkly silent girl. "Louise, come on. You *said* you'd play. You promised." She shook Louise's arm insistently. "If you don't play I'm going home. Give me mama's necklace!"

Louise sat silent and immovable.

Rosellen's blue eyes filled with angry tears. "I'm going to tell your mama you won't play with me. You'll git it! You'll see!"

She started toward the house.

Louise leaped from the bed and caught her by the shoulder. She dug her wiry fingers into the soft flesh. "You tell my mama anything, I'll tell your mama you stole her necklace!"

Rosellen began to wail.

"Shut up! Mama'll hear you!"

The children returned to the bed.

"You said you'd play with me," Rosellen sobbed. "You *promised!*"

"I didn't say where I'd play, did I?" Louise asked. Behind her thick glasses her eyes gleamed redly. "Let's take the dolls an' go up to the ditch. I've got a nice playhouse up there, all cut out of the weeds. Just like a real house. It's got rooms an' a little table an' chairs."

"I don't want to go up there. Mama told me not to get dirty."

"It's got real rugs on the floor. You won't get a bit dirty." Louise began to press the dolls into the box.

"I don't want to go. I want my mama's necklace and my dolls. I'm going home. You're not nice."

Louise seemed to swell darkly. "You do like I say or I'll fix you! I'll follow you around all day an' I'll bite you an' I'll hit you an' I'll kick you and I'll tell all the kids nasty stories about you!"

"I want my mama's necklace!" The tearful blue eyes were frightened. The small lips pouted stubbornly.

"You can't have it till you do as I say."

"P-p-please, Louise!"

"Come on. When we get up there to my playhouse I'll really truly give it to you. Come on. Hurry up."

The blonde child followed reluctantly as they trotted through the hot dust to the irrigation canal that crossed the fields behind the houses. The canal banks were covered with water willows, silver-leafed in the sun, white-flowered, lacy yarrow, water grass, and silky milkweed. In stagnant pools cattails raised pithy spikes. Except for the path it was a secretive, impenetrable wilderness.

The children followed the tunnel-like opening and the grasses closed vibrantly over their heads. They came out of the thick vegetation onto the concrete abutments of the headgate that controlled the flow of water into the smaller ditches. In the wide spillway the water ran swift and dark as it poured in a thick greenish torrent into the deep pool below. The water moved silently except for an oily lapping against the rough walls of the spillway. Dimpled whirlpools formed on its surface and vanished with sucking gurgles. Things moved in the greenish depths—swirls of moss, flickering shadows, sibilant things.

"Look here," Louise cried, standing close to the edge.

"No," Rosellen sniffed, drawing back. Her small face was pale beneath the sweat and tears. "I'm scared. I want to go home. I bet you haven't got any ole playhouse. I want my mama's necklace."

"Don't be a baby. Come look."

"L-l-look at what?"

"There's a turtle. A big yellow one with red eyes. Come look, then you can go home. I promise."

"You'll give me mama's necklace?"

"Cross my heart and hope to die."

The oath was a fearful one. Rosellen edged closer to the dark water. She stretched her slender neck. Her yellow braids fell forward over her small shoulders. "Where's the turtle? I don't see any ole turtle."

"Right there," said Louise, pointing downward. "You watch. He'll come up again in a minute."

Around the children rose moist hot air, thick with the smells of slimy mud and decay. Blue dragonflies hovered on silken wings above the green water.

"See. Here he comes." Louise held the jewel against her skinny chest. Her fingers caressed its carved edges.

"Where? I don't see any ole turtle!" Rosellen leaned forward.

Louise put her free hand against the small warm back—and pushed.

There wasn't much splash and only a choked scream. The struggling child came to the surface once. Her small hands reached out toward Louise. Her eyes were round and black with terror. Her mouth opened and closed soundlessly.

Louise, still leaning a little forward, watched impassively, her left hand still clenched around the blood-red stone that seemed to throb like a living thing.

A whirling current seized Rosellen and pulled her under. The checked pinafore and the blue-ribboned braids vanished in the greenish depths.

Louise straightened. She had put the paper-doll box on the ground and now she picked it up and threw it into the water. It drifted like a small flat boat across the pool and then capsized and sank, slowly turning. The paper dolls floated down the stream. They might have been gay flowers on a peaceful lily pond.

Louise sat on the bank and drew the necklace from its hiding place. The crimson lights leaped and danced in her hand. She held the stone to her eye and lay back on the grass.

Quickly and effortlessly a crimson, silken softness came up about her and carried her away to a small room where a dinner party was in progress. It was a wonderfully rich room with deep red-velvet carpets and red-silk wall hangings. Everything was jeweled with gold and diamonds, and soft lights glowed from crystal chandeliers. She was there inside herself, feeling all the delicious things, and yet she was watching herself with all-seeing eyes.

She was more beautiful than ever. Her dress was of glittering cloth of gold, and rubies covered her wrists and neck. Rubies smoldered in her high-piled black hair. People with smiling mouths and admiring eyes crowded around her. She lifted a golden cup and drank sweet red wine that tasted better than the smell of perfume and the touch of soft feathers. Her whole body tingled with a rapturous delight. Her pulses throbbed with a dizzying ecstasy. She seemed to be floating in a world of brilliant, gilded, crimson light and high, clear, ringing sounds that were unbelievably beautiful.

Then the vision, despite her best efforts to sustain it, began to grow dull.

The melodies faded, and a strident something was pulling her down, down into a dark pit.

"Louise! Louise!" It was her mother's angry voice. "Where are you? Come here this instant!"

The girl sat up on the bank. She drew a deep breath. She felt weak and languidly spent. She smiled slowly and dropped the pendant back inside her shirt and buttoned the collar high around her throat.

She stood up and peered into the water. Then she turned and began to run and scream.

She burst through the tall grass shrieking hysterically, "Help! Help! Mama, come quick! Rosellen fell in!"

III: The Sound of Women Weeping

THE HOUSES FACED EACH OTHER ACROSS THE DINGY STREET; ONE WAS WEATHered, white-painted, two-storied, the other squat, drab-brown, with a wide veranda and a screened-in side porch. They seemed to regard each other with suspicious eyes—the two-story one from narrow windows pinched beneath a high, white-walled forehead, and the squat one from beneath the beetling veranda roof that projected like a thick, dark brow. The pale and wintry light of the late afternoon sun made barred shadows across the dead lawns. The street was quiet. Only an occasional car scuttled by, crisping through the fallen leaves.

Ed Crossman stood behind his front windows and gazed with somber gray eyes across the street at the brown house. He was a tall, broad-shouldered man with a gentle and deep-lined face. The black suit he was wearing was too small for him and smelled faintly of moth spray. He drew his hand over his face with a gesture of inarticulate grief and turned from the window to the stairs.

At the bottom of the steps he leaned against the banister and listened to the silence of the old house. In the kitchen the refrigerator hummed monotonously; beneath the floor some timbers creaked faintly; against the outside wall the thin cold wind drove a branch with a stealthy tapping—all the sounds seemed to intensify the hollow emptiness of the rooms. The house seemed to be waiting, listening—for the gay laughter and skipping feet that would never come again.

Since that night of horror, Ed Crossman had never been alone to think of the future, to plan the things that must be done. Doctor Miller had come first and then the police and the ambulance crew. Later the neighbors had appeared, and the relatives with their tears and their shocked faces, and

inevitably the reporters with their notebooks and cameras, and finally the curious with their prying eyes and pointing fingers. Carloads of them had come, staring and whispering under the bare-limbed elms that lined the street.

It was over now—the unbelievable, the unbearable thing that had happened; and he and Ellie must face the long darkness that lay ahead. Ed Crossman straightened his shoulders and climbed the stairs. He tapped at the door of the front bedroom, and when there was no answer he pushed open the paneled door.

His wife lay motionless on the big fourposter bed. She hadn't changed her dress after the funeral and the limp, black silk made her small body look shrunken and shapeless. Her eyes were closed and her hands folded inertly on her breasts. She lay so quietly that the man hurried to her side with a sudden cold fear. He touched her creek and felt the burning dryness of her skin. She opened her eyes and stared dully up at him.

"Everybody's gone," he said. "We're alone, Ellie."

He sat on the bed and took her fevered hands in his—small hands, work-hardened hands, good hands, busy hands; through all the years of their marriage they had never been idle until now.

"Get her up, get her busy," Doctor Miller had said. "Don't let her lie there and brood about it. Make her angry, make her cry, make her feel something. She needs to cry. If she doesn't, she may drift away from us into a world of unreality."

But Ellie Crossman hadn't cried—not since that night.

"Ellie," said Ed Crossman. "Do you hear me, Ellie?"

Her eyes stared at him blankly.

He shook her gently. "Ellie, I want to talk to you. We've got a lot to do, a lot to decide."

She looked at him. "Why?" she asked. "What does anything matter?"

"You can't give up," he said. "We've got to go on living and the sooner we get at it the better for both of us."

Ellie closed her shadowed eyes. "I don't care any more, Ed. She was all we had. There's nothing left."

"I know how you feel . . . she was my daughter too. My life. Everything." The words were hollow dust in his mouth. He said, "I want to do something that is very hard for me. Right now, this afternoon, and I need you. I need you with me where you've always been."

"Not today, Ed. Let me be."

"Today, Ellie, while I have the strength. Tomorrow bitterness may be too much a habit. I want to go see Steve and Alice."

Her body jerked and tensed, her fingers dug into his hands, her eyes

blazed at him. "Why?" she cried. "How can you forget? How can you even speak their names?"

Ed Crossman shook his head. "It wasn't their fault, Ellie. You can't blame them any more than you can blame yourself. None of us knew what was going to happen. If we'd stayed home, if we hadn't left her alone . . . None of us knew there was any danger—in this house, in this quiet street, in this peaceful town. Who could think . . . It was one of those stupid, senseless things, without reason or meaning. We can't live the rest of our lives blaming ourselves—or blaming anyone."

He stood up and crossed the room to the front window. He looked down on the dry front lawn and suddenly it was spring and long ago. The grass was green, the flower beds blazed with color, and children played with shrill laughter in the golden sunlight. He remembered the day so long ago and so long forgotten—Steve's son, Carl, standing by the hedge, his still eyes watching, his dark face frowning.

Had Ed felt a cold premonition even then? The vision was so real that he felt again the swelling half-awed pride he had known that day as he had watched his chubby, blonde-headed little daughter. So beautiful and perfect she had always been to him . . .

His eyes lifted now to the squat brown house across the street, and the happy voices were silent, the withered lawn empty and cold.

A car came slowly down the street and clattered up the opposite driveway. A small man got out of the car and stood a moment leaning against it. His thin body was stooped and aged and the wind sent his wisps of dark hair flying.

Ed Crossman turned from the window and spoke to his wife. "Steve just came home and I'm going over there. Come along, Ellie. They're still our friends. They've got awful trouble."

The woman moaned and covered her face with her hands. "What's their trouble compared to ours? Our child is dead! I hate them, Ed. I'll hate them as long as I live and I don't want to ever see them again. How can you be so—so—unfeeling?"

The man rubbed the side of his face. His big hand shook. He said slowly, "Ellie, I know I'm asking a lot. Too much, maybe. But look at it this way. If the kids were sick or got hurt in an accident, wouldn't you and Alice comfort each other? If our Joanie died and Carl was terribly injured wouldn't you do all you could to help Alice?"

The woman turned on the bed and stared at him with burning eyes. "It's not the same, Ed."

"No," the big man agreed heavily. "It's worse. Our pain and sorrow are clean things and all our memories of our daughter are tender and good.

But think of Steve and Alice. What will they have to remember all the rest of their lives? Come with me. Please, Ellie."

The woman shook her head and buried her face in the bedclothes. Ed Crossman covered his wife with a blanket and went out of the room and down the stairs.

The wind was cold and damp on his face when he reached the street. There was a feel of fog in the air, and a trace of rising mist paled the thin light of the sun. Ed Crossman walked slowly through the rustling leaves. How Joanie had loved to tumble in the big leaf piles! How she had shrieked with delight as she raced the falling leaves, her eyes blue as the sky, her yellow curls flying. It was as if the recent years had never been, as if he remembered her most vividly as a child. Sometimes she seemed to skip beside him, her small warm hand clasping his. In these moments his crushing sense of loss was so great that it seemed unbearable.

He stood before the brown house. The windows were dark, the shades drawn, the porch leaf-littered. With leaden feet he climbed the porch steps. He was sweating coldly. Beyond the closed front door some malevolent presence seemed to lurk. He knew it was only his tortured mind that made it seem so, but it was with the greatest difficulty that he forced himself to raise his hand to the knocker.

He tapped gently. No answer. He struck the knocker more firmly. This house where he had always come and gone almost as though it were his own had become an unfriendly thing.

The house remained coldly silent. Almost with relief he turned away. And turning, he heard the savage chuck-chuck of a hoe in the back yard. He went down the steps and around to the back.

Steve Parkson was wielding the tool with violent slashing strokes as he dug into the earth of his vegetable garden.

Ed Crossman watched him a moment, then called his name.

The small man swung around. He had been crying and the pale light glinted on his thin, tear-streaked cheeks. He stared at Ed with incredulous eyes and his face twisted in an anguished grimace. Then their hands met.

Steve Parkson said huskily, "You didn't need to come, Ed. I know how you must feel and, God, I can't blame you. I can't believe it's happened. It's a damn dream, a nightmare. I keep thinking I'll wake up and—and I'll see Carl and Joanie . . ."

"I know, Steve, I know."

"Maybe it wouldn't be so bad if we'd had other kids. But I guess it wouldn't matter. It'd be the same. I got to talk to someone. You, Ed? You want to talk? You got time?"

"I've got time, Steve."

The men sat on a stone bench in the fading sunlight. Behind the back yard fence and out of the wind the sun had a faint warmth. They were silent for a time, each buried in his own thoughts.

"I went to see the boy today," Steve Parkson said with a shuddering effort. "They got him in a cage like an animal. He walks up and down, up and down. He said he's sorry and if I saw you I was to tell you he didn't mean it. He didn't mean to hurt Joanie. He said something just sort of snapped. He loved her. I guess he always did, even when they were kids, only it was play then."

"If he loved her," Ed Crossman cried, "how could he kill her?"

"I don't know, Ed. I don't know." Steve Parkson pounded his fist on the stone bench. "I tried to raise him right, teach him right from wrong. I guess I'm not much of a teacher. I figured if I just loved him enough he'd come out okay. Inside I knew there was something wrong. He was such a quiet boy but he had a temper—he always did even when he was a little kid. You know how it is, you can't believe there's anything wrong with your own kid. Other people's kids, yes—but not your own. Sometimes he was such a good boy. Helped his ma, helped me. And always when I'd see him growing so big and handsome and strong, it was like a flame warming me, my pride in him. I loved everybody because he was my son."

"I know, Steve, I know." The big man put his arms around the small man's shoulders.

"I knew something was wrong with him. But I just wouldn't believe it." The small man choked, tears sliding down his cheeks. "I saw a lot of things. I kept making excuses for him. It's my fault. If I'd beat it out of him, maybe? I don't know. I did lick him good once, the time I saw him burn Mrs. Carter's cat in the incinerator. He swore up and down he didn't, but I saw him. The cat scratched him. I licked him more because he lied to me, I guess, and then I was scared because he'd do a thing like that. If I'd taken him to the doctor then, maybe this wouldn't have happened."

"You didn't know, Steve. You can't take all the blame on yourself for what happened. Maybe if we hadn't left her there alone . . ." The night of the lodge party. He and Ellie had wanted to go. It had seemed safe enough. Joanie had laughed at his fears, called him her Darling Worry Bug. "I'm sixteen," she had laughed. "I don't need a baby sitter. For goodness' sakes, Father, I'm practically grown up!" He could see her face, the smooth curve of her cheek, the roundness of her slender neck . . . Looking at his daughter from the open door, Ed had felt an urge to go back and kiss her goodbye, to tell her how much he loved her. All the rest of his life he would have that deep regret . . .

"Why did he kill her? What did he tell you?" Ed asked with slow pain.

Steve Parkson looked far up into the opaque and empty sky as though he too searched for an answer. "He talked to me today," he said. "He never told the police anything except that he killed her. He told me that he loved her. Nobody could ever understand how much. She wouldn't be true to him, he said. She wanted to date other fellows."

"She was just a youngster, just past sixteen!" Ed Crossman cried.

"He says he saw you and Ellie leave and he went over to talk to Joanie. That was all he meant to do, just talk. They had quite an argument about it. Finally Joanie told Carl to leave. He says that's when he—well, then something snapped. She looked so pretty when she was mad, with her eyes full of sparks and her cheeks all pink. He tried to kiss her. He told her if he couldn't have her nobody else would either. She pushed him away and ran into the kitchen. She tried to get out the back door. Next thing the boy knew, he was standing over her with a kitchen knife in his hand and Joanie was on the floor . . . and blood over everything."

Ed Crossman closed his eyes. They had come home early, driven by his unrest. It had been a night of brilliant full moon, clear pale light, and velvet shadows. He had been putting the car into the garage when Ellie had begun to scream. Rushing up the walk, he had found her kneeling over Joanie's body. Bright red blood on the black and white tiles of the kitchen floor.

The unbelievable nightmare had begun then and it would never end. It would never end for Steve and Alice either. All their lives were caught up in this one senseless, maniacal act.

It was hard, hard not to hate. Ed drew in a deep breath and put his hand on his friend's thin shoulder. "I'm sorry for all of us," he said. "Most of all for Joanie. Her life would have been such a happy time. To her everything was wonderful. I know she wouldn't even—even hate Carl for what he did to her. And because it wasn't in her to hate, I can't either—not and be fair to her. I'll do what I can for your boy, Steve. Taking his life isn't going to bring back Joanie. Maybe I can help. I'll do what I can."

Along the back fence a row of bronze chrysanthemums bloomed in bright defiance of the coming winter. The dying sun touched the top flowers and they glowed bright gold. Like Joanie's hair, Ed Crossman thought with a quick stab that tightened his throat.

Parkson touched his arm almost timidly. "Thanks, Ed," he said. "There aren't many guys in the world would say what you just did."

"We've been friends and neighbors—thirteen years, isn't it, since you moved in here?"

"The fall of forty-eight." Parkson hesitated a moment then asked, "How's Ellie?"

Ed Crossman rubbed his cheek. "She's still feeling the effects of the shock, Steve. She and Joanie were very close. She's upstairs in bed now."

The big man stood up. The air was rapidly growing colder and pale mists were gathering in the still air. The bare trees along the street raised skeleton arms.

"I've got to go home, Steve."

"I'd ask you in but Alice—she don't feel so good either. She hasn't slept since we heard about the boy. At night I feel her lying so stiff and full of pain beside me. I know she is thinking like I am—of all the things we did we shouldn't and what we didn't do we should have. She never cried, not even when I told her—she just stared at me. She keeps it all bottled up inside her. She won't go to see the boy. She doesn't even ask about him. It's like he never was. You know what she does, Ed? She cleans house like it's killing her. We've got the cleanest house this side of hell."

The small man looked at Ed Crossman. "I'd like to ask you in but Alice, she says she don't want to see anybody."

"Sure, Steve. I understand."

Their hands met and Ed Crossman turned away. He looked across the street and saw Ellie coming toward them through the chilly dusk. She had changed her black silk for a clean starched housedress and her soft, graying hair was brushed back neatly. She walked with a firm step and her grief-lined face was calm. She saw the men and came toward them.

"Hello, Steve," she said and touched his shoulder. "Where's Alice?"

Steve Parkson nodded toward the house. Ellie looked at her husband. "You were right, Ed," she said. She leaned forward and her dry lips brushed his cheek. "I saw you and Steve sitting together, talking together, and I knew this can't be the end of things for us. I belong with you."

Ed Crossman looked at his wife and knew that he had never loved her more. She climbed the back stairs and let herself in the back door. She called, "Alice! Oh, Alice! It's me, Ellie!"

The men heard the sound of women weeping.

a new story by

EDITORS' FILE CARD

AUTHOR: VICTOR CANNING

TITLE: ***Through the Wall***

TYPE: Mystery Story

LOCALE: London

TIME: The Present

COMMENTS: *Haverstock had an odd theory to account for all the disappearances in the city of London . . . a story to remember.*

NEARLY EVERY AFTERNOON around four, I have a bath bun and a cup of tea in a café near our office in Fenchurch Street. It's not much of a café now, but in the old days—I mean 'way back—I'm told there used to be a famous London coffee house on the site. Nothing famous about it now—just a café with people like myself dodging in and out for a break from work.

And mostly they are the same people. A regular clientèle, you might say. You get to know faces, even get to miss faces—but you don't get to know the people. All you get is a few disjointed facts that you pick up now and again.

Take Fingleton, for instance. I don't know his first name. Just Fingleton. Usually he's there on Mondays, Wednesdays, and Thursdays. Always sits down at my table if there's a free seat, and we talk for about five minutes and then go our different ways. I don't know what Fingleton does, and he doesn't know what I do. But I know what he thinks about our Test cricketers, about football, about politics, about TV programs—he's mad about Westerns. He's about forty, going bald, and doesn't look too healthy. But he's got a nice smile and always has a cheery word for the waitress. Nice chap.

Then there's Haverstock. I don't know his first name either. Just Haverstock. He's a tall, lean-faced, almost aristocratic-looking chap, if you know what I mean.

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Looks as though he's seen better days. Faded elegance would be it, maybe. He comes in about once a week but never on any regular day. Just pops up, and then sometimes you don't see him for a month, and then he's in again week after week.

What do I know about Haverstock? Not much. He doesn't normally talk a lot—always seems to be brooding about something. I know one thing, though. He's mad about London. Knows all its history, knows all the churches and who built them—why, he can name you all the Lord Mayors right back and back! And he's good on coins, too. Fingleton brought in some old coin he'd found and Haverstock said right away it was a George the First shilling or something.

Well, now and again the three of us come together—it's just chance, about twenty or thirty times a year. Over the past five years. We're old friends. City types. And we don't know a damned thing about one another. Makes you think, doesn't it?

But I like it in a way. There's nothing spoils friendship like getting too friendly. In another five years, I suppose, we might have got round to knowing each other's first names. Might have. Because, you see, I haven't seen either of them for a year, but I remember very clearly the last time I saw them.

June, it was. Fingleton was with me, having bath buns and tea, and in walks Haverstock, drooping and faded and looking very harassed. He orders and drinks half his cup without saying a word.

I said, "You look under the weather, old boy."

Haverstock nodded. "Am a bit. Think I need a holiday. Too much rushing about. Beginning to get me down. It's a strain. Your nerves begin to go. Get irritable. Not yourself any longer. A man can only take so much of it. I tell you, sometimes I begin to wonder."

"Wonder? About what?" asked Fingleton.

"Just wonder. Life doesn't seem real any longer."

"You do need a holiday, old boy," I said.

"Undoubtedly. But I won't get one just yet. Have to have a nervous breakdown first . . ." He paused, holding half a bath bun aloft, and chewed thoughtfully; then he said, "You ever thought much about London—about all the people in it?"

"What about them?" asked Fingleton.

"They scare me. So *many* of them. Hundreds and thousands, going round and round, popping into offices, dashing for trains. Thousands and thousands of strangers. None of them really interested in any of the others. Nobody knowing anybody else. You know, you get so that you don't even look at other people. If you did, you'd get some shocks—that is, if you really *looked* at other people."

"You do need a holiday," I said.

"I don't think so. Not for this kind of thing. Nobody would believe it."

"Believe what?" asked Fingleton.

"What happens if you watch people in London. I know."

I looked at Fingleton and winked. "What do you know, old boy?" Poor old Haverstock was really under the weather.

"I know that a great many of them aren't what they seem to be. I've been studying it lately. And once you begin, you can't stop. I'll tell you something. I was walking down from St. Paul's to Ludgate Circus the other day and there was a man in front of me. Just an ordinary chap—so ordinary that at first I didn't really take him in. And then I did. Don't ask me why. I just said to myself that he was a human being like me and not just a face. So I—well, I sort of concentrated on him. I walked behind him, across the Circus and up Fleet Street. And do you know what?"

"You tell us," I said.

"A little way up Fleet Street he crossed a side road ahead of me and a post office van turned into the side road blocking him from me for a few seconds. Only a few seconds. But when the van passed and I looked—he was gone. Gone!"

"Popped into a doorway, I'd say."

"There wasn't one. He just went like *that*." Haverstock snapped his fingers. "All right, you can smile. But since then I've got into the habit of watching people. Nobody does it in London. No time for other people. But I've watched them. The other day it was a young girl by the Bank. You know what she did?"

"Disappeared up a lamp-post," said Fingleton.

Haverstock didn't seem to mind our laughter. "You aren't far out. She went over a pedestrian crossing just ahead of me. I'd been following her for some time. She stepped onto the pavement in the middle of the crowd and went slap through the wall of the Bank. Slap through. And not a soul noticed."

"Oh, come off it," said Fingleton. "You really need a doctor."

"Or an oculist," I said.

"I don't need either," said Haverstock, a bit stiffly this time. "It happened, and I think I know why."

"Why?"

Haverstock took a deep breath. "Well, my theory is this. London is full of people. Thousands of them, and not all of them are living. It's full of ghosts. People in the past who have worked here, given their lives to this place, got so attached to it, the whole of their lives just one long habit of being in London, of being part of it . . . Well, when they die they can't escape. They come back. People come back, don't they? To the places they were attached to? I tell you London is full of ghosts."

"How many have you seen?" asked Fingleton skeptically. "Just

one man and one girl. There could have been a perfectly logical explanation. The man jumped on a bus or other people got between you and him and you missed him. And the girl—well, she couldn't go through a wall. She just got mixed up in the crowd, or you had a few bilious spots in front of your eyes for a moment and some trick of the light made you imagine it."

Haverstock shook his head. "I may have plenty on my mind with the way business is going—but I'm still seeing straight. I tell you, I saw those two. And since then I've seen others. I tell you, I've got into the habit of watching people now and the damndest things happen. I've even seen it at night, when I've been working late. A man ahead of you in a deserted street. You're only five paces behind. You turn a corner after him and—he's gone. Once you begin to watch people it happens—it keeps happening. And I tell you, it's not a good habit to get into. I wish I could stop myself now. But I can't. I'll be walking down a street and suddenly someone ahead of me attracts my attention—and I know it's going to happen again."

Fingleton laughed, and stood up. "Haverstock, old man," he said, "you need a holiday *and* a checkup with your doctor. But it's a good yarn, and I entirely agree with you that we're all strangers. Well, see you sometime."

He went toward the door, and Haverstock and I watched him go out.

Haversock said, "Don't *you* believe me? Damn it, I'm not seeing things."

"Well . . . " I didn't really know what to say. "I suppose it's a—"

I stopped talking, my hand still in my pocket where I had begun to fiddle for change to pay my bill. My eyes were on Fingleton who had just gone out of the café door.

He crossed the street. I saw him clearly through the window.

He stepped onto the pavement and walked across it—and went straight through the brick wall opposite.

The shock hit me like a blow. I turned and looked at Haverstock. He was staring out of the window, too, and had clearly been watching Fingleton.

Haverstock gave me one look and then got up and went. I haven't seen him since.

Or Fingleton.

a new story by

EDITORS' FILE CARD

AUTHOR: **HOLLY ROTH**

TITLE: ***As With a Piece of Quartz***

TYPE: Crime Story

LOCALE: Djibouti

TIME: The Present

COMMENTS: *The world-shaking problem had to be faced now, right here, in the street of Djibouti, in the heat, in front of an audience of two native policemen . . .*

He walked up a narrow side street, entered the town's square, and stopped short. The desolate scene was strange and yet oddly familiar. He had read about this sort of square, and he had seen motion picture attempts to recapture those novelistic descriptions. Also, in Mexico, he had known similar *plazas* at first hand.

But here in Djibouti the overall effect was not merely ochre plus the gray-brown of dirt with a superimposition of yellow sunshine; this place was the glaring color of heat—a sparkling, blinding sandiness like that of a dusty canary diamond under a blazing arclight.

And the desolation was far more profound than anything he had ever seen or read about. Nothing moved. There was no wind.

Djibouti on a Sunday morning was probably always like this. A Sunday morning in the Holy Month of Ramadan added to the effect of a photograph of vacuity.

He moved slowly toward the middle of the square, seeking the shade of the sparse little trees in its center. Forgetting its religious connotations, Ramadan means literally "the hot month"; although it was only nine o'clock in the morning, the sun was already vicious, and in common with the Somalis, the Arabs, the Danakils, and the French colonials, he didn't wear a hat. Why people in this slice of the world didn't wear hats he couldn't imagine. And then he answered himself: that much extra clothing was not worth the protection.

He reached the center of the

open area and found that the little trees were too scrubby to provide any shade. As a geologist, he knew the answer to that: edge of the desert, no irrigation, and manganese in the soil. The irrigation problem was almost insurmountable, certainly too expensive for the French in view of their Algerian outpourings.

He walked toward the shuttered fronts on the east side, glancing up and noting that the square was called Place de l'Europe and simultaneously realizing that the area was not as deserted as he had first thought. A Somali cab driver was lying on the back seat of the parked taxi he had just passed, and in front of the Hôtel de l'Europe another driver was nodding behind his wheel. An Arab beggar sat under the colonnade of mosquelike apertures on the north face of the area, his legs crossed tailor-fashion; he had no arms. A woman in a dirty yellow sari was crossing the square not far from him, her bare feet making no sound. And to his right there was a little brisker motion as two native policemen, their backs to him, strolled away, neither purposefully nor lethargically.

As he watched, the policemen turned a corner and disappeared. They hadn't looked at all out of place, he thought, and somehow he found the fact strange. Their neat khaki shorts and shirts were much better pressed than the Hawaiian concoctions of the French, or than his own whites. The police did wear hats, red fezlike affairs, unfestively tasseled. They were equipped with Sam Browne belts that supported holstered guns, but one could not imagine their using those guns. As a last trim touch, they wore brown ribbed knee socks and sturdy-looking sandals. He, like the French and those of the natives who wore shoes at all, had on a pair of leather soles with double thongs that fitted between the bare big toes and their neighbors. When, seven months before, he had first come to Africa, he too had worn shoes and socks; they had lasted almost long enough to take him through the wastelands of Ethiopia.

Well, he would fly across the Strait to Aden on Tuesday morning and while he was there he would do some temporary outfitting. Then he would go on to London, tie his business up, buy a few less transitory clothes (he could afford to buy more than a few now, even to be extravagant), and fly to New York about ten days hence. A few days in New York . . . He should arrive in Milwaukee in about two weeks. Home.

He stood in the shade of the colonnade and watched a two-inch cockroach scramble over the irregular course of cement-mixed-with-stones that was the sidewalk toward the hard-baked smoothness of the dirt road; the enormous in-

sect stood so high from the ground that he carried an impressive shadow behind him. He wondered what the roach was doing there, so far from whatever plumbing that was his home . . . and then he thought suddenly: what was he himself doing there so far from his home?

He had flown in the night before from Addis Ababa, arriving in Djibouti at 22:10; in the Ramadan season that meant that the airport lights were the only lights in town. He had managed to root out the proprietor of the Hôtel de Paris, and the resultant accommodations —cockroaches on the floor, fleas in the bed, mosquitoes in the air, all of them monstrous specimens of their respective species—had seemed good enough after half a year of no rooms at all. The bathroom, with its one tap in the sink, one handle in the uncurtained shower (cool water in the early morning before the sun heated the tank on the roof, boiling water from noon till nine) had seemed sheerly luxurious. But London was more luxurious, New York fabulously so. And West Allis, suburb of Milwaukee, offered the comforts of home.

Today was Sunday. That was his excuse for meandering aimlessly through this day. Although it wasn't much of an excuse: Barbier, the mining man, and LaVrie, the agent, would not be in their offices, but Barbier was Swiss and LaVrie was French; Ramadan was merely an annual nuisance to them and they would not mind if he called them at their homes on a Sunday. Nevertheless, when he had passed the hotel's makeshift desk a half hour before he had looked disinterestedly at the thin, dirty telephone book.

The truth was, he did not want to seek out his contacts, to expedite matters, to catch the Aden plane on Monday instead of Tuesday. What he had not acknowledged then, he admitted now: he wanted this one day of transition. That was probably why he had not written home, had not explained that he would arrive there months before his original schedule of a full year. Letters—complaints, the pettinesses that seemed always to infest Milwaukee—would have disturbed this day. But his delinquency in writing home would do little good—tomorrow LaVrie would deliver his accumulated mail, always so fraught with problems; tomorrow would deliver the world.

He had not succeeded in escaping that mail, that world, not even in the depths of Ethiopia. Helicopters had brought letters when they delivered provisions, and at other times, when the world had seemed almost big and wide enough, he had been brought to realize that must always be an illusion, for then runners brought his problems from home.

Once he had stood just outside of

Axum, capital city of the Queen of Sheba, and learned that his son Robert was incorrigible, inattentive at school, disobedient at home. He had tried to see the humor of the two antiquities—Sheba's city on the one hand, the naughtiness of a boy on the other—but behind the scrawled complaint from his wife was a frightening intensity that took all humor out of the absurd congruity. Or perhaps the failure lay in himself: he had never learned how to lighten the teapot storms, to peel away the pretentiousness and show them up for the nonsense they were.

Well, he would have at least this day to himself; then perhaps everything would be better. He was 44, not too old. He had been a comparative failure up to now, but that was because he had been a desk man; he hated confinement, and few men succeed at jobs they hate. Four times in twenty years he had broken away to do field work. Colorado, Mexico, the Philippines, and Ethiopia. Each excursion had been more than merely a break; each had been an upheaval, a rending, wrenching, nerve-shattering achievement over breast-beating illogic. And not one of the first three trips had been worth the effort.

Maybe if he had accepted the fifteen or so opportunities the twenty years had offered, he would have struck it before now. But that was a dead issue; now was the reality. In addition to salary and expenses, he had been given a piece of this fourth one, and it was a good one. The setup behind him was solid, capable, monied. They would exploit his findings, do a good job of it. The debts in West Allis would no longer fill his mail and his dreams, a good college for his daughter was no longer a matter of yearning—and even peace with his wife now seemed a possibility.

He shifted his weight on the thin soles of his sandals and moved aimlessly toward his right. A motored bicycle passed through the square, the sarong on its brown rider not seeming particularly anachronistic. A monster of an American car—cream-colored bottom, salmon-colored top—drove though in the opposite direction. Nor did that vehicle seem a bit out of place. His eyes followed it, noting the two charmingly winblown Frenchwomen in the front seat. Their shoulders were bare; as far as he could tell they might have been nude.

When they had passed out of sight his glance settled on a figure that had appeared from somewhere—out of the Hôtel de l'Europe probably—during the car's passage. Now *there,* he thought, *there* was a truly exotic effect. He smiled involuntarily and realized he had almost laughed aloud. But it wouldn't have mattered; she was at least thirty yards away. He swung left and strolled after her, impelled by sheer incredulity.

The woman was dressed in black, all in black. Her dress had long sleeves, on her head was an insane piece of black felt, and she wore shoes with broad, heavy heels. As he looked at the heels he noticed the seam springing upward from beneath them: stockings, by God!

And then his eyes settled on the legs, noted the determined swing of the solid hips, rose to the mass of rather untidy brown hair beneath the ridiculous hat.

His smile left, but the shock didn't come until after he had called out.

"Sally?" he called. *"Sally!"*

She didn't hear him although it seemed to him that his cry had filled the emptiness. She had always had a habit of not hearing, brought on, he thought, by the habit of determination. Whenever she was awake she was determined about something—but what could be her aim at the moment? He thought of Barbier, of LaVrie, and he moved rapidly into the sun-soaked street.

"Sally," he called again, and she heard him.

She turned and walked toward him, and he saw that her face was not determined but irresolute. Always, always, in the small things, she surprised him. And always in the big thing, in the end result, she came out at the same and expected place.

She said, "Oh, there you are."

He stopped, so that, insanely, they were standing several feet apart in the middle of the square. He said, "Where did you come from? What are you dressed like that for? Do you realize you're soaking wet? What on earth is—"

"Of course I know I'm wet. But it's cold in Milwaukee."

"But the stockings. Did you have to put on stockings?"

"I couldn't walk in these shoes without them. And my girdle wouldn't stay down."

"Girdle—Sally, what in the name of God are you doing *here?"*

"Looking for you. We need you so badly."

He felt the sun blazing on his head, and shivered. "Robert?" he asked.

"No. It's Doris."

"Oh, my God. Accident? Is she —is it—"

"No, no. It's something else. It's —worse."

"Worse?" What could be worse? Pregnancy?

"It's Ben Lloyd."

"What's Ben Lloyd? Who's Ben Lloyd?" The familiar nightmare was coming on him, the nightmare in which words made no sense and logic went to pieces and he himself became incomprehensible because you can't answer nonsense with sense, not for very long, and after a while you're not sure who's making the nonsense and you begin to suspect it's yourself.

"Oh, for goodness' sakes, Phil,

try to react just this once, will you? You can't possibly have forgotten Ben Lloyd. His brother George used to play with Robert, until I put a stop to it." Yes, he remembered something of that. "Ben's the one who went to reform school. He's the one who—"

"All right, all right, I remember Ben Lloyd. Dimly. Now let's make some sense. What has that boy got to do with your being here in the middle of Djibouti all dressed up for a masquerade?"

Her steaming face moved deliberately downward to take in his semi-nudity. "Who's the one dressed for a masquerade? Even if I wanted to look like that I didn't have time to get into costume."

"Sally, what about Doris? What *is* it?"

"She's running around with Ben Lloyd. I can't put a stop to it. She'll be eighteen in a month and out of school a month after that, and I'm so afraid. I need you. She needs you. I'm desperate. Can't you see that?"

Yes, he could see that. But why? He thought of his daughter, tall, slim, much too self-contained. When one lived with Sally one either became self-contained or went crazy. He said, "Either you are mistaken about her interest, or the boy has turned out well. Sally is extremely level-headed."

"My God, Phil, have you no interest in your children? Have you no heart? Why do you think I came all this way, spent all this money? Do you think I'm crazy? As for Doris, she's so level-headed that she had got an idea in her so-level head that she's going to France to some school."

Ah. So that was it. Sally was getting out too. Too?

He looked around the brilliant street and saw the two policemen standing on the near corner gazing expressionlessly at them. They must look ridiculous, the white man in his brief white clothes, the white woman in her exotic black costume, their wide-apart conversation, the trills and shrills of Sally's carrying voice. The two taxi drivers had been joined by a third and all three were showing interest. The peace—or the illusion of peace—had gone from the square. Suddenly he felt very tired.

"Now, look," he said in a low voice, "Let's get out of the sun. Then we'll make a little calm sense." (How many times in his life had he said those words?)

He stepped forward and reached for her arm, but she quickly backed away. On her face was an expression he knew well—a parody-expression of total astonishment. Hadn't he *heard* her? the face said. Sun or no sun, could he postpone a discussion of this world-shaking problem for as much as another moment?

He considered mutiny, and as always got no further than the impulse. He knew exactly how—he

always knew how—she would defeat him. If he insisted on trying to take her arm, she would wriggle and fling herself about. The effect, for the benefit of the policemen and cab drivers, would be almost as if he were trying to assault her.

If, on the other hand, he turned around and walked away, she would stand stubbornly in the sun until he came back for her. The world-shaking problem had to be faced now, here, in the street, in the heat, in front of the audience.

He said, "If Doris wants to go to school in France, then what makes you think she's planning to get married? How often does she see this boy, this Lloyd boy?"

"I don't know. You don't think he comes to the house openly, do you? I think she meets him outside."

Had Doris as much as set eyes on the boy? he wondered. Likely not. "Do you mean you let her go out whenever she wants without knowing where she's going?"

"Of course not. But this French school idea, and eloping probably, has filled her with ideas about money. She's taken a ridiculous job. At night. A job in a library that handles French books."

"I see nothing wrong in that, but I'm surprised you permitted it."

Her mouth pulled down grimly. "I did forbid it. But Doris dragged some teacher home from school, her French teacher, and the woman actually pleaded with me. Said the experience would be good for Doris."

My God, how Sally must have resented the implication that anyone except herself knew what was good for her daughter! And what courage Doris had shown! Doris must have known that such intervention would never be forgiven by a would-be deity. And yet she had dared the move and its inevitable consequences.

He choked on admiration and felt a deep shame—it was more than he had ever dared to do.

"So," he said coldly, "Doris may have been meeting a boy you disapprove of and she may not. If she is meeting him it is probably in the shocking confines of a library. Is that it?"

"I think you're a fool. A stupid fool. And a rotten father. Do you think I'd come all the way here without reason? That I'd spend all this money for nothing? Have I ever in my life thought of anything but my children?"

"No, you never have. You've thought of them, used them, deployed them. To your own ends. To—"

"You—you dirty liar." She choked. Her face was an alarming color, and the sweat was running down it and into the high black collar.

"Were you thinking of your children when you called me home from Colorado because Robert had 'diphtheria'? The doctor said he

had told you clearly and repeatedly that it was laryngitis." This was madness; this was playing her game of senseless recrimination. He said, "Come on, Sally. Let's get out of this open square."

"I was thinking of you, too. I thought Robert was going to die and you would want to be with him. You weren't there when he was struggling for every breath, when I sat up nights holding his head so he could breathe. And how could I trust a doctor who had let the Henkel child die of scarlet fever while he called it measles?"

He felt anger rising and he tried to push it down. His seven months' of resolution mustn't be dissipated so quickly. But the sun blazed on his bare head, the watching eyes burned holes in his back, and her determined, self-righteous face infuriated him.

He contrived only to keep his voice low. "The episode of the Henkel child was afterward. After Robert's illness. And I'd be willing to bet that you believe it, that you've forgotten how that malicious rumor and others like it were started. The doctor hadn't dismissed your insane lie as an excess of mother love. He said it was neurotic nonsense."

"And you agreed with him!"

"As a matter of fact, I didn't. Not out loud. I was afraid to. If he'd known you as well as I do, he would have been afraid too. But he didn't realize that he'd be damn near pushed out of his practice because of rumors started by you."

His voice stayed low but bitter anger edged into it as he went on, "All for your children? What about the time you decided, without a word to me, that the mortgage had to be paid off, so you liquidated everything we had in the world—into cash, for God's sake—and then burned the bills, 'by accident,' in the hot-water stove. But the trick failed to get me home from Mindoro because you had forgotten the insurance money. The loan from that carried you over, and then we had to start from the bottom again. Was that for your children?"

"It's rotten of you to bring that up. You know it was an accident, and the most miserable time of my life. It could have happened to anyone."

"Sally, you are very funny. You are really very, very funny. 'It could have happened to anyone,' huh? Everybody, just everybody, goes around stoking the stove with their life's savings, huh? I don't think you're certifiable, and I don't even think you'd be of interest to a psychiatrist. You're too clear a case. All your twists and turns are really as straight as a die. Direct action for direct ends, that's you."

"At this point in any discussion you start talking Freud. Who's crazy, I want to know, you or me? What 'ends' do I have when I make a terrible mistake like burning money or thinking my son is dying?"

He spoke very softly. "Me. To get me, keep me, choke me. I'm the end product."

"Why, you, you— I don't *have* you, do I? I don't—"

She broke off and stood staring at him, wet to the point of being wringable. Some of the rivulets streaming down her face were tears.

No, she didn't have him. She didn't own him. Even if he tried to accommodate her, she could never really achieve her purpose. An impossible goal was a bitter cross, he thought. He shouldn't feel sorry for her, but he did. Perhaps all the trouble lay in that fact.

He realized now that in the past months a crystallization had taken place. As with a piece of quartz, the facts of his life had arranged themselves with symmetry—so that they were now almost transparent. The truth that came through to the surface of those planes said that he was to blame for his life.

Her strength lay in his weakness. For every martyr there had to be a martyree.

Well, it was not too late. In his change must lie her change. And it would start in a moment.

He said, "Come on. You're in the Europe, aren't you? It has no lobby, so we'll collect a timetable, go up to your room, and figure out how to get out of here, out of this heat. Come on."

She didn't move. "You'll come home with me?"

"Not yet. I can't. Soon."

"But they said you were finished!"

His palms tightened on his knuckles. He should have known. "Who said?"

"Mr. LaVrie and the engineer, whatever his name is. They told me yesterday that you'd be here Monday, probably, and then you'd be finished."

"Finished in Ethiopia. Finished as far as they're concerned. But there are matters to take care of in London. And in New York. What story did you give them?"

"Why, the truth. What else could I say?"

"The truth? You mean you told filthy lies about your own daughter?"

"Don't you dare speak that way to me. Don't you dare! And you're coming home with me. Now. If not—"

"I'm coming home in about two weeks. Now, for God's sake let's find some shade and some privacy."

"If not," she repeated deliberately, "if you don't come home with me —today, tomorrow, as soon as we can get out of here—I shall go straight to the head company, to the people who sent me your salary checks. I know the return address in New York. I'll go straight there and what I told Mr. LaVrie and the other man will be nothing, just nothing, compared to what I'll tell them."

He stared at her red, wet, determined face. Yes, she would do just

as she threatened. No little thing like burning money or tempting fate with the life of her son had ever stopped her. Was there anything in the world that would stop her?

He didn't believe so, but for the first time in his life he had to make the effort. He said deliberately, with pauses between his words, "If you do anything of the sort—anything at all, mind you—I shall leave you. I shall leave you permanently. Finally. Forever. Understand?"

But she had had her way too long, for too many years. The habits of any man or animal can't be changed after so many years. She sprang at him, leaped across the space between them with an agility he wouldn't have believed was in her. She had always been strong but the ferocity of this slashing attack was born of hysteria.

He tried to protect his face, but she pulled his crooked arm down and reached out her other hand, curled like a bird's. Her nails were short and broken, but they scraped painfully down his cheek. With the other hand she struck as hard as she could at the opposite side of his jaw.

He raised his arms again, to get and hold her wrists, and then—he had not realized he was backing up—he stumbled against the curb's edge and abruptly sat down. For a second he sat motionless, looking at the dirt road between his legs, feeling foolish. Then he set himself to grab her. He knew she would not kick him, but would lean over and pummel away, and so he would wrap his arms around her . . .

But she wasn't leaning over him, and he looked up to find out why.

One of the native policemen had her by the shoulder, and she was trying to wrench herself in two directions at once—toward the policeman, to see who it was, and away from him to free herself.

My God! he thought, he mustn't do that! Interference of any sort drove her wild. Actual physical interference would release heaven only knew what sort of outburst.

He said, "Wait—", put a hand behind him to push himself upward, and saw that the other policeman was coming across the street at a trot. "Sally—" he said and stopped.

Then he relaxed the pressure on his hand and sat still.

Sally had the policeman's gun. Now, how had she got that? Well, she had it. Damn fool, he thought. She wouldn't know how to fire the thing, to say nothing of releasing the catch. But the policeman who had lost the gun was standing motionless, balanced warily on the balls of his feet. *He* didn't know how harmless Sally was.

Her husband looked up at her face and recognized that the apparent determination written on it was merely a hangover. Behind the expression she had returned to fear and confusion and helplessness—as

she always did when she finally realized she had gone too far.

Well, he thought, now what? Will they arrest her? Will I have to call LaVrie? I had better explain, say something calming.

He had certainly better say something calming, since the second policeman, still coming up behind Sally and now only a dozen feet away, had drawn his gun.

He opened his mouth to say something calming, saw Sally's continuing expression of frozen determination, saw that the unarmed policeman had abandoned wariness for sheer fright, and then he said, "Sally, for God's sake, don't!"

He dug his heels into the dirt road, pushing himself farther backward onto the sidewalk. Then he flung his arm across his face, and so missed seeing her crumple as the four shots hit her in the side of the neck and at an angle below her shoulder.

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THE ZERO CLUE

by REX STOUT

(Continued from page 113)

She was hating it, but she went on: "You said I have sense enough to hold a well-paid job in a highly competitive field, but if you only knew. It's not a field, it's a corral of wild beasts. There are six female tigers trying to get their claws on my job right now, and if they all died tonight there would be six others tomorrow. If it came out what I went to Leo Heller for, that would be the finish of me."

The tip of her tongue flashed out and in. "So that's what this means to me. A magazine like *Mode* has two main functions, reporting and predicting. American women want to know what is being made and worn in Paris and New York, but even more they want to know what is going to be made and worn next season. *Mode's* reporting has been good enough, I've been all right on that, but for the past year our predictions have been utterly rotten. We've got the contacts, but something has gone haywire, and our biggest rival has made monkeys of us. Another year like that, even another season, and goodbye."

Wolfe grunted. "To the magazine?"

"No, to me. So I decided to try Leo Heller. We had carried a piece about him, and I had met him. The idea was to give him everything we had, and we had plenty, about styles and colors and trends for the past ten years, and have him figure the probabilities six months ahead. He thought it was feasible, and I don't think he was a faker. He had to come to the office to go through our stuff. Of course, I had to camouflage what he was there for, but that wasn't hard. Do you want to know what I told them he was doing?"

"I think not," Wolfe muttered.

"So he came. I phoned him the next day, and he said it would take him at least a week to determine whether he had sufficient information to make up a probability formula. Yesterday I phoned again, and he said he had something to discuss and asked me to call at his place this morning. I went. You know the rest of it."

She stopped. Wolfe and Inspector Cramer exchanged glances. "I would like," Wolfe said, "to have the names of the six female tigers who are after your job."

She turned white. I have never seen color leave a face faster. "Darn you!" she said in bitter fury. "So you're a rat, like everybody else!"

Wolfe showed her a palm. "Please, madam. I have no desire to betray you to your enemies. I merely want—"

He saved his breath because his audience was leaving. She got up and headed for the door. Stebbins looked at Wolfe, Wolfe shook his head, and Stebbins trailed after her.

As he left the room at her heels Cramer called to him, "Bring Busch!" Then he turned to Wolfe to protest: "You had her open. Why give her a breather?"

Wolfe made a face. "The miserable wretch. She was dumb with rage and it would have been futile to keep at her. But you're keeping her?"

"You're right we are. For what?" He was out of his chair, glaring down at Wolfe. "Tell me for what! Except for dragging that out of that woman, there's not one single—"

He was off again. I miss no opportunity of resenting Inspector Cramer; I enjoy it and it's good for my appetite, but I must admit that on that occasion he seemed to me to have a point. I still had seen or heard no indication whatever that Wolfe's statement that he had a lead was anything but a stall.

So as Cramer yapped at my employer, I had a private feeling that some of the sentiments he expressed were not positively preposterous. He was still at it when the door opened to admit Stebbins with the sixth customer.

The sergeant, after conducting this one to the seat the others had occupied, facing Wolfe and Cramer, did not go to the chair against the wall, which he had favored throughout the evening. Instead, he lowered his bulk onto one at Cramer's left, only two arms' lengths from the subject.

That was interesting, because it meant that he was voting for Karl Busch as his pick of the lot, and while Stebbins had often been wrong, I had known him, more than once, to be right.

Karl Busch was the slick, sly, swarthy little article with his hair pasted to his scalp. In the specifications on his transcript I had noted the key NVMS, meaning No Visible Means of Support, but that was just a nod to routine. The details of the report on him left no real doubt as to the sources he tapped for jack.

He was a Broadway smoothie, third grade. He was not in the theater, or sports, or the flicks, or any of the tough rackets, but he knew everyone who was, and as the engraved lettuce swirled around the midtown corners and got trapped in the nets of the collectors, legitimate and otherwise, he had a hundred little dodges for fastening onto a specimen for himself.

To him Cramer's tone was noticeably different. "This is Nero Wolfe," he rasped. "Answer his questions. You hear, Busch?"

Busch said he did.

Wolfe, who was frowning, studying him, spoke "Nothing is to be

gained, Mr. Busch, by my starting the usual rigmarole with you. I've read your statement, and I doubt if it would be worth while to try to pester you into a contradiction. But you had three conversations with Leo Heller, and in your statement they are not reported, merely summarized. I want the details of those conversations, as completely as your memory will furnish. Start with the first one, two months ago. Exactly what was said?"

Busch slowly shook his head. "Impossible, mister."

"You won't try?"

"It's this way: If I took you to the pier and ast you to try to jump across to Brooklyn, what would you do? You'd say it was impossible and why get your feet wet. That's me."

"I told you," Cramer snapped, "to answer his questions."

Busch extended a dramatic hand in appeal. "What do you want me to do—make it up?"

"I want you to do what you were told to the best of your ability."

"Okay. This will be good. I said to him, Mr. Heller, my name's Busch and I'm a broker. He said broker of what, and I said of anything people want broken, just for a gag, but he had no sense of humor, so I dropped that and explained. I told him there was a great demand among all kinds of people to know what horse was going to win a race the day before the race was run or even an hour before. I had read about his line of work and thought that he could help to meet that demand.

"He said that he had thought several times about using his method on horse races, but he didn't care himself to use the method for personal bets because he wasn't a betting man. He said for him to make up one of his formulas for just one race would take an awful lot of research. It would cost so much it wouldn't be worth it for any one person unless that person made a high-bracket plunge."

"You're paraphrasing it," Wolfe objected. "I'd prefer the words that were used."

"This is the best of my ability, mister."

"Very well. Go on."

"I said I wasn't a high-bracket boy myself, but anyway that wasn't here or there or under the rug, because what I had in mind was a wholesale setup. I had figgers to show him. Say he did ten races a week. I could round up at least twenty customers right off the bat. All he had to do was crack a percentage of forty or better and it would start a fire you couldn't put out if you ran a river down it. We could have a million customers if we wanted 'em, but we wouldn't want 'em. We would hand-pick a hundred and no more, and each one would ante one C per week, which, if I can add at all, would make ten grand every seven days."

"Go on."

"Well, that would make half a

million per year, and Heller and me would split. Out of my half I would expense the operating, and out of his half he would expense the dope. He would have to walk on his nose to cut under a hundred grand all clear, and I wouldn't do so bad. We didn't sign no papers, but he could smell it, and after two more talks he agreed to do a dry run on three races.

"The first one he worked on his answer was the favorite, a horse named White Water, and it won, but it was just exercise for that rabbit. The next one it was heads or tails between two sweethearts. Heller had the winner all right, a horse named Short Order, but on a fifty-fifty call you don't exactly panic. But get this next one."

Busch gestured dramatically for emphasis. "Now, get it. This animal was forty to one, but it might as well have been four hundred. It was a muscle-bound, sore-jointed hyena named Zero. That alone, a horse named Zero, was enough to put the curse of six saints on it, but also it was the kind of looking horse which, if you looked at it, would make you think promptly of canned dog food.

"When Heller came up with that horse, I thought, oh-oh, he's a loon after all, and watch me run. Well, you ast me to tell you the words we used, me and Heller. If I told you some I used when that Zero horse won that race, you would lock me up. Not only was Heller batting a thousand, but he had kicked through with the most—What are you doing, taking a nap?"

We all looked at Wolfe. He was leaning back with his eyes shut tight, and was motionless except for his lips, which were pushing out and in, and out and in, and again out and in. Cramer and Stebbins and I knew what that meant: something had hit his hook, and he had yanked and had a fish on.

A tingle ran up my spine. Stebbins arose and took a step to stand at Busch's elbow. Cramer just sat with his eyes on Wolfe.

Busch asked, "Is he having a fit?"

Wolfe's eyes opened and he came forward in his chair. "No, I'm not," he snapped, "but I've been having one all evening . . . Mr. Cramer. Will you please have Mr. Busch removed? Temporarily."

Cramer, with no hesitation, nodded at Purley, and Purley touched Busch's shoulder and they went. The door closed behind them, but it wasn't more than five seconds before it opened again and Purley was back with us. He wanted as quick a look at the fish as his boss and me.

"Have you ever," Wolfe was asking Cramer, "called me, point-blank, a dolt and a dotard?"

"Those aren't my words, but I've certainly called you."

"You may do so now. Your opinion of me at its lowest was far above my present opinion of myself." He looked up at the clock, which said

five past three. "We now need a proper setting. How many of your staff are in my house?"

"Fourteen."

"We want them all in here, for the effect of their presence. Half of them should bring chairs. Also, of course, the six persons we have interviewed. This shouldn't take too long—possibly an hour, though I doubt it. I certainly won't prolong it."

Cramer was looking contrary. "You've already prolonged it plenty. You mean you're prepared to name him?"

"I am not. I haven't the slightest notion who it is. But I am prepared to make an attack that will expose him—or her—and if it doesn't, I'll have no opinion of myself at all." Wolfe flattened his palms on his desk, for him a violent gesture. "Confound it, don't you know me well enough to realize when I'm ready to strike?"

"I know you too darn' well." Cramer looked at his sergeant. "Okay, Purley. Collect the audience."

The office is a good-sized room, but there wasn't much unoccupied space left when that gathering was fully assembled. The biggest assortment of homicide employees I had ever gazed on extended from wall to wall in the rear of the six subjects. Cramer was planted in the red-leather chair with Stebbins on his left, and the stenographer was hanging on at the end of my desk.

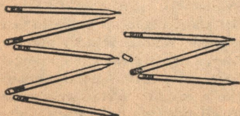
The six citizens were in a row up front, and none of them looked merry.

Wolfe's eyes went from right to left and back again, taking them in. He spoke: "I'll have to make this somewhat elaborate, so that all of you will clearly understand the situation. I could not at the moment hazard even a venturesome guess as to which of you killed Leo Heller, but I now know how to find out and I propose to do so."

Wolfe interlaced his fingers in front of his middle mound. "We have from the first had a hint that has not been imparted to you. Yesterday—Tuesday, that is—Heller telephoned here to say that he suspected that one of his clients had committed a serious crime and to hire me to investigate. I declined, for reasons we needn't go into, but Mr. Goodwin took it upon himself to call on Heller this morning to discuss the matter."

He shot me a glance and I met it. Merely an incivility. He went on to them: "He entered Heller's office but found it unoccupied. Tarrying there for some minutes, and meanwhile exercising his highly trained talent for observation, he noticed, among other details, that some pencils and an eraser from an overturned jar were arranged on the desk in a sort of pattern. Later on that same detail was, of course, noted by the police. It was a feature of that detail which led Mr. Cramer

to come to see me. He assumed that Heller, seated at his desk and threatened with a gun, knowing or thinking he was about to die, had made the pencil pattern to leave a message, and that the purpose of the message was to give a clue to the identity of the murder. On that point I agreed with Mr. Cramer. Will you all approach, please, and look at this arrangement on my desk? These pencils and the eraser are placed approximately the same as those on Heller's desk. From your side you are seeing them as Heller intended them to be seen."



The six did as requested, and they had company. Not only did most of the homicide subordinates leave their chairs and come forward for a view, but Cramer himself got up and took a glance—maybe just curiosity, but I wouldn't put it past him to suspect Wolfe of a shenanigan. However, the pencils and eraser were properly placed, as I ascertained by arising and stretching to peer over shoulders.

When they were all seated again Wolfe resumed: "Mr. Cramer had a notion about the message which I rejected and will not bother to expound. My own notion of it, conceived almost immediately, came merely as a stirring of memory. It reminded me vaguely of something I had seen somewhere. The vagueness disappeared when I reflected that Heller had been a mathematician, academically qualified and trained. The memory was old, and I checked it by going to my shelves for a book I had read some ten years ago. Its title is *Mathematics for the Million,* by Lancelot Hogben. After verifying my recollection, I locked the book in a drawer, because it seemed to me it would be a pity for Mr. Cramer to waste time leafing through it."

"Let's get on," Cramer growled.

Wolfe did so. "As told in Mr. Hogben's book, more than two thousand years ago what he calls a matchstick number script was being used in India. Three horizontal lines stood for two, and so on. That was indeed primitive, but it had greater possibilities than the clumsy devices of the Hebrews and Greeks and Romans. Around the time of the birth of Christ some brilliant Hindu improved upon it by connecting the horizontal lines with diagonals, making the units unmistakable."

He pointed to the arrangement on his desk. "These five pencils on your left form a 3 exactly as the Hindus formed a 3, and the three pencils on your right form a 2. These Hindu symbols are one of

the great landmarks in the history of number language. You will note, by the way, that our own forms of the figure 3 and of the figure 2 are taken directly from these Hindu symbols."

A couple of them got up to look, and Wolfe politely waited until they were seated again. "So, since Heller had been a mathematician, and since those were famous patterns in the history of mathematics, I assumed that the message was a 3 and a 2. But evidence indicated that the eraser was also a part of the message and must be included. That was simple. It is the custom of an academic mathematician, if he wants to scribble 4 times 6, or 7 times 9, to use for the 'times' not an X, as we laymen do, but a dot. It is so well known a custom that Mr. Hogben uses it in his book without thinking it necessary to explain it, and therefore I confidently assumed that the eraser was meant for a dot, and that the message was 3 times 2, or 6."

Wolfe compressed his lips and shook his head. "That was an impetuous imbecility. During the whole seven hours that I sat here poking at you people, I was trying to find some connection with the figure 6 that would either set one of you clearly apart, or relate you to the commission of some crime, or both. Preferably both, of course, but either would serve. In the interviews the figure 6 did turn up with persistent monotony, but with no promising application, and I could only ascribe it to the mischief of coincidence.

"So at three o'clock in the morning I was precisely where I had been when I started. Without a fortuitous nudge I can't say how long it would have taken me to become aware of my egregious blunder, but I got the nudge, and I can at least say that I responded promptly and effectively. The nudge came from Mr. Busch when he mentioned the name of a horse, Zero."

He upturned a palm. "Of course. Zero! I had been a witless ass. The use of the dot as a symbol for 'times' is a strictly modern device. Since the rest of the message, the figures 3 and 2, were in Hindu number script, surely the dot was, too—provided that the Hindus had made any use of the dot. And what made my blunder so unforgivable was that the Hindus had indeed used a dot; they had used it, as explained in Hogben's book, for the most brilliant and imaginative invention in the whole history of the language of numbers. For when you have once decided how to write 3 and how to write 2, how are you going to distinguish among 32 and 302 and 3002 and 30002?

"That was the crucial problem in number language, and the Greeks and Romans, for all their intellectual eminence, never succeeded in solving it. Some Hindu genius did, twenty centuries ago. He saw that the secret was position. Today we

use our zero exactly as he did, to show position, but instead of a zero he used a dot. That's what the dot was in the early Hindu number language; it was used like our zero. So Heller's message was not 3 times 2, or 6; it was 3 zero 2, or 302."

Susan Maturo started, jerking her head up. Wolfe rested his eyes on her.

"Yes, Miss Maturo. Three hundred and two people died in the explosion and fire at the Montrose Hospital a month ago. You mentioned that figure when you were talking with me, but even if you hadn't, when I realized that Heller's message was the figure 302, I would certainly have eventually connected it with that disaster."

"But it's—" She was staring. "You mean it is connected?"

"I'm proceeding on that obvious assumption. I am assuming that through the information one of you six people furnished Leo Heller as factors for a formula, he formed a suspicion that one of you had committed a serious crime, and that his message, the figure 302, indicates that the crime was the planting of a bomb in the Montrose Hospital which caused the deaths of three hundred and two people—or at least involvement in that crime."

It seemed as if I could see or feel muscles tightening all over the room. Most of those dicks, maybe all of them, had, of course, been working on the Montrose thing. Cramer pulled his feet back, and his hands were fists. Purley Stebbins took his gun from his holster and rested it on his knee.

"So," Wolfe continued, "Heller's message identified not the person who was about to kill him, not the criminal, but the crime. That was superbly ingenious and, considering the situation he was in, he deserves our deepest admiration. He has mine, and I retract any derogation of him. It would seem natural to concentrate on Miss Maturo, since she was certainly connected with that disaster, but first let's clarify the matter. I'm going to ask the rest of you if you have at any time visited the Montrose Hospital, or been connected with it in any way, or had dealings with any of its personnel. Take the question just as I have stated it." His eyes went to the end of the row, at the left. "Mrs. Tillotson? Answer, please. Have you?"

"No." It was barely audible.

His eyes moved. "Mr. Ennis?"

"I have not. Never."

"We'll skip you, Miss Maturo. Mr. Busch?"

"I've never been in a hospital."

"That answers only a third of the question. Answer all of it."

"The answer is no, mister."

"Miss Abbey?"

"I went there once about two years ago, to visit a patient, a friend. That was all." The tip of her tongue came out and in. "Except for that one visit I have never been

connected with it in any way or dealt with any of its personnel."

"That is explicit. Mr. Winslow?"

"No to the whole question. An unqualified no."

"Well." Wolfe did not look frustrated. "That would seem to isolate Miss Maturo, but it is not conclusive." His head turned. "Mr. Cramer. If the person who not only killed Leo Heller but also bombed that hospital is among these six, I'm sure you won't want to take the slightest risk of losing him. I have a suggestion."

"I'm listening," Cramer growled.

"Take them in as material witnesses, and hold them without bail if possible. Starting immediately, collect as many as you can of the former staff of that hospital. There were scores who survived, and other scores who were not on duty at the time. Get all of them if possible, spare no effort, and have them look at these people and say if they have ever seen any of them.

"Meanwhile, of course, you will be working on Miss Maturo, but you have heard the denials of the other five, and if you get reliable evidence that one of them has lied I'm sure you will need no further suggestion from me. Indeed, if one of them has lied and leaves this room, in custody, with that lie undeclared, that alone will be half the battle. I'm sorry—"

"Wait a minute."

All eyes went to one spot. It was Jack Ennis, the inventor. His thin, colorless lips were twisted, but not in a smile. The look in his eyes showed that he had no idea of smiling.

"I didn't tell an exact lie," he said.

Wolfe's eyes were slits. "Then an inexact lie, Mr. Ennis?"

"I mean I didn't visit that hospital as a hospital. And I didn't have dealings with them; I was just trying to. I wanted them to give my X-ray machine a trial. One of them was willing to, but the other two talked him down."

"When was this?"

"I was there three times, twice in December and once in January."

"I thought your X-ray machine had a flaw."

"It wasn't perfect, but it would work. It would have been better than anything they had. I was sure I was going to get it in, because he was for it—his name is Halsey—and I saw him first, and he wanted to try it. But the other two talked him out of it, and one of them was very—he—" He petered out.

Wolfe prodded him. "Very what, Mr. Ennis?"

"He didn't understand me! He hated me!"

"There are people like that. There are all kinds of people. Have you ever invented a bomb?"

"A bomb?" Ennis's lips worked, and this time I thought he actually was trying to smile. "Why would I invent a bomb?"

"I don't know. Inventors invent

many things. If you have never tried your hand at a bomb, of course you have never had occasion to get hold of the necessary materials—for instance, explosives. It's only fair to tell you what I now regard as a reasonable hypothesis: that you placed the bomb in the hospital in revenge for an injury, real or fancied; that included in the data you gave Leo Heller was an item or items which led him to suspect you of that crime; that something he said led you, in turn, to suspect that he suspected; that when you went to his place this morning you went armed, prepared for action if your suspicion was verified; that when you entered the building you recognized Mr. Goodwin as my assistant; that you went up to Heller's office and asked him if Mr. Goodwin was there for an appointment with him, and his answer heightened or confirmed your suspicion and you produced the gun; that—"

"Hold it," Inspector Cramer snapped. "I'll take it from here. Purley, get him out and—"

Purley was a little slow. He was up, but Ennis was up faster and off in a flying dive for Wolfe. I dived too, and got an arm, and jerked. He tore loose, but by then a whole squad was there, swarming into him, and since I wasn't needed I backed off.

As I did so, someone dived at me, and Susan Maturo was up against me, gripping my lapels. "Tell me!" she demanded. "Tell me! Was it him?"

I told her promptly and positively, to keep her from ripping my lapels off. "Yes," I said.

Two months later a jury of eight men and four women agreed with me.

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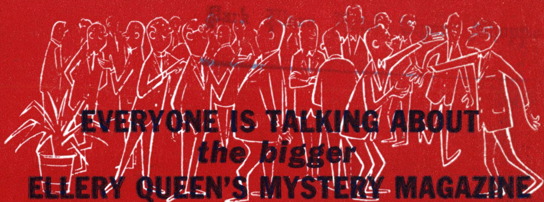

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